

**An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna**

**Department of Education and Skills**

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

**REPORT**

**Coláiste Choilm  
Ballincollig, County Cork  
Roll number: 71103K**

**Date of inspection: 5 February 2014**



**AN ROINN OIDEACHAIS  
AGUS SCILEANNA** | **DEPARTMENT OF  
EDUCATION  
AND SKILLS**  
**INSPECTORATE**

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

A whole-school evaluation of management, leadership and learning (WSE-MLL) was undertaken in February 2014 in Coláiste Choilm. 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, and 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. The board of management of the school was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the report, and the response of the board will be found in the appendix of this report.

## ***Introduction***

Coláiste Choilm is one of the largest post-primary schools in Ireland. It is a co-educational community college under the trusteeship of Cork Education and Training Board (ETB) and the Diocese of Cork and Ross, and is located in Ballincollig, an expanding satellite town of Cork City. A decision of the board of management in 1990 led to the establishment of a Gaelcholáiste as an integral part of the school. Gaelcholáiste Choilm now accounts for 340 of the 1393 students currently enrolled. The number of students enrolled continues to grow in both parts of the school.

## **SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT**

### ***Key Findings***

- The school is led by a highly effective senior management team.
- The leadership is characterised, at all levels, by positive working relationships and effective systems of communication.
- The questionnaire responses of students and parents showed consistently high ratings for the school and its operation.
- A highly motivated, able and dedicated staff has embraced change with optimism.
- The school, comprising Gaelcholáiste Choilm and Coláiste Choilm, embodies a rich, unique, and integrated model of educational provision.
- The two parts of the school combine to provide a broad and balanced curriculum.
- The support systems for students are of the highest quality.
- The participation and achievements of students in the very wide range of extra-curricular and co-curricular activities are encouraged and celebrated.
- The facilities are well maintained and administered by efficient and welcoming staff members.
- The teaching and learning observed was of the highest quality.
- A professional, informed and reflective approach underpins good teaching practice and a continuous focus on self-evaluation for improvement.

## ***Recommendations for Further Development***

High standards were observed throughout the school in the areas evaluated in this WSE-MLL. Very effective organisational structures and a strong sense of common purpose underpin the quality of teaching and learning observed. The management and staff are encouraged to continue their progressive work in order to maintain these high educational standards for future generations of students. To this end, the inspectors provided support, affirmation and general advice to management and to staff in the course of the evaluation.

### **1. QUALITY OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP**

#### ***1.1 School ownership and management***

The board of management is highly supportive of, and works in collaboration with, the senior management team in the effective management and leadership of a school with significant strengths. The board is properly constituted. Board members are well informed and have a clear understanding of their corporate role. The board shows an appropriate understanding of the legal framework in which it operates. Members show a shared understanding of current educational initiatives and participate in decisions regarding the school's participation in them.

Policies and plans are proposed and considered by the board for review and ratification as a standard item, and in a rolling cycle, on its meeting agenda. Decisions are made on the principle of consensus and a report for communication to the nominating bodies is agreed prior to the conclusion of meetings. In addition to formal and informal board meetings, a sub-committee of Cork ETB has been established also, as the board of management of Gaelcholáiste Choilm, to consider issues that support the Gaelcholáiste within the whole-school framework. This board also meets regularly, both formally and informally, and participates in additional meetings with the full board.

The principal and two deputy principals comprise a highly motivated senior management team, providing effective, values-based leadership to the whole school. Each is an experienced leader with a strong commitment to the school and to its role in the development of the wider community. A striking characteristic of the team is the positive working relationship that has been established, not only among its members, but also between the team and staff, students and parents, and among the partners. The quality of the climate created in the school is indicative of the efficacy of successive senior managers and has enabled a smooth transition following recent alterations to the team. The visible presence of the team members and their affirmative responses in all encounters with staff and students provided additional evidence of the role of the team as effective instructional leaders. An awareness and sensitivity to: curricular issues; an understanding of, and engagement with national developments in education, such as junior cycle reform; and continuing participation in subject teaching, contribute to this effectiveness.

