Whole-School Evaluation
REPORT

Rice College
Ennis, County Clare
Roll number: 61910K

Date of inspection: 29 November 2010
WHOLE-SCHOOL EVALUATION

A whole-school evaluation of Rice College was undertaken in November 2010. This report presents the findings of the evaluation and makes recommendations for improvement. During the evaluation, the quality of teaching and learning in four subjects was evaluated in detail, and one subject was evaluated in advance. Separate reports are available on these subjects. (See section 7 for details). The board of management of the school was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the report, and the response of the board will be found in the appendix of this report.

INTRODUCTION

Rice College is a co-educational, Catholic voluntary secondary school under the trusteeship of ERST – the Edmund Rice Schools Trust. Education has been provided by the Christian Brothers in Ennis since 1827. The first primary school was built on the site in 1832, followed by the current secondary school in 1937. Rice College became a co-educational school in 1997. The college is situated close to the centre of Ennis with the river to its back and facing a public park. It is justly proud of having served the educational needs of the town of Ennis for more than 180 years, and also welcomes students from a wide rural catchment area including the parishes of Ruan, Connolly, Kilmaley, Doora-Barefield and Quin. The school has a current enrolment of 626 students and the demand for places each year is very high.

1. QUALITY OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT

1.1 Characteristic spirit of the school

Rice College is operated according to the religious and educational philosophy of the ERST Charter. Respect, care and concern for the school community are central to this vision as well as the provision of a broad and comprehensive education. The work of the school is grounded in a mission statement based on Christian values that aims to recognise the needs and develop the talents of each person. The vision is communicated through the mission statement, through the five pillars of the ERST Charter, and is reflected in the day-to-day activities of the school. The charter provides the guiding principles against which the school community measures its mission, performance and priorities, while the Charter in Action document provides a useful blueprint on how the charter should be put into practice. A simple, colourful chart representing the five elements of the charter is on display in prominent locations throughout the school.

ERST supports the school in promoting and fostering its characteristic spirit. Its support involves the nomination of representatives to the board of management and regular contact between its education office and the principal. The trustees play an active role in issues to do with property and school management, and in all major decisions affecting the future of the school. They receive copies of the minutes of the board of management meetings, and yearly accounts are submitted for their approval. Additional support is provided to the principal through the meetings of principals in the ERST network. Both ERST and the board of management share the goal of sustaining and developing the quality of education provided in the school.

The mission statement and the characteristic spirit of the school are reflected both in the daily routines and procedures, and in the policies that support the academic, spiritual,
emotional, social and physical development of students. The school’s commitment to promoting the spiritual and holistic development of students is very evident. Religious liturgies help to frame the school year from the opening school Mass to the involvement of musicians, singers, dancers and readers in Christmas services, the St Patrick’s Day celebrations in the cathedral and the end of year graduation Mass. Students act as Faith Friends for children preparing for Confirmation, they travel as helpers on the annual Lourdes pilgrimages, and engage in fundraising for charities in Ireland and abroad. In these ways, students are encouraged to develop their spiritual dimension and a sense of concern for others. Care is also shown by the school for those among its own students whose families are experiencing financial hardship or other difficulties.

During the evaluation, the students displayed a sense of pride in their school and commented on the good relationships between students and teachers. All members of the school community, including parents, praised the positive and welcoming atmosphere of the school and the respect shown to all.

1.2 School ownership and management

The first board of management was established in the school in 1990. The current board is newly appointed but its composition includes a number of former members with a wealth of experience and commitment to the school. The board of management is appropriately constituted, meets regularly and actively fulfils its role. The board is aware of its statutory functions and obligations. Training for the board has been availed of in the past and plans are in place for members to attend further in-service provided by ERST.

The board operates in a spirit of consultation and partnership; it engages in self-evaluation and is proactive with regard to the future of the school. The guidance offered by ERST supports the board in its mission to promote Christian values and a holistic education. The members see their role as one of providing support and advice to school management in areas relating to the running of the school. Furthermore, the board encourages and supports staff professional development and has facilitated teachers to attend courses and in-service training. It also supports initiatives within the school such as the canteen.

The level of communication between the board and the school community is very good with regular reports given to staff and to the parents’ association. It is suggested that when the update to the school’s website has been completed, the website should be used by the board to publish an annual report on the operation and performance of the school as set down in Section 20 of the Education Act (1998).

Well-established procedures are in place for policy development and ratification, and the board has been active in contributing to the discussion on policies, and to their eventual adoption. These include the legally required policies relating to admission and enrolment, the code of behaviour, child protection, health and safety and numerous other policies concerning the operation of the school. The board has engaged in self-evaluation of its own work and has identified a number of developmental priorities for the school for the future.

1.3 In-school management

The principal and deputy principal form a very effective management team. The principal was appointed to the school in November 2008 and was an external appointment, while the deputy principal brings sixteen years’ experience in the school to the position. It is evident that they have established a very good working relationship over the past two years. This collaborative partnership is strengthened by their effective formal and informal communication with each other during the school day. While there is a clear division of
responsibilities, it is also evident that the roles overlap in particular in relation to care and concern for students’ welfare and their academic progress.

The principal has brought to the post a strong sense of the importance of teamwork and communication as well as an open-door approach to all. There is evidence of a clear vision for the school that places students at the centre of all activities. During the evaluation, the members of the school community expressed their confidence in the leadership abilities of the principal. His approach was described as open and transparent. He is supportive of his staff, and one of the strengths of his leadership style is the importance he accords to promoting a sense of collaboration and community through encouraging and supporting both staff and students. The deputy principal’s role involves leadership, administrative duties, and responsibility for attendance and student behaviour. His work is pivotal in the area of discipline where his presence on the corridors and his personal knowledge of each individual, combined with concern for the student’s welfare and progress, ensure that a positive learning environment is created.

