Whole-School Evaluation
REPORT

Saint Killian’s Vocational School
New Inn, County Galway

Roll number: 71310P

Date of inspection: 8 May 2010
WHOLE-SCHOOL EVALUATION

A whole-school evaluation of St. Killian’s Vocational School, New Inn was undertaken in May 2010. This report presents the findings of the evaluation and makes recommendations for improvement. During the evaluation, the quality of teaching and learning in four subjects were evaluated in detail, and separate reports are available on these subjects. (See section 7 for details). 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

St. Killian's Vocational School was officially opened in 1952, and has been pivotally important in the local community ever since. The school is used regularly in the evenings by community groups for meetings and for music lessons by a local music school. It provides post-primary, adult, and post-Leaving Certificate FETAC courses.

New Inn is located equidistant from Athenry, Loughrea, Mountbellew and Ballinasloe in rural east County Galway. The school is one of several smaller vocational schools serving a large rural area in the hinterland of these towns. It has three main feeder primary schools, New Inn, Kilconnell and Cappataggle. Small numbers of students also enrol from up to ten other primary schools. Students’ homes are widely spread throughout the area and St. Killian's has its own school bus which significantly aids the maintenance of current student numbers. The routes the school bus follows have recently been changed to facilitate students who otherwise would find it less convenient to attend St Killian's.

The school’s population is characteristically homogenous with few students from Traveller or foreign national backgrounds. Mainstream student numbers in the school are currently 180 and have been more or less at this level for several years.

Although offering a wide range of subjects, its ambience, perceived as a traditional vocational school characterised by a strong profile in practical subjects, may have effected enrolment. Management has recently sought to counter this perception of St. Killian’s by public relations emphasis on the very good Leaving Certificate results that some of its students have attained.

1. QUALITY OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT

1.1 Characteristic spirit of the school

The school has a mission statement and also an elaboration on this described as the vision statement. Both statements are clearly worded and briefly stated, and are printed at the front of the teacher’s handbook, and used on other documents.

The mission statement is well applied in practice. It is reflected in the pastoral care system, and in the individual attention students receive. There is a clearly stated focus on fairness in the mission statement. Gender-linked equality of opportunity, as a subset of fairness, may now need attention if it is to be fully embodied in reality. Success too is a focus of the mission statement, and this aspiration for success of students needs more clarity in policy making and documents to guide the school in attaining it. It is recommended that practices in the general culture of the school be re-examined for the degree to which they reflect mission and vision statements. It would be desirable that a review group be drawn from all
strands of management, parents and students to do this, and that the timeframe be short in order to facilitate the use of its findings in policy and planning soon thereafter.

Fuller attention should be given to the development of academic opportunities, methodologies and standards if student success is to be optimised. Participation in extra-curricular activates should be carefully balanced with attention to academic standards for all those enrolled in the school.

St. Killian’s is part of County Galway Vocational Education Committee (VEC) scheme, which plays a supportive and integrated role by providing beneficial access to administrative knowledge and to resources and personnel that are available for all the schools in the scheme. Services such as an ICT expert, an advocacy service and an education officer are available. The allocation and monitoring of St. Killian’s resources are centrally devised by the VEC. The chief executive officer (CEO) of County Galway VEC is kept up to date on budgetary and administrative matters by the principal and by VEC representation on the board. The principal meets the CEO formally four times a year and detailed analysis is done of all aspects of the running of the school. Commendably, support and advice are always available to senior management in the school through the CEO’s open-door policy.

The school has a vision and purpose that unites management, VEC, parents and staff, with a strong reference to the community served. Commendably, there has been formal communication with students, through the student council, and their views have had a defining influence on the nature of the new canteen service and the school uniform. It is recommended that the role and capabilities of the student council be further developed.

The characteristic spirit of the school as reflected in policy and procedure is good. The draft ‘appreciation’ policy sums up how the school aspires to document and formalise its interpretation of the mission statement. A comprehensive range of policies, most of them in place for a long time, endeavour to support this characteristic spirit.

There is a welcoming and friendly atmosphere in St Killian’s. This and the good relations that exist between students, management and staff were noted by parents and students as being one reason for enrolling in the school. That the school is advantageously integrated with the community it serves is most obviously evident by the access it has been allowed to local facilities. Very good pastoral care procedures and discipline maintenance reflect the characteristic spirit. Teachers are generous with their time and go beyond what is required of them in their efforts to help students in every way possible. Although discipline maintenance is proactive and effective, the school aspires to maintain a lightness of touch in student-teacher relations which results in a cordial easygoing atmosphere.

1.2 School ownership and management

The board of management of St Killian's is a sub-committee of County Galway VEC. It is correctly constituted and has the spread of representation required. The VEC has four representatives on the board and these provide close and constant communication with the parent body.

The board is aware of its statutory functions and obligations. Well-attended meetings are regularly held. The current board is new, having been constituted in April. Training for members will be available before the end of this year. The upcoming training is designed to ensure that all board members understand their role and are aware of the supports available to them through County Galway VEC.
The board has to date operated in close co-operation and effectively with senior management. The board has both expertise and commitment, and its members have complete loyalty to the school and its community. It would be to the great advantage of students if it now used its capabilities to ensure, through senior management, educational improvement and development.

The board and its predecessors have been involved in policy ratification and adoption. At present work is progressing on some policies. It is commendable that consultation has been part of the ratification of policies. However, the planning culture of the school needs to be developed. A complete and comprehensive school plan and attendant action plans to ensure implementation is now required. Systems and structures to make the planning process effective, along with steering the process towards early completion is strongly recommended to the board to ensure that it fulfils its requirements under the Education Act.

