

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

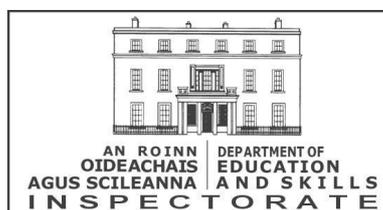
Department of Education and Skills

**Whole-School Evaluation
Management, Leadership and Learning**

REPORT

**Curragh Post-Primary School
Curragh, County Kildare.
Roll number: 706600**

Date of inspection: 12 May 2011



Whole-School Evaluation

Management, Leadership and Learning

A whole-school evaluation of management, leadership and learning (WSE-MLL) was undertaken in May, 2011 in Curragh Post-Primary School. This report presents the findings of the evaluation and makes recommendations for improvement. During the evaluation, the inspection team met with the school's board of management, in-school management, groups of teachers, parents and students. Inspectors also reviewed a range of school documentation and responses to questionnaires and examined other data in relation to the operation of the school. As part of the evaluation, a range of lessons across a number of subject areas was inspected.

Introduction

Curragh Post-Primary School operates under the trusteeship of County Kildare Vocational Education Committee (VEC). The school is situated in the Curragh army camp, a short distance from the town of Newbridge, where there are a number of second-level schools. The school participates in the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) initiative, the School Completion Programme (SCP) and the Home-School-Community Liaison (HSCL) scheme.

The second-level cohort comprises 158 students and an additional thirty-two students attend a Post Leaving Certificate Business and IT course on the premises. The school has been successful in reversing a trend of steady decline in enrolment experienced in the recent past. The school buildings and site, which are owned by the Defence Forces, impose certain restrictions with regard to the potential to expand the school further. That said, the Defence Forces have identified and indicated to the partners a willingness to provide a suitable site for a new school building. The board of management of the school was given an opportunity to comment on the findings and recommendations of the report; a response was not received from the board.

1. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

1.1 Key Findings

- The board of management's capacity to lead school review and self-evaluation is a key strength.
- The leadership of staff is very effective, and communication among and between the senior management team and staff and the school community is very good.
- The very good quality of learning and teaching observed in the majority of lessons is a significant strength.
- Almost without exception, interactions engaged in and observed between teachers and students during the course of the evaluation were characterised by a very strong sense of mutual respect.
- The tuition time provided falls well short of the minimum requirements stated in Circular 29/95.

1.2 Recommendations for Further Development

- The board should extend its educational leadership capacity and should establish structures which will allow it gain greater insights into the school's curriculum.
- It is imperative that the board makes arrangements to complete the development of a DEIS plan, including a literacy and numeracy plan.
- The board must ensure compliance with Circular M29/95 in relation to time in school.

- A greater emphasis is needed, both in planning and delivery of content, on the use and sharing of expected learning outcomes, differentiation and assessment for learning.

2. QUALITY OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP

2.1 School ownership and management – the Board of Management

Composition, functioning and fulfilment of statutory obligations

The board of management (the board) is properly constituted, is aware of its statutory responsibilities, and meets at regular intervals throughout the school year. Communication between the board and senior management and school staff is very good. In the case of parents, there is scope for the board to develop more formalised means through which to disseminate information on matters relating to the operation and performance of the school in accordance with Section 20 of the Education Act, 1998.

A Parents' Association was established shortly before the evaluation. The chairperson was the only officer elected. The board appreciates the potential that greater parental participation in the management of the school offers. Actions through the SCP and HSCL scheme have been successful in improving parents' attendance at parent-teacher meetings. Clearer links need to be established between the parents' association and parents' representatives on the board. In addition, the board should, in collaboration with the principal and the liaison teacher, explore the development of a greater awareness of its role among the student body through the student council.

The board takes a lead role in policy development and review. Best practice was reflected in the recently reviewed and adopted code of behaviour, in the drafting of which all school partners were consulted. Plans were in place to review the school's health and safety policy, which was dated 2005. It is recommended that a cycle of review be incorporated into the policy formulation process.

Board members' level of knowledge and understanding of the school's curriculum and of additional programmes available varied. In order to extend its educational leadership capacity, the board should establish structures which would provide it with greater insights into the implementation of the school's curriculum. In this context, the board should invite subject and programme co-ordinators to submit or present a report on their work, outlining their aims for future development, focusing in particular on their contribution to improved student learning.

The school's admissions policy is open and offers access to students from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, educational experiences and needs.

The tuition time offered to students falls well short of the minimum of twenty eight hours required under the terms of Circular 29/95. The board must ensure compliance with this circular as a matter of urgency.

Confirmation was provided that, in compliance with Post-primary Circulars M44/05 and 0062/2006, the board of management has formally adopted the Department's Child Protection Guidelines for Post-primary Schools (Published September 2004). Confirmation was also provided that these child protection procedures have been brought to the attention of management, school staff and parents; that a copy of the procedures has been provided to all staff (including all new staff); and that management has ensured that all staff are familiar with the procedures to be followed. A designated liaison person (DLP) and a deputy DLP have been appointed in line with the requirements of the guidelines.

