

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna
Department of Education and Skills

Whole-School Evaluation
REPORT

Saint Mary's Secondary School Convent of Mercy
Mallow, County Cork
Roll number: 62350D

Date of inspection: 25 September 2009



AN ROINN OIDEACHAIS AGUS SCILEANNA | **DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND SKILLS**

WHOLE-SCHOOL EVALUATION

A whole-school evaluation of St Mary's Secondary School, Convent of Mercy, Mallow was undertaken in September 2009. This report presents the findings of the evaluation and makes recommendations for improvement. During the evaluation, the quality of teaching and learning in three subjects and in the Transition Year (TY) programme were evaluated in detail, and separate reports are available on these subjects and programme. (See section 7 for details). The board of management was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the report, and the response of the board will be found in the appendix of this report.

INTRODUCTION

St Mary's Secondary School has provided second-level education for girls in Mallow for over three quarters of a century as part of the educational involvement of the Sisters of Mercy in the town. This involvement goes back over one hundred and sixty years. Students of the school are drawn from Mallow and the surrounding areas of County Cork. The present school building was opened in 2003. St Mary's now operates under the trusteeship of CEIST: Catholic Education - an Irish Schools Trust, the patron body for schools of five congregations including the Sisters of Mercy.

St Mary's expresses commitment, in its mission statement and aims, to the development of the full potential of all its students in a holistic manner, particularly those who experience disadvantage or marginalisation. In its statement of Mercy philosophy, the school espouses a Catholic ethos in "an atmosphere of care, respect and joy" embracing values of "partnership, accountability, transparency, inclusion, respect for diversity, parental choice and equality".

1. QUALITY OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT

1.1 Characteristic spirit of the school

The vision of St Mary's is clearly presented in its mission statement which is communicated effectively through school documentation to parents, students and the whole-school community. The stated mission is promoted and fostered by the trustees among the board of management, the parents' association, the school staff and the student body. There is a strong sense in the school that its vision is shared and supported throughout the school community. The aims and objectives of the various policies adopted by the board of management, and the day-to-day implementation of these policies, reflect the vision of the school.

1.2 School ownership and management

The board of management is appropriately constituted, under the terms of the *Articles of Management for Catholic Secondary Schools*. It consists of eight members, four members nominated by CEIST, two members nominated from the parents of students attending the school and two members nominated from the teachers with the principal acting as secretary to the board. The board operates in accordance with the terms of the *Articles of Management for Catholic Secondary Schools* and the Education Act (1998).

The board is appropriately supported in the discharge of its duties by CEIST and the Joint Managerial Body for Secondary Schools (JMB). This support includes the provision of

training for board members on various aspects of their collective and individual roles in relation to the successful functioning of the board. Board members avail of such training enthusiastically to inform themselves fully regarding their functions. The members of the board expressed their determination to discharge their functions in an exemplary manner including compliance with all statutory requirements and regulations set down by the Department. They discharge their duties effectively and comprehensively.

The decision-making of the board is open and shared, in a spirit of consultation and partnership and in the best interests of the school community. Communication among members of the board and between the board and the school community is well developed, cordial and effective. This interaction has a very positive influence on the sense of shared mission. Procedures are in place for policy development and adoption which include the central and indispensable role of the board. Policies ratified by the board include those which are legally required on admission, attendance, child protection, behaviour, relationships and sexuality, special educational needs and health and safety, together with a range of other policies in many areas. Among the very well developed policies is a draft policy on whole-school guidance which is comprehensive and reflective of the appropriately integrated approach taken to guidance provision in the school. This draft whole-school guidance policy should be agreed and ratified by the board at an early date.

Review and evaluation of key aspects of the school form an important focus for the board, which adopts a commendably flexible approach to fulfilling its role in this regard. Meetings of the board are wide-ranging and the principal's report to the board provides current information on progress in meeting the aims of the school. It is commended that priority areas identified at the September meeting inform the drafting of agenda for meetings throughout the year. It is suggested that a review or evaluation of a selected aspect of the school could, as time permits, be included as an item on each agenda. Such focussing on each key aspect in rotation would further strengthen systematic review and evaluation over time.

The board has identified a range of developmental priorities for the school that include educational, organisational and physical aspects. They include further development of the special educational needs department, finalisation of the review of the code of behaviour, and refurbishment of the old school gymnasium. These and other developmental concerns have been identified collaboratively and in a positive manner with the school community.

Clear targets and strategies are set for the achievement of the aims prioritised by the board, in close collaboration with school management and the school planning committee. The board facilitates and supports the active involvement of parents both in policy development and in a wide range of school activities. This involvement is achieved through the parents' association and very good communication with the general body of parents. The board provides parents with pertinent information on the work and performance of the school.

The board has adopted and implements clear and transparent procedures for dealing with complaints. These procedures include the grievance procedures agreed between the JMB and the Association of Secondary Teachers, Ireland (ASTI). Appropriate procedures are also in place for dealing with complaints from parents or students. The success of school management and staff in dealing promptly with complaints at the appropriate level is acknowledged and affirmed by the board. This is good practice.