Detailed minutes are kept at board meetings and these records are used as the basis of formal written communication of the general business of the board for teachers and parents. Where confidentiality may be an issue the minutes are edited prior to being made available.

The current and previous board has concerned itself with improving the physical fabric of the school building, its equipment and other amenities. Its present focus is the replacement of five prefabricated classrooms with permanent accommodation. It has also made a submission to the Department of Education and Skills in relation to the provision of a second science room. In association with the principal, there has been significant progress in ensuring that maintenance of the building continues and for several years Summer Work’s scheme funds have been made available to waterproof the roof of the old building. This is an ongoing project. Early in 2010, it was necessary to radically improve the heating system and considerable funds were made available for this through the Department. The board has also assiduously kept up to date with school activities and successes across a range of educational and leisure pursuits. This is reflected in the minutes of their meetings. It has supported the school's fundraising drives, particularly the campaign to buy a school bus.

The administrative aspect of the board’s role has been good and the school has benefited from its expertise and commitment. The educational vision and leadership dimension of the board should now be developed further, and it is recommended that, in the life of the present board, members become attuned to good practice in this regard in the County Galway scheme and elsewhere.

Communication by the board with parents is achieved through parents’ association representatives on the board. It is suggested that an agreed report should be made available through the school's website so that parents would have an alternative way of staying in touch with the board's activities.

1.3 In-school management

Since being appointed three years ago, senior management has provided leadership in the various areas. They have been successful in implementing a reorganised discipline system in the school which has contributed to overall improvement by providing a good basis for achieving the mission statement objectives. Fundraising, promoting the school, attending to the maintenance and development of current building stock, and developing skills in relation to the day-to-day running and operation of the school, particularly discipline, have been among the main leadership activities to date.

There has been effective co-operation and collaboration in the work done on a daily basis by principal and deputy principal and the settled, positive atmosphere that they have
established in the school is commendable. Different facets of the senior management role are undertaken by principal and deputy, and the post holders have taken on responsibilities that support them in the management of the school. Communication is good between principal and deputy principal and they work very effectively as a team. Their aptitudes and strengths are complimentary and the duties they now execute reflect these different characteristics and interests. The principal focuses on timetabling and discipline. The deputy principal has a strongly pastoral role, dealing with students’ personal issues, with subject change and careers, and liaising with staff. He has significant contact with middle management. Both principal and deputy principal admirably maintain a teaching workload beyond what they actually should do, as a result of recent cutbacks in school resources. The deputy principal and the principal also maintain a rota of supervision responsibilities, particularly before and after the school day.

The main thrust of the principal’s work is operational in character while that of the deputy is pastoral. It is recommended however that the principal develop a wider conception of principalship. In the interests of the further progress of St. Killian’s, fully informed educational leadership is necessary in relation to subject department planning and whole-school planning in general. It is important, if student outcomes are to be improved, that all concerned in the management and delivery of learning experiences are up to date with current developments in education. It is recommended that the principal engage more pointedly with the school self-evaluation and school development planning process as a vehicle for school improvement so that standards are raised, enrolment expanded and better habitual use is made of ICT for teaching and learning.

There is no written job description currently available for the roles and duties of the two senior management posts. In the interest of proactively progressing work, the compilation of job descriptions that take on board a focus on executive responsibilities for long-term school development should be completed in respect of the principal and deputy principal.

The principal and deputy principal meet almost every morning. This formal daily meeting centres on the business for the day ahead and the practical arrangements that need to be organised. Ongoing issues of student behaviour and welfare are dealt with, as well as urgent and unforeseen matters where contingency arrangements are required. This is good and effective practice. It is recommended that more meeting time should be scheduled regularly for non-operational planning and activity, and review and evaluation.

On appointment to their posts, the principal and deputy, encouraged by the VEC, participated in the Leadership Development for Schools course for school managers. It is commendable that they both have completed this worthwhile professional development.

Some evidence that a capability for self evaluation and review within senior management exists. After eighteen months in their posts, the principal and deputy reviewed the work of middle management. Assistant principals and special duties teachers were surveyed with the aim of reviewing the school's needs. On the basis of this information, changes and developments of posts were made, which led to change and improvement that directly benefits students.

Senior management is supported in its work by the assistant principals who function as a middle-management tier. In the temporary absence of the principal and deputy, the assistant principals as individuals and as a group can be relied on to substitute for the functions of senior management. This is commended. There are three assistant principals and three special duties teachers. Communication and interaction by senior management with post holders is good and the wide range of tasks they do represents considerable delegation and shared leadership. Post holders meetings are held, among themselves and with senior management. This is good practice that enhances overall school quality.
There is good distributed leadership. Effective staff participation in the running and visualisation of how the school should be operated has been given excellent practical attention by current management. Well in advance of formal staff meetings, all staff are surveyed, by written questionnaire, on aspects of the school that are working well and those that need improvement. This survey sets out an agenda for the staff meeting that reflects, in a democratic way, the path ahead towards a collective engagement. Staff meetings include briefing by the principal and deputy, along with group work, to tease out and seek solutions to issues. Management and staff are highly commended for this work. All staff are also involved on some in-school committee.

It is recommended that ways of reducing senior management’s hands-on administration and supervision be examined, in order to initiate, develop, and monitor whole-school policy most urgently for the improvement of outcomes for students. Good outcomes and attainment are reliant on the combined input of planning, classroom practices, pedagogical approaches, ICT use, homework and assessment. Developing such a multifaceted, holistic approach to student outcomes should be the school’s primary developmental priority.