As part of the inclusive leadership style that has been promoted by senior management, there is an emphasis on communication with staff and the dissemination of relevant information through informal announcements and the staff notice board. A staff handbook containing the school’s key policies and procedures was introduced this year and has proved to be a very worthwhile document that helps to ensure that all staff members have easy access to the information required for carrying out their work.

Since his appointment, the principal has been responsible for leading a number of initiatives. One of the first tasks undertaken was a review of the schedule of posts of responsibility. As a review had not been carried out since the 1990s, it was prioritised in order to ensure that the needs of the school and the students were met in the most effective way possible. The re-organisation of posts was carried out in an open and consultative manner over a period of time though discussion with staff and the board of management. The process was facilitated by an external facilitator. All posts, and their accompanying duties were assigned in accordance with agreed procedures, and this represents very good practice.

The middle-management team consists of seven assistant principals and fourteen special duties teachers. Due to the current moratorium on the filling of posts of responsibility, six posts have been lost including three posts at assistant principal level. Senior management has been proactive in ensuring that a number of key posts, including year head positions, have been filled. In addition, they have also taken on additional responsibilities themselves. The cooperation and good will shown by all involved is acknowledged and commended. However, the burden of the extra duties may not be tenable in the longer term. In light of possible future retirements and the negative impact that the loss of additional posts may have on the smooth running of the school, it is recommended that there be an ongoing review and re-organisation of the duties assigned to post holders and other staff in order to ensure that the needs of the school continue to be met.

The assistant principals and the special duties teachers play a significant role in the middle-management structure. They contribute to the work of the school through the carrying out of a range of tasks including pastoral, disciplinary, administrative and curricular duties. The year head system is a key component of the middle-management structure. The role is clearly defined and includes a weekly timetabled meeting with senior management. This enables the year heads to offer support and advice to the principal and allows for a discussion of whole-school issues including policies and procedures. In addition, the year heads are instrumental in suggesting items for the agenda for staff meetings and they endeavour to resolve issues that may arise at meetings. The pastoral aspect of the year heads’ work with students is an important part of the student-support structure within the
school. As a general rule, a year head will take responsibility for a year group in first year and will stay with that cohort as they advance through the school. Their regular contact with students and their parents obviates the need for a more formal class-teacher structure.

Senior management actively promotes teacher professional development. It is a tribute to the professionalism of the staff that many of them have undertaken professional development courses both in relation to their subjects and to their areas of responsibility within the school. Through the Clare Education Centre, they have been involved with networks of teachers, and they also assist in the mentoring and induction of new teachers and student-teachers on the staff. In addition, it is very positive that some teachers have had an input into the delivery of in-service for their colleagues. It is suggested that this practice should be expanded in order to make use of the expertise and experience available within the staff. The sharing of good practice and the dissemination of the outcomes of professional development among all staff members would help to foster the development of a professional learning community.

Even though the total student enrolment has increased, Rice College continues to be significantly oversubscribed. Consequently, the admissions policy has been identified as a key factor in ensuring an open and fair enrolment procedure, and it is reviewed annually. The board of management has recently completed a lengthy review of the policy in consultation with ERST and the stakeholders, involving much discussion of the issues in an effort to reach a consensus on how best to proceed. The new policy has been ratified by the board and is being implemented by management in a fair, transparent and equitable manner. The principal’s willingness to meet individually with all unsuccessful applicants each year is recognised and commended.

As befits the mission statement, the code of behaviour strives to promote positive behaviour among students. The code is a comprehensive document that sets out clearly the school’s commitment to providing students with an environment that is both safe and conducive to learning. It is regularly reviewed and updated to reflect changes in adolescent culture. For their part, students are expected to be responsible for their own behaviour both on and off the school grounds. The code also acknowledges the role of parents in helping their children to conduct themselves appropriately. The consequences attached to unacceptable behaviour are clearly explained in the code, and the role of the different members of staff in the ladder of referral is described. Notwithstanding the disciplinary aspect of the code, it is clear that positive behaviour is actively encouraged and affirmed at all times, and a pastoral care approach is used where possible when issues arise. Likewise, it is good to note that attention has been paid to ensuring that new students understand the principles of the code. To this end, the simplified list of school rules for first years serves to make the code accessible to all.

Positive student behaviour is acknowledged and commended wherever possible. Such an acknowledgement may take the form of praise from the principal, deputy principal or year head either verbally or by means of a note in the student’s journal, or through the annual Awards Scheme. Parents may also be informed of the good behaviour through a phone call from management. Students’ work is showcased on the walls of the school, and students’ achievements are celebrated and updated weekly on a notice board. The emphasis on a positive behaviour structure helps to encourage student engagement and reflects the holistic approach taken in the school. It is good to note that the students interviewed during the course of the evaluation made reference to the very good level of discipline and the relaxed atmosphere within the school.

A student council has been in place in the school since 1980. Over the years, the composition of the council has changed to reflect the changes in the student cohort with female representatives introduced following the move to co-education in 1997.
Representatives are democratically elected from all year groups, and issues that are of interest to students are discussed at meetings. To date, the council has been responsible for a number of improvements and initiatives including the provision of drinking-water fountains, the introduction of healthy options to the menus in the canteen, as well as changes to the uniform, and their efforts on behalf of the student body are commended. The council has also been consulted during the drafting of relevant policies. However, in order to give council members greater ownership and responsibility for the student council, a constitution should be drafted and officers appointed to roles such as chairperson and secretary. This would enable the members to gain experience of these offices and would allow them to undertake tasks such as the recording of minutes and the preparation of a report for management after meetings. Further suggestions for the proper functioning of the council may be accessed in the guidelines on running an effective student council available at www.studentcouncil.ie.

