An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Whole-School Evaluation
REPORT

Bishopstown Community School
Bishopstown, Cork
Roll number: 91397T

Date of inspection: 26 March 2010
WHOLE-SCHOOL EVALUATION

A whole-school evaluation of Bishopstown Community School was undertaken in March 2010. This report presents the findings of the evaluation and makes recommendations for improvement. During the evaluation, the quality of teaching and learning in two subjects and of the school’s provision in the area of special educational needs was evaluated in detail. Another subject was evaluated in advance. Separate reports are available on these evaluations (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

Bishopstown Community School is a co-educational school which opened in 1979 with an enrolment of 35 students. It expanded in the mid 1980’s to over 700 students. By the mid 1990’s this number had dropped to approximately 300. At the time of this evaluation, the school had a student population of 143, comprising 97 males and 46 females. A fundamental reason behind the development of the community school system was to create a school with a broad general curriculum where students would be able to sample both practical and academic subjects. The curriculum offered in Bishopstown Community School is in line with this principle. Also, reflecting the spirit of the community school system, it has for many years offered an adult education programme that is continually adapting to meet the needs of the community it serves. Its well equipped sporting facilities are also used by many local businesses and other local groups.

The school is located in Bishopstown, a south-west suburb of Cork City. The school community prides itself on being an inclusive school which provides a broad education for students of all abilities including those with special educational needs. Through the years the school has been aware of and adapted to the changing needs of its students. In recent years it has catered for an increasing proportion of students with special educational needs and newcomer students for whom English is an additional language (EAL). In 2006, the school became part of Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS), the Department’s action plan for educational inclusion.

Bishopstown Community School seeks to accommodate and cater for the educational needs of all enrolled students. While it is Christian in its ethos it welcomes and accepts students of all faiths and of none. This is in keeping with the overall level of care provided to the students which was noted during the evaluation. The catchment area includes the suburb of Bishopstown and its rural hinterland but the school accepts applicants from all primary schools. While the school-going population in the area has undergone a natural decline, the school is also facing significant competition for enrolments. The building, which is a single-storey construction, has been shared with St Kilian’s primary school since 2004. This school specialises in providing programmes designed to cater for pupils with severe specific educational needs.
1. QUALITY OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT

1.1 Characteristic spirit of the school

The mission statement of the school focuses on both the individual and the entire school community. The former is characterised, in the school, by efforts to improve students’ learning experiences and outcomes, by setting clear expectations and by embracing diversity and inclusion. The school’s vision is to cater effectively for the needs of its student cohort and there is evidence, in the policies created by the school and the range of programmes available to the students, that every effort is made to ensure that this vision is lived out in the school. The school’s staff members, through their energy, enthusiasm, commitment and concern for the well-being of individual students play a central role in working to make this vision a reality. Their efforts, sometimes in difficult circumstances, to promote togetherness, learning, caring and respectfulness in their work and communications with the students in the school play an important role in the individual development of the students. As one student put it “we are a bit like a big family here and we all look out for each other.” For all of this, the staff of Bishopstown Community School deserves acknowledgement and praise.

1.2 School ownership and management

The board of management of Bishopstown Community School, as set up under the Deed of Trust for Community Schools 1979, has as its trustees the City of Cork Vocational Educational Committee (VEC) and the Catholic Bishop of Cork and Ross. The current board has been in place since autumn 2009. The existing board is properly constituted. The principal acts as secretary to the board. The deputy principal, who is invited to attend meetings, acts as the recording secretary. Neither the principal nor the deputy principal has a vote on the board. This is in line with the instruments and articles of management for community and comprehensive schools. The nominee for the position of chairperson of the board was proposed and seconded by the members. A majority of the members have served on previous boards and those new to the position have sought training to enable them fulfil their roles. This training should be accessed when it becomes available.

The board meets approximately every six weeks. This is good as the articles of management place a minimum requirement on boards of community schools to meet once every term. Prior to each meeting, members are circulated with a set of draft minutes relating to the preceding meeting and an agenda. A finance update is prepared for each board meeting. A finance sub-committee was in place during the term of the previous board and the setting up of a similar sub-committee of the current board has been discussed. This would be a positive move and would involve the board more closely in an important aspect of the running of the school. Regular contact between the chairperson of the board and the senior management team is maintained outside of meetings.

The board is educationally aware and is highly conscious of the school’s context and of its students’ needs. The board members see their role as one of providing support and advice along with expertise to school management in areas relating to the running of the school. Generally the decisions taken by the board are based on the consensus of its members. The board members stated that their main concern is making sure that everyone is looked after and cared for and that difficulties are dealt with sympathetically. The board oversees curricular planning and seeks to maximise the effective use of resources. Board members endeavour to keep up to date with relevant legislation, Departmental circulars and the associated legal obligations which relate to education and schools. This is a good practice.

The board has been centrally involved in school development planning. It was confirmed that the board has been proactive in discussing, contributing to and ratifying each of the
school’s policies. These include the legally required policies which relate to admission and enrolment, attendance and participation, behaviour, child protection and health and safety. The board has recognised that it has an additional role to play in relation to overseeing a schedule of review for school policies and acknowledged that a number of the policies are currently due for review. As an aid to this, is recommended that the relevant ratification dates be put on each policy. It is further recommended that, at the time of ratification, a review date be agreed for each policy.

Communication between the board of management and its various nominating bodies is facilitated through a variety of informal means. Staff and parent nominees provide oral feedback to their respective groups. It is recommended that the board consider formalising the reporting procedures to these two groups. A short, agreed, written report should be provided for the teacher and parent nominees, which could then be delivered by them to their respective nominating bodies. Furthermore, as set down in Section 20 of the Education Act (1998), the board is urged to publish an annual report on the operation and performance of the school, with particular reference to the achievement of objectives as set out in the school plan.

The board has been made aware of the need for additional classroom space at St Killian’s primary school, which currently occupies nine rooms in the building. The allocation of an additional room, currently housing the school library, to address this need has been agreed by the trustees and the Department. While the current sharing arrangement is less than satisfactory to the board and the staff, it is important that issues of concern to both schools are dealt with in a collaborative manner. In this regard the recent improvements in communication between the two centres are welcomed.