1.3 In-school management

Senior in-school management is characterised by high-quality leadership. Stability and effectiveness are brought about by partnership and teamwork at the highest level. The principal's vision, dedication and drive is fully embraced, supported and amplified by the deputy principal. The clear vision for the school enunciated by senior management is held in common with the board and is shared by the staff.

School management and leadership are distributed effectively and appropriately through the middle management team and the remainder of the teaching staff. The roles and responsibilities that are devolved to post-holders within this management structure are assigned with clarity and openness. The posts of responsibility schedule was reviewed during the year preceding this school evaluation, and changes to the lists of assigned duties were agreed. The review exercise was completed with reference to the needs of the school and the students. Identifying the necessary changes to the schedule involved the whole staff. The assignment of duties to individual post-holders was by agreement with the teachers concerned. This is very good practice. It is imperative that post-holders' duties be reviewed regularly in order to prioritise the needs of the school and the students, and with a view to bringing about the greatest possible contribution by post-holders to the middle management of the school. This should be achieved where possible through the normal procedures, and by agreement with the whole staff and the individual post-holders.

School management has consistently facilitated and supported an impressive range of continuing professional development (CPD) activities. Individual CPD involvement is recorded centrally on an annual basis. Teachers have been encouraged to share the benefits of CPD sessions with their colleagues on returning to the school and have responded positively. This is good practice on the part of management and teachers. Whole-school CPD has likewise been facilitated with very positive results. This has placed the focus on areas of current importance in the development of the school, such as co-operative learning, assessment for learning and the development of positive behaviour among students. Agencies engaged to provide such CPD have included the Second-level Support Service (SLSS) and Leadership Development for Schools (LDS). The school has also invited and benefitted from collaborative interaction with another secondary school in relation to the further development of team teaching. Collaboration with teacher colleagues from other schools in this way is very good practice and provides valuable opportunities for reflection and professional growth.

The admissions policy reflects the mission statement and explicitly cites the commitment of the school, in keeping with CEIST values, to implement the underlying principles of education legislation, encompassing partnership, accountability, transparency, inclusion, respect for diversity, parental choice, and equality. The procedures for enrolment are clearly outlined in the policy, and the clarity of the assertion, "Except in very exceptional circumstances, pupils will be enrolled on application", indicates good enrolment policy and practice. It is urged that this assertion explicitly include applicant students who have additional educational needs so that the paragraph headed "special needs" is placed in context. It is recommended however that the application of enrolment criteria, in particular in the case of oversubscription, be clarified in the admissions policy.

The school is inclusive of all of its students. The spirit of inclusion permeates the day-to-day interactions with students by subject teachers, class teachers, year heads, guidance staff and management. School care and discipline structures give expression to this underlying spirit. Behaviour policy is defined by very clear and transparent rules. These rules define the limits and expectations for acceptable behaviour and provide a coherent rationale for good behaviour based on mutual respect, security and responsibility. The rules are effectively communicated to students, parents and the school community and are included

in the students' journals and the teachers' handbook. These rules are backed by a coherent range of appropriate incremental sanctions which are likewise communicated to students, parents and staff in line with good practice.

The rules for students are implemented consistently and fairly, tempered by the appropriately integrated student-care system. The application of the code of behaviour is predicated on achieving the highest levels of care for the students. The policy on behaviour was being actively reviewed at the time of the evaluation and a very coherent draft was going through the formal process. This document was being drafted in close reference to the guidelines issued by the National Educational Welfare Board's (NEWB), *Developing a Code of Behaviour: Guidelines for Schools*. Particular attention was being paid to including ample provision for positive and effective encouragement of good behaviour. Management and staff see this as already being inherent to the approach of the school. This is very good practice.

Good practice is also adopted regarding the organisation of the students' council which has been a feature of the school for over ten years. The members have been democratically elected by their peers. The council is active and representative of all the students. Regular meetings are held, agendas are set and records are kept, in line with good practice. The council has adopted the practice of electing assistant officers from among the students elected from the junior-cycle classes to further ensure continuity. This is very good practice. The council is supported in its work by the students' council liaison teacher and engages very effectively with school management, the board of management and the teachers. In particular, the students' council engages appropriately in decision-making processes on issues relating directly to the students' lives in the school and is active in school-policy development where appropriate. Leadership development training has been provided for members of the students' council to support them in developing their own leadership skills and in their role when interacting with their peers. The provision of training of this kind, in keeping with the guiding principles of the trustees, is very positive.

