

**An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna**

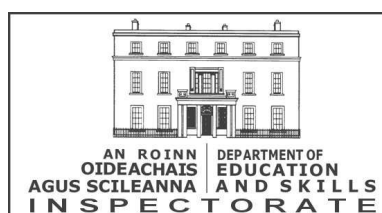
**Department of Education and Skills**

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

**REPORT**

**Saint Mary's College  
Rathmines, Dublin 6  
Roll number: 60560E**

**Date of inspection: December 2011**



# **Whole-School Evaluation**

## **Management, Leadership and Learning**

A whole-school evaluation of management, leadership and learning (WSE-MLL) was undertaken in December 2011 in St Mary's College, Rathmines. This report presents the findings of the evaluation and makes recommendations for improvement. During the evaluation, the inspection team met with the school's board of management, in-school management, groups of teachers, parents and students. Inspectors also reviewed a range of school documentation and responses to questionnaires and examined other data in relation to the operation of the school. As part of the evaluation, a range of lessons across a number of subject areas was inspected.

### ***Introduction***

St Mary's College is a fee-charging school for boys, with a current enrolment of 434. It is a Spiritan school, founded in 1890 by the Holy Ghost Fathers. In 1999, the congregation established a single trustee body, the Des Places Educational Association (DEA). This was followed by further changes in the management arrangements in these schools, including the establishment of boards of management.

There is a junior school on the same campus, most of whose pupils transfer to 'the senior college'. Students, parents and staff see the co-location of the schools as a significant strength, contributing to a sense of family and shared identity. St Mary's College describes itself as a school with a strong academic and sporting tradition and ambition, and school management showed an awareness of the need to conserve what is valuable while committing to improvement. The principal and deputy principal were appointed to their present roles in an acting capacity in 2010. 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.

## **1. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT**

### ***1.1 Key Findings***

- The school is reflective, has embarked on self-evaluation, and has the capacity to bring about improvement where necessary.
- The board of management and senior management manage and lead the school effectively.
- Development priorities have been established and are being progressed in a measured way.
- While distributed leadership is evident in the school's structures, there are areas for further development and review.
- The parents' association, student council and student leadership team operate in partnership with the school and have a meaningful consultative role.
- The quality of teaching in a significant majority of lessons ranged from good to exemplary, while weaknesses in practice were identified in a minority of lessons.
- Substantial action has been taken to address many recommendations in earlier inspectorate reports.

### ***1.2 Recommendations for Further Development***

- The amendments to policies recommended in this report should be undertaken.

- To assist the process of self-evaluation, specific targets should be set wherever possible.
- The post structure and the dean system should be evaluated to ensure that they serve the present and evolving needs of the school.
- A greater emphasis on self-directed learning and assessment for learning is recommended, to assist students to reflect on and improve their work.

## **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 properly constituted and members have received relevant training from the DEA and other bodies. It meets regularly and is well informed of issues on the ground. The board's role in financial management has been assisted by the recent re-establishment of the finance sub-committee. The board has attended well to its statutory obligations and duties as employer. A high level of awareness of its leadership role was evident in the board's presentation, subsequent discussion and the minutes of board meetings. The sustained support of the DEA clearly assists the board in developing its leadership role in particular. The annual school report to the DEA provides the board with an opportunity not only for reflective practice but also for a measure of self-evaluation, and it uses this well.

The board regards the senior management team very highly and offers it continuing support and advice. Board members bring a range of expertise and viewpoints to their work but display a strong corporate identity and operate by consensus. The present board is half-way through its three-year term and its composition has ensured a good balance of continuity and renewal. Detailed minutes and the preparation of the annual report provide very good handover systems from one board to the next.

The board has been attentive to policy development and review and, to assist in this ongoing process, the following recommendations are made. The enrolment policy warrants some rewording to correct certain factual inaccuracies and to ensure that it reflects the school's inclusive practices. The enrolment criteria should be stated in objective terms and clearly ranked. The planned review of the code of behaviour should prioritise a focus on positive behaviour and attitudes and should ensure that the code supports a high level of student participation in, and responsibility for, good-quality learning. The anti-bullying measures are sensible and could be expressed in a separate document to acknowledge that bullying is more than a straightforward disciplinary issue. In this regard, the concept of restorative practice could be investigated.

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*.