Very good attention is paid to attendance and to the retention of students. Effective procedures are in place to monitor student attendance, in the first instance through a twice-daily clocking-in system. The analysis of the data collected is used by the deputy principal to track attendance. This system speeds up communication with an absent student’s year head, and ensures that communication is established between school and home. This communication may be by means of the student journal, through telephone contact or by letter, as appropriate. Procedures are also in place to monitor and approve requests from students to leave the school during the school day. The school reports that are issued to parents detail the absences and late arrivals of a student during the year. In the case of students who are identified as having a difficulty in attending school regularly, efforts are made to ascertain the reason for the non-attendance, in particular as to whether this relates to a pastoral or curricular issue, or to behavioural difficulties. In each case, procedures are put in place to resolve the problem as quickly as possible including, as appropriate, a meeting between the deputy principal and students together with their parents in order to co-ordinate a return to school. The commitment shown by management to ensuring the successful reintegration into school life of a student who has been absent for a period of time, is noted and acknowledged.

The Rice College parents’ council evolved from the Ladies Committee and Past Pupils Union in the mid-1980s and it is affiliated to the National Federation of Christian Brothers Schools Parents’ Council. Its role is primarily advisory and consultative on behalf of parents, and it is consulted by management whenever policies are being drafted or are under review. Parents also have representation on the board of management where they take an appropriate role in policy development. The council is active in its support for the school and has recently engaged in a fund-raising campaign for new student lockers. Previous campaigns have been instrumental in raising funds to support initiatives in Transition Year (TY) programme, to pay for the purchase of team jerseys and to finance the school’s two minibuses. The council also organises information evenings on topics of interest to parents and students. In this way, the council helps to reinforce the importance of partnership in the links between the school and the home. It was very positive to witness the role played by members of the parents’ council at one of the annual parent-teacher meetings. The catering sub-committee of the council handles various events during the school term including parent-teacher meetings, the first year induction evening and the graduation Mass. Parents are kept well informed on the activities taking place in the school through the text-a-parent system and through the school prospectus, newsletter, magazine, and the local parish bulletin. The open door approach taken by senior management also allows parents to meet the principal both with and without an appointment.

Parent-teacher meetings are organised annually for each year group. Parents who are unable to attend these meetings are encouraged to telephone the school for a progress report and, in this way, contact between the school and parents is maintained. During the course of the
year, various information events are organised for parents including an open night for parents of prospective first-year students and an evening for parents of third-year students. At this event, information on the TY programme and the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) is made available. An information evening on third-level college application procedures is also held for students in sixth year and their parents.

The school has very good links with the local community and with outside agencies such as local hospitals, businesses, Ennis Youth Service and Clare FM. These links add to the opportunities offered to students and are of benefit when placements are required for work experience. Strong links are also maintained by management and the care team with student-support agencies in order to assist students such as those with additional educational needs and those from minority groups.

It is positive that the school has begun engaging in a process of self-evaluation and review. Significant progress has already taken place at board of management level while the process has been instigated at school level through involvement in school development planning, the review of the posts of responsibility structure, feedback from previous inspection reports as well as discussion among staff. It is clear that strengths and priorities for development have been identified and these should now be used to inform future planning.

### 1.4 Management of resources

The school calendar complies with the required number of teaching days in the school year and students are provided with twenty-eight hours of instruction per week in accordance with Department regulations. In terms of its teaching staff, there are currently forty-seven teachers on the staff of Rice College, thirty-two of whom have permanent whole-time contracts. The school is at present within quota and the teachers are appropriately deployed in line with their qualifications and interests. However, in light of both recent retirements and possible future retirements in some key areas, it is recommended that management carry out an analysis of future staffing needs in order to be able to plan for sufficient qualified personnel in a number of specialised subject areas.

A member of the parish clergy is chaplain to the school and contributes greatly to the spiritual dimension of the school through the many liturgies held throughout the year. The valuable work of the six special needs assistants and their willingness to become involved in all aspects of school life is likewise commended. The ancillary staff, especially the caretaking and administrative staff, plays an important role in creating a pleasant environment in the school. The good work and support provided by the caretaker, canteen staff, cleaning staff and the administrative staff deserves recognition and praise.

The school building is very well maintained through an ongoing programme of improvement and refurbishment. A new extension was opened in 2007 and this has provided much needed new classrooms and specialist rooms. Recent improvements include new brightly-coloured lockers, a water conservation system and improvements to the canteen. Attention is paid to ensuring that the building is a bright and pleasant working environment through the use of attractive displays in the corridors and open areas. It is commendable that the corridors and classrooms are kept litter-free. The photographs of student groups and student of the year awards as well as the art displays and sculpture serve to highlight the school’s long history of achievement and greatly enhance the learning environment.

The facilities available include general classrooms, specialist rooms, laboratories, computer rooms, a learning support suite, a prayer room, a sports hall and administrative offices. However, due to the confined nature of its town centre location, with the main building...
fronting the road and with the river to its back, the school has very limited parking facilities and more importantly, it does not have its own playing pitches. Instead, it makes use of the adjoining public park as well as sports facilities and pitches in other locations. Access to these pitches is facilitated though the use of the two school minibuses. Great credit is due to the school for the way in which it continues to offer an extensive programme of sports and leisure activities in spite of these restrictions.

