An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna
Department of Education and Skills

Whole-School Evaluation
Management, Leadership and Learning

REPORT

Kilkenny College
Castlecomer Road
Kilkenny
Roll number: 61570M

Date of inspection: May 2011
Whole-School Evaluation  
Management, Leadership and Learning  

A whole-school evaluation of management, leadership and learning (WSE-MLL) was undertaken in May, 2011 in Kilkenny College. 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  
Kilkenny College is a Church of Ireland fee-paying, voluntary secondary school under the patronage of the Incorporated Society for promoting Protestant Schools in Ireland and the governance of a board of directors. The school, which can trace its foundation to 1538, caters for day and boarding students, and is the largest co-educational boarding school in the country. The student population is drawn from the United Dioceses of Cashel and Ossory and a catchment area extending across the south-east of Ireland. The school’s first fully representative board of management assumed office in January 2009 and is in the final year of its three-year term. The principal has held the position since March 2010. The school offers the Junior Certificate, Transition Year (TY), the established Leaving Certificate and the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP). The board of management was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the evaluation, and the response of the board will be found in the appendix to this report.

1. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT  

1.1 Key Findings  

- The board of management conscientiously undertakes its responsibilities.  
- The principal and deputy principal are an able senior management team.  
- The students of Kilkenny College are educated in a well-ordered, caring and supportive environment.  
- The school’s campus is very well managed and maintained.  
- The overall quality of teaching and learning observed was very good.  
- While WSE-MLL questionnaire responses reflected very well on the school in many ways, outcomes of the student questionnaire may be significant or very significant in terms of students’ views of their school experience in certain areas, such as having a say in how to make the school a better place or how well bullying is dealt with.  
- Notwithstanding the extensive TY programme compliance with the Department of Education and Skills (DES) circular M1/100, The Transition Year Programme, by all subject departments in respect of their TY subject programmes has yet to be fully realised.  
- Kilkenny College has the management and leadership capacity required to achieve continued improvement.
1.2 Recommendations for Further Development

- In the interests of improved communication, the board should submit to the parents’ association an annual report on school attendance as stipulated by the Education (Welfare) Act 2000, meet formally with the association’s representatives each year and consider providing parents and the wider school community with an annual report on the operation and performance of the school.
- A review of the posts of responsibility should be undertaken.
- The equivalence of one class lesson weekly of Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) should be provided for all junior cycle classes.
- Strategies and initiatives should be developed to explore and address students’ perceptions with regard to aspects of their school experience as identified through the student questionnaire.
- Where compliance with circular M1/00, The Transition Year Programme, still requires attention by a subject department in respect of the TY subject programme provided this matter should be addressed.
- Students should complete their sampling of subjects in TY before choosing their optional subjects for their Leaving Certificate programme.

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 of management is properly constituted and presented as a committed body that conscientiously undertakes its responsibilities. The board is responsible for the management and operation of the school while a board of directors has responsibility for the strategic development of the school and financial matters. The board of management meets at regular intervals and an agreed report is distributed to the wider school community after all meetings. It is recommended that the board also submit an annual report on school attendance to the parents’ association as stipulated by the Education Welfare Act 2000, 21(6)(b). The board should consider providing parents and the wider school community with an annual report on the operation and performance of the school and meeting formally with the representatives of the parents’ association annually.

The board of management is very cognisant of its leadership role as is evidenced by the attention given to the review and development of school policies and the board’s approval of initiatives to improve the quality of the education provided for the students. For example, the school’s anti-bullying policy and code of behaviour are reviewed annually, a new SPHE-Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) policy is currently being drafted and the board approved the establishment of an advisory board of studies to evaluate and make recommendations regarding curricular matters. With regard to policies it is advocated that the school’s enrolment policy be reviewed to ensure that the policy clearly communicates the commitment of the school to enrolling students with special education needs.

Confirmation was provided that, in compliance with post-primary circulars M44/05 and 62/2006, the board has formally adopted 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 new staff); and that management has ensured that all staff are familiar with the procedures to be followed. A designated liaison person (DLP) and a deputy DLP have been appointed in line with the requirements of the guidelines.
The school’s priorities for development

The board of management’s priorities for development essentially aim to foster continuing improvement of the holistic education provided for the students and the wellbeing of the school community. The priorities encompass: ensuring high standards of teaching and learning, the provision of additional facilities, the development of the school’s ethos, the promotion of equality of esteem and opportunity for staff and students, the encouragement of a broader cultural mix among the student population and improving communication between the stakeholders.

