

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

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

REPORT

**Gael-Choláiste Chill Dara
Naas, County Kildare
Roll number: 68072I**

Date of inspection: 11 February 2016



**A N R O I N N | D E P A R T M E N T O F
O I D E A C H A I S | E D U C A T I O N
A G U S S C I L E A N N A | A N D S K I L L S**

THE INSPECTORATE

Whole-School Evaluation

Management, Leadership and Learning

A whole-school evaluation of management, leadership and learning (WSE-MLL) was undertaken in February 2016 in Gael-Choláiste Chill Dara. 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. The board of management of the school was given an opportunity to comment on the findings and recommendations of the report; the board chose to accept the report without response.

Introduction

Gael-Choláiste Chill Dara is a co-educational school operating under the trust of Foras Pátrúnachta na Scoileanna Lán-Ghaeilge Teoranta. The school was established in 2003 as a result of the work of a parental pressure group who demanded post-primary educational provision through the medium of Irish. The school was located at the current site in 2010. The school's ethos is based on respect for people, high-quality education, and creating a learning environment where each student flourishes. The school's enrolment has been increasing continuously and there are 289 students on the roll at present. The students come from a wide range of socioeconomic and sociolinguistic backgrounds. The school has a wide catchment area and primarily serves students from Irish-medium primary schools in County Kildare, Portlaoise, Blessington and Rathcoole. The school provides the Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate (established) programmes and the Transition Year is mandatory.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

Main findings

- There was a very positive atmosphere in the school and the respect that members of the school community had for each other was clear in different interactions during the evaluation.
- The board of management is committed to providing a high-quality of education and the goodwill, enthusiasm and professionalism among the staff to establishing and developing the school is clear.
- The quality of the teaching and learning ranged between good and very good in most of the classes and fair in a small number.
- The subject plans were of very high quality.
- The continuing professional development of the staff and the self-evaluation process are central to the school's development and improvement.
- The students are very well cared for and have a strong voice in the school.

Recommendations for Further Development

- In order to support the goal of making students self-directed learners, it is recommended that the exemplary practices identified in teaching, learning and assessment become standard practice.
- It is recommended to continue to improve student attainment in certificate examinations and monitor their attainment in in-house examinations as part of this work.
- It is recommended that the board formally adopts a school plan for its term in office and agrees action plans for the priorities identified.
- It is recommended that the worthwhile work being carried out in respect to peer-observation and team teaching is built on.

1. QUALITY OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP

1.1 School ownership and management

The board of management (the board) is appropriately established and has a very strong link with the trustees, senior management and the school community in general. The board is committed to the school and to providing a high-quality of education to the students in an atmosphere in which all participants respect one another. The board is also committed to preserving the school's ethos as it grows.

The board members have a range of experience and beneficial skills which aid the development and running of the school. As well as that, they have taken part in appropriate training programmes. While a lot of the work has been focused on the school's location and accommodation since its establishment, the board has succeeded, in line with the school motto – "*ar thuras léinn is feasa*" ("on a journey of learning and knowledge") – in including the provision of the curriculum and the recruitment and continuing professional development of the staff among its priorities for development. The board and senior management team recognise that they must now develop the vision for the school as part of the educational provision in Naas and focus more on expanding the curriculum and the student learning experience.

While the necessary policies and all components of the school plan are available, the board has yet to formally adopt a school plan. It is recommended that the board formally adopts the current plan, with appropriate amendments. This would help to clarify the board's development goals for its term of office to the school community. As well as that, action plans for the different development goals should be defined as this would help with the process of monitoring the implementation of the plan.

Board members showed a very good understanding of their role and of the school's educational provision. The board holds regular meetings and, in line with best practice, provides agreed reports to both the teaching staff and parents. The members agree on decisions and, where necessary, time is taken between meetings in order to carry out further research on particular matters.