The board demonstrates keen awareness of the challenges that face the school as a result of falling enrolment. Its members are aware that the school fills an important role in the community and the city and would like to become large enough to sustain what they currently provide in terms of inclusion and care for individual students. It is important that the board, in conjunction with the staff, endeavour to highlight to current and prospective parents the positive learning environment and opportunities for students that exist within the school.

1.3 In-school management

The principal of Bishopstown Community School took up her duties in autumn 2009 and was an external appointment. The deputy principal has been in the position for a number of years and brings considerable experience to the post. Both agree that a good working relationship is evolving between them. The principal and deputy principal communicate effectively, having meetings at the beginning and end of each school day that are supplemented with further informal communication during the day. This good practice is also effective as a means of developing and promoting a collaborative approach to management. A clear division of responsibilities between the principal and deputy principal is evident although in many instances the two roles overlap and complement each other and both are comfortable with this. Senior management agree on the importance of having a high level of visibility around the school and this presence was in evidence during the course of the evaluation.

The principal has overall responsibility for the management and running of the school. Included in this is overseeing the operation and maintenance of the building, financial control and budgeting, ensuring compliance with legislation and liaising with the Department of Education and Skills and other outside organisations. The deputy principal takes responsibility for the day-to-day running of the school and has a major role to play in relation to guiding and directing the disciplinary system along with administrative duties.
Both the principal and deputy principal seek to balance the role of disciplinarian with that of provider of care and support. This is facilitated by cultivating a distinction between the behaviour and the individual and also having an ‘open-door’ policy in dealings with staff and parents. Very good evidence of this in operation was seen during the in-school week.

Management promotes an open and inclusive leadership style within the school. Information disseminated in literature and during formal and informal meetings that occur, internally in the school, is seen as central to ensuring that the staff is made aware of relevant issues. The information document that each member of staff received at the beginning of the 2009/2010 school year is a comprehensive handbook for teachers containing useful information relevant to teachers during the course of the teaching year.

The middle-management team is currently composed of five assistant principals and ten special duties teachers. All posts, and their accompanying duties, are assigned in accordance with agreed and proper procedures. The moratorium on the filling of posts of responsibility in schools has resulted in the loss of co-ordination of school planning and of the student council in the current year. To avoid these losses having a negative impact on the running of the school, the school is aware that some re-organisation of duties is now required. To this end, it is planned to undertake such a review in the coming school year. This intention is praised and fully encouraged.

Assistant principals are assigned to either year-head duties along with other areas of responsibility or in one instance to a programme co-ordination role. The assistant principals bring experience and commitment to their posts. Their range of administrative, pastoral and year-head duties helps to ensure the focused involvement of the school in students’ education and care. The year heads meet each week as part of a larger group in their role in the care and management of students. However, there is no timetabled meeting involving the principal, deputy principal and the assistant principals to discuss issues relating to the management of the school. It is recommended that regular management meetings take place. The timetabling of such meetings in the future has significant potential to create a clear, coherent and proactive middle-management structure within the school. It should also ensure that the caring and inclusive vision of senior management for the school is shared and considered in decision-making.

The special-duties posts consist of some administrative roles, with others dealing with extracurricular, pastoral or more direct educational tasks. While there are no formal procedures for reviewing the work of special-duties teachers, the principal and deputy principal invite individual feedback and discussion towards the end of each school year. In some instances the duties listed for post-holders include the role of subject co-ordination. Ideally this role should rotate among the teachers in the subject grouping and not be attached to post duties. It is therefore recommended that the role of subject co-ordinator be detached from the duties associated with a post of responsibility in any future review.

As stated earlier, the school has an open and inclusive ethos. The school operates a clear open-door policy when it comes to admissions. However, the school’s written admissions policy does not fully reflect this. Minor alterations to wording in order to more accurately represent the current good practice in relation to enrolment is recommended.

The school operates an effective class-teacher system on a voluntary basis. The class teacher is best described as filling a pastoral role, with some disciplinary functions, while year heads and senior management have some pastoral duties and they deal with the serious disciplinary issues. The work being done by teachers in their role as class teacher deserves particular praise.
During the evaluation the code of behaviour was identified by inspectors as an area in need of review. The current code has created a logical discipline structure where the roles and responsibilities of students, teachers, class teachers, year heads and senior management are laid out. However, it is framed mainly in negative terms and does not fully reflect the current care structures and interventions in place in the school. In light of this the time is now opportune to proceed with the review and to add a positive behaviour structure which could enhance the discipline structure which the school plans to put in place. It is recommended that investigation and formalisation of such a positive behaviour structure, suited to the needs of the school, be undertaken. Such systems, incorporating rewards and strategies to encourage student engagement, have been successfully adopted in other schools. The guidance contained in the National Educational Welfare Board’s publication, *Developing A Code of Behaviour: Guidelines for Schools*, could prove useful in this regard.

It is positive to note that a student council has existed within the school since 1999. A captain and vice-captain are elected, annually, by each class group as representatives on the council. The process was co-ordinated by a member of staff until 2009. The aim of the council is to give each student a voice and to improve the school as much as possible for the students. The council have been involved in many initiatives in the school down through the years. These include improvement in seating and the range of foods in the canteen, photo displays, school-uniform updates and environmental issues. The council have also been consulted on some draft policies. This is good practice and should be extended to all relevant future policies. The council operates under a constitution and guidelines which were formulated in 2004.

The school has prepared attendance and retention policies which is good practice. In this regard, the school benefits from its involvement in the School Completion Programme (SCP) as part of a cluster which also includes another post-primary school and a number of primary schools. This programme provides for a range of supports for identified students in the school community. Examples of such supports include breakfast and lunch-time clubs, transition courses for students transferring from primary to post-primary schooling and summer courses. In-school supports provided through the SCP, such as the provision of an on-site worker for a number of days who offers a variety of supports from academic tuition to mentoring, also make a very noteworthy contribution to students’ educational experience.

