

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

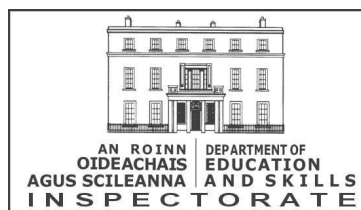
Department of Education and Skills

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

REPORT

**Mount Sackville Secondary School
Chapelizod, Dublin 20
Roll number: 60120W**

Date of inspection: 10 March 2011



Whole-School Evaluation Management, Leadership and Learning

A whole-school evaluation of management, leadership and learning (WSE-MLL) was undertaken in Mount Sackville Secondary School in March 2011. This report presents the findings of the evaluation and makes recommendations for improvement. During the evaluation, the inspection team met with the board of management, in-school management, groups of teachers and students. Inspectors also reviewed a range of school documentation and responses to questionnaires and examined other data held by the Department of Education and Skills. As part of the evaluation, a range of lessons across a number of subject areas were inspected. The board of management 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

Mount Sackville Secondary School is a fee-paying school for girls with an enrolment of 637 students. The school was founded in 1864 by the Sisters of St Joseph of Cluny and is under the trusteeship of Le Chéile. While a Catholic school, it welcomes students of all faiths. Core values of spiritual and moral development are of paramount importance. Much focus is placed on the all-round development of the individual and encouragement to realise full potential. The school provides for all abilities including gifted and talented students and those with special educational needs. The curriculum incorporates the Junior Certificate, a compulsory Transition Year (TY) programme and the Leaving Certificate.

1. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

1.1 Key Findings

- Progress on the priorities for development is advanced and effective action has been taken to implement beneficial changes to many areas of school operation.
- Senior management enables a collaborative, whole-school approach to modernisation and meeting the needs of students.
- Leadership of staff and leadership of students are highly effective.
- A highly engaged parents association supports learning and the school community.
- Engagement by teachers in continuing professional development (CPD) is enhancing teaching and learning in the application of differentiated methodologies and in meeting the needs of students with special educational needs.
- There is potential for the development of students' understanding of the school's democratic processes and for the extension of tracking of student attainment.
- A broad and holistic education is provided. Activities outside the classroom are viewed as an integral part of the curriculum offered. While the first year timetable is extensive, it is leading to less than satisfactory time provision for many subjects.
- In almost all lessons, the standard of teaching and learning observed was of a very high quality.

1.2 Recommendations for Further Development

- Students' understanding of democratic structures in the school should be enhanced and the student voice should be promoted in sustained and routine ways.
- Consideration should be given to the development of a system of target setting and tracking to monitor students' individual progress in subjects.

- Careful planning and consideration should be given to curriculum developments, particularly the breadth of the first-year curriculum.
- Future subject department planning and CPD should focus on strengthening the effective use of ICT and assessment for learning (AfL) methodologies.

2. QUALITY OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP

2.1 School ownership and management – the Board of Management

Composition, functioning and fulfilment of statutory obligations

The board is a committed, active body that possesses the collective knowledge and abilities to manage and lead the school effectively. It is a relatively new board but is aware of its statutory obligations and has a thorough understanding of school values and practices. The board demonstrates a high level of confidence in the staff and presents a clear rationale for all systems, including the curriculum. The board supports partnership through good communication with nominating bodies and the production of agreed reports. The board is open to ideas from stakeholders, to the identification of needs and responses to them.

The board has identified a number of policies for development, including the health and safety policy, which will need to incorporate the new building extension. The draft special educational needs policy has also been identified for completion. It is recommended that the existing policy on Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) be updated in line with more recent guidelines from the Department. Wording in the admissions policy should be amended to reflect the school's inclusive practice.

All of the elements of a school plan are in place. The board should oversee the collation of these into a single concise document. Particular attention should be given to ensuring the good consultative practices are recorded.

Confirmation was provided that, in compliance with Post-primary Circulars M44/05 and 0062/2006, the board of management has formally adopted the Department's Child Protection Guidelines for Post-primary Schools (Published September 2004). Confirmation was also provided that these child protection procedures have been brought to the attention of management, school staff and parents; that a copy of the procedures has been provided to all staff (including all new staff); and that management has ensured that all staff are familiar with the procedures to be followed. A designated liaison person (DLP) and a deputy DLP have been appointed in line with the requirements of the guidelines.