The strategies in place to monitor and maximise students' attendance are robust and comprehensive, based on the well-defined attendance policy. Implementation of the strategies includes the efficient use of the students' journal, in which reasons for all absences are recorded by parents and witnessed on receipt by teachers. All absences are recorded in the first lesson, morning and afternoon. Names of absentees are displayed in the staffroom to alert teachers. The use of an ICT-based display for this, and for the display of a range of other information, indicates the commendable progress made in developing effective systems of communication in the school. Parents are provided with a phone message-answering service to log any absence before ten o'clock each morning. It is proposed to introduce automated text-sending to alert parents to unexpected absences. Absences are notified in an appropriate manner to parents and the NEWB and the rates of absence compare very favourably with rates nationally. The retention of students through junior cycle and senior cycle is very good. Effective guidance, counselling and care strategies, together with the approachability and attentiveness of management and the whole staff, support the retention of students, as individual students feel known and valued in school.

Partnership with parents is central to the vision of the school and this is expressed formally through the facilitation and support provided by the school for its very active and effective parents' association. This association is the main vehicle for the involvement of parents, and through its activities purposeful two-way communication with parents in respect of all aspects of school life is generated. The association operates transparently in the context of a well-defined formal structure under the direction of an annually elected executive. Minutes are extant for the past ten years. Members of the executive encourage the active participation of all parents and, in particular, their involvement on the executive. Regular

meetings are held, generally monthly, and they are usually attended by the principal. There is very good ongoing communication between the principal and the chairperson of the association. The executive is involved in consideration of school policy about which it is formally consulted by the principal. Recent consultation related to school policies on attendance, special needs and anti-bullying. Parents expressed their satisfaction that their suggestions have been carefully considered and acted upon. The association willingly involves itself in supporting the school in a variety of ways and has been instrumental in organising a bi-annual careers fair for students. Evening classes in many areas such as flower-arranging, cookery and golf are organised for parents. Fund-raising activities, such as a flag day and a second-hand book sale, are also undertaken. These have been very successful and using the funds raised for clearly identified purposes has been affirming for parents. This is very good practice. To further enhance the representative nature of the parents' association, it is urged that parents and school management take further steps to promote the active involvement of parents from each geographic area of the school's enrolment and from the diversity of parents. Such steps could involve seeking representatives from each of the parishes or areas from which the students are drawn.

Very good practice is seen in the links that the parents' association maintains with the wider community. These links include contact with similar bodies in other schools locally. This contact has been positive and has provided opportunities for discussion and consideration of shared issues leading to a deepening of the parents' appreciation of education. While the parents' association provides the main channel of involvement, parents also willingly become involved in other ways such as volunteering for rotas for supervision of games-training sessions. Additional involvement by parents is encouraged and facilitated in line with good practice.

The school has a comprehensive and effective system of communication with parents in general. The student's journal and a range of standard letters provide for routine communication. Students' achievement and progress are communicated by means of regular school reports and formal parent-teacher meetings are organised in line with agreed procedures. Parents are also kept up-to-date on events in the school by means of the periodic, admirably concise, school newsletters which are also used to great effect to affirm students' achievements. The current newsletter, together with other information including the key policy documents, is made available on the website of the school.

Good relations with the wider community are fostered by management. Many links are forged with local businesses through the organisation of work experience for students of Transition Year and Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA). Management also maintains contact with a wide range of bodies and groups who are facilitated to use the school hall which is a valuable resource for the community. Other links include regular contact with the feeder primary schools and with the principals of the other local post-primary schools. Contact with the primary schools includes the communication of information on St Mary's and, commendably, former pupils of each school, now in the TY class, are taken to address the sixth-class pupils. Contact with the principals of the primary schools is also a valuable channel for information on incoming students. It is reported by senior management that the post-primary principals in the area meet informally and exchange shared concerns and that a good relationship exists among them.

A spirit of self-review and self-evaluation is an integral part of the approach adopted by management in fulfilling its role and this spirit is articulated through its leadership and shared by the school community. There is an appropriate focus on the outcomes for students when any aspect of the school is being reviewed or evaluated by management.

1.4 Management of resources

The organisation of the school calendar complies fully with the terms of Department of Education and Science Circular 0107/2007 with regard to the standardisation of the autumn mid-term, Christmas, spring mid-term and Easter holidays. The number of teaching days planned for the current school year and the number of instruction hours timetabled per week are generally in compliance with the terms of the Department of Education and Science *Time in School* Circular, M29/95. However, in the case of one class, both the number of teaching days and the number of instruction hours per week fall short of the requirements of those required. It is essential that all students are provided with a minimum 167 teaching days per year and with a minimum of twenty-eight hours of timetabled instruction per week.

Good practice is followed with regard to the deployment of teachers. Members of staff are assigned to teach subjects according to their qualifications, expertise and experience in compliance with the regulations of the Department of Education and Science. This assignment is fair and equitable in the context of meeting the educational needs of the students within the staffing allocation of 42.61 whole-time teacher equivalents. Management's practice regarding the deployment of these teaching resources is consistent with the principles of partnership and teamwork promoted and implemented by the school and hence the teachers' professional needs and preferences are also considered appropriately. The teaching staff responds by engaging fully in a spirit of professional partnership and teamwork which is clearly expressed in their work.