Responses by students and parents to questionnaires administered in the course of the evaluation provided substantial confirmation of these findings. Very high ratings were noted in the responses of both groups to items related to happiness with the school and its operation.

Priorities identified by the board and by senior management include the enhancement of teaching and learning, and the fulfilment of staff and student potential. Also prioritised is the maintenance of the currently high levels of staff participation and contribution, which have been essential elements of the development of the school. The cyclical review of policies is ongoing, with a current focus on the enrolment policy and consideration is being given to the development of the physical environment, with proposals for the development

of the canteen, the physical education facilities and specialised meeting rooms. It is clear that the school has advanced considerably through its engagement with the school-development planning process and has very effectively applied the principles of school self-evaluation in the identification and achievement of its goals.

### ***1.2 Effectiveness of leadership for learning***

Excellent systems of formal and informal communication are fundamental characteristics of the operations of the senior management team. These include weekly newsletters, digital notices and the use of the school website, in addition to ongoing contacts with staff, individually, through the year head and class tutor structure, and during regular structured meetings. This facilitates ongoing dialogue throughout the school and enables the identification of opportunities for distributed leadership among staff and students. This is very good practice and has had a significant positive impact on staff participation in school middle management.

Through their structured approach to the development of systems, the management and staff have created a highly effective learning environment that belies the size of the school. The effective student management and student support systems are underpinned by collaborative staff members whose expertise, whether professional or personal, is deployed in the best interests of students and staff. The preparedness of staff at all levels of experience, responsibility and seniority to share good practice has had clearly positive outcomes for staff morale and for the environment of holistic development espoused in the school's mission.

A collaborative approach to whole-school planning has enabled the development of well-structured subject departments and well-formed policies. The effective design and implementation of policies is particularly noted in the high rates of student attendance and retention. Perusal of the comprehensive subject-department plans reveals a clear commitment by staff to review, self-evaluation and to consequent actions. Good practice was noted where, for example, plans were clearly mission focused and where the reports of structured subject department meetings included a significant component of self-evaluation. Similarly, academic standards were seen to have a high priority in subject-department planning. Comparative analyses of the school's results in certificate examinations and the nationally aggregated results were included in the plans and confirmed the school's success in enabling students across the cohort to reach their academic potential. On a more general level, such an approach has facilitated the implementation of creative approaches to learning and teaching, and significant participation in the reform of the junior cycle by piloting the development of short courses.

Such commitment to professional practice entails regular upgrading of skills and competencies. The encouragement and facilitation of continuing professional development (CPD) by management has ensured the development of high levels of skills among staff. These skills continue to be shared collegially and applied in the classroom and in the general administration of the school.

Students are introduced to the school through a lengthy induction process that includes communication with feeder primary schools, visits to the schools and open sessions in which prospective students are provided with opportunities to experience the subjects available in Coláiste Choilm. A supportive induction programme extends into the first term following entry during which time students become familiar with the school's many systems. The learning needs of new students are carefully considered and supported. In addition to information gathered during the induction process from parents and from primary schools, the learning support department and the guidance department collaborate

in their assessment. The information gathered is used to ensure that students are given maximum exposure to classes of mixed ability, to the range of available optional subjects and levels, and to the additional resources provided through, for example the Special Education Support Service.

The enrolment process is based on clear enrolment and admission procedures. These have been valuable in the management of the annual dilemma that faces both parts of the school, where the numbers of students wishing to enrol is greater than the available places. Also underlying the admission process is the school's code of behaviour, which is mission led and emphasises respect, co-operation and support in a manner that is clear and positive, in keeping with the atmosphere that has been created.

The range of subjects available to students at all levels of the school is comprehensive and includes all of those required under the Department's rules. The range of optional subjects in both the junior cycle and senior cycle is based on the polled preferences of students. Where decisions need revisiting, a flexible approach is taken, with highly supportive inputs from individual staff members and from the departments with specific responsibility for such support. Similar processes and supports are invoked at the other transitional phases in students' progress through the school, as when programmes, such as the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) are chosen, when decisions are made regarding career options and when students are in need of personal support. Students' and parents' satisfaction with these processes and systems was highly rated on all possible occasions during the evaluation.