Many teachers have their own designated classrooms or specialist rooms. In many instances, the teachers have created a stimulating learning environment through the display of posters and charts. The development of information and communication technology (ICT) for teaching and learning, and for administrative purposes has been a focus in recent years and further development is ongoing. A post-holder has responsibility for ICT development and an ICT plan and an internet access policy have been implemented. All classrooms are equipped with computers and data projectors, and all rooms are wired for internet access. The computer laboratories are well resourced and one room is prioritised for use with technology classes. Teachers have access to a fully-equipped preparation room with computers and photocopiers. Future priorities identified by the co-ordinator for the development of ICT include the upgrading of classroom computers, new equipment, changes to the school website and work on an e-learning plan. The next stage of work on e-learning has been mapped out and involves the identification of individual teacher needs in terms of up-skilling and the development of competency in using ICT as a teaching tool. The commitment shown to the ongoing implementation and integration of ICT is reflected in the time spent on ensuring that a well-maintained and effective system is in place to support staff and students in their work.

In accordance with requirements, the school has prepared a comprehensive health and safety statement outlining procedures for staff and students. This was completed following a safety audit and the completion of the new extension. The staff has been made aware of the need to adhere to the provisions of the safety statement, and the importance of regular risk assessment audits in practical subjects has been recognised. Training for staff has been held in first aid and in the use of the school’s defibrillators. It is good to note that the recommendations relating to health and safety arising from a recent science inspection have been implemented. All of this is good practice.

2. **QUALITY OF SCHOOL PLANNING**

2.1 **The school plan**

The school is engaged in an ongoing whole-school planning process which is supported by the board of management. The board, staff members, the parents’ council and the student council have all been included in the development and review of policies as appropriate. The process is grounded in the mission statement of the school with a focus on the development of the student. School development planning is led by a recently appointed co-ordinator in conjunction with senior management. Priorities for development have been identified by the board and staff. These include the development of ICT as well as a number of objectives in the areas of learning support, discipline, communications, the arts and extra-curricular activities.

Significant work has taken place in the development of the permanent section of the school plan. The focus of much of the planning in recent years has been on the preparation of comprehensive policy documents that are in line with statutory requirements and guidelines on best practice. The policies form part of the permanent section of the school plan; they have been ratified by the board and are subject to regular updating and review. It is very positive that the board of management, staff, parents and the student council have all been
included in the planning process. The updating of the admissions policy in particular has been central to the policy work of the last two years. This represents very good practice.

The absence of a whole-school guidance plan is identified by management as a priority that needs to be addressed. Management furthermore recognises that, while very good work in the area is being done on the ground, the work is often carried out in isolation and information has not been fully collated and documented. Accordingly, work has begun on the preparation of a whole-school guidance plan with a view to integrating the different elements into one document. The plan is being co-ordinated at present by the deputy principal and the school-planning co-ordinator, and it is envisaged that the pastoral care team will play a significant role in steering the project. It is recommended that the key components of the student support system should be incorporated into the plan including Social and Personal Health Education (SPHE), Religious Education, Guidance and special educational needs. The school’s commitment to undertaking this work is acknowledged and it is recommended that the drafting of the plan continue to be prioritised.

Time is made available for formal subject-department planning at the annual planning meetings at the start of the year, when each department completes a SCOT analysis of the strengths, challenges, opportunities and threats for each subject area. Planning is also a regular feature on the agenda of staff meetings and weekly management meetings. It is evident from a review of the documentation and from meetings with staff members during the course of the evaluation week, that priorities for future development have been identified. However, the developmental section of the school plan needs to be re-focused so as to become a more streamlined, working document that will provide an action plan and framework for the next few years. It is suggested that planning could be divided into a number of separate strands such as policies, teaching and learning, and resources, with a strategic plan for the targets to be achieved in each area over a period of time. The preparation of a timeline showing the stages for each policy or target would allow for progress to be easily identified. The attendance of the school planning co-ordinator at some middle-management meetings or the use of a template to summarise any discussion relating to planning, would also ensure that whole-school planning takes a more central role.

As the school has made very good progress in the area of policy formulation, it is recommended that the next stage of the planning process should concentrate on advancing whole-school planning with a particular focus on a whole-school approach to teaching and learning. The collated results of the SCOT analysis used in subject planning could be used to inform a planning cycle of review, design, implementation and evaluation with a focus on improving learning outcomes for students. The priorities for development might include, as appropriate, the further integration of ICT into teaching and learning, and a focus on teaching methodologies.

Some very good practice was observed with regard to subject planning. Subject specific plans and programmes of work have been prepared across the subject areas. To build on the work to date, and to ensure that all departments maintain and strengthen their focus on the improvement of teaching and learning, it is suggested that an action plan for each subject be prepared focusing on a small number of key priorities or targets together with a timeframe for evaluation of the progress made. Sharing the knowledge, experience and good practice that already exists within the staff is recommended as a further element in the development of teacher professional learning.

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

3. QUALITY OF CURRICULUM PROVISION

3.1 Curriculum planning and organisation

Students in the school are offered the Junior Certificate, the TY programme, the established Leaving Certificate and the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP). While the LCVP has featured on the curriculum for a number of years, the optional TY programme was re-introduced in 2006 and was expanded to include a second class in 2010.

The curriculum is broad and varied. A comprehensive range of subjects is offered to students on enrolment and as they progress through the school. In first year, the subjects studied by students include Irish, English, Mathematics, French, German, Science, History, Geography, Religion, Business Studies, Materials Technology (Wood), Technical Graphics, Technology, Music, Art, and Civic, Social and Political Education (CSPE).

The non-examination elements of the Rice College programme for students include Religious Education (senior cycle), Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE), Computer Studies, Career and Personal Development, Physical Education and Games, Debating and Public Speaking, Television Studies, Choir, and Drama.