The board's practices in respect to the development and review of policies are of high quality. A clear development cycle is in place that ensures that policies are kept up to date. Draft policies and policies under review, along with input, are provided to stakeholders before the board approves the policies.

The school management is determined that the Irish language is used in all aspects of the school's functioning. It is policy that students sit their certificate examinations in Irish, as appropriate. As well as that, the school has achieved a Gaelbhreach.

The partnership with parents and students is central to the school's ethos. The parents' council is very active and it provides support in various areas of the school's operation. For example, it is worth mentioning the mock interviews organised for senior students and the co-operation between the parents' council and the student council in respect to policies on healthy eating and the school uniform.

As is clear from the response to questionnaires and the meeting held with a focus group of students, students have a very strong voice in the school and they are confident that the management team listens to them. The student council is very active and representative of all year groups. The work of the Irish language committee is also commended, especially for the leadership opportunities that it creates for students in promoting the language and in creating links with other schools in the area.

A buddy system was one of the development goals identified by students. The parents' council also mentioned this as a means through which the school's ethos could be preserved as the school community expands. It is recognised that the management team is happy to support the development of the system. In order to discuss relevant development priorities, it is recommended that the board of management

and the parents' council include a meeting with the student council in their programme of meetings to be held during the school year.

1.2 Effectiveness of leadership for learning

The senior management team operates very effectively and they use their leadership and management skills and competences to benefit the learning of students and the teaching staff. As founders of the school, they have an agreed and clear vision for the school. They have defined responsibilities and a good understanding of each other's role. They adopt a partnership approach towards school leadership. They hold regular daily meetings as a team and communicate regularly, openly and effectively with all stakeholders. By providing leadership and a good example, they encourage the staff to provide a high-quality of education and continue their professional development.

The school has two posts of responsibility at assistant principal level. The post-holders hold regular meetings with the senior management team. The duties relating to these posts correspond to the school's needs and the list of duties reflects a very high level of self-motivation and dedication to the school and the students. The goodwill, self-motivation and dedication of other teachers on the staff and their invaluable input in the running of the school are also recognised. The delegation of duties is very good and effective in promoting innovation in teaching and learning and in school improvement in general. As part of strategic planning, for example, training is being provided to year heads. This structure is currently being developed.

Regular staff meetings are held and pedagogy is on the agenda of these meetings and of the meetings of subject departments. A high-quality staff handbook is available. Staff members are assigned based on their qualifications. The structures and staff participation in continuing professional development (CPD) help the school to be at the forefront of national priorities and of good teaching and learning practice in general. These include CPD opportunities provided centrally, the pilot Droichead project (the Teaching Council) and the *Teaching and Learning for the 21st Century* initiative (TL21, National University of Ireland, Maynooth). Good progress is being made in nurturing peer-observation and team teaching practices as part of the school culture. In order to ensure that the teachers have a high degree of competence in Irish, the trustees provide the staff with an Irish language course linked to the *Teastas Eorpach na Gaeilge* (TEG – European Certificate in Irish).

The students are very well cared for. The pastoral care team functions effectively, with very good support from class teachers and the valuable links that have been created with appropriate agencies. Particular emphasis is placed on wellbeing, including mental health, on different occasions during the school year. The team meets regularly, with formal meetings at both the beginning and end of the school year. The existing plan to put all meetings on a more formal basis is commended, especially with the year-heads system now coming into place.

The application of the admissions policy, which is regularly reviewed, is in line with the mission statement and vision of the school. It is recommended that the purpose of the one-off cost mentioned in the documentation is clarified and that any wording that could potentially discourage a student from applying to the school is removed. It should also be clarified that the school provides a six-year educational course as the Transition Year is mandatory.

Student attendance and retention is carefully monitored. The retention rates are very good. However, the management team recognises the need to continuously work to improve attendance in the case of a particular group. The plans that are in place to tackle this issue are to be commended.