Management is fully engaged with ensuring to the greatest possible extent that the future staffing needs of the school are met. Present and emerging needs have been identified in an efficient manner. Management is engaging energetically with the challenges facing the school in the present circumstances, is assertive in maintaining existing resources where possible and is proactive in seeking new resources.

The spirit of partnership and teamwork which is a characteristic of the school extends to the non-teaching support staff members who are enabled and encouraged to make appropriate and effective contributions to the life of the school beyond the completion of their core assigned duties. The contributions of these members of the school community are applauded as an indispensable element in maintaining and enriching the students' positive experience of school.

The school buildings are maintained to a very high standard. Attention to detail by management and the maintenance and caretaking staff, as well as the care of the whole school community, has ensured that the physical amenities have remained in pristine condition since the new school building was occupied over five years ago. The school has responded efficiently to a number teething problems, some of which are ongoing. The resilience and determination of senior management in this regard is admirable. The accommodation available to the school is of a very high standard and provides excellent teaching facilities. Subject departments and the school in general are very well equipped with material resources to support teaching and learning and these resources are appropriately utilised.

The school building, which was designed to accommodate 575 students, is utilised to the optimum. Over 600 students are now enrolled. The building incorporates a spacious gymnasium which is an excellent facility for teaching Physical Education. School facilities are made available to various groups from the community. This good practice is very helpful to the community, helps derive maximum benefit from the facilities and forges worthwhile links between the school and the wider community. The school has retained an older hall which is adjacent to the main building and is about to be refurbished. This provides very good additional space for assembly and use by the community. The campus

includes a range of very well-appointed courts and a playing pitch that provide excellent facilities for the wide range of sports activities included in the extracurricular programme.

Facilities in the school for using ICT are very good and include a dedicated area above the staffroom for lesson planning, preparation and research. The ongoing expansion of ICT within the school includes the use of ICT for administration and communication at various levels as well as for teaching and learning. Remarkable progress has been made in harnessing the potential of ICT. The commitment of the school, indicated most clearly by its willingness to employ the expertise needed to achieve success in this area from its own resources, is commended. It is urged that continued emphasis be placed on the further development of ICT as a learning resource in classrooms, fully integrated into the various teaching approaches adopted in lessons. Commendable progress has been made in facilitating the creation, storage and sharing of learning materials on a school intranet.

A health and safety statement is in place and was ratified by the board of management at the end of 2007. This statement is provided in discharge of the responsibility of the board of management under Section 20 of the Safety, Health and Welfare Act 2005. This statement should be reviewed annually in line with the undertaking contained in its introduction. The composition of the safety committee and the status of the safety representative(s) should be clarified and appended, as provided for in the statement. It is also suggested that separate health and safety statements be drawn up and ratified for areas in which particular hazards may need to be managed, such as the home economics rooms and the science laboratories. These should then be appended to the school's health and safety statement.

2. QUALITY OF SCHOOL PLANNING

2.1 The school plan

The school plan has been very effectively compiled. It encompasses a comprehensive range of clear and coherent policy documents, including the mandatory policies listed earlier in this report. The school plan is very well structured in three parts, covering its permanent features, its developmental features and the current action plan in place to address these development needs. The action plan sets out clearly defined targets, appropriate timescales for their achievement, the personnel and groups charged with meeting the targets and explicitly-stated desired outcomes. The policy documents have been compiled by means of a clearly-defined inclusive process of development, followed by ratification by the board of management. The policy documents are in line with statutory requirements, department circulars and other guidelines. The policy statements reflect the school's shared vision and refer appropriately to the school's philosophy and mission statement that are also included in the plan. This is very good practice

Collaborative planning is enabled and facilitated by the leadership and vision of senior management and the board of management. It is very effectively conducted under the direction of the school's planning team that is efficiently small and representative of staff and senior management. The planning team meets on a weekly basis and its work is very capably documented. A number of policy documents which were in the process of being written or reviewed at the time of the evaluation were seen, and provided an indication of the commendable active spirit of collaborative planning in the school. The records of the school planning group are also a testament to this spirit and its implementation. It is clear that the planning group considers aspects of the school comprehensively at its regular meetings. The various elements of the school community, teachers, parents, students and management, are appropriately involved in the planning process. The collaborative, partnership approach to school development planning has resulted in a shared ownership of the process and of the implementation of the plan.

Self-evaluation, review and identification of priorities form a firm basis for action planning in St Mary's and its school development planning process is a cycle encompassing these activities, with regular monitoring of the achievement of targets. The process of self-review and self-evaluation would be further strengthened by explicit listing of the aspects to be reviewed each year. This list could form part of the overall plan for the year which is included in each annual school-planning document. To derive further benefit, the aspects for review could be consistent with those identified by the board of management for consideration at its meetings. There is clear evidence of the implementation of planning in the school and this has led to changes and further improvements that are recognised by management and staff. Innovative ideas have come from various levels within the school structure and this process has been facilitated by school management. Such innovation has been led on occasion by small groups of teachers who professed an interest in a specific area, such as the development of the homework club. This idea for a homework club originated several years ago and has developed through regular review and end-of-year reports. This is a very successful model for development. To build further on this positive, collaborative spirit, the increased use of small planning groups should be explored to review existing policies, with the planning team steering the documents through the consultative stages. Teachers should be invited to engage in this work according to their particular interests and skills.