The schools admissions policy is fair, inclusive and welcoming. Although there are few students from minority groups in the school at present, this is due to the school’s context.

Expectations of behaviour, deportment, punctuality and respect have been clarified in the behaviour policy and established in daily practice. These expectations have been implemented and monitored, particularly by the principal and deputy principal. Positive student behaviour is encouraged and validated. The nature of sanctions that are applied for breaches of the behaviour code are clear and good standards of behaviour are now strongly evident. The principal has overall responsibility for the pastoral and disciplinary system in the school and gives serious attention to any cases referred to him. The principal is the final arbiter in cases of serious infringements leading to suspension.

The school is currently working on a draft policy that will give even stronger affirmation by making the encouragement of positive behaviour a formally recognised strategy in the management of students. The school is also actively seeking to give enhanced attention and status to the nurture of positive school-enhancing relationships through the development of an ‘appreciation’ policy. This is most commendable, as it attempts to build on the schools existing mission statement aspiration for fairness, encouragement and positivism. It is notable that in the teacher’s handbook it is stated that subject teachers must aim to communicate both positive and negative observations to parents.

By developing better discipline and supervision arrangements, senior management has improved the basis for the delivery of a quality school and learning environment in St Killian’s. The achievement of this was a big investment of time and effort for the principal and deputy principal. Such task-focused operational leadership is highly commendable. Most commendably, the teaching staff has also committed to supervision over and above the level required, illustrating their dedication and conscientiousness to the common good.

All students are issued with an excellent student journal. The journal is a key vehicle for subject teachers and parents to communicate on an everyday basis. As well as being a notebook for recording homework, the journal outlines expectations for positive behaviour along with the essence of the school’s stance on a range of important issues.

Class tutors and year heads are engaged on a daily basis in the management of students. In the small school setting, students are individually known by all staff and this adds to the personalised and insightful way that they are managed. A five-minute tutorial happens every morning before classes begin. Class tutors use this time to keep in contact with
students and for roll call. The class teacher has the role of attending to the pastoral care needs of the students. The year head is charged with being aware of every aspect of the year group. This contributes to the learning environment of the school. In contrast to the class tutor, the year head role has a strong focus on the maintenance of good discipline. The year head has responsibility to ensure that all steps in the discipline process and all school procedures and systems operate effectively in the year group. There is an expectation that problems should be resolved by the subject teacher where possible before being passed on to the year head for further investigation and intervention. It is reported that this system is currently working well.

The students’ council in St Killian’s dates back to the appointment of current senior management and is now established as a feature of school life. Members of the council represent every year group and are democratically elected. There is one male and one female representative for each year. The council perceives its role as complementing student-teacher liaison and developing effective student leadership. A liaison teacher works with the council and members are conscious of their role as being the official voice of the student body. The council had an input to the anti-bullying policy and to the new canteen arrangements for healthy eating. It is recommended that, whenever possible, the students’ council should have some training for their role.

Very good retention of students has been the norm in St. Killian’s, in part due to the supports available and the level of personal attention that is possible. There is a good strategy for tracking attendance and for follow-up procedures for repeated absenteeism, which tends to involve a small cohort of students. It is important that the school continues to monitor the poor attendance of this cohort and tries to provide solutions. With this end in view, it is recommended that the use of the Junior Certificate School Programme materials and strategies for those who are repeatedly absent, and thus at risk of dropping out of school, be investigated during the upcoming academic year.

The parents’ association of St. Killian’s has been long established and a new association has recently been democratically elected. Parents have representation on the board of management and, through them, the school has developed admirable links with the community. Recent fundraising for the school bus is testament to the association's success in mobilising the community in support of the school. The school issues a regular newsletter for parents, providing communication on key school activities and events. It is recommended that the school's website is used to post information from both school and parents’ association in an effort to achieve wider communication with the generality of parents. The home-school-community liaison (HSCL) coordinator’s core work is parental communication by telephone and letter, and the principal follows these up through home visits. It is recommended that this practice be reviewed, and that home visits are assigned to the HSCL coordinator. Management has good, effective links with outside agencies and professional services that support the work of the school.

Parent-teacher meetings are offered every year for all year groups. During the course of the school year, the school runs various information events for parents, including an open night for parents of prospective first-year students, which is coupled with a sports day for prospective first-year students in May and followed by another two-day induction in early July. A subject options information evening for parents of incoming senior cycle students is also held and this provides contact with the school and information pertinent to subject choice for Leaving Certificate.
1.4 Management of resources

At present, there are twelve permanent whole-time teachers, one contract of indefinite duration (CID) teacher and four part-time teachers in St. Killian’s. This allocation is determined centrally by the VEC. All teachers are timetabled for full hours appropriate to their status. There are no special needs assistants (SNAs) allocated to the school. Support and ancillary staff are well deployed and integrated into the in-school community, where their work is valued and affirmed. ICT is used extensively by the school secretary and thus contributes to the clerical efficiency of school administration. The school grounds and buildings are maintained by a full-time caretaker, who is aided in this task by a part-time cleaner.

The school is compliant with the Department of Education and Skills requirements regarding the appropriate deployment of staff, and the use of available resources, with the exception of the special educational needs resources. The allocation of hours for special educational needs is not being used solely for special needs students. Instead, the staff resources have been used to create additional class periods for the mainstream classes. It is recommended that the hours be used strictly according to the guidelines and to meet the needs for which they were supplied. Staff members work effectively to support the delivery of education and make a valuable contribution to the school by volunteering for additional duties and providing extra tuition for students.