The school's priorities for development

Valuable and highly appropriate priorities for development are being advanced and include: high-quality infrastructure and teaching resources to support learning; staff professional development; and whole-school approaches to meeting the needs of students.

In seeking whole-school approaches to meeting the needs of students, senior management skilfully led staff and enabled them to approach the issue progressively and collaboratively. Developments have led to whole-school changes in structures and practices in relation to differentiation and learning support and have better enabled subject teachers to meet the needs of all students in the mixed-ability setting. This was, and continues to be, enabled by a systematic focus on the issue with staff at key opportunities and enhancement of access for subject teachers to information on students with special educational needs, including student profiles.

Advancements were also possible due to the strong support from the board for professional development, including the pursuit of further qualifications, and capacity building from within the staff. Ongoing CPD and investments in school development planning have

enhanced planning and professionalism within the school and within subject departments. CPD has successfully enhanced differentiated approaches to teaching and learning.

The development of the infrastructure has also brought about change and there has been significant investment in facilities for the integration of information and communications technology (ICT) in administration and teaching. ICT is one area where development is ongoing. Further strategies for developing teachers' skills to effectively use ICT in classrooms are being considered, similar to other whole-school approaches. Management is also exploring future options for the use of ICT as a key learning tool for students as well as a teaching instrument.

The school is well advanced on the continuum of achieving outcomes on each priority. Developments that have taken place over recent years have shown the school to be reflective and evaluative. Developments have brought about significant changes and are benefiting students.

The identified priorities will remain on the agenda for improvement in the long term as management continues to advance the key areas. More short to medium term priorities should also be included in forward planning to clarify more immediate targets. Such priorities will arise from this evaluation as well as outcomes of the parental and student surveys and the recommendation regarding the strengthening of the school self-evaluation process in section 5.

2.2 Effectiveness of leadership for learning

Leadership of staff

The senior management team provides confident and committed leadership with a clear vision for development. The principal and deputy principal divide duties but share roles with regard to the efficient running of the school, communication with stakeholders and leadership. The principal keeps in touch with educational developments and the needs of students and provides clear educational leadership by promoting high standards and a strong work ethic among all members of the school community. The work of the deputy principal enables the principal to focus on developmental priorities by ensuring that day-to-day managerial duties are carried out with high levels of effectiveness. They are strongly supported in their work by the administrative staff, teachers, board and parents' association.

Leadership of staff is highly effective. The collaborative, whole-school approach to developments is enabled through a scheduled meeting time for teachers on one afternoon each week. Meetings that regularly take place include subject department, dean-tutor and staff meetings. There is good devolution of tasks at staff meetings and teachers regularly lead discussions on their areas of responsibility. Meetings have consolidated discussions at staff level and resulted in a rationalised approach to all aspects of school organisation. Discussions also take place on the school curriculum. Recently, teachers were led through a whole-school review of the TY with the outcome of a considerable refocus on the programme and the introduction of portfolio assessment.

Teachers undertake a range of leadership roles, both as part of, and in addition to, the posts structure. Teachers demonstrate high levels of skills in their roles and provide advice and input into decision making. Their contribution to the smooth running of the school is very clear. Teacher-led initiatives can and do lead to systematic changes; the beneficial developments in positive reinforcement of students is one example. Subject co-ordinators have the opportunity to lead in subject areas. Deans and tutors are leaders of students and deans lead staff through the pastoral care structure. The skills of staff are very well utilised for internal CPD, providing further leadership opportunities. Other opportunities include leading initiatives, policy review and work with parents, student council and the board.

Accountability is inbuilt through the regular meeting structure and attendance of senior management at scheduled meetings. Subject departments are encouraged to reflect on the outcomes of the state examinations and discuss these with senior management.

Leadership of students

Leadership of students is rooted in the Cluny commitment to community and nurturing students as individuals in their personal development. School life is structured and orderly and strong attention is paid to courteous interactions. Students are willingly co-operative and respectful reflecting the very high standards set out in the code of behaviour. Students exhibit excellence in attendance and punctuality for lessons.

A very effective care system is in place and is co-ordinated through weekly meetings of key staff. Leadership of students is supported through assemblies and registration which reinforce the school spirit while also being used as occasions for celebration. Responses from the student questionnaires confirm inspectors' observations and indicate strongly that students feel safe and cared for in the school. Targeted interventions such as Feel Good Friday, initiatives to counteract bullying and the work of the guidance and chaplaincy services strongly support the care system.