The code of conduct, including the Irish language rule, and the steps set out therein are clear. Much recognition is given to student attainment in different areas of school life and this supports the very positive attitude towards the Irish language and Irish-medium education that is prevalent among the school community. This greatly enhances the good atmosphere that was noted in the school and expressed in the teacher, parent and student questionnaires.

Policies for Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) and Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) are in place. It was clear at the meeting with a focus group of students and in the response to questionnaires that they were not entirely happy nor sure about their learning in the area of RSE. It is recognised that the programme is under review and it is recommended that these outcomes are considered in the process.

The guidance provision is good and the allocation of responsibilities between two teachers is effective. The draft plan for Guidance prepared for the board's approval is of good quality. Comprehensive information on the range of subjects available is provided to the students and their parents at open nights and by contacting the guidance department. That said, as a result of the response to the parents' questionnaire, it is recommended that the current practice whereby first-year students choose their optional subjects prior to entry be reviewed and that the feasibility of creating opportunities for them to sample those subjects be revisited.

The school delivers a wide curriculum and the timetable shows that every effort is made to attend to the students' particular needs and interests. The board reviews the curriculum every year and it is a recognised aim to enhance it. In this context, it is recommended that priorities identified by parents and students for subjects in the areas of technology and business and the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme are considered.

The subject plans were of high quality. The way in which learning outcomes are set out and the manner in which literacy and numeracy skills are linked with content are especially commended. The teachers have high expectations for the students' learning and there was evidence of analysis of the results and participation in the certificate examinations. The level of participation at the highest levels is good but it is clear that there is scope for improvement in attainment. This analysis should also be extended to the results of in-house examinations. To gain the greatest benefit from the analysis, it is recommended that, in addition to commentary on the outcomes, that goals for development are set out where scope for improvement is identified, as was evident in the case of certain plans. The action plan should be shared with the school management team and the plans should be used as live working documents.

Generally, the Transition Year plan is very good. However, it is recommended that the work experience model in place is reviewed. In this model, the students spend one day per week during the school year on work experience and one week on social work experience. A revised work experience model would create more time in school and an opportunity to allow students experience a wider range of subjects.

The school fulfils its requirements regarding the minimum number of teaching hours and the minimum number of days it is open during the school year.

The resources due to students with special educational needs are used properly. A teacher fully qualified in the area of special education is in charge of co-ordinating the resources and their provision. It is recommended that it is ensured that more than one staff member is qualified in this area. The range of support models, educational plans for individual students and the emphasis on inclusion is to be commended. The current development of the practice of team teaching is especially commended.

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

1.2 Management of facilities

The standard of maintenance of the accommodation and the environment is very high. In accordance with the vision of the senior management team for the school being an integral part of the community in the area, an arrangement has been made with KARE (an organisation that promotes the inclusion of people with intellectual disabilities) with regard to responsibility for the cleanliness of the school. This is a responsibility for which the workers have received a national award.

Very good use has been made of the walls and the other spaces in the building in order to create a motivating learning environment. The way in which the building is used to support the development of literacy and numeracy skills is especially commended. Also commended is the plan that is in place to provide furniture and fitness equipment outdoors that will support the students' life-long wellbeing.

The management team has always recognised the central role of information and communication technology in the promotion of best practice and innovation in teaching, learning and school administration and excellent resources are available. Effective use is made of mobile phones and various software to support learning in the classroom and in the development of autonomous learning skills. Specialist rooms are used properly, including the science laboratory which was provided by school management.

Very good attention is paid to the school environment and environmental issues. It is recommended that work is undertaken to attain a Green Flag.

The health and safety statement is updated on an annual basis.

2. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

2.1 Quality of learning and teaching

The quality of the teaching and learning ranged between good and very good in most of the classes and fair in a small number. The teaching and learning was of excellent quality in almost half of the classes observed and there were examples of exemplary practice in certain aspects of other classes. It was only in the case of a very small number of classes that weaknesses and scope for development were identified.