#### **The school's priorities for development**

The principal's report at each board meeting ensures a sustained focus on educational leadership and development. A school development plan is to be finalised by the end of this academic year. Development priorities have been identified in consultation with staff, parents and students, and with regard to the school context. Initiatives such as the board's special meeting in the summer of 2011 with the DEA education officer show a commitment to strategic planning. The DEA and the board support teachers' professional development

and are committed to building the capacity of the school as a teaching and learning community.

The priorities identified include the enhancement of teaching and learning; the expansion and resourcing of the extracurricular programme; and a revitalising of the school's Spiritan tradition. School management is committed to establishing robust school self-evaluation practices. More effective subject department structures have been agreed and developed as has the use of planning time to improve subject delivery. Inspectorate reports are being used effectively as an aid to evaluating and developing teaching and learning practices. The school has strong links with educational projects in Ghana with a focus on teaching and learning rather than on infrastructural development and an innovative exchange programme has begun. To assist the school in assessing progress made in the priority areas identified, specific and measurable targets should be set where possible.

## *2.2 Effectiveness of leadership for learning*

### **Leadership of staff**

The principal and deputy principal form a very effective senior management team, providing efficient management and forward-looking leadership. They have a shared vision of how the school can and should develop. Daily meetings allow routine matters to be dealt with in good time and also support more substantial discussions on school development planning. Both recognise the need to find the right balance between maintaining the school's valued characteristics and introducing beneficial innovations. Where traditions are strong, change is always a challenge and must be well planned and managed. The senior management team is proceeding prudently and is facilitating consultation and participation in the process of change management. A continued focus by all on the needs of students should ensure that the process remains constructive and enabling.

School structures provide substantial leadership opportunities for staff. The current post schedule includes some posts that link to priorities identified, such as subject development planning. The school has a long-established tradition of deans (year heads) who have a two-year tenure and are remunerated at assistant principal level from the school's own funds. Curricular initiatives have allowed teachers to lead educational developments in their specialist areas and continuing professional development is supported. A system of task groups has facilitated staff participation in policy development in key areas. The DEA provides courses to develop middle leadership in its schools.

The current schedule of posts incorporates some changed areas of responsibility arising from a review process, which is ongoing. Further changes to the posts schedule are necessary and should be directed strategically not only at present requirements but also at the evolving needs of the school. Posts may involve the performance of certain defined tasks, but all posts should have potential to be developed and, where possible, to link with other areas of responsibility and provide a cohesive layer within the school's management structure. All assistant principal posts should carry very significant responsibility.

The dean system merits review and evaluation in tandem with the review of posts, so that the advantages and drawbacks of the present structure can be assessed. It certainly provides significant opportunities for leadership. In addition, the limited term of office allows a large number of teachers to apply for and experience the role, thus deepening the pool of experience and expertise available to the school. However, it may militate against continuity; examples were given of initiatives begun and then discontinued on handover of the deanship to the next incumbent. The rota system also limits the extent to which the deans form a stable consultative layer within the school's management structures. The time

allowance given to deans, and their remuneration, represent a considerable investment by the school.

The review of posts should be placed in the context of the school's developing self-evaluation processes. A key question for the school to consider is the extent to which the two structures (school-paid and Department-paid) assist or impede each other and allow or hinder the development of a meaningful layer of in-school management.

### **Leadership of students**

The management and leadership of students is a responsibility largely devolved to the deans. They view their role as pastoral and supportive as well as disciplinary, and this is reflected in the quite comprehensive job description and in the code of behaviour. The code would benefit from a clearer statement of the ladder of referral in all disciplinary matters and should ensure that issues are dealt with at the lowest appropriate level. Students reported that they can communicate easily with the deans.

A monthly 'notes' system tracking students' application and behaviour is overseen by the deans, who follow up on any reports that cause concern. This system could be linked to an analysis of student outcomes in examinations, an area in which the school is developing a more structured approach. The 'leadership for learning' dimension of the dean's role could be strengthened to reflect the school's development priorities in this area.

The curriculum offered is broad and balanced, and includes a compulsory transition year (TY). The school's investment in its teaching resource means it can offer a substantial number of subjects, including Latin. Students and parents were generally very satisfied with the range of subjects offered and the systems in place for choosing subject options, including the very informative school web site. Senior cycle students with particular third-level goals may avail of an additional subject. The 'eighth subject' option has more limited class contact time and requires considerable student commitment; this is carefully explained to students and parents.