Progress is being made in realising the identified priorities as evidenced by the work of the advisory board of studies in monitoring curricular needs, the timetabling of weekly subject departmental meetings to facilitate collaborative planning and the ongoing development of the school’s information and communications technology (ICT) plan to direct the maximum integration of ICT in teaching and learning. Funding is being sourced for new facilities with the help of the school’s education partners. The recent provision of a quiet room for reflection, An Tearmann, is indicative of the attention being given to developing the school’s ethos. Equality of esteem is being promoted by adherence to transparent procedures in relation to the management of staff and students and by ensuring that parity of recognition for male and female students informs practices such as the display of information on the school’s website. The encouragement of a broader cultural mix among the student population by attracting international students is to be pursued.

Improving communications between the various stakeholders in the school community is being realised through practical measures such as improvements to the school’s e-mailing system and website and a web text system for parent communication.

The term of office of the current board expires in October 2011. A strategic plan should be drafted detailing the progress made in relation to the priorities outlined and given to the next board of management to maintain continuity in long-term planning.

2.2 Effectiveness of leadership for learning

Leadership of staff

The senior management team comprising the principal and deputy principal provide able leadership as is evidenced by their efficient daily administration of the school. They work effectively together as a team, and have agreed specific and shared areas of responsibility. They proactively support ongoing improvement through their involvement with the managerial, curricular, pastoral and extracurricular committees in the school.

Distributed leadership is evidenced by the range of responsibilities that has been delegated to the postholders who form the middle-management tier and the briefs assigned to the various school committees. Senior management should meet in plenary session with the postholders annually in order to underline their important managerial role. It is particularly important for senior management to ensure that the current range of posts meets the school’s needs and towards that end it is recommended that a review of the posts of responsibility be undertaken.

Leadership for learning is evident in the deployment of the teaching staff that underpins the successful implementation of the fortnightly timetable. Formal subject department meetings are timetabled for one class period weekly. Teachers’ engagement with in-service training and continuing professional development (CPD) is supported. Given the significant amount of time that is allocated to subject department meetings, a formal report should be obtained annually from all departments. This will enable senior management to remain fully informed about the progress made and issues being encountered. Furthermore, consideration could be given to the establishment of a steering group to identify and
organise means of sharing the best practices and expertise among the subject departments with the teaching staff.

**Leadership of students**

There is a corpus of policies and structures in place to ensure that a caring and supportive environment, which is conducive to the full development of all students, is maintained. The pastoral care and management of the students are the particular responsibility of their respective yearheads, year co-ordinators, form teachers, the house parents of the boarding students and the pastoral care team.

The transition of students from primary school is well managed. TY is mandatory and an extensive curricular programme has been developed for the students. It is noted that students choose their optional subjects for their Leaving Certificate programme prior to their entry to TY. This practice should be deferred until students complete TY when they will have sampled their proposed subject choices and can make more informed decisions.

There are good opportunities provided for students to develop their leadership skills and assume positions of responsibility in the school community by becoming members of the student council and various committees, prefects and mentors.

A wide range of subjects and extracurricular sporting and non-sporting activities are provided for the students in order to cater for their needs. This provision includes the timetabling of Guidance and SPHE for all year groups. However, the timetabled provision of SPHE for junior cycle students is significantly less than the equivalence of one class lesson per week that is recommended in circular M22/00 *Social, Personal and Health Education*. The shortfall should be addressed.

Students with special education needs are strongly supported. The school has a core team of learning-support teachers. The models of support include withdrawal from class for individual and small group tuition and the organisation of small junior cycle class groups for students with special education needs in English and Mathematics. Commendably, the timetabling of lessons in English and Mathematics for the students with special educational needs is part of the concurrent timetabling arrangements in place for English and Mathematics for the three junior cycle year groups. The core team of learning-support teachers also liaises with the teaching staff and subject departments. It is recommended that the core team acts as a steering group for the teachers providing timetabled learning-support lessons and meets formally with them at regular intervals.

