Whole-School Evaluation
Management, Leadership and Learning

REPORT

Clonaslee Vocational School
Clonaslee, Co. Laois
Roll number: 71470O

Date of inspection: 11 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 Clonaslee Vocational 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

Clonaslee Vocational School is a rural co-educational school providing post-primary education to students from the surrounding locality. In recent years enrolment has been steadily rising. The school is administered by a board of management, a sub-committee of Co. Laois Vocational Education Committee (VEC). The school moved to a new building, on a site provided by the local community, in 2000. The principal and deputy principal were appointed to their posts in this calendar year. The current principal served as deputy principal for a number of years prior to appointment as principal. 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 school has a very good physical environment and a welcoming, caring atmosphere.
- A committed board of management, with very good links to the community, is in place.
- The new senior management team is energetic and hardworking and shows an obvious commitment to the school and the students.
- There are very good relations on the staff, staff members are dedicated to their students and there is a very good culture of volunteerism evident.
- The school receives good support from an active parents association.
- A good range of subjects is available in the school though there are some gaps in curricular provision.
- The quality of teaching and learning was good or very good in the vast majority of classrooms visited.
- Students are open, aware and self-critical. A very good work ethic was evident among students.

1.2 Recommendations for Further Development

- School development planning should be prioritised to more adequately meet the needs of the school. The post of responsibility structure should be reviewed in the revised arrangements.
• Curricular provision at senior cycle, including Transition Year (TY), should be reviewed. A more student-centred approach to the creation of option bands at this level should be adopted.
• Students should be timetabled for Social Personal and Health Education (SPHE) in third year.
• The board of management should plan strategically for the introduction of Physical Education (PE).
• An action plan for information and communication technology (ICT) should be developed to include the maintenance and renewal of the infrastructure, the upskilling of staff and the integration of ICT into teaching and 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 current board of management has been appointed in this school year. While the board is properly constituted, at the time of the evaluation it was awaiting the appointment of one new teacher representative. Some members of the board have served on previous boards. This ensures a good level of continuity at board level. It is recommended that members of the board avail of training in relation to their role as it becomes available.

The board functions well and meets regularly. Members of the board are very supportive of management both past and present. Previous boards and previous management are commended for the innovative and comprehensive manner they have engaged in fruitful partnership with the local community to develop the school, by actively campaigning for a new site and new school building and striving to ensure that a good range of subjects is available to students.

The principal reports regularly to board meetings on developments and achievements in the school. It is positive that an analysis of certificate examination results and student destinations after leaving school are discussed at board meetings. This indicates a good focus on the leadership of learning in the school. It is recommended that an agreed written account of board meetings is prepared for staff and parents.

The principal generally brings policies to the board for review and ratification. A good range of policies has been ratified by the board. No evidence was produced in the course of the evaluation that students and parents are consulted on policy development. This should be addressed. It is suggested that staff members involved in policy development make presentations to the board on the substance of policies proposed for ratification, and that an audit of existing policies take place to determine which policies need to be reviewed or advanced.

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 reported a number of priorities for development. An enhancement of the school’s ICT system is planned in the near future. This investment should be supported by appropriate engagement by teachers with continuing professional development (CPD) to exploit its potential as both a teaching and learning tool. It is positive that the school has already approached Laois Education Centre in this regard. It is recommended that a whole-school approach to the upskilling of staff members is undertaken over the coming years. The development of a comprehensive ICT plan for the school would help steer this initiative.

Other priorities are: to maintain and extend the subject range available in the school and to continue to support high quality CPD in the school, particularly in the area of positive mental health. These priorities show a good focus on teaching and learning as well as student care. To date the developmental priorities in the school have been, in the main, led by the senior management team of the school. It is recommended that the board take a clear leadership role in relation to planning and ensure that a comprehensive school plan is in place, with clear aims and objectives, plans for action and review dates. It is suggested that planning is put on the agenda of a number of board meetings throughout the year.

2.2 Effectiveness of leadership for learning

Leadership of staff

The new senior management team is energetic and hardworking and shows an obvious commitment to the school and the students. Both members of the team have a long period of service to the school. It is recommended, prior to the start of the new school year, that both members of the team agree and document duties and responsibilities. It is suggested that the deputy principal take responsibility for a key area of planning such as programme development. Management should have an appropriate balance between teaching duties and administrative and planning tasks in line with Circular 0081/2007. It is also recommended that the new management team avail of CPD to enhance their management skill-set.