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 by senior management that these child protection procedures have been brought to the attention of management, school staff and parents. New teachers are supported through an induction procedure which includes induction by CEIST. The presentation and explanation of the child protection procedures in place in the school form a part of this induction. The staff handbook, which is given to each new teacher on beginning teaching in St Mary's, lists the school's child protection policy as one of the policies available in the office to be consulted as the need arises. It is recommended that a copy of the child-protection policy be given to each teacher, including each teacher new to the school, perhaps by its inclusion in the staff handbook, so that all members of staff are familiar with the procedures to be followed.

3. QUALITY OF CURRICULUM PROVISION

3.1 Curriculum planning and organisation

The school provides a broad, well-balanced curriculum in junior cycle and senior cycle that complies with Department guidelines and regulations. The subjects offered in addition to Gaeilge, English and Mathematics represent all the main areas of study. The languages offered include French and German, with Italian and Spanish in TY and LCA and Japanese in TY. Social studies include History, Geography, Art and Music. Home Economics and three science subjects, Chemistry, Physics and Biology, are also provided. Business Studies in junior cycle is continued in Accountancy, Business and Economics in senior cycle. The curriculum also includes Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE), Civic, Social and Political Education (CSPE) and Religion. Physical Education is represented in each cycle.

Very good practice is followed in providing educational programmes to meet the various needs, interests and talents of the students. The range of programmes includes TY, the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) and LCA, in addition to Junior Certificate and the established Leaving Certificate. It is urged that students who intend to follow the LCA programme, and their parents, should be provided with the opportunity to consider fully the value of completing the TY programme before starting LCA. These

programmes are very well co-ordinated by the respective programme co-ordinators and delivered in line with best practice, fulfilling the requirements and meeting the guidelines of the Department. Very effective programme teams collaborate with the co-ordinators ensuring high quality planning and delivery. Issues relating to curricular provision are addressed at the whole-school level. Management ensures that planning for the curriculum is carefully and appropriately addressed and that decisions taken are based on providing for students' needs to the greatest extent possible within available resources. Consultation with parents, students and teachers informs decisions with regard to curricular programmes and the framing of the curriculum in general.

Equality of access for students to appropriate programmes, subjects and levels within subjects is assured by means of effective organisation, including timetabling. This good practice successfully seeks to provide all students, including those who possess particular academic talents, with suitable levels of challenge to develop their abilities. In planning the curriculum, effective use is made of curriculum initiatives provided by the Department to address educational disadvantage appropriately within the school and the community. The school reports a great deal of success in meeting the needs of all students and this is supported by the evidence of the outcomes for students. The effectiveness of the curriculum is reviewed constantly and more formally on an annual basis as a central facet of the school development planning process. Management and the whole school community are commended for their considerable efforts in this regard.

The priority when deploying staff and devising the timetable is to meet the educational needs of students to the greatest extent possible. This is very good practice. The school timetable generally allocates time for each subject in line with syllabus guidelines and best practice. However, the time allocated to Physical Education is lower than advised. It is recommended that this issue be reviewed to take account of the subject inspection of Physical Education completed in 2007 which states: "The current allocation of a single period to all students in junior cycle, and a similar allocation for many students in senior cycle, falls far short of the Department of Education and Science recommendations of a minimum of two hours per student, per week (*Rules and Programmes for Secondary Schools 2004-05*)". The report urges the following: "The school is therefore encouraged to revisit timetabling arrangements for Physical Education with a view to providing all students with timetabled physical education lessons in accordance with Department of Education and Science recommendations".

All students in first year are provided with experiences of each of the optional subjects to help them in making the most suitable choices for junior cycle. This is good practice that does, however, reduce the time available for individual subjects. The reduction in allocation of time for subjects in first year in these circumstances is appropriate and well managed. Teachers are consulted by senior management and their interests, skills and knowledge are appropriately considered in the framing of the timetable, in line with good practice.

3.2 Arrangements for students' choice of subjects and programmes

The programme and subject choice process in the school represents very good practice. The programme options for senior cycle, established Leaving Certificate, LCA and TY, are presented simultaneously, with parity of esteem. Subject choices are presented in a commendably open and transparent manner and students' preferences are used in the design of the subject option bands. Students are also consulted with regard to their preferences concerning TY specialisms.

Parents are fully involved in the process of choosing programmes and subjects, and the levels at which their daughters study the subjects. Appropriate, comprehensive information is provided for parents at meetings held prior to their daughters entering first year, TY and fifth year. Comprehensive guidance is provided for students regarding their choices,

including the implications of these choices. Students are actively and appropriately facilitated in making these choices at key transitions as they pass through the school. The arrangement for students to sample the optional subjects in first year and TY is an integral part of the facilitation of effective decision making. This is good practice.