Prefects are an important group of leaders who are given responsibility for promoting care and a sense of belonging among junior groups while also acting as role models. Other opportunities for students to lead include sports captains, student forum and charity work. Their contributions are valued highly by management.

The student council has effected some changes and had some involvement in policy review. A meeting with a focus group of students as part of the evaluation revealed that there is scope to improve their understanding of the school's democratic structures and to promote the student voice in sustained and routine ways. Fifty-seven percent of students surveyed as part of the evaluation disagreed that they have a say in how to make the school a better place. New initiatives such as inviting the officers of the student council to address the board annually on their activities or extending the use of student review surveys to all year groups should be considered.

Leadership of learning is facilitated by a mid-year review of the progress of every student. Monitoring is enabled by the information shared on the network and the use of common assessments in subjects. This could be extended to the outcome of class-based assessments. Good quality reports are sent home and teachers focus their commentary on constructive remarks. After-school study and seminars for students and parents promote good habits. Student attainment in the state examinations is consistently high. However, the inspection team noted that in a few instances students are not attaining at higher level. There is scope for the enhancement of the tracking process and its extension into target setting; students could be encouraged, in consultation with teachers, to identify clear attainable targets for achievement at key times. These targets could be revisited frequently to ensure attainment is commensurate with potential. Given the strengths identified in self-directed learning, it seems possible that the student journal could be used as a tool for this.

The curriculum provided exposes students to a range of subjects and is enhanced by the extensive range of additional activities and charitable work. Participation in activities outside the classroom is viewed as an integral part of school life. The activities and achievements of students are highly valued and depicted in the photographs displayed on corridors and publications.

The TY provides opportunities for experiential and self-directed learning. TY students are encouraged to maintain high standards of work and they sit formal school examinations in

subjects. The range of optional subjects could be extended by taking a modular approach to the TY calendar. The school is asked to consider the benefits for students of introducing the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme.

The first-year timetable, however, is considerable; students take all seventeen subjects for the full year. The rationale is to provide students with a broad sample from which to make informed choices based on a year's performance. Able students seem to be coping and students and parents reported consistently on the merits of the system. The number of subjects is reduced for less able students. However, accommodating all subjects in a forty-three period week has resulted in less than satisfactory time provision for many subjects. The junior cycle curriculum should be kept under continual review to ensure it is meeting the needs of current students.

The school facilitates the full inclusion of students with special educational needs. Their timetable is adapted to allow withdrawal for resource teaching. It is suggested that the scheduling of resource teaching combined with training and careful planning could enable co-operative teaching to be applied occasionally with certain groups. The school should continue to build capacity in this area and consolidate a core team.

The parents' association provides a high level of support for learning through very valuable initiatives that enhance many aspects of school life.

2.3 Management of facilities

Management of the school calendar is excellent and it is evident that the integrity of the school year and week are very important and that no unnecessary erosion of tuition time is allowed. The calendar and weekly provision of tuition is compliant with circular M29/95.

The facilities are extensive and they are excellently managed and maintained. A continuing programme for improvement is evident. The drive to modernise saw the realisation of a substantial building project and modernisation of facilities, including ICT. Developments have taken place with regard to energy saving and the environment. The school website provides information for parents and is evolving as an effective medium for dissemination.

Priority is given to enriching the learning environment and much of this has been possible due to private funding including the library services for staff and students. Classrooms and corridors presented as stimulating learning environments through the placement of student work and teaching resources.

3. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

3.1 The quality of learning and teaching

The quality of teaching and learning observed was very high. In isolated instances, there was scope for a greater range of strategies to actively engage students of all learning styles. Responses from the questionnaires administered to parents and students reflected a good level of satisfaction with the quality of teaching.

Lessons were well planned, paced and structured. In almost all instances, teachers outlined the content and purpose at the outset. Good practice was observed when teachers highlighted the intended learning outcomes in addition to the content. It is recommended this strategy be adopted by all teachers as a key element of teaching practice.

In most lessons, teachers employed enabling strategies to differentiate and support a range of learning styles. Effective differentiation for ability included effective questioning, the

use of graded worksheets, differentiated tasks and individual instruction. Students were encouraged to think for themselves and teachers regularly sought students' opinions. Students were actively and purposefully engaged in their own learning and demonstrated very good capabilities in self-directed learning. Students were articulate and confident in tasks and making presentations to their peers. Very good attention was given to ensuring the accurate use of subject-specific terminology. In language lessons, excellent emphasis was placed on ensuring that students consistently used the target language.