The whole-school support systems available to students are excellent. Student support and guidance is very well structured, under the leadership of senior management, through the well-defined pastoral structure of year heads and class tutors, and through the student-support team that comprises the members of the chaplaincy, the learning support department and the guidance department.

The support responsibilities of individual staff members, whether teaching or non-teaching, are well understood. While some staff members have specified support roles, a clear commitment to supporting students was evident from all responses of staff, including those of administrative staff and those of staff with responsibility for the school's upkeep and maintenance. The support systems are very well defined in the school plan, in the plans of the members of the student-support team and are underpinned by the school's mission. The complementary integration of the mission of care and the code of behaviour is clearly observed in practice. In effect, each year cohort, including those in Gaelcholáiste Choilm, is a sub-school, led by the year head and with designated responsibilities assumed by class tutors, members of the guidance department and other staff. The communication systems, to which allusion has been made, are a vital component of the overall supports that ensure that the needs of each student, whether personal, learning, educational, spiritual or career-related needs, are continually monitored, identified and supported by staff.

The evidence of parents and students gathered during the evaluation very much conformed to these findings. Parents participate formally in the life of the school and in policy formation through membership of the board and of the parents' council. The support of parents for school events and for those organised by staff members is considerable and plays a significant part in their success. A very wide range of extra-curricular activities, comprising over thirty teams in eighteen different sports, various cultural activities, including musical and stage productions in English and Irish, and activities related to co-curricular events, contribute to the richness of students' experience of the school.

The student voice is well represented by the student council that plays a significant role in communication in the school. The council meets weekly, is appropriately structured, and is representative of the student cohort, including that of Gaelcholáiste Choilm. The council

plays an active part in the school's communication system and is affirmed as such by senior management in formal meetings with representatives of the council and in communication with staff through a nominated teacher. Good practice also ensures that the student council has an active role in the formation and review of relevant policies.

Confirmation was provided that the board of management has formally adopted the *Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools* without modification and that the school is compliant with the requirements of the *Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools*.

### ***1.3 Management of facilities***

The value of respect is one of those underlying the school's processes. It was observed that, despite the size of the student cohort, the environment is clean, well decorated and well maintained. The preservation of students' work that is on prominent and permanent display, even in busy corridors, exemplifies the respect shown by students to the work of others. Similar attention is paid to the external environment. Despite the inclement weather conditions at the time of the evaluation, the routine work of maintenance was ongoing and has clearly positive outcomes for the public presentation of the school.

Classrooms are furnished with the requisite furniture and digital technology. The emphasis on safety and on safe procedures was observed in, for example, the floor markings and the display of hazard warnings as appropriate in specialist rooms. In that regard, a comprehensive audit of potential hazards with guidelines for their management was among the documents observed to be in keeping with good practice.

## **2. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING**

### ***2.1 The quality of learning and teaching***

In the course of thirty-four lesson periods in a variety of subjects, teaching and learning of the highest quality were observed. Many examples of excellent practice were observed in a learning environment that was universally positive, affirmative and engaging. In common with the other aspects of the school, the positive relationships between teachers and students and among students enabled communication that was characterised by dialogue, respect and comfortable interactions. The classroom atmosphere was such that student contributions were encouraged and welcomed and, in consequence, enabled ongoing assessment of student progress by teachers and, in many cases, by peer assessment among students.

The planning and preparation of lessons was thorough. Materials and resources were to hand, where used, and included those carried by students, such as textbooks, copybooks and supplementary stationery. The installation of digital technology in classrooms, such as data projectors and visualisers, and the availability of wireless broadband access, enabled their appropriate and planned use in the course of lessons. It was a notable feature of some lessons that tablet computers, which had been provided to students, were used as occasional aids to learning, both as standalone devices and as portals to the internet. The effective use of these devices pointed clearly to their educational potential and demonstrated the capacity of the teaching staff and students to exploit that potential in the achievement of the desired learning outcomes.

In addition to a thorough knowledge of their subjects, student learning was enriched by teachers' enthusiasm and dedication to their chosen subjects. Teachers' personal styles were clearly influenced and enhanced by their personalities and interests, and by the use of authentic routines, which were familiar to, and accommodated by students. Evidence of

prior learning was seen in all lessons and was elucidated in the course of student-teacher interactions. Teachers' familiarity with students' progress was facilitated by their knowledge, not only of academic progress, but also of students' personal attainments and needs. This is very good practice.