3.3 Co-curricular and extracurricular provision

St Mary's provides students with very wide-ranging and varied opportunities to engage in activities that support and enhance their learning. Cultural, aesthetic, community, social and sporting activities are made available with a view to ensuring that each student can take part in activities that suit her interests and talents. The activities on offer include music-related opportunities such as choirs, orchestras and traditional groups at junior and senior levels, sports such as camogie, football, basketball, tennis, badminton, tag rugby, swimming, orienteering, hill walking and golf, and many other pursuits such as table quizzes, dancing, cheer leading and public speaking. During its annual Health Week the school arranges a variety of activities to highlight the physical, mental, emotional, social and spiritual well-being of students. In addition to involvement in community work, students' involvement in charitable activities within the school is also encouraged through the support of various organisations including the Society of St Vincent De Paul, Concern, Trócaire and Africa Self Help. The management and staff of the school encourage all students to take part in all these pursuits and activities. The involvement of all those who support this extensive extracurricular programme, especially the teachers and parents who are actively involved in its provision, organisation or supervision, is commended.

4. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN SUBJECTS

4.1 Planning and preparation

The level of planning and preparation to support learning and teaching was observed to be good and sometimes very good in the subjects and programme evaluated. The curriculum-planning process is informed by collaboration and is reflected in good classroom practices. Subject teams are well established in Mathematics and in History and subject co-ordinators are in place. Formal meetings for subject teams are facilitated by school management. The outcomes of these meetings are well documented and supported by minutes. Informal meetings and collaboration in day-to-day activities also inform collaborative planning. These practices are highly commended.

Inclusive practice is the norm in this school. In the area of special educational needs, planning is well established and in the process of further development. There is good planning for communication and collaboration with subject teachers relating to the support of students in subject-specific areas. Timetabling facilitates communication among teachers in the delivery of support and enhances the effectiveness of the response to students' needs. While a very positive level of collaboration is in evidence, a formal meeting time for the special educational needs core team should be considered. The formal appointment of a co-ordinator is recommended.

Planning and review are embedded in the TY programme. A small but very active core team is in place as is a programme co-ordinator. A designated team-meeting time is also in place. The long-established TY programme is under constant review and includes the voice of students in this process. Commendably, the students themselves have also been given a role in teachers' planning of individual support programmes in the area of special educational needs. These strategies significantly improve and promote self-advocacy and self-esteem. The inclusion of the voice of parents should be considered in planning for the annual review of TY.

A collaborative plan is in place in each of the subjects and the programme evaluated. These subject and programme plans are of high quality and inform classroom practice. Some adjustments to the mathematics plan are suggested in terms of detail, the inclusion of learning objectives and in the integration of the *Project Maths* curriculum initiative. In general, on the basis of the subjects and programme inspected within the evaluation, a review of subject planning is urged to ensure that plans reflect in appropriate detail the learning objectives being set.

The high quality of collaborative planning is also reflected in teachers' individual planning for lessons. In areas where evidence of individual planning was observed, it was of a high standard and had a clear impact on classroom practice. It was also evident from the observation of lessons that teachers engaged in planning for teaching and learning and that lessons were very well prepared. The wide range of teaching resources, ICT and classroom methodologies in use was also indicative of very good planning and preparation by individual teachers. Progress has already been made in introducing ICT to facilitate the pooling of teachers' resources for common usage as recommended in the subject inspection of History. The work of the school, its ICT staff and the teachers concerned is commended in this regard.

4.2 Learning and teaching

In all lessons observed during the course of the evaluation, the quality of teaching and learning was very good. A high level of teacher preparation was evident and this helped to ensure that lessons were underway quickly. The lesson aims were generally shared with the students and this led to focused teaching. The sharing of lesson aims and objectives with students should be extended to all classes. Lesson content was appropriate to the relevant syllabuses and to the ability levels of the students. It is commendable that differentiation was a feature of some lessons while a cross-curricular approach and the practice of team-teaching were notable features of other lessons.

A number of worthwhile strategies were employed to ensure that students were actively engaged in the lessons. Teaching resources were imaginatively used to encourage students to participate and stimulus materials included handouts, maps, *PowerPoint* presentations, pictures and cartoons. A visual approach to teaching was used to good effect in some lessons. There was also use of topical material and real-life examples. This is commendable as it helps to make the material relevant to students.

The methodologies used were often varied and included pair and group work and student presentations. As well as promoting learning by doing, the pair work provided opportunities for students to learn from each other and encouraged self-directed learning. As a result, the teachers were able to assume the role of facilitator and to assist individual students. In classes where a more traditional didactic approach to teaching is taken, it is recommended that a variety of methodologies be introduced so as to encourage students to participate more actively in their own learning.

The use by teachers of a range of questioning strategies as a way of giving the students a voice and encouraging independent learning is particularly praised. The students' enjoyment of their work was a clear indication of the success of this approach and the further use of open and probing questions is recommended to encourage students to think for themselves.