The optional TY programme offers students a varied and interesting curriculum and provides them with an opportunity to acquire a range of valuable skills during the year. In addition to core subjects, a number of modules are offered including Science and Electronics, Media Studies, Environmental and Social Studies, Construction Studies, First Aid, Tourism, Car Maintenance, Spanish and Japanese. It is very positive that the programme is reviewed annually in order to meet the needs and interests of the students. For the Leaving Certificate, students typically study Irish, English and Mathematics as core subjects, with the balance of four optional subjects chosen from among French, German, History, Geography, Business, Accounting, Economics, Physics, Chemistry, Biology, Technical Drawing, Construction Studies, Art, Design and Communication Graphics (DCG) and Music. The link modules and other required aspects of the LCVP are provided for, in line with programme guidelines.

The programmes on offer are well organised and delivered. Access to the programmes is informed by openness and equality. Teachers have high expectations for students and are committed to ensuring that students are able to achieve to their potential through the provision of study plans and other supports. A curricular audit is conducted annually by management to maximise the matching of teacher resources with student needs. It is also very positive that a number of changes have been implemented following discussion with middle management, notably changes to the subject-sampling system, and the reduction in the number of students to twenty-four in Science and some practical subjects in junior cycle. This latter change has been found to have had a favourable impact on student attainment. While the range of subjects currently on offer is varied, a priority for school management is to further develop the curriculum through the introduction of Metalwork and Home Economics as soon as staffing resources allow. As the establishment of a Board of Studies has been mooted as a future possibility by management, it is suggested that as part of its remit, the board or a sub-committee of staff should look at how best to maintain and expand the school’s subject range in the future in light of the resources available.

3.2 Arrangements for students’ choice of subjects and programmes
Students of Rice College have access to a wide range of subjects and levels. A subject-sampling system is in place in first year in order to ensure that all students have an opportunity to study the full range of subjects on offer in the school. This is very good practice as it allows students to make informed decisions relating to subjects and facilitates equality of access by both boys and girls. When students move into second year, they choose their optional subjects for Junior Certificate based on the results of a survey of students’ preferences which is then used to create option blocks. A similar system is in place in fifth year.

An information evening is held for third-year students and their parents at which the programmes available in senior cycle are explained, and information is provided by the guidance counsellor and the programme co-ordinator on subject options, and on the TY and the LCVP programmes. A PowerPoint presentation on the TY programme is also shown at the third-year parent-teacher meeting.

The TY programme was re-introduced into the school in 2006. The success of the programme can be judged from its expansion to include a second class group in the current year. A wide range of subjects and modules is made available to students and the programme is evaluated each year by students, parents and teachers.

The LCVP programme is well-established and is taken by a number of students each year. However, time-tabling constraints caused by the range of subjects and programmes on offer in senior cycle have impacted on the provision of physical education (PE) classes for students in LCVP to the extent that the current cohort are not timetabled for PE. Management has tried within the resources available to rectify this situation, and in the interim has provided a Leisure for Life programme in order to ensure that a range of leisure activities is available to LCVP students. While acknowledging the restrictions imposed by the time-tabling difficulties, every effort should be made to ensure that PE is provided for all students.

3.3 Co-curricular and extracurricular provision

The extensive programme of co-curricular and extracurricular activities is chosen with a view to helping students to develop their talents and social skills. The importance of promoting teamwork is also highlighted. In the last two years, additional activities have been introduced to ensure that there is a good balance in the appeal to both genders in the range on offer. Management and staff encourage all students, including those with additional educational needs to participate in these activities.

Among the many co-curricular activities and extracurricular activities are school tours, ski trips, retreats, field trips, visits to concerts, theatres and art galleries. Students participate in the President’s Gaisce awards, in public speaking and debating competitions, in the Texaco Art competition, the Maths Olympiad and the BT Young Scientist and Technology Exhibition.

The school has enjoyed great success in sport over the years and students are involved in a wide range of sports at county and provincial levels including hurling, camogie, Gaelic football, soccer, badminton, basketball, athletics, and golf. Efforts to increase the range of sports on offer, in consultation with students have resulted in the addition of rugby to the list. Training for many of the sports takes place at lunch-time and this has been instrumental in ensuring the participation of a high number of students. Water sports feature strongly, in particular life-saving, where students have represented their country at international level, while swimming, surfing and canoeing – including flat water, white water and canoe surfing are popular. Other options include set-dancing, hip-hop and yoga.
The school is also well known for its music, and students have a chance to perform in a wide variety of musical genres through the ceilí band, traditional group, classical ensembles, and school choir. They have opportunities to showcase their skills and talents in the school show, in concerts and in competitions such as Féile na hInse, while also enhancing, with their music, the many liturgical celebrations held during the school year. Great praise is due to the many members of staff who give of their time to prepare, coach and support all these activities. Their ongoing contribution and commitment is acknowledged by the WSE team.

4. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN SUBJECTS

4.1 Planning and preparation

Individual planning for lessons in the subjects evaluated was very good in almost all cases. Most teachers had prepared a range of print-based, visual, digital or aural stimulus materials to engage students in the planned learning. Common resources had been compiled to support the teaching and learning in most subjects and this was good practice. While effective use of ICT was observed in some lessons, there is still scope for greater ICT integration into teaching and learning activities across the curriculum.

With regard to the school’s subject-department planning process, three formal department meetings are facilitated by school management during the year, supplemented by informal meetings organised by individual departments. Where very good practice was seen, the role of subject department co-ordinator was rotated among teams of subject teachers and records of the outcomes of meetings were recorded and inserted into planning documentation. As a regular item on the agenda of such meetings, teachers should share teaching and learning methodologies that they have found effective. These methodologies could gradually be compiled into a valuable resource for use by all members of departments.