The school's guidance counselling service has a key role in the leadership of students in each year, which is set out in the comprehensive guidance plan. Various highly commendable initiatives have been undertaken to support and inform students both in educational choices and in their personal lives. Learning support is well organised and co-ordinated and good resources have been provided.

The parents' association is highly supportive and proactive. It has for example assisted the school in providing scribes and readers during house examinations for students entitled to reasonable accommodations. It communicates effectively with the whole parent body and reported high parental participation in school events and attendance at parent-teacher meetings. The association is actively involved in policy development. Its officers were aware of previous inspectorate reports and of actions taken to address recommendations.

The school has a student leadership team and a student council, which provide students with opportunities to lead and represent their peers. Both groups are consulted about policies. The inspectors met the student leaders, who showed impressive levels of quiet confidence and maturity when describing their role in the school. They are elected by their peers who evidently take this responsibility seriously.

### **2.3 Management of facilities**

The school buildings are well maintained and a programme for the maintenance and expansion of facilities for curricular and extracurricular activities is ongoing. The board has supported improvements in the school's infrastructure including the development of

information and communication technology (ICT) resources. The expansion of ICT is the most noticeable aspect of the enhancement of classrooms, although the provision of more flexible seating to replace integrated desks and chairs was also noted. However, there is scope for considerable improvement in the development of classrooms as stimulating learning environments, and the need to address this area has been raised in previous subject inspection reports.

### **3. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING**

#### ***3.1 The quality of learning and teaching***

Twenty-four lessons including two double lessons were observed. All years in the school and all programmes offered were covered. The range of subjects included core, optional, practical and non-examination subjects. A positive atmosphere prevailed in classrooms, characterised by respectful and courteous interaction.

The majority of lessons were well structured to promote learning and motivate students. The pace of lessons was good overall. Best practice included a very high level of planning and preparation to ensure that quality learning took place; careful attention to the structure of the lesson and the sequencing of the lesson activities; and an imaginative choice of materials and resources. In a significant majority of lessons, teachers identified and shared learning outcomes with students and then used them at the end of the lesson to summarise and evaluate learning. This good practice should occur in all classrooms. There was inadequate preparation with little evidence of planned learning outcomes in a small number of lessons.

The quality of teaching was good or very good in a significant majority of lessons observed, and some exemplary practice was noted. Methods that engaged students as active participants in their own learning were used effectively. Many teachers used a range of questions not only to test understanding and recall but to invite students to apply their knowledge, to reflect and to formulate considered responses. Differentiated tasks were employed to support increased levels of student participation and engagement. The most successful outcomes were achieved through activities that involved students in discovering for themselves and making informed judgements.

Many teachers demonstrated subject expertise in a way that engendered confidence in students. In these instances, a clear focus on the use of subject-specific terminology or vocabulary was evident, often reinforced in students' oral responses and by visual cues. Where teachers focused on clarifying and explaining key terms and formulas, students' literacy and numeracy skills were supported.

The most effective teachers were inventive in their use of technology, key words, mind maps, and active learning. In a number of lessons, teachers demonstrated expert use of ICT to illustrate key concepts and give them a real-life context. ICT worked best when integrated into the flow of the lesson so that it served a specific learning aim and represented a productive use of lesson time. The level of computer use was generally good although there was scope for further focused use of ICT in some lessons.

There were identifiable weaknesses in the teaching practices observed in a minority of lessons. In these instances, expectations of students were not sufficiently high and there was a corresponding lack of challenge in the tasks assigned. At times, there was considerable teacher input which was not sufficiently directed towards meaningful student learning. Poor organisation of the learning time and of the learning environment in these lessons hindered the achievement of successful outcomes.

There was convincing evidence of good or very good learning in most of the lessons observed. For example, students displayed very good aptitude in applying their learning, whether in the use of language, the completion of investigations and tasks, or the solving of practical problems. Where expectations were high, students responded to meet these expectations. Many lessons facilitated students' self-directed learning through group work, pair work and practical activities, and balanced teacher instruction and student input. Such approaches should be extended so that students are sufficiently challenged and facilitated to achieve to the best of their ability.