The classroom atmosphere was positive and energetic and a very high standard of student behaviour was observed. The relationship between students and teachers was respectful and collaborative and helped to create a very good working environment. The enthusiasm and sense of classroom enjoyment created by the teachers is highly praised.

4.3 Assessment

The school engages in a comprehensive range of assessment practices. Students are formally assessed twice a year at Christmas and in summer. Results are appropriately stored, used to track students' progress and to inform parents. Third-year and sixth-year groups also sit mock examinations. Reports are sent home on foot of these formal examinations. Parent-teacher meetings take place once a year for each year group. The students' journal is a further systemic support to linking assessment with the monitoring of progress. Some common examinations are set and the extension of this practice is recommended where practicable.

Daily classroom observation, interaction with students and a review of homework and class work combine with more formal assessment practices to inform teaching and learning. Other assessment modes include the evaluation of completed projects, exhibitions of work, and written assignments. Homework plays an important role in the learning process and students' copybooks and journals revealed that regular homework is assigned which is good practice. There was evidence that teachers regularly monitor students' copybooks. Good practice was evident where teachers, through the use of comments, encourage and direct students' efforts. Students' work, in both copybooks and journals, was maintained to a high standard. In one instance it was recommended that completed work should be stored in folders in the same way as other handouts, since corrected tasks can be a useful revision aid. In TY, assessment is carried out in a number of programme-relevant ways, including evaluation of oral presentations and portfolios of learning. The careful attention to assessment processes in TY contributes to the success of the programme in the school.

Good practice was seen in the use of team-teaching which in particular facilitated immediate assessment, feedback and guidance to students. Such classes allow multiple opportunities for dialogue between teachers and students. In-class questioning was observed in all lessons, with, in many instances, a good mix of lower-order and higher-order questioning by teachers. These, and other strategies within lessons, worked very well and contributed to making in-class assessment very much part of the learning process for students.

Standardised and diagnostic tests are being introduced in first year. The school also adopts a systematic approach to arranging Reasonable Accommodations in Certificate Examinations (RACE).

5. QUALITY OF SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS

5.1 Inclusion of students with additional educational needs

The school has developed and implemented whole-school policies and practices relating to students with special educational needs. The high quality and extent of provision reveals the school's understanding of the ongoing interplay between inclusion, school self-evaluation and school improvement for all. The co-ordination of the school's designated special class is ably undertaken by a qualified teacher. While a team approach, under the guidance of the principal, is adopted throughout the rest of the school. The leadership shown by senior management in promoting an inclusive school is commended in this report, as is the willingness of all staff members to play a role in supporting students with their learning and development.

Needs are identified in a systematic and effective manner, both in advance and during the students' time in the school. Good lines of communication among members of staff, combined with wise and appropriate use of the additional resources, are evident throughout the school. Flexible and responsible arrangements are in place to meet the identified needs of individual students and more recent efforts, such as team-teaching, have been adopted to

meet such needs in the collective setting of the classroom. Such practices are in keeping with Department of Education and Science guidelines and reflect the school's wish to do what is best for their students. Teachers who form the core team work effectively together and engage with colleagues and parents to maximise learning and teaching opportunities. Good lines of communication with external personnel are also well established.

A more detailed report which evaluates the quality of support for students with special educational needs forms part of the appendix to this report. It highlights very favourably the good work being undertaken by the school and identifies a small number of areas for development, which are well within the remit of the school.

5.2 Guidance and student support in the whole-school context

Practice regarding guidance in St Mary's is very good. Guidance is an integral part of the educational provision and it is seen and implemented as a whole-school support for students. The draft whole-school guidance plan is a well-structured and admirably clear description of the school's guidance programme and how it meets the guidance needs of students. The guidance plan is an integral part of the school plan and it identifies all the student-support services that are offered by the school.

The guidance provision of 1.27 ex-quota posts is appropriately used for the intended purpose. Two guidance counsellors form the guidance subject department and they work collaboratively in planning for and maintaining the guidance department, as well as providing a professional guidance presence on teams, including the pastoral care team, and at various meetings.

The very good facilities provided for the guidance department include a guidance office with appropriate ICT equipment and services with internet access and appropriate careers software, together with telephone facilities and file storage. A careers library, provided in the careers room, is accessible to teachers and students and all careers-related materials coming into the school are placed here for the students to access. Students may also request materials which are then sourced for them. There is a small careers section in the main school library while a selection of videos and compact discs are available from the guidance counsellors. Further computer and internet access is arranged as needed by advance booking of the computer room or the multi-media laboratory.

All students have appropriate access to personal, educational and career guidance. There is also access to individual counselling as appropriate. Procedures for referral of students by teachers or parents are well established and supported by inclusion in the whole-school guidance plan. All appointments are efficiently administered, appropriate forms and slips are used for ease of recording and records are appropriately and confidentially maintained, according to defined procedures. The guidance department is committed to the use of a wide range of teaching methodologies for the delivery of guidance in the classrooms. This is good practice.