Records show that the numbers of students who have been absent for more than twenty days in one year are high. To address this, the school has developed an attendance strategy. Year heads and class teachers are central to the management of this strategy. Attendance and lateness are checked by year heads on a daily basis and any student who is absent is required to present an absence note on his or her return to school. Teachers check student attendance at the beginning of each lesson. Year heads, at a weekly meeting, are made aware of any pastoral-care issues which may be impacting on particular students’ attendance. When a student’s attendance is becoming problematic, a letter is sent to the student’s parents. A range of pastoral-care supports is also in place which may be used to support students who are experiencing difficulties which in turn might lead to poor attendance. The school liaises with the local education welfare officer (EWO) regarding students whose attendance is particularly poor. All of this is most praiseworthy. Overall, it is clear that staff and senior management are being proactive in addressing the area of school attendance and that there is a need to continue to prioritise this area.

The parents’ association in Bishopstown Community School has been in existence since 1980 following the adoption of its constitution. Key functions of the association include providing a meaningful channel of communication between parents, teachers and school management and providing assistance in catering for the needs of the students of the school. The association members, who meet on a regular basis, are enthusiastic about their
involvement in various initiatives such as arranging mock interviews for the students. The association is consulted by management when school policies are being devised or revised. Parents are happy with the overall level of communication between the school and home, facilitated by measures such as phone-calls and letters home, information meetings that focus, for example, on curricular issues, and annual parent-teacher meetings. Management also operates an open-door policy which encourages parents to come to the school to discuss issues of direct concern to them. The representatives of the association were very complimentary in relation to the support provided to them, and all parents, by management and by the home school community liaison (HSCL) co-ordinator.

There is a high level of co-operation and liaison with local community groups and various outside agencies. This is highly praised. This contact and collaboration seeks to support students and address their needs. These links also strive to provide for students with additional educational needs in areas such as transfer, induction, progression and retention. Some of the most effective liaisons are those which have been facilitated by the school’s involvement in DEIS, of which the SCP remains a significant feature. The school’s involvement in DEIS facilitates direct access to supports provided by agencies, including, for example, the Health Board, juvenile liaison officers, social workers and Ogra Chorcaí. The school’s involvement in the University College Cork (UCC) Plus Programme (formally UCC Access), as well as its links with a local company, makes a significant contribution to students’ experiences of schooling and education. The school is situated adjacent to the Cork Institute of Technology (CIT) which, over the years, has been generous in making facilities available to the school.

1.4 Management of resources

The teaching day at Bishopstown Community School commences at 8.40am and finishes at 3.45pm except on Wednesdays when classes finish at 12.55pm. The morning breaks last for fifteen minutes and fifty minutes are allocated for lunch. This provides for weekly instruction time of twenty-eight hours which is a Departmental requirement. However, in a number of instances classes or groups of students are timetabled for study periods. Study is not tuition and should be avoided in future timetabling.

In addition, a small number of teachers’ timetables have periods allocated for outdoor activities on a Wednesday afternoon. As such provision is available to students on an optional basis and takes place outside of school time; it has to be regarded as extracurricular provision. Department regulations do not allow for extracurricular activities to form part of a teacher’s timetable. It is recommended therefore that the deployment of staff be reviewed in the school, so as to ensure that all staff members on the incremental salary scale are timetabled for at least the minimum class contact hours required.

In terms of its teaching staff, the school is currently 5.64 whole-time equivalent (WTE) positions over its quota. School management has analysed current and future staffing needs and additional resources have been sought as deemed necessary. The senior management team is concerned in relation to the school’s ability to continue to provide the current range of programmes and subjects. Difficulties that arise as a direct consequence of the school’s over-quota situation will need to be carefully managed as the teaching cohort changes in the coming years. Notwithstanding the constraints that apply, it is evident that efforts are being made to deploy teachers appropriately according to their qualifications, skills and interests.

Of the 5.64 WTE positions over-quota whole-time equivalents, 4.65 has been allocated by the Department of Education and Skills for provision for students with special education needs, English language support for EAL students and a number of other areas within the school. It is acknowledged that there are difficulties in seeking to align supernumerary positions alongside allocations in these areas. However, the report written following an
evaluation in 2008 by the Inspectorate of provision for students learning English as an additional language and the report on the provision for students with special educational needs which accompanies this report both highlight a significant shortfall between the hours allocated to the school and those hours identifiable in the timetable to support learning for those students identified as requiring interventions in these areas. It is of the utmost importance that the adjustments recommended in these reports, which are necessary to ensure that the allocations received are used to the maximum benefit of the students involved, are incorporated into all future timetable planning.

The school building and the immediate grounds are very well maintained. In light of this, the good work of both the care-taking and cleaning staff of the school is now acknowledged. The important role that they and the administrative staff play through the completion of their assigned duties, as well as the support they provide to staff and students, deserves praise and recognition.

Construction of the school building was completed in 1979. Work has been undertaken over the years to ensure that the school building is well maintained and updated. The proposal by the Department and the trustees to allocate additional space to St Killian’s involves the transfer of the room that is currently used as the school library. In light of this it will be necessary to revamp an existing room to provide a comfortable and attractive space for the books, with hopefully, computers available for students’ use. The roof of the school is in urgent need of refurbishment. It is important that this work be progressed as speedily as possible.

The school is airy and bright, providing a pleasant working environment. The school’s single-story construction ensures that the building is fully accessible to all. In addition to the general classrooms the school has three fully equipped and well-maintained science laboratories with store rooms attached. Practical rooms include well-equipped home-economics, engineering, art and materials technology rooms. The school has three computer rooms, including the newly fitted-out computer room for technology subjects. The school plant also houses a canteen and assembly area which doubles as a hall for school events. This area also provides a meeting space for the students and houses a number of notice-boards for the display of students’ work, as well as information relevant to the student body. The building also accommodates a number of offices and resource rooms for use by the teaching staff, as well as a parents’ room and a behavioural support room. The school also has a sports hall, tennis courts and playing pitches.

Most teachers have their own base classroom; this represents a positive deployment of resources. This facilitates opportunities to have examples of students’ work, subject-related posters and charts displayed on the walls of these classrooms. In many instances, teachers have taken advantage of this to create print-rich, colourful and stimulating learning environments. This is greatly encouraged as a means of further motivating and interesting students in their learning.