The school's priorities for development

The board's practice of setting, monitoring and reviewing priority areas for development is very good. Those identified represent a balance between school infrastructure, policy, and, to a lesser extent, curriculum and its implementation. The range of subjects offered is regularly monitored and reviewed, and the introduction of additional programmes has also been considered. The possibility of offering the Junior Certificate School Programme merits further discussion by members of the school community. This programme could complement the very good work already undertaken to support student learning.

With regard to the school's participation in DEIS, it is imperative that the board makes the necessary arrangements to develop and ratify a DEIS plan. Work completed on the themes of attendance and retention is very thorough. This reflects the school's proactive approach to addressing these issues and, while evidence suggests improvements have been realised, no measurable targets were set. Arrangements should now be made to establish baseline data and set targets for all themes to be addressed in a DEIS plan, including literacy and numeracy.

2.2 Effectiveness of leadership for learning

Leadership of staff

The leadership of school staff is very effective. The principal and deputy principal work to their strengths in the duties they fulfil. The level of communication among and between the senior management team and staff is very good. Management, parents and students acknowledge the dedication of teaching staff to improving student learning. Almost without exception, interactions engaged in and observed between teachers and students during the course of the evaluation were characterised by a very strong sense of mutual respect.

Over time, duties assigned to post-holders have expanded and their experience in a range of school management and leadership areas has developed and deepened. In order to support the future development of the school, and to implement recommendations in this report pertaining to DEIS planning in particular, a review of post-holders' duties is recommended.

School management recognises the value of staff participation in continuing professional development (CPD) opportunities, and in particular those which focus on improving learning. In order to maximise the benefits the school derives from staff participation in such events, the development of a report form is recommended, one which would prompt teachers to reflect and articulate how their new learning could contribute to improving learning and teaching in the school.

The work of each subject and programme department is coordinated by a member of the team. Given that it is a small school where some staff members are shared with another school, many teachers contribute to a number of subjects and programmes. A review of subject and programme plans revealed significant variation in the level of development reached and in the quality of the content of the plans.

The school's practice in addressing the learning needs of students with special educational needs (SEN) is good. Tuition is, in the majority of instances, provided in small groups and in some cases in team teaching contexts. However, it is recommended that management, in collaboration with the learning support team, address the need to demonstrate how learning support and resource hours available are allocated in a more transparent manner, beginning with the development of an SEN register.

Leadership of students

The management of students is good and high standards of behaviour are expected. Participants in the student focus group meeting and students' responses to questionnaires demonstrated a very good level of awareness and understanding of the code of behaviour. It is recommended that the next version of the code place more emphasis on the recognition of positive behaviour. While the awards presented at the end of the year represent a good balance between different areas of school life, and a small number of other awards, such as for the best journal, are provided during the year, positive behaviour needs to be recognised on a more immediate basis. The student journal could be a very effective tool in this regard; it is currently very much underused as means of communicating positive messages to students and parents.

The school's student council is active and has contributed to a number of recent changes, including the school uniform, code of behaviour, the introduction of healthier food options and a buddy system which is to commence in the next academic year. First-year students are represented by sixth-year students. Reconsideration of this arrangement is necessary, as it is vital that first-year students be represented by their peers and that their active participation in the school community be facilitated.

The year-heads meet regularly with senior management and their work is supported by a very good pastoral care policy. The timetable includes registration periods at the beginning of the school day and again before classes resume in the afternoon. Should the use of tuition time in this manner be continued, it must include a pastoral element. The planned introduction of an e-portal system will reduce the need to allocate instruction time and teaching resources simply for registration purposes.

Student attendance is very closely monitored and parents are promptly informed of absences. Parents were highly complimentary of the openness, accessibility and the professional manner in which school staff deal with issues. The very good efforts made to reduce the number of students placed on detention are also experiencing some success.

Management endeavours to provide all students with a broad and balanced range of subjects. The number of subjects taken by fifth-year students should be kept in check, as should the time allocated to the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme, which is generous.

The school's guidance allocation of 0.5 whole-time equivalent is fully utilised and counselling services are augmented by the school. The Guidance plan is of very good quality. Provision and access to Guidance in senior cycle is very good. The lack of any timetabled provision in junior cycle and the uncertainty expressed by students with regard to access to Guidance should be addressed. A third of parent and student respondents to questionnaires expressed some level of dissatisfaction with the information provided on subject choice.

2.3 Management of facilities

The VEC and the Defence Forces share the management and maintenance of facilities. The school comprises two adjacent buildings and, while they are old and were not purpose-built to house a school, they are equipped and, almost without exception, maintained to a very high standard. With regard to one of the classrooms visited, there is a need to pay closer attention to cleanliness in order to avoid any health and safety consequences that may arise.