A range of duties are associated with the middle management posts. Due to retirements and other factors some gaps have arisen and the duties associated with the posts no longer adequately cover all the key priority areas of the school. It is recommended that an audit is undertaken of the needs of the school and that a review of posts is undertaken. The area of school planning should be included in the posts structure. There should be an annual review of posts.

Staff members are committed to the school and dedicated to their students and indeed the local community. A very good spirit of volunteerism among staff members was evident. Very good inter-staff relations exist. This is a tribute to the quality of support staff members have received from present and previous management teams.

Staff members are facilitated in their attendance at CPD events. Good communications structures exist with parents and an active parents’ association, very supportive of the school, is involved in many areas of school life.
Subject planning is at different stages of development in the various subject departments. Where best practice was evident, departments had appointed a coordinator and subject planning documentation included a good set of aims and objectives. In these cases learning outcomes were linked to resources, methodologies and assessments and termly common schemes of work were available. These good practices should be extended across all subject departments. Records of meetings, plans for teaching and learning and action plans for the subject should be stored in the department folder. Subject inspection reports received by the school will give further guidance to the school in this respect.

A wide range of subjects is available for study. The taster programme in first year allows students to sample optional subjects. The TY programme is available as an option to students. Some very good aspects of TY are in evidence such as the mini company and students’ access to ICT. However interviews held with students, parents and teachers would suggest that some aspects of the TY programme are in need of review. This review should take place as soon as possible. Every effort should be made, within available resources, to allow students to sample as wide a range of subjects as possible in the TY programme and to timetable TY students in a discrete TY class group.

Students in senior cycle follow the established Leaving Certificate programme and in most instances study eight subjects. This is a heavy workload for students. Due to the vocational nature of most subjects available in the school, it is suggested that the LCVP programme would be a viable and useful alternative for students. It is recommended that the school give active consideration to the introduction of this programme and plan accordingly.

**Leadership of students**

Very good practices are in place in relation to the management of the student body. Transitions from primary school are well organised. Parent and student questionnaires and interviews indicate that behaviour in the school is very good. Students interviewed were aware of the code of behaviour. Interactions observed over the days of the evaluation and interviews undertaken suggest that good relations between staff and students are in place.

A student council is in place for the last two years. Systems to elect students to the council are very equitable. The student council has had good involvement in a number of fundraising and organising activities. Student interviews and questionnaires would suggest that students would like to have a greater say in how to make school a better place. It is recommended that the student council is further developed to act as a forum for students to express their opinions and concerns and give their view on proposed policies. To this end, it is suggested that a student council notice board be put in place and that the student council make a yearly presentation to the board of management on their activities and concerns.

Interviews with students, staff and parents suggest that the level of care in the school is very good and that a whole-school approach to student care is adopted. It is laudable that a care team is in place. To provide a forum for members of the team to share information and to plan action to respond to the needs of those students facing particular challenges in any given week, it is recommended that the team meets weekly. It is suggested that the size of the care team be rationalised to facilitate such meetings.

Students with special educational needs (SEN) are well catered for in a systematic and organised fashion. Good modes of delivery of additional support are in place including small group withdrawal. The possibility of using some SEN resources to create in-class support for students could be investigated.
Students’ access to guidance support is good. In senior cycle, including TY, students have timetabled guidance periods and intermittent support is given in junior cycle. Parents and students are happy with the level of guidance and support given at senior cycle. Parent interviews and questionnaires indicated that many parents expressed concern about the quality of the information they received about their child’s subject choice prior to entry to cycles. To improve communication with parents in this area it is recommended that a guidance input is arranged for open nights both at junior and senior cycle.

Interviews with students and parents indicated that there are issues with subject option banding with many students indicating that they did not get the subject or level of their choice. It has been the practice in the school to divide the optional subjects in both cycles into pre-arranged subject bands. It is recommended at Leaving Certificate level that a more student-centred approach be adopted, that students be surveyed prior to entry to the cycle and that the option bands are created to ensure that the maximum number of students get the subjects of their choice. In time a review of the optional subjects offered in junior cycle should also take place. It should include a whole-school student survey in relation to the taster programme and the option bands within that programme, to ensure that the present arrangements are best meeting the needs of students.

An analysis of the school timetable revealed a number of issues. There are some gaps in curricular provision. SPHE is not timetabled for third-year classes. This compliance issue should be addressed. PE is not available on the timetable and no teacher on the staff is qualified to teach PE. Extracurricular and co-curricular activities such as games, a walk, project work and study are timetabled for two class periods one day per week. While the attention to physical activity and teachers’ willingness to supervise these activities is lauded, the centrality of games-training periods on the timetable is unacceptable. It is recommended that the board of management works with the VEC to plan strategically for the introduction of PE with a suitably qualified teacher of PE.