Teachers' assessment of student progress was observed during questioning, facilitated discussion and in-class testing. Verbal feedback, given either individually or globally, offered clear direction for improvement. Homework is assigned regularly in most subject areas as evidenced in student copies and journals. However, the practice of giving written formative feedback was not always evident. This is an essential element of assessment for learning and teachers should strive to implement it in every subject area to help improve outcomes for students across the range of abilities.

#### **4. IMPLEMENTATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS FROM PREVIOUS EVALUATIONS**

##### ***4.1 Management***

There was convincing evidence of actions taken in response to recommendations made in previous subject inspection reports. The school timetable has been adjusted to accommodate recommended changes in Business, Physical Education (PE) and TY. Subject department capacity building has been supported in various ways: through the appointment of a school planning co-ordinator; ensuring that all PE teachers hold recognised qualifications; and ensuring that teachers are rotated between higher-level and ordinary-level classes. Curricular initiatives to fulfil recommendations include TY curricular review and increased focus on the uptake of higher level, though some further focus on this is necessary to help ensure that student outcomes are improved especially in the languages.

The improved quality of the planning in subjects and in TY was evident. The planning documentation for all the subjects evaluated has been reviewed, augmented and enhanced. Further development of subject plans including the setting of long term goals for each subject should inform future planning. The establishment of subject planning co-ordinators should provide increased focus in this regard.

##### ***4.2 Learning and Teaching***

Teachers have attended well overall to the implementation of many of the recommendations made in previous subject inspection reports. Subject departments have taken a range of actions in response to these recommendations. There was evidence of planning of learning outcomes through sequencing of lesson content and activity and selection of appropriate resources. Methods that promote active student learning, including investigative and discovery learning, were evident but could be more widely applied. Further use of co-operative learning would help improve outcomes. The use of ICT across the curriculum has considerably improved with enhanced facilities and training. Improvements necessary include further display of students' work in classrooms, and increased use of assessment for learning practices to include the use of written formative feedback.

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

### **5.1**

The school has the capacity to bring about improvement where necessary. Initiatives are in place to support sustained efforts to maximise students' academic potential. The initial focus of self-evaluation was through subject inspection reports. There is now an increased focus on the quality of teaching and learning, and measures are in place to monitor students' development and achievement through tracking and target setting. Analysis of student outcomes and outcome trends should be seen as an essential aspect of the school's improvement agenda.

The surveys of parents and students conducted as part of the evaluation reflected positively on the school. The school might consider conducting similar surveys to inform and support its developing self-evaluation processes.

*Published September 2012.*



# 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 welcomes this report as an independent endorsement that St Mary's is committed to excellence in education, and is building upon its strengths to ensure that every facet of its work becomes a benchmark for exemplary practice.

The Board particularly welcomes the findings of the survey of parents, in which virtually 100% agreed that their sons felt 'safe and well looked after in the school'.

Also welcome are the key findings that the school is 'reflective', managed and led 'effectively', 'forward-looking', with a 'broad and balanced curriculum', 'well-organised learning support', a 'comprehensive guidance plan', and a 'highly supportive and proactive' parents' association.

We believe St. Mary's has a characteristic spirit, of students who are confident without being arrogant, who work hard, look after one another, and have a strong sense of service to others. In this context, we were affirmed by the inspectors' comments about finding student leaders with 'impressive levels of quiet confidence and maturity', and the 'positive atmosphere' in classrooms, 'characterised by respectful and courteous interaction'.

We congratulate the teachers in the school on the quality of teaching in the 'significant majority of lessons' described as ranging from 'good to exemplary', the 'improved quality of planning', the 'increased focus on the quality of teaching and learning', and the 'substantial action' taken to address recommendations in earlier inspection reports. Such findings are testament to sustained hard work over many years.

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

There is valuable learning for us in this inspection process that will feed into our planning processes. Areas to work on include rewording of our enrolment policy, investigation of the concept of restorative practice, continued development of the roles of middle-management, continued expansion of ICT, and extension of best practice in lessons regarding self-directed learning, challenging tasks, and written formative feedback.

We see the future as having a sustained focus on teaching and learning, including dedicated training on assessment for learning, as well as analysis of student outcomes and outcome trends.

In their work in the school, the inspectors were thorough, analytical, challenging and affirming. While this form of Whole School Evaluation focuses mainly on management, leadership and learning, the wider curriculum in the school was duly noted. We thank the Inspectorate for this report and look forward to continuing the constructive partnership in our shared mission to provide an exemplary education for the boys entrusted to our care.