The timetabling of practical classes for students in lieu of Physical Education (PE) takes place. The scheduling of these classes is co-ordinated in a way that allows junior and senior teams to be trained for Gaelic games. While basketball, yoga and other activities, including board games, are provided for students who are not being trained to compete on a school team, the centrality of games-training periods on the timetable is unacceptable. It is recommended that this practice be discontinued as it inhibits the flexibility desirable for optimal scheduling for curricular subjects. It favours a particular group. It is recommended that the board and senior management research the possibility of providing a PE teacher on a part-time basis to offer the official PE syllabus to all students.

The practice of having a short school day on Friday should be reviewed. The school’s superior catering and transport arrangements mean that the school day and school week could be longer without putting strain on students. A longer lunch break would facilitate extracurricular and co-curricular activities, and a full school day on Friday would create an improved timeframe for the school’s core business of course delivery, teaching, learning and assessment.

Recent diminishment of human resources by 0.6 WTEs has meant that Physics, Chemistry, History and Geography or now unavailable in senior cycle. These subjects are a loss to the breadth and balance of the curricular options. The principal aspires to having these reinstated when resources become available.

St. Killian’s has benefited from its relationship with the local community, who allow the use of a large community hall for activities during the school week. The building stock of the school, is old but effectively used. Maintenance is essential and ongoing. In addition to the main building built in the 1950s, there is ample additional space provided by extensions and a number of prefabricated classrooms. There are specialist rooms for practical subjects and the sciences, and the level of equipment and facilities of these varies, the technology and woodwork areas being the most up to date.

The school’s ICT resources in general are quite considerable and represent a potential that has not as yet impacted optimally on students’ attainment and engagement although junior and leaving certificate results are considered by the school management to have
consistently improved as a result of the availability of ICT in the last three years. Two computer rooms, with forty-four new machines overall, along with three interactive white boards, have been provided lately. Effective integration of ICT into learning and the delivery of courses should be now developed in tandem with other interventions focused on improving attainment levels. Subject department planning should include reference to use of ICT on an ongoing basis in teaching and learning. The recently set up staff resource and work room has been equipped to provide internet access, and this is a very good development. The school’s ICT policy has been documented. The ICT teachers meet every term and keep minutes of proceedings. This good practice is commended. It is recommended that continuing professional development (CPD) for management and staff in the use of the schools available ICT facilities be accessed when possible on an ongoing basis.

In accordance with requirements, the school has a documented health and safety policy. This should be audited and updated regularly to continually reflect all aspects of subject requirements and syllabus changes. Individual teachers in subject departments have responsibility for ensuring that the health and safety policy is effectively applied. While the policy is generally comprehensive, it is recommended that all the subject departments prepare a specific additional reference document for particular health and safety issues of their respective departments. Specifically health and safety information regarding the equipment, activities and accommodation that they use for delivering courses and programmes should be available. Tracking and storage of dangerous equipment should be referenced by all the relevant subject departments. It is recommended that the board and the principal ensure that the specific risks for all subjects, and the antidote to these risks, are comprehensively documented and added to the existing health and safety policy as soon as possible.

2. QUALITY OF SCHOOL PLANNING

2.1 The school plan

The school planning process was facilitated at the outset by the School Development Planning Initiative (SDPI) facilitators and their advice about methods and procedures were followed in the initial work done on the policies. In 2004, three staff members attended a week-long planning course in National University of Ireland, Galway, an excellent engagement by these teachers. This began the planning process in the school and the policies were developed subsequently in 2007-08. The blended communities of parents, staff, management and board were represented on the planning teams. After the policies were completed the planning process lost momentum. Since then there has been a poor culture of formal goal-focused planning.

The school has developed a collection of policies which act as the permanent section of the school plan. Some of these policies have been in place prior to the current administration; others are now just beginning to be developed. There is a comprehensive range of policies that outline some procedural and operational structures used in the day-to-day running of the school. Some of these policies need more work to fully develop their potential and clarity as tools for school development.

There is no comprehensive, articulated documentation of ideas and aspirations for the school. It is important that this situation be reversed and that an action plan that acts as a practical guide for school development, particularly educational development, be prepared. It is recommended that an action plan focussed on a few key and appropriate priorities, and with reference to a set of specific timeframes, is now developed, ratified and implemented. Provision should also be made for review and evaluation of the progress through the phases
of the production of the action plan. The process of drawing up such a plan presents an opportunity for management to articulate a vision for the school.

It is important that management utilise the planning process as an important tool for improving outcomes and upgrading the school's efficacy in delivering courses and catering for the different aptitudes and interests of all students. It would be desirable that inclusive participation in planning is promoted, and that the completion of an initial action plan occurs as soon as possible.

More engagement with the outcomes of the state examinations may enhance management’s ability to be proactive in improving academic outcomes for students. At present, more detailed analysis is necessary and it is recommended that the principal undertakes to do this and to follow with formal meetings with the subject departments. As a rule, state examination outcomes are not analysed by the subject departments themselves. It is recommended that the subject departments prepare for the joint meeting with the principal by analysing outcomes every year, by discoursing on their conclusions with senior management, and by proposing strategies for improvement.

There is a need for a concerted effort to get students to take subjects at the highest level that their ability allows. The management team now need to be more proactive in countering any culture that does not expect the highest possible level of academic attainment. Subject department teams should encourage a greater uptake of subjects at higher level. It is necessary that they do this at junior cycle, as it has implications for students’ Leaving Certificate opportunities and subsequent life choices.

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.