In almost all lessons, effective methods were used to actively engage students. The tasks set involved students in acquiring and applying both knowledge and skill. Tasks included the analysis of texts, role play, conducting practical tasks and evaluating the outcomes as well co-operative learning through pair and group activities. The inclusion of such approaches fostered independent and collaborative learning and helped to advance key skills such as creativity, communication, problem solving, decision making and team work.

Teachers were consistent in their expectations regarding literacy and numeracy skills, homework and standards of attainment. Homework was regularly assigned and monitored. Good practice was noted where teachers provided regular formative feedback and guidance for students on their written assignments. This affirmed efforts and helped to further improve the quality of their work. Aspects of AfL were evident in the delivery of every lesson, but there was scope for further development given students' self-directed capacities. To build on the existing good practice, consideration should be given at times to the use of a broader range of in-class strategies to correct homework, such as self-assessment, peer correction and feedback through the application of agreed criteria, in addition to the established practice of teacher monitoring and feedback.

Student behaviour was exemplary. The learning atmosphere in all of the lessons observed was positive, encouraging and in many cases inspiring. Teachers were very open to constructive feedback demonstrating a positive attitude to professional development and a commitment to continually enhancing student learning.

4. IMPLEMENTATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS FROM PREVIOUS EVALUATIONS

4.1 Management

Very good responses have been made to recommendations in previous inspections. These were outlined in detail by the board and confirmed in observations by the inspection team. Management encourages subject departments to take ownership of the implementation of recommendations and closely oversees developments. In practice, recommendations are placed on the agenda of subject meetings until resolved.

A few recommendations still to be addressed were identified by the board and these include the provision of additional time for Science in first year and revising the scheduling of double lessons for languages. These have not been possible to implement to date due to the constraints imposed by the breadth of the first-year curriculum and timetabling exigencies.

4.2 Learning and Teaching

Subject department have taken a considered approach to acting on recommendations. Good examples of changes to teaching and learning in subjects were evident during the course of the evaluation. There was also evidence that influence has extended to changes in practices in other subjects. Changes successfully accomplished include: revisions to TY subject plans to broaden subject matter; focus on the use of the target language during language lessons; displays of student work; application of co-operative learning; and a more conscious focus

on investigatory and active learning. However, changes of approach were not always reflected in some subject plans. TY plans for some subjects should also be developed to consolidate experiential methodologies.

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

A capacity for self-evaluation was demonstrated among the skill set of teachers, management and the board, which will ensure the school continues to modernise in response to the evolving needs of its students. The school was open to the observations of this evaluation and showed a strong interest in the outcomes of parent and student questionnaires. Reflective processes are embedded and have led to progress on the priorities for improvement and effective action on implementing changes to many areas of school operation. The whole-school aspect of recent developments contributes to the progressive nature of the school.

Formal school self-evaluation is still evolving and has capacity for development. The self-evaluation process needs to be strengthened, formalised and more routinely embedded in practice. The potential for the extension of data collection, analysis and tracking of student attainment has already been stated. There is potential also to collect other types of data in more systematic ways so that the school can make more informed observations about its strengths and weaknesses, particularly in relation to the views of students. This would further develop the partnership approach to school improvement.

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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 report was generally very well received by the school community. It was felt that overall the report affirmed the good practice that exists in the school and the hard work of a professional staff. This good practice was recognised across a number of areas such as SEN, CPD, leadership & management, a highly motivated parents' association. There was a recognition of the holistic education provided here in Mount Sackville and the high standard of teaching and learning.

The recommendations of the report are clear in regard to:

- Student understanding of the democratic processes in the school.
- Developing a system of target setting.
- Curriculum developments.
- Future use of IT and AFL.

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 school has undertaken to introduce a pilot group for LCVP. This has received the approval of the Board of Management and the staff.

Our First Year Curriculum will be reviewed when there is more clarity on the Revised Junior Certificate.

We have two in-services planned as part of our Croke Park hours and are currently considering topics such as AFL for discussion, and target setting, monitoring of student progress.

Our student forum has taken on a project with Amnesty International this year aiming to have Mount Sackville named as a Human Rights School. A key component of this project involves an enhancement of student participation in School Governance. We have also requested that they make an annual report to the Board of Management. This should go some way to redress the democratic deficit.