The short-term planning was of good quality or high quality for the majority of classes. The learning intentions were shared with the students in each case, and the tasks in some cases, and they were revisited at appropriate times during and at the end of class. To enhance this practice, it is recommended that consideration be given to how the teacher and the students may co-construct learning objectives and intentions.

It is commendable that the practices observed are underpinned by assessment for learning and autonomous learning principles and associated skill and strategies. Co-operative learning was central in each class, with numerous opportunities for students to work in pairs or in larger groups and appropriate attention was often given to the differentiation of learning. The students undertook co-operative learning enthusiastically and, where the interaction had an appropriate structure and a definite time limit, the work had a sound learning outcome. In a small number of cases, a key word or single words were accepted as feedback instead of eliciting more complete answers or their own opinions from students. In a small number of other cases, the best use was not made of the class contact time in order to progress learning. It is important that new learning is carried out in each class. The expectations with regard to raising the students' speaking and writing ability in English are also commended. The particular role of the English class in supporting the school's improvement plan for English literacy is recognised.

A number of exemplary examples of the use of questioning, peer-assessment and continuous assessment were observed. Special praise is given to the practice in which various opportunities for active learning were created through individual work or group work, in which practical skills were developed on an incremental basis and in which teacher questioning was used effectively to evaluate and differentiate learning. Constructive feedback and guidance for improvement were given to students during the class. With regard to a small number of cases, care must be taken in choosing students to answer questions and ensuring that the same voices are not being heard again and again.

There was a very positive relationship between teachers and students in all classes. Students were given positive feedback and they were regularly encouraged and praised. The number of classes in which students were comfortable asking teachers content related questions, and the quality of those questions, was noteworthy.

Examples of student work and other printed material on display in classrooms created a positive learning environment. Those cases in which the material was used during the class are especially commended.

The students' diaries and written work were in very good order. There was variety in the quality of homework given and in the quality of the corrections to written work. It is strongly recommended that the exemplary practice of constructive corrections that was evident in certain cases and a culture of assessment for learning practices be consolidated and extended on a whole-school basis.

With regard to a small number of cases, inaccuracy in Irish must be addressed in exemplars presented by teachers orally and in writing, as well as avoiding the habit found in speech in a small number of cases to complete sentences using a mixture of Irish and English.

In accordance with the aim of achieving the holistic development of the student, the range of co-curricular and extra-curricular activities that are delivered and that comprise sport, drama, music and debate are to be commended.

3. IMPLEMENTATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS FROM PREVIOUS EVALUATIONS

3.1 Management

Very good progress has been made in implementing the recommendations of evaluation reports. It is clear that the board take the recommendations seriously and that arrangements are made for their implementation. Reports are shared with the parents' council. The council's level of information about the recommendations made in evaluation reports was outstanding.

3.2 Learning and Teaching

A significant strength of the school is the open way in which the improvement of the quality of teaching and learning is undertaken on a whole-school basis. Evaluation reports are discussed at staff and subject department meetings in order to share best practice and to plan strategically for the implementation of recommendations. All the recommendations made are currently being implemented. For example, a topic from international history is now included in the Transition Year programme, monitoring, review and analysis is being carried out on the results of certificate examinations, differentiation and questioning practices are being implemented and developed and history and SPHE resources are available on the school's server. As was observed, there is more emphasis on learning through instrument playing and singing in Music and an assessment for learning culture is being promoted in the school.

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

The self-evaluation process is an integral part of the school's operation at various levels. Both the management team and teachers showed a very good understanding of the process. There was evidence that stakeholders are consulted in order to identify and agree priorities for development.

Gael-Choláiste Chill Dara has made significant progress in the development and implementation of improvement plans for Irish and English literacy, for assessment for learning – the other aspect chosen – and in the current development work on the improvement plan for numeracy.

The school has shown a great capacity to use the self-evaluation process to address improvement and implement the recommendations of this report.