Recognition and affirmation of student achievement is a notable feature of the students’ education. For example, the annual Prize Day and the weekly whole-school assemblies are occasions when meritorious students are publicly acclaimed for their achievements. Similarly, the displays of students’ artistic work and framed photographs in the school are indicative of the affirmation provided. Consideration should also be given to the formulation of a policy for gifted students.

Kilkenny College has an effective record-keeping system in place to positively enforce punctuality and to encourage full attendance. The school provides 167 days instruction per year which is in keeping with circular M29/95 *Time in School*. Practices such as the staggered start to the school year for students and the configuration of the timetable on days when parent-teacher meetings are held should be reviewed to ensure that a minimum of 167 instruction days is delivered for all class groups.

The good work that is being done to ensure effective leadership of students is very commendable. However, management’s attention is drawn to outcomes of the WSE-MLL
student questionnaire which may be significant or very significant in terms of students’ views of their school experience in certain areas, such as having a say in how to make the school a better place or how well bullying is dealt with. It is strongly recommended that strategies and initiatives be developed to explore and address students’ perceptions relating to these findings.

2.3 Management of facilities

Kilkenny College has a large campus that is very well managed and maintained. The buildings, facilities and grounds are the subject of constant review and improvement. Among the most recent developments were the completion in 2007 of Yates House for senior female boarding students and the Jonathan Swift Building, which has provided additional classrooms and facilities. Infrastructural improvements such as the enhancement of the school’s ICT facilities, roof repairs and replacement of plant equipment have been progressed with the help of grants secured from the Department of Education and Skills. Given the high standard of upkeep of the school campus, senior management should pursue the award of a Green Flag in order to help maintain students’ awareness of the attractiveness of their campus and to enable them to assume greater responsibility for its upkeep.

3. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

3.1 The quality of learning and teaching

The quality of learning and teaching in the lessons observed was very good overall and there were a number of examples of exemplary lessons. Many teachers identified and shared learning outcomes with students at the outset. This good practice should be extended. In the majority of lessons, a very positive atmosphere prevailed. In many lessons there was a good balance between teacher instruction and student activities. Seating arrangements were mainly conducive to student participation and teacher mobility.

Most lessons were well planned and had a definite focus. Teachers were encouraging and supportive of their students. However, while many lessons incorporated opportunities for students to engage in self-directed learning activities, often through group work, pair work, role play and audience participation, others were more teacher-led than is desirable in terms of producing independent learners. This practice should be avoided and increased levels of student participation facilitated through activity-based learning. It is also important, when planning and delivering TY lessons, to ensure that innovative approaches and skills development are prioritised in line with TY guidelines. In addition, students should remain supervised at all times when using equipment during practical activities.

The quality of interactions between students and teachers was a key feature of many lessons. In such instances, students were exposed to a good level of challenge through teacher questioning that included a very good mix of lower-order and higher-order questions. Moreover, questioning was often two-way and helped to foster discussion and enhance learning.

Where relevant, a clear focus on the use of the target language or subject-specific terminology and vocabulary was evident and this was often reinforced by students’ oral responses and by visualisation on the board or through ICT. The board was well utilised throughout the majority of lessons to highlight key words and concepts. The level of computer use was good although there was scope for further focused use of ICT in some lessons.
Students frequently displayed very good aptitude in applying their learning, whether in the use of language, the completion of experiments and tasks, or the solving of practical problems. In a few lessons observed, enhanced input from students would have considerably improved lesson outcomes and the quality of student learning.

The setting of homework was linked directly to the lesson content and to prior learning. The emphasis on formative assessment strategies was very impressive in some instances as evidenced by the annotation of students’ copybooks and the constructive comments written on assigned examination questions and project work. However, the application of this practice requires improvement across many subject areas. It is recommended that consistent whole-school practice regarding written developmental feedback be established.

4. IMPLEMENTATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS FROM PREVIOUS EVALUATIONS

4.1 Management

The board of management has given evident attention to the recommendations made in previous subject inspections which included Mathematics, English, Physics, German and Physical Education. The provision of ICT facilities has been enhanced or is in the process of being provided where such a recommendation was made. Recommendations concerning the provision of greater access to the school’s multi-media room and the storage of chemicals have also been implemented. In respect of Physical Education, recommendations relating to the concurrent timetabling of classes and the deployment of unqualified teachers to teach the subject are being addressed.

Consideration was given to the suggested provision for junior cycle students of a more open choice between German and French that would have enabled them to choose their preferred language. It was decided that French should remain a core subject for the students and German an optional subject choice, albeit with an increase in the allocation of German lessons for first-year students from two to five lessons per fortnight.

The recurrent recommendation that in the Physics, Mathematics and English inspection reports regarding compliance with the Department’s circular M1/100 The Transition Year Programme in respect of the subject programmes provided has yet to be universally implemented. The board of management should direct all subject departments that are involved in the TY programme to ensure prompt compliance with this recommendation.

4.2 Learning and Teaching

The subject departments have given considered attention to the recommendations made in previous subject inspection reports. Recommendations implemented include increased usage of ICT in Physics, the establishment of the practice of a member of the learning support department attending meetings of the English department, and the organisation of mixed-ability class groups in English for first-year students with the exception of a designated class group for a number of students with special education needs. Recommendations concerning the organisation of mixed-ability English class groups in TY and the rotation of the position of subject co-ordinator among the English teachers were considered but have not been progressed.
5. THE SCHOOL’S SELF-EVALUATION PROCESS AND CAPACITY FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Kilkenny College has the management and leadership capacity required to realise continued improvement. This is evident in the capable leadership provided by the board of management, the principal and deputy principal. Review and self-evaluation inform decisions as evidenced by the work undertaken with regard to policies by the board of management and the formal collaboration of the teaching staff in subject planning. Moreover, the board of management, the principal and deputy principal regard the external evaluation as an important means of informing the ongoing development of Kilkenny College.

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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

Kilkenny College welcomes this MLL Evaluation report. It is pleased to read that the inspectors were impressed by the quality of teaching and learning observed along with the well ordered, caring and supportive school environment. The recognition of the conscientious work of the Board of Management, management team, teachers and other staff in developing and promoting the holistic vision of education pursued is encouraging.

We note that the huge role of extra curricular activities, of music and art in the experience of the students may fall outside the remit of this evaluation report. The extensive experience of sampling 10 optional subjects throughout first year, guidance provision throughout the junior and senior cycle along with flexible transfer of pupils between options merits mention.

The Transition Year subject departments continue to develop a wide range of approaches in the classroom and incorporate input from visiting speakers, out of school expeditions, projects and pupil exchanges within their programmes. A wide choice of modular courses emphasising personal development and career skills is provided. The extensive outdoor pursuits programme, team building, leadership development and work experience are all part of the holistic vision of Circular M1/100 cherished by the College. The scope of this evaluation may not have had the remit to evaluate and give feedback on the whole programme.

The recognition by inspections of the capacity of the college personnel for continued initiative, improvement and development is most encouraging. The College community found the process to be positive and to compliment the internal review already underway.

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 recommendations and ideas contained in the report help to give focus to the objectives to be pursued in school development planning. A set of priorities has been drawn up and the development of a strategic plan by the education partners has operated in tandem with this. Together these give the college much invaluable data and insights with which to refashion our plan for development and improvement.

Since the MLL evaluation in May the existing term letter to all parents has been added to with the formal reports and contacts recommended between the Board of Management and Parents’ Association. Further informal communication through the website and twitter is being developed with the partners.
The required timetable provision for SPHE/RSE and P.E is being phased in. The teaching staff and Advisory Board of Studies are using the report to focus on best practice in teaching and the organisation of learning. Subject department planning time is being diversified for incorporation of other functions including year group pastoral, academic and behavioural planning and review. Up-skilling and planning for SPHE/RSE and Learning Support continues.

The year co-ordinator structure has been extended to assist all year groups with academic and pastoral support. Pupil involvement in decision making and policy formation is being advanced through further development of the Student Council with members involved on relevant policy committees with parents and teachers. A Green Schools Committee has been elected from a joint Student Council/Transition Year initiative.

The board will give serious consideration to all of the recommendations highlighted in this report.