Levels of progress in relation to common departmental plans for the subjects evaluated ranged from fair to very good. Well-developed plans included agreed programmes of work arising from identified learning outcomes for all year groups that integrated the different areas of the relevant syllabuses as well as the requirements of certificate examinations. They also described agreed student-assessment procedures and teacher self-review processes, as well as planning for students of differing abilities and for students preparing for different levels of the certificate examinations. Aspects for development in subject-department plans where less progress had been made included the need for the formalisation and agreement of core principles and practices to guide the teaching of the subject, the development of common schemes of work, and greater inclusion of information on the use of teaching and learning methodologies linked to specific content in the programmes of work. These methodologies should include strategies for active learning and the use of ICT. The appended inspection reports provide subject-specific advice to support departmental plans for the subjects evaluated.

4.2 Learning and teaching

The quality of teaching and learning in five subjects was evaluated as part of the whole school evaluation process. Overall, the quality of teaching and learning observed was of a high standard, with inspectors noting many instances of very good practice. Clear learning outcomes were identifiable at the end of most lessons with students displaying knowledge, understanding and skill acquisition commensurate with their ability.
Most lessons were well structured and of a suitable pace. The content of almost all lessons was linked to work that had been previously completed. Where best practice was observed, a clear progression of activities within the lesson served to reinforce learning. Clear and timely instructions ensured that students were able to complete tasks. In addition, effective organisation of activities meant that tasks were set at a pace that challenged students appropriately. The use, in some instances, of plenary sessions to review and evaluate learning proved to be of value to both teachers and students. Teachers are therefore asked to consider the merit of extending this practice.

Many teachers indicated the planned activities to students at the outset of the lesson. In some instances, this included reference to the expected learning outcomes for students. This good practice was of even greater benefit when teachers used the actual learning outcomes as a basis for evaluating learning at the end of the lesson. All teachers should consider making review strategies such as these a feature of lessons.

An air of positive engagement existed in all lessons. In particular, those teachers who displayed high expectations of attainment as well as high levels of enthusiasm for their subject inspired their students to engage with the lesson. Students were familiar with classroom routines and their attentiveness to task completion created a work-orientated atmosphere. Many teachers welcomed students’ eagerness to participate in lesson activities and regular affirmation of their contributions often stimulated further engagement. Indeed, all inspectors noted the particular enjoyment and benefit that students derived from activities that involved interaction with their peers. The increased use of co-operative learning strategies that would promote autonomous learning across all subject areas is therefore recommended. As a further extension of fostering independent learning, teachers are reminded of the value of requiring students to develop the skill of note-making during lessons.

Questioning was used to good effect across all five subject areas. A mix of global and directed questioning was often used to evaluate prior learning before the introduction of new material. The use of differentiated questioning ensured that questions posed were appropriate to students’ ability levels. The posing of open and probing questions that places a requirement on students to think for themselves is particularly commended and all teachers are asked to extend their usage of enquiry-based questions that would encourage more self-directed learning by students.

Efforts have been made by many teachers to create a stimulating learning environment through the display of posters and samples of students’ work. This is very positive. A need was identified in some instances, however, for the display of reference material that would support students when completing tasks during lessons.

The variety of activities that characterised all lessons ensured continued student engagement and also consolidated learning. While tasks assigned were both of an individual and interactive nature, methodologies that involved overt teacher direction tended to predominate. Given the high quality of the learning that took place during activities such as whole-class discussion, peer-explanation and demonstration, pair-work and group work, wider adoption of active methodologies that promote student interaction is strongly recommended.

The range of resources used to support and facilitate learning included the whiteboard, textbooks and worksheets. Visual resources were used to good effect by many teachers. In particular, the use of ICT provided teachers with the opportunity of using materials that related to the lives of the students themselves, thus encouraging their active participation.
4.3 Assessment

The school has a formal homework and assessment policy which is implemented and monitored by the teachers. With regard to the subjects taught, the school engages in a comprehensive range of procedures to assess students’ learning and to inform teaching. Formative assessment takes place in a variety of ways. These strategies include oral questioning, written assignments, projects, regular end-of-topic assessments and twice-yearly formal examinations. Homework, which includes written, and where appropriate, aural and practical work, is given on a regular basis and is consistently marked. The school’s homework policy guides much of the homework practices implemented by the teachers. There is a common approach to homework in the larger subject departments which follows good assessment practice. Homework is set as needed to reinforce the learning objectives for the current topic being studied and may involve completion of work begun in class. It is also used effectively to prepare students for work which is to be undertaken in the following lessons. In some subject departments, the team has devised homework and assessment guidelines as part of their planning. This is good practice.

With regard to the subjects evaluated, assessment formed an integral part of teaching and learning in the lessons observed. Formative assessment was used effectively and very good feedback was provided for students. Questioning was used to good effect by some teachers to assess students’ understanding of the material that had been taught. These teachers used differentiated questions which ensured that all students experienced success during lessons. Some teachers also took time to check and correct homework during lesson time, as appropriate, which is good practice. In one instance, good use was made of homework completed to build on students’ prior knowledge, thus developing the lesson.