Teaching resources for subject departments are accessed through a formal requisition process and all reasonable requests are facilitated. Subject areas are, on the whole, well resourced. Senior management and the board have been proactive in providing information and communication technology (ICT) for the teaching staff. The school has broadband internet access throughout the school building. A post-holder has been appointed to further the development of ICT in the school and an interactive whiteboard has been acquired. It is good practice that in-house expertise in this area is being shared with other members of staff.

The school has a safety policy, outlining safety procedures for staff members and students. A post-holder has been designated as the school’s health-and-safety representative. All of
this is good practice. However, the subject inspection report on Construction Studies (CS) and Materials Technology (Wood) which accompanies this whole school evaluation report contains recommendations for improvements in this area. The Review of Occupational Health and Safety in the Technologies in Post-primary Schools (State Claims Agency/Department of Education and Science) gives guidelines relating to health and safety in schools. Management is urged to act upon the guidelines and recommendations.

The school facilities are made available in an appropriate manner to the local community. This is achieved, by and large, through the provision of adult-education classes, which have been provided in the school since its inception. The adult-education programme in the school is organised and co-ordinated by a staff member, as part of a special-duties post.

A notable feature of the school is the number of photographs, certificates, posters and trophies displayed throughout the school, representing students’ participation and achievements in many different fields of activity dating back through the years. These show evidence of the many impressive successes of teams and individuals in a variety of different sports and activities, helping to create a sense of pride within the school of students’ achievements over the years.

2. QUALITY OF SCHOOL PLANNING

2.1 The school plan

Bishopstown Community School has a long tradition of staff actively inputting into decision-making. The staff was involved in the planning for the introduction of the Transition Year (TY) and Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programmes into the school. In 2000, following the appointment of a co-ordinator for school development planning, the process of developing a school plan was initiated. The fact that the school has had ongoing engagement with the School Development Planning Initiative (SDPI) is applauded. As a result, a number of whole-staff planning days have benefited from the input of the personnel attached to the initiative. Initially staff members volunteered to work in groups on one of five areas that had been identified and became the focus of planning. A steering group of senior management, school development planning co-ordinator and a representative from each group was set up to oversee the process. Over time this process has continued although the focus and composition of the overseeing group has been updated on a number of occasions.

In more recent times the remit of this steering group is to work on initial drafts of policies which are then brought to the staff, the parents and the board of management. Where applicable and relevant these are also brought to the student council. The steering committee then looks at all the suggestions and draws up the next draft of the particular policy. This then goes back to the staff, the board, the parents and the student council, where applicable. When all partners are satisfied with the policy it is then brought to the board to be ratified. It is very good practice that all stakeholders are involved in the planning process, with senior management, staff, the parents’ association, the board and the student council contributing to the development of policies.

The process outlined above has resulted in significant progress in the development of a permanent section of the school plan. This work has been recorded and collated into two large school planning folders. A wide range of policies may be found in the permanent section of the plan including those related to admissions, suspension and expulsion, anti-bullying, attendance and retention, drug abuse and dealing with critical incidents. The school has also prepared policies on homework, and provision for students with special educational needs. In addition drafts of other policies are being advanced. These include a
policy on the teaching of English as an additional language and an inclusion policy. The school has made very good progress in the area of policy development and it has created effective structures for carrying out this key work.

In 2006 the school was invited to become part of the DEIS action plan. Since 2008 the focus of planning has been the priority areas for this initiative and the production of the school’s DEIS three-year action plan. The current plan has set down targets and strategies to achieve them. However, this plan should be extended to include realistic, specific, measurable, achievable and time-bound targets in relation to improvements in areas such as attendance and retention, literacy and numeracy, examination attainment and educational progression and partnership with parents and others. It is recommended that baseline data in each of the chosen areas be gathered and collated in order that progress in each area is measurable. The achievement of these targets will allow the school to acknowledge and promote its ‘added value’ and positive outcomes to the wider community.

The school has also prepared a child protection policy. This policy is included in the handbook which teachers receive each year. Confirmation was provided that, in compliance with post-primary Circulars M45/05 and 0062/2006, the board of management has formally adopted the Child Protection Guidelines for Post-primary Schools (Department of Education and Science, 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.

Work done in planning to date has focused very much on appropriate whole-school issues. Therefore it has not been possible to progress all subject planning at a similar pace. Subject plans have been developed to a variety of levels. While the completion of subject templates as promoted by the School Development Planning Initiative (SDPI) is applauded, it is recommended that the focus of current and future subject planning should be directed towards, as far as possible, the core issues of teaching and learning. This is particularly relevant as the Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP), with its emphasis on innovative teaching strategies, is about to complete its first cycle within the school. Among the issues which should be discussed at subject planning meetings are decision-making on syllabus options, identifying common needs from a budgeting standpoint and feedback from in-service attendance or subject association membership. The sharing of ideas and methodological approaches, pooling resources, promoting differentiated teaching strategies and developing a collaborative approach to teaching and learning are also all worth including.

3. QUALITY OF CURRICULUM PROVISION

3.1 Curriculum planning and organisation

The curriculum offered in Bishopstown Community School is created to provide for the wide range of its students’ interests and needs. This is apparent from the number and range of programmes and subjects offered in the school. Since 2008 all incoming students follow the Junior Certificate School Programme up to the conclusion of their junior cycle. While it is currently appropriate that all students follow this programme it is recommended that this be reviewed each year to ensure that the majority of incoming students continue to meet the recommended selection criteria related to the programme.
During their first year all students, with the exception of some students with special educational needs, study all subjects for the year. This allows students to sample each subject and assists them when they decide which subjects to pick for their Junior Certificate. They are not required to select their optional subjects until second year. The following core subjects are then studied by all junior cycle students from second year on, as part of the school’s JCSP: Irish, English, Mathematics, Religion, History, Geography, Science, Social Personal and Health Education (SPHE), Civic, Social and Political Education (CSPE) and Physical Education (PE). Students can also choose optional subjects from a range of subjects including Art, Craft and Design, Business Studies, Music, Home Economics, Materials Technology Wood, Metalwork and Technical Graphics. In second and third year Irish, English and Mathematics are set to ensure that all students have the option of taking all subjects to higher level. While French is also a core subject for junior cycle, some students with additional educational needs receive extra tuition during the time allocated to French lessons.