3. QUALITY OF CURRICULUM PROVISION

3.1 Curriculum planning and organisation

The school timetable is constructed by the principal. The VEC, post holders, guidance personnel and programme co-ordinator all contribute with information and insights. Before work begins on the timetable, the teachers are surveyed in relation to their subjects’ needs and the allocation of time required and these are taken into account, where possible, in drafting the timetable. Because the subjects are offered to senior cycle on a best-fit model, the timetable varies in what it offers from year to year. Timetabling issues are given attention at staff meetings and in the work of subject departments.

St Killian’s offers a range of academic, practical, arts and technological subjects, and languages, at both junior and senior cycle. In junior cycle, all students study the following core subjects, except in special circumstances: Irish, English, Mathematics, Science, CSPE, SPHE, and Computer Studies. In addition, students must choose subjects from amongst History, Geography, Home Economics, Religious Education, Art, Craft and Design, Business Studies, Materials Technology (Wood), Technical Graphics.
In senior cycle, all students study the core subjects Irish, English and Mathematics and a number of choices from the following: Biology, Agricultural Science, French, Technical Drawing, Construction Studies, Computer Studies, Engineering, Business, Accounting, Art and Home Economics - Social and Scientific. History and Geography have been discontinued this year due to lack of resources. For senior cycle, students are asked to choose their subjects in late third year and then every effort is made to accommodate them in timetabling. Higher-level Mathematics is a flagship subject for St. Killian’s. The post-Leaving Certificate secretarial course is at FETAC certificate Level 1 and 11.

3.2 Arrangements for students’ choice of subjects and programmes

Very good arrangements are in place for information giving about enrolment and transfer, both for the parents and the potential students. Parents of incoming first-year students are invited to attend an information session before their child starts school. They are asked to provide as much information as they can about their child and have an opportunity to tour the school and to converse with the subject teachers and senior management. All incoming first-year students attend a pre-enrolment induction day of sports and other activities in May during their final school term in primary school. This is followed by a two-day induction course in July, a commendable voluntary initiative by the principal which helps with students’ engagement and holistic development. Both of these induction initiatives are aimed at improving transition from primary school, helping with the development of social contacts and introducing students to some of the subjects available. Incoming first years choose their non-core subjects after sampling what is available for the first two weeks of term, though they do so on the understanding that they may make changes if they wish during the first few weeks. The two week sampling is too short an experience of any subject. The choices students make, as children without any experience of post-primary life, determine the path they will take in secondary school and will define the vocational, further education and life choices available to them. Improving educational attainment means that decisions about how first-year students are organised, and how they choose their subjects, need now to be reviewed. Changing the way first year is approached is one way to make a better base for improving student outcomes. It is recommended that a module system, where students have significant immersion in all subjects before making their choices, should be developed. This should be part of an extensive review of the whole curriculum, of student options and availability of subjects, and of access to subjects across genders.

On entry to first year, two mixed-ability class groups are formed. Some students with special educational needs are identified prior to the start of the school year, on the basis of information provided by parents and feeder primary schools. Others are identified in the course of the first term in St. Killian’s. All this is very effective practice. All students receive timely individual guidance support, appropriate to their needs and to their stage in the school cycles.

There is very good information given about subject choices to students and parents through open nights at the school at key points of transfer for students, and good guidance given to support students in decision making. Subject choices and options available to students are designed and offered at both junior certificate and leaving certificate based on students’ preferences, for which they are surveyed, and on foot of the information gleaned from this process, strands of subject options are set up. These strands of options vary from year to year, based on and reflecting student preferences. This is good practice as it endeavours to ensure that students’ are accommodated in their choice of subjects for vocational and aptitude purposes. The school make great efforts at senior cycle to accommodate all students’, and with the help of the VEC, have to date managed, despite low student
numbers, to provide a wide choice of options for students to enhance their vocational aspirations.

3.3 Co-curricular and extracurricular provision

There is good provision for co-curricular and extracurricular activities in St. Killian’s and it is reported that there is a high level of participation in these. Sport, arts, travel and culture are all covered by the school’s provision. There has been a long tradition of tours to Europe every two years for sporting and cultural purposes, which has developed language awareness. There is a strong tradition of staff giving time and expending effort and commitment in the service of the students’ holistic educational needs and to furthering the goals implicit in the ethos of the school. Many of the co-curricular and extracurricular provisions available would not be possible without the notable generosity of the staff. This culture of giving, is recognised, appreciated and acknowledged by board, parents, students and VEC.

Participation in a variety of competitive events supports and enhances curricular learning and personal development. The school has a consistent history of success in team sports, including All Ireland titles. Drama classes are provided by an outside specialist and performances for the school community ensue at Christmas. A mobile cinema service stages screenings at intervals and this has augmented the cultural profile of the school. A French-language theatre company perform annually in the school. A local music school gives two students a tuition scholarship. These students are nominated by the school management after research and consultation. To date the beneficiaries have always been girls. It is suggested that a better gender representation should be possible in awarding these scholarships in future. There is good participation in music lessons and some students over the years have played in the National Youth Orchestra.

Current lunch time arrangements do not facilitate optimal participation in extracurricular and co-curricular activities, though these have been available. Computer usage, visual art and other activities valuable for holistic development could be more accessible to students than at present, subject to the implementation of recommendations regarding the length of the school week.

As an alternative to sport and training in the timetabled physical activities class, board games, yoga and other activities are often available. It would be important that all students use this period productively and that any tendency to drop out be countered by supporting, through good tuition, achievement in the activities involved.

Students view science experiments carried out on special demonstration days at the University of Limerick. The open days at third-level and further-education institutions are attended by groups of students annually. Attendance at concerts, plays and exhibitions, along with visits to museums and galleries, and field trips valuably extend what is taught in the classrooms of St. Killian’s.

4. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN SUBJECTS

4.1 Planning and preparation

The school is engaged in subject planning and there is evidence of good collaboration among teachers in the different subject departments and across departments. Meeting times are made available and co-ordinators are in place. Informal meetings also take place in many departments. This facilitates professional dialogue.
A review of the planning documentation presented during the evaluation demonstrated that the various subject plans were at different stages of development. In all cases, the plan provided information on the organisational details of the department, schemes of work and assessment and homework procedures. In many departments, the schemes of work consist of a very broad outline of topics to be taught and a timescale for delivery but do not address the knowledge, skills and learning outcomes that the students should achieve each year. In some instances the plans aligned strongly to the format of the state examination papers rather than the agreed overall aims for the subject. To support the short-term planning of individual teachers, it is recommended that the planning documentation be reviewed regularly and collaboratively in combination with the relevant syllabuses and should address, in addition to syllabus content, matters of skills acquisition and teaching strategies as well as learning outcomes.

In the individual lessons observed, there was evidence of good short-term planning. In many lessons, the aims were clear and this contributed to good quality learning. Planning for the use of resources, including ICT, was of a very good standard in the majority of lessons. Very effective planning for inclusion was a feature of many lessons observed. Indeed, very good links between the individual subject departments and the team supporting students with additional educational needs were evident. This is commended.

4.2 Learning and teaching

Good quality teaching and learning was evident in the lessons observed, with many instances of very good practice noted in individual subject inspection reports. The purpose of lessons was clarified at the outset and the pace was purposeful and appropriate. Teacher exposition and instructions for student activities were clear.

Very good individual planning for lessons was evident in the range of resources used to support student learning. These included ICT, a DVD, handouts, maps, the whiteboard and worksheets. Of particular note was the effective integration of ICT and visuals which impacted positively on students’ learning and enhanced their participation and interest. The increased use of ICT and visual stimuli is recommended in this regard. In all subject areas, good linkage was established between the lesson content and the students’ local environment and familiar experience. This is a commendable means of making the topics interesting and relevant.

A variety of teaching and learning methodologies was employed in lessons. In line with good practice, these methodologies created a good balance between teacher exposition and students’ active engagement with lesson content. Some very good examples of well-managed group-work and pair-work activities, in addition to peer assessment and self-evaluation tasks, were observed. Good quality questioning strategies were in evidence where higher-order and lower-order questions were mixed appropriately to cater for the variety of abilities. In some lessons, the increased use of targeted questioning strategies is recommended to enhance the participation of all students.

There was evidence of differentiation, in the lessons visited, to accommodate the different styles of learning in the mixed-ability class setting. Differentiation strategies centred on questioning techniques, support for individual students, assigned exercises and the development of subject-specific language. This is good practice and should be further developed to provide a greater focus on upward differentiation, key-word glossaries and the use of mind maps or other graphic organisers to summarise lesson material.

A positive and supportive learning environment, underpinned by effective classroom management, good rapport and mutually respectful relationships between students and their
teachers, characterised each lesson observed. The students were engaged in their learning and displayed a good level of knowledge and understanding of the subjects evaluated.

4.3 Assessment

The school has appropriate arrangements in place to support and monitor the regular assessment of students’ learning. Formal assessments take place in November and at the end of the first and the third term. These are further supplemented by class tests and ongoing in-class assessment of students’ progress. Effective systems have been established in relation to the recording of attendance and achievement in each subject area. Parents are kept well informed of students’ progress through annual parent-teacher meetings organised for each year group and school reports which are issued three times a year. The students’ journals are also used to communicate the outcomes of class tests.

Homework is regularly assigned across the subject areas evaluated. Some very good practice was evident where assessment for learning (AfL) practices were applied and included useful constructive feedback and evaluative comments to guide students in improving the quality of their work. The use of such formative assessment techniques should be extended to all subject areas. Information on AfL is available on www.ncca.ie, the website of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA).

In most cases, a review by inspectors of students’ copybooks generally revealed good quality work and indicated good progress. In some subject areas it is recommended that a greater variety of homework tasks and assessment strategies be implemented to support students in acquiring knowledge and developing a range of skills in line with syllabus objectives.

An analysis of students’ performance in certificate examinations is carried out by management. Responsibility for this task should be devolved to subject departments and it should form an integral part of ongoing subject planning. This practice will enable each subject department to identify trends and to plan for the development of student assessment as well as teaching and learning. It was noted from a review of documentation that, while student attainment in the certificate examinations is generally good, there is scope for the school to review the levels taken by students, particularly in the Junior Certificate examination. A whole-school strategy, with a focus on target setting and action planning, should be developed to encourage a greater uptake of subjects at higher level.

5. Quality of Support for Students

5.1 Inclusion of students with additional educational needs

The special educational needs policy was formulated in 2005 and has been successfully in operation since. The policy makes ample provision for inclusiveness and equality, and the procedures for supporting students’ special educational needs, as detailed in it, are very good. The parents are asked to provide whatever information and records are available about their child’s condition and needs before enrolment and are encouraged to meet and discuss these at the school’s open evening with the special educational team and senior management.

A special educational support team of three teachers, and the school guidance counsellor, have different, clearly-defined roles in the provision of educational support. A special educational needs co-ordinator, a qualified learning-support teacher and a part-time Science and Mathematics specialist carry out the executive, organisational and delivery functions
outlined in the plan. There is good liaison with, and information giving to, parents and subject teachers, and with senior management.