There was evidence of good practice with regard to the regular setting, checking and monitoring of homework in the teaching of most subjects. Samples of students’ work indicated that a good level of written tasks is assigned. Copybooks contained work that was appropriate, relevant and well presented. There was evidence that teachers are monitoring students’ copybooks. It is also good to note that students frequently receive comments and words of encouragement and guidance on their assessments. This good practice is encouraged further as regular constructive feedback enhances learning by informing students about their own individual progress. This practice, which provides good opportunities for increased assessment for learning (AFL), should be expanded. In some subjects, teachers encourage students to correct and amend their work as this helps students to develop as independent learners. It is recommended that this practice be extended to all classes as, in some instances, student monitoring and correcting of their work could have been more explicit. To advance this strategy it would be timely to organise assessment procedures aimed at developing all students as independent learners.

Examination year students are formally assessed twice per year, during November and the mock examinations during the second term. All other students are continually assessed throughout the school year and, in addition, have formal examinations at the end of the school year. It was noted in some subjects that common examination papers are set for first-year students, and within levels for subsequent year groups which is good practice. The school conducts a subject-specific statistical analysis of the certificate examination results and compares these results with the national norms. The use of this analysis to inform planning is good practice and is encouraged.

Good communication mechanisms are in place to inform parents of their son’s or daughter’s progress. Students are assessed at the completion of each topic. Teachers retain a record of attendance and of the results of these assessments, and, in the case of the examinations, they are recorded in the school database. The outcomes of all continuous assessments and examinations are recorded and are made available for parents at the annual
parent-teacher meetings. Reports are sent home on foot of these assessments and of the twice-yearly formal examinations. The students’ journals provide a further means of communication which is used by teachers to report on the progress of students. There is scope for the students’ journal to be used more effectively as a means of two-way communication between the school and parents. Progress in this area is encouraged.

5. QUALITY OF SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS

5.1 Inclusion of students with additional educational needs

The school has an open and inclusive admissions policy and a number of students with additional educational needs are currently enrolled. Relevant policies have been prepared and ratified by the board of management. The special educational needs policy was first formulated in 2004-2005 and has been reviewed on a regular basis since that date. Key areas addressed include the provision of guidelines for the screening of students, assessments, planning, record keeping and communication with parents. The school’s commitment to the provision of resources to support students has included the provision of a suite of rooms for use by the department. The resources provided include ICT equipment and a laptop and camera for use by students with a visual impairment.

There is a special educational needs team in place led by a co-ordinator. The creation of a core team and the provision of a timetabled weekly meeting have been instrumental in the development of a dedicated, qualified and well-organised department. Members of the team are encouraged by management to avail of relevant in-service courses and the commitment of staff in pursuing further studies in this area is recognised and commended. Observation of a meeting of the core team during the week of the whole school evaluation demonstrated the importance and effectiveness of such contact time in facilitating the sharing of information and good practice, and the identification of the varying needs of individual students. Very good practice was seen in the way in which action plans for students were proposed, discussed and reviewed during the meeting.

The school’s allocation for learning support and for special educational needs is used to facilitate individual and small group withdrawal from mainstream classes for the provision of support. In this way, students are supported in accessing subjects, and each student’s progress is monitored and reviewed on a regular basis. Subject teachers are also timetabled to complement the work of the department by providing periods of one-to-one tuition in a subject. This practice has been found by the team to be successful in that it ensures inclusion for all teachers in this work and facilitates collaboration between the core team and the mainstream teachers. It is very positive that there has been a move to engage with team-teaching as a way of supporting students in the classroom. It is recommended that there should be further investigation of the benefits of team-teaching as a mode of delivery of support, in conjunction with more established modes such as withdrawal and small-group teaching.

A significant feature of the work of the department is the emphasis on the early identification of students who may benefit from support. Good links have been established with the feeder primary schools that allow for the appropriate sharing of relevant information. In addition, the “intake window” of the first weeks of term has been identified by the school as a key time for the assessment and screening of incoming students in order to allow for early intervention where appropriate. This screening process is carried out in collaboration with the guidance counsellors. Help is also available to ensure that students have a study plan so that they can organise and timetable their work more easily and effectively.
Supports to aid the inclusion of students for whom English is an additional language, are focused on language support as well as on social and emotional assistance in making the transition from one culture to another. Assistance is also offered for students sitting the certificate examinations. The extra support provided by the after-school homework club and the language classes offered by Clare Immigrant Services are also sources of extra support. Students from disadvantaged or minority groups receive support both within the whole-school context and also from subject teachers. The school is in receipt of additional hours to support the needs of a number of Traveller students. This allocation is used to support their full integration in class and it is very positive that Traveller students are currently preparing for the Junior Certificate and the Leaving Certificate examinations. Care is taken to ensure their participation in extracurricular activities and to encourage good attendance. In addition there is ongoing communication between the school and the relevant agencies.

5.2 Guidance and student support in the whole-school context

Due to the increase in student numbers, the school has been allocated additional hours for Guidance and now has an allocation of twenty-eight hours per week. As a result, an additional guidance counsellor has been employed in the school. The facilities for the service comprise of an office and classroom equipped with a computer and internet access, printer and shredder. However, in light of the increased numbers of students, it is recognised by management that students require improved access to ICT in order to research their career options. It is planned to facilitate students’ access to ICT through the future expansion of ICT resources within the school.

A comprehensive guidance plan gives details of the work of the guidance department. The guidance curriculum in the school is divided between a formal and an informal component. The formal curriculum is delivered through individual contact with a student or through whole-classes contacts. The informal guidance programme involves liaison with management, staff, parents and outside agencies in the delivery of the guidance plan. There is a good balance in provision between junior cycle and senior cycle and between individual and class guidance and counselling. Access to personal, social, educational, and vocational guidance varies according to the needs of the students and their year group. In first year, the focus is on the transition from primary school while examination skills and subject choices for senior cycle form the basis for work with third years. All senior classes have timetabled guidance classes focused on careers planning as well as individual assistance from the guidance counsellors. There is regular communication between the guidance counsellors and other members of staff. In addition, guidance counsellors meet with parents at the information evenings held to brief parents on subject choices and programmes.