Other anomalies also exist on the timetable. Some subjects have very generous timetabled provision while others have low provision. The practice of coupling subjects together for timetabling purposes should be discontinued as it puts unnecessary constraints on the timetable. Students’ ability to study a subject to higher level at Leaving Certificate in one subject should not be dependent on their proficiency in another subject. These anomalies should be addressed as soon as possible.

Student retention rates are very good. Good strategies in relation to attendance are evident.

**Management of facilities**

A high quality physical environment is in place. This is a testament to the collaboration between management and the local community who donated the site for the school and allow staff and students to use the very good community sporting facilities on site. The buildings are very well laid out. A number of specialist rooms, including a computer room, support teaching and learning. All of these facilities contribute in a very constructive manner to the delivery of the curriculum in the school.

Members of the school community spoke in positive terms of the contribution of the ancillary staff to the school. The buildings and grounds are very clean and well maintained. The school reported, however, that the lack of a full time caretaker created difficulty in completing some necessary tasks during the summer months.

**3. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING**
3.1 The quality of learning and teaching

Eighteen lessons were observed over the course of the evaluation. In the vast majority of classrooms visited the quality of teaching and learning was either good or very good. Teacher enthusiasm and dedication was evident and teachers had high expectations of their students. Parent and student questionnaires and interviews indicate a high level of satisfaction with the standards of teaching in the school.

Teachers were well prepared for their lessons and in almost all instances good pace and timing were observed. In many classrooms teachers introduced the intended learning outcome to the students at the beginning of the lesson and in a minority of lessons time was made for review at the lesson end. These good practices brought structure and clarity to lessons. It is recommended that they be extended to all lessons.

In most classrooms visited a very good learning environment was in evidence with subject specific displays of student work in place. However this was not the case in all classrooms.

The predominant teaching methodology used was teacher exposition supported by student questioning. Questioning practices were good in many instances although there was scope to extend the range of higher order and open-ended questioning to support differentiation in some classrooms. It is recommended that directed questioning rather than global questioning is used. In some classrooms students were given independent learning opportunities. This is good practice. In a minority of lessons cooperative learning strategies such as group work or pair work were used. This is highly commended. It is recommended that there is an appropriate balance between teacher direction and student activity in all lessons.

Assessment modes are very good across the school. An examination of students’ journals and copybooks show that homework is given regularly and frequently monitored in the majority of classrooms visited. Excellent assessment strategies, including good organisation of student work and the use of Assessment for Learning, where teachers give students formative feedback about their work, were noted in a number of instances. This should be mainstreamed across all subject departments. Assessment outcomes in the school are very good. This is a tribute to the dedication of teachers and to the very good work ethic of many students.

4. IMPLEMENTATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS FROM PREVIOUS EVALUATIONS

4.1 Management

A number of previous inspection reports were reviewed for this evaluation including Science, Guidance, Business and Mathematics. There has been good progress in addressing many of the recommendations in these reports. The guidance plan is still in draft format and should be amended to include recommendations made in the guidance report and progressed to the ratification stage. Structured inputs for junior cycle students, linked to the third-year SPHE syllabus, should be included in the plan. Double periods for Accounting at senior level should be considered. Recommendations were made in a number of the reports in relation to subject planning and ICT resources. Further attention still needs to be given to these areas.
4.2 Learning and Teaching

Arising from recommendations made in previous reports some areas were selected for attention. ICT is still used as a teaching and learning tool in a minority of lessons but this will improve when the ICT infrastructure is advanced. There remains scope to extend the range of active learning methodologies in use in many classrooms. Homework and assessment practices were very good in all subjects reviewed. Systems should be put in place to ensure that generic recommendations from one subject report are communicated to and adopted by all departments.

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

The evident vibrancy of the school and recent developments including the building programmes that have taken place over the last ten years would indicate that senior management and staff are well-placed to engage in self evaluation and strategic planning for the future. This should take place in a systematic and organised fashion. The board of management should ensure that a comprehensive school plan is developed to drive change in the school. This should include yearly targets and review dates and focus on policy development, the quality of teaching and learning, the development of a comprehensive ICT plan and a curricular review. Key factors associated with a successful change process will be consultation with staff, students and parents. Time should be set aside each year both at school and board of management level for planning and review.

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