It is good to note that a total of twenty-seven different JCSP initiatives, including Maths Laboratory and Drop Everything and Read, have been undertaken with students over the last three years. The school is praised for the range and breadth of the initiatives undertaken which enhance the learning experiences of the students. The quality and effectiveness of the co-ordination, the active involvement of teachers in the running of the programme and the close links between the special educational needs team, the behaviour support team, the SCP co-ordinator and the HSCL co-ordinator have all helped make this a success story in the school. Subject teachers use the subject-based and cross-curricular statements with students in the delivery of topics, as well as a variety of support materials that are available. Teachers’ awareness of students’ literacy needs in classrooms through, for example, the ‘key word’ approach is of benefit to all students, in particular those with special educational needs and those for whom English is not their first language.

Transition Year (TY) is optional in Bishopstown Community School. In 2008, all students opted to follow either the TY programme or the LCA programme. This has resulted in the absence of a sixth-year cohort taking the established Leaving Certificate in the current year. The TY programme is organised to ensure that the majority of students access a set of core subjects: Irish, English, Mathematics and French. Students also take modules in the following subject areas: Business, Engineering, Construction, Art and Design, Sciences, Music, Technical Graphics, Home Economics and ICT, which leads to a European computer driving licence (ECDL) qualification. Other non-examination modules are also studied. These include Drama, Career Guidance, Technology, Social Studies, Religion, Outdoor Education, Social Skills and Mini Company. Such a broad programme is praised, as it ensures that all students get to sample all of their preferences along with acquiring other valuable skills and knowledge during the course of the year. Individual teaching plans for each subject feed into the overall school plan for TY.

Students proceeding to Leaving Certificate do so either directly from third year or on completion of TY study three core subjects and select four other subjects. Students also have the option of taking Applied Mathematics as an eight subject. The ongoing commitment from management and teachers contributes to the effective delivery of the LCA programme in Bishopstown Community School. The organisation and planning of the programme is being successfully facilitated. Good systems are in place to meet programme objectives.

3.2 Arrangements for students’ choice of subjects and programmes

Students attending the school have access to a wide and open choice of programmes, subjects and levels. This approach is in keeping with the school’s mission statement. The operation of the subject selection process, both in junior and senior cycle, is designed to
maximise students’ access to the subjects offered in the school. In the first instance, prospective second and fifth-year students select the subjects they would like to study for the relevant certificate examination. Student preferences are used to create ‘best fit’ subject blocks. Students make their final subject selection from these blocks. The subject-sampling programmes, which operate in first and fourth year, assist students in the making of informed decisions relating to subjects and levels. This, along with the open approach to subject choice is to be praised as it places the student at the centre of the process. It also facilitates equality of access to subjects by boys and girls, another positive feature of the school’s arrangements for subject choice. The school is also flexible in the case of students who seek to change an option subject.

Parents are consulted on and included in the programme and subject-choice systems that operate in Bishopstown Community School. They are informed by letter when programme and subject choices need to be made. Information meetings are arranged and addressed by among others the guidance counsellor where clear guidance is supplied in relation to the implications of choices made. Input by other staff members is also availed of as appropriate. The guidance counsellor, along with the subject teachers, seeks to ensure that students are informed and facilitated in making the choices required. All involved in this process deserve high praise.

Given the wide range of programmes and subject choices currently available to students and the current enrolment indications it is difficult to see how the present curriculum arrangements can be sustained into the future. The return of a sixth-year cohort in the coming year will add to the challenges. It is recommended that management, in consultation with staff, review the sustainability of the curriculum on offer. This review should prioritise the retention of the greatest possible range of sustainable choices for students within the resources available.

### 3.3 Co-curricular and extracurricular provision

There is a high level of co-curricular and extracurricular activities available to students in Bishopstown Community School. This is a noteworthy strength. The activities are wide-ranging, seeking to provide for the aesthetic, cultural, social and sporting interests of the students. In many instances the activities are programme related or subject-led and are provided on a voluntary basis by the staff. This additional commitment and dedication is praised. Links have been established with outside agencies to promote and support this area of school life and efforts are made to foster and further develop these links. A high level of interest and participation by students in organised activities is reported by students, management and staff. The SCP is involved in the organisation of a comprehensive range of activities and events. Activities such as school tours, fieldtrips, excursions, theatre and cinema trips, outings to museums and heritage centres, gallery visits, participation in national events such as the JCSP support service organised ‘make a book’ exhibition are integrated into the educational experiences of students attending the school. Students are afforded opportunities to partake in a range of sports, each having a recreational, competitive or community basis. This level of provision is very good indeed.

Staff and students are fully aware of the positive impact of co-curricular and extracurricular provision, with both groups highlighting the very favourable contribution that involvement in these activities makes to overall relations. Management and staff should endeavour to sustain this very important and significant part of school life.
4. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN SUBJECTS

4.1 Planning and preparation

Formal subject planning meetings are facilitated by management during the school year. More frequent informal meetings take place on a regular basis between the subject teachers concerned. Where appropriate, one of the teachers acts as subject co-ordinator. As is good practice, this role is currently rotated among members of the team in some subjects. It is recommended that a co-ordinator for the technology subjects be appointed in order to allow for collaboration in areas of common interest such as subject planning. The duties of the co-ordinator should also be set down in the subject plan. Within the area of special educational needs, the appointment of a co-ordinator would help to ensure that planning for students’ learning is cohesive and collaborative. This is particularly important in light of the significant cohort of students with additional educational needs and the whole-school approach advised during the evaluation process. The provision of a formal weekly timetabled meeting to allow for relevant personnel in the special educational needs area to meet would assist in this process. The involvement of teachers from a number of related subject areas in subject planning is also suggested as a way of enhancing good practice and encouraging collaboration in the technologies. In some subjects, an agenda is set and minutes of meetings are kept. As this helps to ensure continuity in planning, it is a practice worth maintaining by all departments.