Very good practice is seen in the well-balanced provision of guidance from junior cycle to senior cycle. The provision is wide-ranging and integrated, formal and informal and permeates all aspects of the education provided by the school. The guidance plan very clearly describes the delivery of the personal and social, educational and careers elements as part of the timetabled curriculum. Delivery of these elements includes lessons in SPHE and Religion in junior cycle and guidance lessons in LCVP link modules, LCA and established Leaving Certificate as well as an impressive range of activities outside of the timetabled curriculum. Guidance is well integrated into each of the educational programmes provided by the school.

Communication between the guidance counsellors and other groups and individuals within the school community is a constant, very effective feature of the school. Informal guidance, including regular meetings between the guidance counsellors and senior management, as well as their joint involvement in groups and meetings which deal with guidance-related issues, ensures very effective ongoing two-way communication. The guidance counsellors are, commendably, an integral part of communication channels between the school and parents and participate in gatherings such as open nights, subject-choice meetings and parent-teacher meetings to provide clear information and to discuss matters with parents. Parents are welcome to meet the guidance counsellors by appointment and may be referred by the principal when appropriate. This is good practice. The guidance counsellors provide information and support for parents to assist them in helping their daughters to make successful subject and programme choices and successful transitions between programmes.

A very well organised student-support structure is in place in the school. Classes and year groups are assigned to teachers who act as year heads and assume overall responsibility for their year group, dealing with discipline issues, contacting parents and meeting students individually or in groups as the need arises. Class tutors fulfil a pastoral role described in the school plan as one of “caring, listening, motivating, noticing and passing on information to guidance counsellor or year head”. Care of students is coordinated by a broadly-based pastoral care team including senior management and the guidance counsellors. The team meets weekly to discuss issues affecting individual students and groups of students and to identify appropriate responses and actions to be taken, which are then suitably assigned to team members for implementation. Other wider issues including the ongoing development of positive interventions such as the school’s awards ceremony are dealt with by the team. This is indicative of its function in the realisation of all aspects of the school’s stated mission. A well-established referral system within the student-support structure assists in the smooth delivery of support and there is a clear system of communication with parents relating to students’ progress and well-being.

6. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The decision-making of the board is open and shared, in a spirit of consultation and partnership and in the best interests of the school community.
- Senior management is characterised by high-quality leadership, with stability and effectiveness ensured by partnership and teamwork at the highest level.
- The clear vision for the school which is enunciated by senior management is held in common with the board and is shared by the whole staff.
- The teaching staff engages fully in a spirit of professional partnership and teamwork which is clearly expressed in their work.
- Very good practice is followed in providing educational programmes to meet the various needs, interests and talents of the students.
- The involvement of all those who support the extensive extracurricular programme, especially the teachers and parents who are actively involved in its provision, organisation or supervision, is commended.
- The whole staff is praised for its active involvement in developing ICT in the school.
- Very good quality teaching and learning were observed in all lessons visited during the course of the evaluation.
- The high quality and extent of provision for students with additional educational needs is commended.

- Guidance is an integral part of the educational provision and is seen and implemented as a whole-school support for students.

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

- Regular review of post-holders' duties should place the needs of the students and the school in order of priority, so as to ensure that all key duties are included among the duties of post-holders.
- It is essential that all students be provided with a minimum 167 teaching days per year and with a minimum of 28 hours of timetabled instruction per week.
- It is recommended that the application of enrolment criteria, in particular the manner in which the criteria are applied in the case of oversubscription, be clarified in the admissions policy
- The health and safety statement should be reviewed annually and the composition of the safety committee and the status of the safety representative(s) clarified.
- In classes where a more traditional didactic approach to teaching is taken, it is recommended that a variety of methodologies be introduced so as to encourage students to participate more actively in their own learning.
- Consistent with the very positive level of collaboration in evidence in the special educational needs core team, a formal meeting time should be considered and the formal appointment of a co-ordinator is recommended.
- The timetabling arrangements for Physical Education should be reviewed.

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 History – 07 November 2008
- Subject Inspection of Mathematics – 24 September 2009
- Subject Inspection of Special Educational Needs – 23 September 2009
- Programme Evaluation of Transition Year – 30 September 2009

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 of St Mary's Secondary School welcomes the very positive report from the Whole School Evaluation. It wishes to acknowledge and commend the teaching staff, students, parents, special needs assistants, secretarial and caretaking staff for their dedicated hard work in maintaining the high standards evidenced in the Report.

The board wishes to confirm that all teachers receive a copy of the Child Protection Policy.

The Board is aware that due to circumstances outside its control, one class has up to now not received 28 hours tuition per week. Negotiations are underway with School Transport Section to rectify the situation.

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 Board acknowledges the recommendations made in the Report. Some have already been implemented and while taking financial and logistical constraints into consideration the Board will strive to implement others in the future.