The Defence Forces recently granted the school access to a sports field. This expands the range of sporting facilities now available to the students and supports the newly-introduced Physical Education (PE) curriculum, along with the already established access to other army resources, such as the swimming pool and gym.

The school's information, communication and technology (ICT) infrastructure is very good and includes a well-equipped and modern science laboratory and a home economics room, computer rooms, and broadband access in all classrooms.

3. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

3.1 The quality of learning and teaching

The very good quality of learning and teaching observed in the majority of lessons is a significant strength in the school. Teachers set high expectations for student learning. In a small number of cases teaching was poor and in need of considerable improvement. In response to questionnaires and in discussions, parents expressed a very strong level of satisfaction with the quality of learning and teaching in the school.

Very good lessons were typified by their clear structure, students' active engagement in their learning, the use of suitable, varied and effective methodologies and strategies, the seamless integration of support materials such as work sheets and ICT resources, differentiation of learning supported by a questioning style which ensured higher order thinking, and classroom management and student behaviour of a very high standard. Of particular note during the course of classroom visits was the frequency with which students demonstrated their confidence and willingness to ask content-related questions of their teachers. Student input was actively sought, welcomed, and affirmed.

Where lessons were in need of significant improvement, planning needed to take more account of the time available and of students' learning styles and needs. In a few instances, classroom management issues needed to be addressed and the school's code of behaviour, including the use of student journal, and classroom rules, adhered to.

In order to enhance the very good practice identified, a small number of areas, such as lesson structure, need further refinement. To this end, and as recommended in previous subject inspection reports, the sharing of the expected learning outcomes with students in class and reflection on learning at the end should become standard practice across all departments. One very good example was observed where the outcomes were shared with students and they were then in turn asked to articulate what they expected to learn during the course of the lesson.

In a number of instances attention was paid to the development of students' literacy skills, and key words strategies were used. Evidence was also available that limited use is made of 'Drop Everything and Read' (DEAR). In general, there is a need for greater focus and awareness of the potential offered by lessons in subjects across the curriculum to support the development of students' literacy and numeracy skills.

Examples of oral and written feedback on students' work indicate that the implementation of assessment for learning (AfL) needs greater attention. Subject department plans and teacher journals reflect variety in practices with regard to homework and assessment practices. It is of concern that, with the exception of house examination results, no further assessment records were maintained in some instances. It is recommended that the school develop an assessment policy which will incorporate homework. In order to extend the very good practice in evidence in a number of subject areas, the policy should include the responsibilities of all partners and an approach to correction based on the principles of AfL.

4. IMPLEMENTATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS FROM PREVIOUS EVALUATIONS

4.1 Management

A review of the implementation of recommendations in previous inspection reports revealed that progress was good in most areas and that many recommendations had been addressed. Subject options in the area of science have been reviewed and teaching methodologies included in the plan; a competency-based test in Mathematics has been devised for incoming first-year students, and a fifth period has been allocated to each year in junior cycle; minutes of history department meetings are available; some progress has been made in the development of the planning template for Irish to include methodologies, assessment modes and learning outcomes.

A consistent whole-school approach to a number of areas across the curriculum is recommended: clear statement of expected learning outcomes; learning and teaching methodologies and strategies; assessment for learning; the integration of literacy and numeracy strategies; cross-curricular planning; and consistency within departments with regard to assessment and homework practices and record-keeping. In addition, outcomes of reviews and analyses of student attainment in house and state examinations should be included in the plans as standard. Senior management should lead development in this area as part of their instructional leadership role. This work should complement the school's DEIS planning process.

4.2 Learning and Teaching

The extent to which recommendations in previous subject inspections had been adopted across the curriculum was examined. Students were actively engaged in their learning in the majority of lessons; literacy and numeracy and differentiation strategies were employed in over half the lessons; the learning environment included samples of students' work and health and safety notices were visible in approximately half the lessons, and in less than half the lessons, the expected learning outcomes were shared with students at the outset. There is considerable scope for a greater level of sharing of good practice across the curriculum, including generic strengths identified in evaluation reports.

5. THE SCHOOL'S SELF-EVALUATION PROCESS AND CAPACITY FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

The school's capacity to self-evaluate at board level is a key strength. This is reflected in the proactive manner in which the board, in collaboration with the school community, addressed the issue of declining enrolment, improving school infrastructure and facilities, and the reintroduction of Art and introduction of PE to the school curriculum.

Subject departments with experience of subject inspection have demonstrated a willingness to engage with change and the capacity to support on-going school improvement. In order to enhance the capacity already demonstrated and to ensure a whole-school approach to improvement, it is recommended that all subject departments and programme teams, as part of their planning process, set realistic and achievable targets for improvement and devise action plans to support their realisation. In addition, the board should develop clear procedures to support subject departments and programme teams in addressing areas identified for development in inspection reports and to take advantage of the opportunity such reports offer to extend good practice across the curriculum.

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