The constructive consequences of the school's engagement in teaching and learning initiatives supported by the ETB were noted in teachers' practices. Lessons were well-structured. Students were informed of the desired learning outcomes in all lessons, in many cases using the mini-whiteboards that had been installed for that purpose. Lessons were conducted using a variety of teaching methods. Learning was co-operative and negotiated and included tasks that involved student participation and activity, small-group work, and the imaginative use of resources. Appropriate use was made of textbooks and digital technology.

The atmosphere in which lessons were conducted was predicated on the respectful behaviour of students and teachers. Teachers were comfortable in this environment, moved appropriately among students, sought reactions and affirmed responses. Students, similarly, interacted well with teachers, responded to questions and sought clarification when needed.

Assessment was ongoing and formative. Effective use was made of higher-order questions and strategies that enabled student consideration of issues prior to response. Of the many effective strategies used, the use of a short pause between question and response was particularly noted. This enabled consideration of the question by students and, by a show of hands, a quick estimate of student learning by teachers. In most lessons, the content, and that of previous lessons was recapitulated prior to their conclusion and homework was assigned.

Other good practice observed included a general focus on numeracy and literacy, in confirmation of whole-school initiatives noted in the reports of staff meetings and subject-department meetings. Classrooms and corridors are decorated with samples of student work, subject-related materials and posters, which add to the environment of the school. While space does not permit the assignment of rooms to individual teachers, a good compromise has been achieved in the general and specialist rooms by the rich environments that have been created using such materials.

### **3. IMPLEMENTATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS FROM PREVIOUS EVALUATIONS**

#### ***3.1 Management***

The management of the school has had a clear commitment to the implementation of the recommendations of previous evaluations. Thoughtful consideration has been given to the reports and the recommendations have been implemented.

#### ***3.2 Learning and teaching***

Most of the recommendations of previous evaluations have been subject-specific. Where recommendations could be applied more generally across the curriculum, such as the recommendation that outline programmes be developed or that oral competence in a language be assessed, it was observed in the course of lessons and in subject planning documents, that all of the recommendations had been implemented.

#### **4. THE SCHOOL'S SELF-EVALUATION PROCESS AND CAPACITY FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT**

The school has had a long and effective engagement with the school development planning process. The use of small groups of staff to accomplish tasks is well embedded in practice and is in accord with good practice. Dialogue among staff and management ensures the establishment of priorities for development that are arrived at by consensus and are informed by reviews in which the opinions of staff, parents and students have been surveyed. The focus of the school continues to be on improvement and well-balanced consideration of professional teaching practice and support for students.

Self-evaluation has continued to be an ongoing feature of the improvement process in Coláiste Choilm since before the current national focus on the practice. Fundamentals of the process, such the use of evidence to inform decisions and the use of questionnaires and other instruments in gathering evidence, are well rooted in practice. Similarly, the structural foundations evident in the school's policies and subject departments have been well developed over time. In this context, and in the context of the compatibility of the school's mission with the process, it is clear that the school is already well advanced in, and continues to develop its capacity for, self-evaluation.

# **Appendix**

**School response to the report**

**Submitted by the Board of Management**

### **Area 1 Observations on the content of the inspection report**

The board warmly welcomes the recent overwhelmingly positive WSE-MLL report on Coláiste/Gaelcholáiste Choilm. This report greatly affirms the high standards of teaching and learning in our school and the high quality of our student support systems. The board is very pleased that the report acknowledges the dedication and commitment of staff, parents, students and management. The report also recognises the richness of the educational experience provided by the unique model of Coláiste and Gaelcholáiste Choilm.

### **Area 2 Follow-up actions planned or undertaken since the completion of the inspection activity to implement the findings and recommendations of the inspection**

All school partners acknowledge that the WSE-MLL was a very positive experience which affirmed best practice and enhanced the self-evaluation process. The board has no doubt that the school will continue its progressive work in order to maintain these high educational standards for future generations of students.