Supports to aid the inclusion of students from disadvantaged, minority and other groups, and those for whom English is a second language, are very good and hinge on the pastoral care awareness of the school as a whole and on the scrutiny of academic progress by the year head, who works through the subject teacher. The identification of needs through these methods leads to active support for the inclusion of these students in all aspects of school life. The *buddy* system provides daily support from peers. The school’s well-implemented anti-bullying stance ensures that the general environment is as stress free as possible. Where psychological or behavioural difficulties are discerned, the school contacts the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) psychologist for specific supports. Where appropriate, the learning support necessary for a student who has a mother tongue other than English is available through withdrawal. Games and sports, and co-curricular and extracurricular activities are also available as a tool to further the school’s goal of universal inclusiveness. Ultimately, the friendly ambience of the school aids integration as does the emphasis on fairness and success that derives from the mission statement.

Students with special educational needs are integrated effectively into mainstream classes. The role of the learning-support team is to provide additional teaching support in literacy and numeracy to students with low attainment and special educational needs. Students receive this additional teaching by being withdrawn from Irish lessons. Individual education plans (IEPs) are used to create a tuition package for students with special educational needs. The special education team also communicates regularly with the parents of all students with special educational needs and those receiving additional tuition, and consult with them regarding the setting and review of learning targets in the IEPs. The learning-support team collaborates with mainstream teachers in relation to students with special educational needs by advising on educational choices, making information available on the particular learning needs, abilities, and attainment of individuals, and by advising on teaching strategies and resources, learning materials and assistive technology. The school management encourages special-educational and all other staff to up-skill and attend relevant in-service courses.

All records for students with special educational needs are kept securely, as befits their confidential nature. The special education team meet the principal and deputy principal once per term, regarding concerns or updating of students’ progress. The special education co-ordinator develops a relationship with the feeder schools from where students with special educational needs are enrolled and with the local NEPS psychologist and Enable Ireland, in order to set up strategies that will ease their transfer to St. Killian’s. The NEPS psychologist generally meets parents of students with special educational needs who are new to the school and with the special education co-ordinator when assessing these students. The co-ordinator also assesses first-year reading ages during the first week of term. Specific tests are in use for information gathering and assessment about special needs. The attendance and retention of the cohort of students who receive learning support is subject to the same scrutiny and corrective intervention as with all other students.

At present, the provision of additional teaching and interventions for students with special educational needs is focussed on the core subjects as well as a few non-core ones. It is recommended that attention should now be extended to a wider range of subjects, as the resources are available for this but are being used to create smaller class groupings which do not optimally benefit the relevant students.

The deputy principal’s centrality and influence in all aspects of the holistic development of students, which is a priority for the school, is an important strength, not just for those with special educational needs but for the whole student population. Students with special
educational needs receive the high-quality guidance that all other students do. Parents testify to the care and support that students with special needs receive as one reason for enrolling their children. There is clarity about the procedures that apply to teacher-parent contact in relation to special education issues. There are also effective procedures for links with outside agencies and bodies and the principal plays a key role in meeting parents to determine individual students’ special requirements, liaising with psychologists and meeting representatives of relevant outside agencies.

5.2 Guidance and student support in the whole-school context

The school’s ex-quota allocation for Guidance is well used and the school has an excellent programme. Every effort is made to sensitize students, in an age and aptitude appropriate way, to the necessity of being proactive in relation to their own future. Excellent systems and support are in place for this and these are commended in the highest possible way.

There is a guidance office where students are scheduled for meetings with the guidance counsellor. This is equipped with a computer and internet access. Students have access to over forty computers on which, with the support and encouragement of the guidance counsellor, they are required to do their research on their career options. Many complete their CAO application online. They must periodically complete a form where they outline the study, the grades and skills-building activities they must undertake in order to achieve their goals in relation to the future.

Access to educational, personal and vocational guidance is good and is a function not just of the guidance department but of the whole school, with subject teachers and tutors giving advice and encouragement. The pastoral care system is a dimension of guidance and supports holistic development. It is recommended that links be strengthened with SPHE teachers in order to utilise the possibilities inherent in this programme as part of whole-school inclusion in the guidance process.

The way that the guidance programme is constructed and organised is excellent both at junior cycle and senior cycle. First years complete psychometric testing and start a careers folder which they keep throughout their years in school, adding to it and collecting information. Second years continue to extend their careers folder. Guidance in third year features classes in subject choice and study skills. It is recommended that study skills are also provided in first year and second year.

In the transition from junior to senior cycle, additional information is provided to students to assist them in choosing subjects, programmes and levels. The guidance process becomes more focused and extensive in fourth year. Career guidance and a study skills programme are provided for all Leaving Certificate students. These include information regarding subjects, colleges, grants and career paths, along with some skills to build self knowledge and sensitivity to personal needs and preferences in relation to careers and further education.

The guidance plan outlines the role of all school personnel, including the board, in the process. For example, the computer teacher is responsible for instructing students in using guidance software and skills that enable them to research specific careers that interest them as individuals.

In fourth year, there is a big emphasis on aptitudes, learning styles and a focus on multiple intelligences. Suitable assessment instruments are used. The guidance counsellor has utilised the MENTAGNA system, a computerised tool for careers assessment, with fourth
years. Appropriate speakers from businesses, colleges and the world of work are arranged during the year as part of the holistic and multifaceted approach.

Skills’ building is excellent in relation to the activities and tasks students have to undertake for guidance. In senior cycle, students fill in a mock CAO form to familiarise them with the techniques of doing this key task properly. Every student meets individually with the guidance counsellor prior to filling the CAO form for real. Commendably, there is a parents’ night held in St. Killian’s prior to filling in the CAO forms. LCVP participants do a recorded interview. There is a good focus on the interlinked nature of examination success and guidance processes and activities. The guidance that students receive is extensive and of very high quality.

6. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The mission statement is well applied in practice.
- The school has a welcoming admissions policy. It aspires to provide a fair and encouraging environment that contributes to student success. The school has well-developed links with and enjoys the respect and support of the local community and, interacts well with outside agencies and services.
- The school maintains good discipline using a lightness of touch in student-teacher relations which results in a cordial atmosphere. This has recently been emphasised in the draft ‘appreciation’ policy.
- The board of management is properly constituted, aware of its statutory functions and obligations, has regular well attended meetings, and is a strong support to management. The school enjoys good communication with, and support from, County Galway VEC.
- The teaching staff is dedicated and professional, and contributes to co-curricular and extracurricular activities, to supervision and to the pastoral care of students.
- Good quality teaching and learning was evident in the lessons observed.
- A range of documented school policies is in place, and others are in draft form.
- The students’ council contributes valuably to student welfare.
- The parents’ association is active and supports the school in a range of ways, notably through its successful fundraising campaigns.
- There is an excellent guidance and counselling programme available to students.
- Transfer of students from primary school is excellently catered for.
- Cultural and sporting activities are well developed.

As a means of building on these strengths and to address areas for development, the following key recommendations are made:

- It is strongly recommended that the board and the principal develop systems and structures to make the planning process effective. The principal and deputy should fast forward the key elements of a draft school plan in order that this is implemented relatively quickly.
- It is recommended that the board becomes familiar with its role and function in line with the requirements of the Education Act, and that it becomes proactive in advancing strategies for future educational improvements in St Killian’s.
- It is recommended that the shortened school day on Fridays be discontinued and that the lunch break is extended as part of a raft of holistic measures to improve student outcomes.
- It is recommended that the principal guides all departments to undertake detailed analysis of the school’s results in the state examinations annually with a view to creating strategies for improving success across the range of student abilities.
• It is recommended that the form and content of first year curriculum and
timetabling should be part of the extensive review of the whole-school curriculum.
• It is recommended that the allocated resources for special educational needs be
used for the direct benefit of the students for which they are provided.

Post-evaluation meetings were held with the staff and board of management when the draft
findings and recommendations of the evaluation were presented and discussed.

7. RELATED SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORTS

The following related Subject Inspection reports are available:
• Subject Inspection of Business – 2 May 2010
• Subject Inspection of English – 8 May 2010
• Subject Inspection of Geography – 10 May 2010
• Subject Inspection of History – 29 April 2010

Published, June 2011
Appendix

School response to the report

Submitted by the Board of Management
Area 1  Observations on the content of the inspection report

The Board is extremely pleased to welcome this very positive report which affirms the work carried out to date by the new senior management team in St. Killian’s. It comprehensively recognises the high quality of teaching and learning in the school. In addition it endorses the competence and enthusiasm of the staff as well as the courteous and polite demeanour of the students. Further to this it acknowledges the caring atmosphere, the mutual respect and the inclusively that is the prevailing culture within the school.

The Board of Management notes that the inspection was carried out during a period of industrial action and as such limited teacher input into the evaluation. This situation was admirably dealt with by all school personnel during the evaluation period.

Positive aspects highlighted in the evaluation include;

- A mission Statement which is well applied in practice.
- Senior management who have provided leadership in the various areas.

- There is good distributed leadership. Effective staff participation in the running and visualisation of how the school should be operated has been given excellent practical attention by current management.

- A committed staff, caring atmosphere and the respectful interpersonal relations which exist in our school.

- The Board would like to state that the exceptionally high achievement of students in the State Exams is consistent with the excellent quality of teaching and learning found during the various subject inspections and the efforts made by teachers to provide a secure, caring, stimulating and supportive learning environment.

- The very successful pastoral care procedures and discipline maintenance.

- The settled, positive atmosphere that senior management have established in the school.

- The well-implemented anti-bullying stance ensuring that the general environment is as stress free as possible.

- The high retention rates of students which has been the norm in St. Killian’s.

- Most commendably, the teaching staff have committed to supervision over and above the level required, illustrating their dedication and conscientiousness to the common good.

- The broad provision for co-curricular and extra-curricular activities.

- The very good arrangements in place for information given about enrolment and transfer, both for the parents and the potential students.

- The quality of information given about subject choices to students and parents through open nights at the school, at key points of transfer for students, and the good guidance given to support students in decision making.

- That the school is engaged in subject planning and there is evidence of good collaboration among teachers in the different subject departments and across departments.

- The well established links between the individual subject departments and the team supporting students and additional educational needs.
• The positive and supportive learning environment, underpinned by effective classroom management, good rapport and mutually respectful relationships between students and their teachers, characterised each lesson observed.

• Of particular note was the effective integration of ICT and visuals which impacted positively on students’ learning and enhanced their participation and interest.

• The Special Education Needs policy which makes ample provision for inclusiveness and equality, and the procedures for supporting students’ special educational needs, as detailed in it, are very good.

• The excellent Guidance systems and supports which are in place for this are commended in the highest possible way.

• The broad range of subjects provided.

• The quality of ICT facilities available to support teaching and learning across the curriculum.

• The range of co-curricular and extracurricular activities provided.

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

• The B.O.M. have put a plan in place to deal with the recommendations of the Inspectorate and have prioritised them over a period of time. A compliance procedure is also being put in place to ensure that each recommendation is satisfactorily dealt with so that the many strengths already highlighted in the report can be further supplemented and built on into the future.