A significant strength of the school is the support and care for individual students. This is made possible by the good pastoral care structures that are in place. It is evident that there is a whole-school approach to care for students that involves senior management, teachers, ancillary staff and the students themselves. A pastoral care team, comprised of the principal and deputy principal, guidance counsellor and year heads meets each week to share information on each year group and to identify individual students who may be in need of support. The system of year heads is a key element in these structures as the role of the year head includes a pastoral function. Subject teachers also play an important part in the care of students. They work closely with the year heads and may refer any concerns about individual students to the year head or to the guidance counsellors as necessary.

A well-established mentoring programme also illustrates the school’s commitment to the care of students, in particular students in first year. A number of senior cycle students are chosen each year to act as mentors for first-year students with four students assigned to
each class. Following training before the start of the school year, they act as a “big brother or big sister” to the new students during their first year. The emphasis is on befriending students and making them aware of the supports available to help them. Among the recognised benefits of the scheme is that it helps the mentors to grow and develop also. The mentoring system is seen to be of value in that any attempt at bullying is quickly identified and stopped. It also establishes links between the first years and the student council as some mentors have experience as student council representatives. The mentors organise activities for the students with the support of a liaison teacher. Activities such as sports, board games, dance, and a cinema club ensure that all new students have a chance to socialise and to make friends during their lunch-time break.

SPHE and Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) are key elements of curricular support for the personal and social development of students. All students in junior cycle are provided with SPHE timetabled lessons, as required. The teachers work in collaboration with the care team and the special educational needs department in order to ensure that the curricular content of the programmes is adjusted to address students’ needs. This represents good practice.

6. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Respect, care and concern for the school community are central to the work of Rice College.
- There is a strong and effective senior management team with a clear commitment to leadership of students and staff.
- The board of management is properly constituted and is committed to the development of the school.
- The assistant principals and the special duties teachers form an effective middle-management structure in the school.
- The parents’ council is active in its support for the school, notably through its successful fundraising campaigns.
- Significant work has been done in the development of the school plan and a range of documented school policies is in place.
- The curriculum on offer in Rice College is broad and balanced, while subject choice is provided on the basis of students’ preferences.
- The quality of teaching and learning in the lessons observed was of a high standard, with some instances of very good practice. Lessons were well structured and an atmosphere of positive engagement existed in all lessons.
- The school’s provision for students with additional educational needs is very good. The support is well-organised and is delivered by a caring and committed core team.
- A well-organised student-support structure is in place. The care of students is coordinated by a pastoral team that includes senior management and the guidance counsellors.

As a means of building on these strengths and to address areas for development, the following key recommendations are made:

- It is recommended that staffing needs and the schedule of posts of responsibility be reviewed on an ongoing basis in order to ensure that the needs of the school continue to be met.
• The focus of school development planning should be directed towards the preparation of an action plan for whole-school planning and the drafting of the whole-school guidance plan should be prioritised.
• There should be continued development of the priorities identified by the board with regard to ICT, in particular the integration of ICT into teaching and learning and the upskilling of staff.

Post-evaluation meetings were held with the staff and board of management when the draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation were presented and discussed.

7. RELATED SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORTS

The following related Subject Inspection reports are available:
• Subject Inspection of Design and Communication Graphics, and Technical Graphics – 25 November 2010
• Subject Inspection of Irish – 22 November 2010
• Subject Inspection of Mathematics – 26 November 2010
• Subject Inspection of Music – 23 November 2010
• Subject Inspection of Science and Chemistry – 8 October 2010

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Appendix

School Response to the Report

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

The Board of Management was pleased with the positive aspects outlined in the WSE and since it was undertaken, management and staff have taken on board the appropriate recommendations to continue improving the quality of education at Rice College.

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 following action has been undertaken since the completion of the inspection:

1. The Croke Park Agreement has afforded an extra 7 hours now devoted to subject planning.
2. The Student council formation and application have now been addressed.
3. Whole school Development Planning and Whole School guidance plan is completed.
4. I.C.T. upgrading plans are further advanced.
5. Staffing needs/contribution and allocation are constantly being monitored.
6. P.E. and healthy eating modules are now given to senior cycle students.
7. Input to methodologies is constantly reviewed and updated at staff planning sessions.
8. All subject co-ordinators are now rotated.
9. The School website has been completed and is constantly updated.
10. A Board of Studies is now established.
11. Guidance classes have now adopted using a new careers portal package.

In the subject inspection areas the following action has also been undertaken since the completion of the inspection.

(A) Technical Graphics

1. Extra planning is now done through time afforded by the Croke Park Agreement.
2. DCG and TG plans have been integrated.
3. Methodologies will be implemented into future plans.
4. A written module descriptor for DCG has been added to the TY programme.

(B) Maths

1. Planning/methodologies have been enhanced through extra time afforded by the Croke Park Agreement.
2. Extra resources have been purchased for project maths classes.
3. The Maths co-ordinator has been rotated.

(C) Music

1. Planning/methodologies have been enhanced through extra time afforded by the Croke Park Agreement.
(D) **Irish**

1. Teacher’s qualifications are being addressed through staffing allocations.
2. As of December 2010 all Junior and Senior Cycle Classes are now divided into mixed ability classes within levels as per school policy.
3. The position of subject co-ordinator rotates on an annual basis.
4. Regular assessment is carried out on the speaking ability of students.
5. Irish is the medium of communication in all classes.
6. Further development of Irish planning has taken place under the extra time afforded by the Croke Park Agreement.