Good progress has been made in the development of comprehensive plans for the subjects evaluated although further work remains to be done. The plans have been developed collaboratively over time, are well structured and generally provide clear information on the knowledge and skills that students should achieve. In addition to a mission statement and aims and objectives, the plans include the annual schemes of work as well as planning for the use of effective teaching methodologies, planning for a culturally diverse society and cross-curricular planning. It is very positive that the variety of abilities and educational needs of the students are taken into account in planning, in particular in support for students’ literacy. Specific recommendations for the further development of the plans are made in some areas including a review of programmes to incorporate resources, and the linking of content and skills using a learning-goal oriented approach where appropriate. While subject planning is in line with the syllabus or curriculum requirements, the development of the TY plan to include a wider range of mathematical experience is recommended. The proposed requirement to prepare formal individual education plans in the area of special education should also be borne in mind.

Cross-curricular and co-curricular planning has already led to good collaboration between some subjects. As a further development in the technology subjects, it is recommended that relevant subject departments explore the opportunities for further integration of first-year students’ design project work into their activities.

Planning for the use of teaching resources has led to the preparation of a range of material to support learning and teaching in the classroom and these resources were used to good effect during the lessons visited. It is suggested that the preparation of digital teaching resources in some subjects is a next step in advancing this work.

4.2 Learning and teaching

On the evidence of the inspections it is clear that teaching and learning of a high standard is the norm in Bishopstown Community School. It was also positive to note that the quality of students’ learning was seen to be in keeping with students’ ability levels.
In the lessons observed, teachers’ presentation of work was clear and preparation for teaching was evident. Lessons are very well structured. At the beginning of a lesson students are made fully aware of the expected outcomes. The whiteboard was used to introduce the lesson topic and, in some cases, was in turn availed of at the end of the lesson to show the progress made over the duration of the lesson. Best practice was observed in those lessons where a review of the achievement of the learning objective was conducted towards the end of the lesson. In general, the whiteboard, textbooks, handouts and worksheets, flashcards and, to a lesser extent, learning aids and information and ICT were used to good effect as resources in lessons.

Effective use was made of time to create links to the students’ prior learning and to their everyday experiences. Learning was seen to be both content-focused and also learner-focused with every effort being made to create an atmosphere that was conducive to learning. In many instances, JCSP keyword posters were used effectively along with students’ individual key-word folders. In addition prominent displays of phrases helped students to communicate with the teacher. It was good to note that attention was paid to establishing correct terminology, pronunciation and to the development of listening skills. Students were encouraged to ask and to answer questions and this is very good practice.

Interaction among students and teachers was predominantly positive and founded on mutual respect. Students are affirmed for their work and behaviour and encouraged to achieve their full potential. Such good practice ensures that all students are encouraged to work to the best of their abilities and to engage with the learning activities in lessons. Students were uniformly polite and courteous during all aspects of the evaluation. Ongoing sharing by teachers of the good practices witnessed is a significant recommendation in relation to teaching and learning.

The common teaching method used in lessons involved the teacher modelling a procedure followed by students repeating the method on similar type questions while the teacher assisted individuals. It was very positive that the variety of activities helped to keep students interested and engaged while allowing opportunities for students to work individually and in pairs. In some instances lessons included purposeful pair work to advance the lesson aims and objectives. In other instances it was recommended that the teaching team broadens the range of teaching strategies used in lessons, to best meet the needs of their student cohort.

It was observed in the lessons observed that the good use of a range of questioning techniques enabled the teachers to motivate their students. Questions were differentiated in many instances, providing appropriate levels of challenge depending on individual ability. This very good practice can be further enhanced by increased differentiation of the teaching methods or strategies used. Students were visibly engaged in the lesson as witnessed by the quality of questions they asked their teacher.

The effectiveness of student learning, as indicated by the quality of students’ work and their response to the enquiries of the inspector, is consistent with appropriately high expectations, given the range of student abilities. Students display an appropriate level of knowledge and understanding of the subjects. The involvement of students in lessons and their engagement with the work they undertake were of a high standard. Teachers’ support was given in a manner that promoted independent learning and students were clearly benefiting from this support.

Teachers demonstrated a high level of competence and skill. In addition the teacher’s energy and enthusiasm helped to create a challenging and stimulating lesson environment and the students responded very positively to this approach. Teachers’ knowledge of both their subject and their students assisted in determining the pace of the lesson.
The atmosphere in the classroom was relaxed yet purposeful and students were polite and co-operative at all times. Classroom management was effective and appropriate, and students were kept on task. Students were generally attentive to their work. There was a sense of mutual respect between teachers and students, creating an atmosphere that was conducive to learning. It was evident that the students enjoyed their work and that they benefited from the individual attention, encouragement and affirmation that they received from their teachers.

A range of posters was displayed to create a visually stimulating environment in the classrooms. It is good that student-generated posters and examples of students’ work are on show in addition to JCSP materials and further use of this good practice is encouraged. Such displays have been found to foster among students a sense of being valued by, and of belonging to, the school community. They also motivate learners by showing students that they have a potential audience for their work and therefore, correction and subsequent redrafting or redesigning are relevant, important and the norm for all.

4.3 Assessment

In relation to each of the subjects inspected, it is evident that the subject departments plan for a range of modes and procedures to assess students’ learning and inform teaching. The modes, formal and informal, are broadly consistent with the homework and assessment policies adopted by the school. In addition to formal examinations at Christmas and in summer, continuous assessment is commonly employed and includes end-of-topic tests and project assessments. In one instance further more formal structuring of continuous assessment practice is recommended, to be detailed in the subject-department plan.

The school is examining new standardised tests which will attend to students’ cognitive abilities. The school should examine the feasibility of testing cognitive domains and monitoring affective domains with a view to revisiting these at a later date. It is recommended that the findings from retesting, along with other student gains, should be appropriately shared with colleagues. Less easily quantifiable aspects of students’ progress should also be tracked as indicated in the separate special educational needs inspection report.

Homework is generally appropriately assigned in line with the policy of the school which recognises the need for differentiation by content, process and product. Where practice regarding the assignment of homework is not consistent across a subject department, the subject team should agree on a broad definition of what constitutes homework and assign work in line with this.

Good practice is often followed regarding informal assessment as a means of encouraging learning and promoting students’ self-esteem, as well as acknowledging academic achievement. The regular monitoring of students’ work is generally affirmed in the reports, sometimes with reference to appropriate written comments by teachers, occasionally signed and dated, being used to encourage students’ efforts. Such appropriate feedback for students is identified positively for supporting the principles of assessment for learning in lessons. It is suggested in some instances that greater emphasis should be placed on ensuring an active role for students in monitoring their own work in copybooks and making corrections where required.

Parents are regularly and effectively informed of students’ progress. They are facilitated, on their request, to meet with teachers. Information is communicated at annual parent-teacher meetings, by means of the students’ journals and in standard school reports posted home following formal assessment twice a year, including mock examinations for students about
to sit the certificate examinations. Record-keeping is generally systematic and of a high standard. Teachers maintain ongoing records of students’ attendance and achievement.

5. **QUALITY OF SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS**

5.1 **Inclusion of students with additional educational needs**

Bishopstown Community School is an inclusive and caring place of learning. The principal holds formal qualifications in the area of special education and another permanent member of staff has been appointed co-ordinator and is commencing the Post Graduate Diploma in Special Educational Needs (PGDSEN) in September 2010. These actions, combined with the ongoing promotion of a whole-school response, augur well for the quality of supports for students with additional educational needs. The needs presenting among the student population are wide ranging and are systematically identified by the school with the support of external agencies.

The school’s staff has shown considerable commitment to meeting the needs of students not only in their daily interaction with students but also in their individual and collective pursuit of professional development. In advancing the quality of support, senior management prioritises the importance of open communication and the sharing of information in a manner that promotes collaboration among all teachers, special-needs assistants, parents and others. The school recognises and seeks to establish inclusive practices with an understanding that such inclusive practices are in turn closely linked to overall school improvement.

In seeking to further improve upon existing good practices in relation to providing for additional educational needs, the school should prioritise issues around the timetabling of additional resources, including the formation of a student register. It is also recommended that the school give serious consideration to the benefits of collaborative practices within classrooms such as team-teaching. An inspection report, specific to an evaluation of the quality of provision for students with special educational needs is appended to this report.

The school has experienced a significant intake of students for whom English is an additional language. It is very good to note that the school, through its board of management, has implemented most of the recommendations of an inspection report written following an evaluation in 2008 of provision for students learning English as an additional language.

The reintroduction of a hearing impaired unit in the school in the current year is a response to the need for such a provision in the city. The positive welcome and openness to the unit within the school reflects the overall inclusive ethos that endeavours to cater for all of the school’s population to the highest standards possible.

As a further support for a small cohort of students the school has introduced a ‘behaviour support’ process into the school. This enables a long-term intervention, targeted at a small number of students to enhance their interaction with their education, to be provided in the school. The inclusion of this initiative is positive and helps to ensure that all students can derive long-term benefit from their schooling.

The school has links with nearby third-level institutions and are involved with the UCC/CIT plus programme. This programme is designed to provide support to students who might not otherwise progress to third-level education. Management deserves recognition for its plans to create links to colleges offering Post-Leaving Certificate (PLC) courses.
Such links, once established, could prove beneficial to students who wish to progress to PLC courses in the future.

A number of practices to support students from financially disadvantaged backgrounds are in place and deserving of praise. These include a book scheme, the provision of material supports, the non-application of charges and the funding of co-curricular and extracurricular activities.

5.2 Guidance and student support in the whole-school context

The school has prepared a whole-school guidance plan in accordance with the Planning the School Guidance Programme NCGE (2004). This is positive and emphasises the inclusive-whole-school nature of guidance and care in the school. The school also houses a well-developed and appropriately equipped guidance suite. The guidance counsellor, appointed in a permanent capacity, is on secondment to another agency and is substituted by a qualified practitioner on a part-time basis. The allocation to the school for Guidance is eleven hours per week. The current guidance counsellor also teaches Social Personal and Health Education. Some non-class contact time is used for counselling. Along with the guidance counsellor, the HSCL co-ordinator and the chaplain are also involved in the provision of counselling to students. The school is fortunate to have this range of expertise available within its staff. In light of the range of available provision, it is recommended that the whole-school-guidance plan would be updated to reflect the current range of supports available to students and that the implementation, management and co-ordination of the counselling service are clearly and unambiguously outlined within the plan.

In the current year, the two TY classes and the sixth-year LCA classes are timetabled for either Guidance or Vocational Preparation and Guidance. Guidance programmes should be developed for all students in all year groups. Senior cycle classes would benefit from the provision of at least one period of Guidance each week and a satisfactory level of contact with other class groups can be facilitated in a number of ways. It is recommended that, in future, the hours allocated for the purpose of guidance and counselling be appropriately deployed and clearly identifiable in the guidance plan.

At community level, the school is assisted by local employers and institutions who, for example, provide information through visits to the school and who provide employment through the school’s work-experience programme. In addition, links have been established with agencies external to the school such as NEPS and local health services to which referrals may be made in collaboration with senior management.

The school’s support for and care of the individuals within its student cohort is one of its most significant strengths. Each year group has a year head and a class teacher. Both would have a strong pastoral care function. The year head also deals with discipline issues. The class teacher also meets with subject teachers both officially and unofficially to discuss individual students. Due to the size of the school a student that may be having difficulty in any area is, in many ways, cared for by everyone. A care team, comprised of the principal and deputy principal, guidance counsellor, the chaplain and the year heads meet each week to discuss each year group and individual students who may be experiencing difficulties. In addition the school also has a behavioural support team consisting of the guidance teacher, HSCL co-ordinator, School Completion Programme personnel and the school principal. This team discusses young people who are having behavioural difficulties or may be showing signs which could lead them into difficulty. The school’s staff is also responsible for a number of planning initiatives in the care area, for example, the development of a comprehensive, critical incident policy.
The recently appointed HSCL co-ordinator plays an important role in creating, fostering and maintaining communication with parents. These home-school connections encourage parents to become more involved in their child’s education and increase co-operation between students, parents and teachers. Among the activities undertaken is a visit to the home of every first-year student. The numbers of parents who attend courses in the school are also increasing.

The school’s full-time chaplain seeks to respond to the spiritual and religious needs of the members of the school community. The chaplaincy also plays a role in meeting parents and has an involvement in the various teams within the school who provide supports for students. The chaplain also co-ordinates a number of activities associated with students’ faith journey.

The overall progress which the school has made over the years in areas of general student support and the priority that this area has in planning for the future is applauded. More recent developments like the introduction of the JCSP, advances in catering for EAL students, the acceptance of special-needs assistants, the upskilling of staff in special educational needs and other initiatives suggest that the school is aware of the changing needs of its student cohort and is adapting to meet these. Such awareness deserves praise and it is important that these levels of innovation and flexibility be maintained in the years to come.

6. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Bishopstown Community School is an inclusive and caring place of learning.
- Teaching and learning of a high standard is the norm in the school.
- The school is aware of the changing needs of its student cohort and is adapting to meet these needs.
- The board of management is educationally aware and is conscious of the school’s context and its students’ needs.
- The school operates an effective class-teacher system on a voluntary basis.
- The School Completion Programme (SCP) provides a range of supports for identified students in the school community.
- Staff and senior management have been proactive in addressing the area of school attendance.
- Parents are very satisfied with the overall level of communication between the school and home.
- There is a high level of co-operation and liaison with local community groups and various outside agencies.
- The school building and the immediate grounds are very well maintained.
- Significant work has been done in the development of the school plan.
- Students are afforded the opportunity to partake in a range of sports, each having a recreational, competitive or community basis.
- The good practice of forming the option blocks based on student choice is in place.
- Interaction among students and teachers was found to be positive and based on mutual respect.
- Good progress has been made in the development of comprehensive subject plans.
- Teachers demonstrated a high level of competence and skill.
- Students displayed levels of knowledge and understanding of subjects commensurate with their abilities.
• Informal assessment practices are used effectively as a means of encouraging learning and promoting students’ self-esteem, as well as acknowledging academic achievement.
• Parents are regularly and effectively informed of students’ progress.
• A number of supports for students from financially disadvantaged backgrounds are in place.
• The school has re-introduced a unit to enable specific provision for students with hearing impairments.

As a means of building on these strengths and to address areas for development, the following key recommendations are made:
• Timetable provision for students with special educational needs and for those with EAL needs should be reviewed.
• The hours allocated for Guidance should be deployed in this area and be clearly identifiable in the guidance plan.
• The deployment of staff should be reviewed so as to ensure that all teachers on the incremental salary scale are timetabled for, at least, the minimum required class contact hours.
• Management, in consultation with staff, should conduct a review of the sustainability of the range of subjects and programme on offer in the school.
• A review of the current code of discipline to include the addition of a positive behaviour structure should be undertaken.
• The focus of school development planning should be directed towards, as far as possible, the core issues of teaching and learning.
• The DEIS plan should include realistic, specific, measurable, achievable and time-bound targets in relation to improvements in the areas of attendance and retention, literacy and numeracy, examination attainment and educational progression and partnership with parents and others.

Post-evaluation meetings were held with senior management and the 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 Construction Studies and Materials Technology (Wood) – April 2010
• Subject Inspection of French –March 2010
• Inspection of provision for students with Special Educational Needs –March 2010
• Subject Inspection of Mathematics –January 2010

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Appendix

School Response to the Report

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

The Board of Management wishes to praise the Inspectorate on a very thorough and fair evaluation of the school. The Board is extremely pleased to welcome this very positive report which comprehensively recognises the high quality of teaching and learning, the competence and enthusiasm of the staff and the courteous and politeness of the students at Bishopstown Community School. The report also acknowledges the caring atmosphere, the mutual respect and the inclusivity that is the prevailing culture within the school. We the staff and students of the school wish to thank the team of inspectors for their professionalism, their courtesy and their genuine interest throughout their visit.

The Board of Management is particularly pleased that the findings clearly identified:

- Bishopstown Community School is an inclusive and caring place of learning.
- Teaching and learning of a high standard is the norm in the school.
- The school is aware of the changing needs of its student cohort and is adapting to meet these needs.
- The board of management is educationally aware and is conscious of the school’s context and its students’ needs.
- The school operates an effective class-teacher system on a voluntary basis.
- The School Completion Programme (SCP) provides a range of supports for identified students in the school community.
- Staff and senior management have been proactive in addressing the area of school attendance.
- Parents are very satisfied with the overall level of communication between the school and home.
- There is a high level of co-operation and liaison with local community groups and various outside agencies.
- The school building and the immediate grounds are very well maintained.
- Significant work has been done in the development of the school plan.
- Students are afforded the opportunity to partake in a range of sports, each having a recreational, competitive or community basis.
- The good practice of forming the option blocks based on student choice is in place.
- Interaction among students and teachers was found to be positive and based on mutual respect.
- Good progress has been made in the development of comprehensive subject plans.
- Teachers demonstrated a high level of competence and skill.
- Students displayed levels of knowledge and understanding of subjects commensurate with their abilities.
- Informal assessment practices are used effectively as a means of encouraging learning and promoting students’ self-esteem, as well as acknowledging academic achievement.
- Parents are regularly and effectively informed of students’ progress.
- A number of supports for students from financially disadvantaged backgrounds are in place.
- The school has re-introduced a unit to enable specific provision for students with hearing impairment.
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 Special Educational Needs Department within the school is being totally re-organised. As part of this reorganisation the time-table is being restructured. This re-organisation will be facilitated by the fact that one of the full-time members of staff is presently attending the Post Graduate Course in Special Educational needs University College Cork.

Guidance is now timetabled weekly for 5th and 6th year classes. Junior Certificate classes receive guidance tuition at different points over the year. Into the future it is planned this provision will be made available to other year groups.

The issue of teachers being timetabled for the minimum required class contact hours is being resolved.

The sustainability of the range of subjects and programmes is always a part of our staff meetings. While we are aware of this in the short term, our numbers are increasing and this should solve itself over the next few years.

The code of discipline has been reviewed and changes have been made to include the positive behaviour structure that exists in the school. The new code of behaviour has been passed by students, staff, parents and the Board of Management.

The focus of school development planning is now being directed more on teaching and learning. The co-ordinator for planning has retired and under the present fiscal limitations there is no post holder available to take on the position.

The Deis plan has been looked at. We have revised our targets to make them more realistic, specific and attainable.