Whole-School Evaluation
REPORT

Coláiste Mhuire
Mullingar, Co. Westmeath
Roll number: 63270K

Date of inspection: 26 March 2010
WHOLE-SCHOOL EVALUATION

A whole-school evaluation of Coláiste Mhuire was undertaken in March 2010. 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, Art, English and Geography, were evaluated in detail and separate reports are available on these subjects (See section 7 for details). A previous programme inspection of the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme was conducted in January 2010 and forms part of the evidence base for the whole-school evaluation. 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

Coláiste Mhuire is a boys’ secondary school located in the centre of Mullingar. The school first opened its doors in 1856. The Hevey Institute, as it was then called, consisted of a Collegiate or Classical School where boys were grounded in Latin and Greek to prepare for entry to St. Patrick’s College, Maynooth, and a general school, in the care of the Christian Brothers, where local children were taught a mixture of academic and practical skills. By the 1860s there were already 400 pupils in attendance and, in time, the Classical School gave way to the general school.

In 1972 a new secondary school building was constructed and in 2005 a major extension was added to this building. Currently major renovations are progressing in the original Hevey Institute building which continues to form part of Coláiste Mhuire.

Coláiste Mhuire has a long history and tradition of service to the people of Mullingar and surrounding areas. The school is one of four post-primary schools in Mullingar. It draws its students from the urban area of Mullingar and from an extensive rural hinterland surrounding the town. At junior cycle, students are prepared for the Junior Certificate examination. Senior cycle students are offered an optional Transition Year (TY) programme following which they take the Leaving Certificate or Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP). The school also runs a repeat Leaving Certificate programme to which girls may also apply. There are currently 659 students attending Coláiste Mhuire, of whom thirty-eight are girls.

1. QUALITY OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT

1.1 Characteristic spirit of the school

Coláiste Mhuire secondary school formerly operated under the patronage of the Christian Brothers. Following the recent withdrawal of the Christian Brothers, the school has come under the patronage of the Edmund Rice Schools Trust (ERST). The mission statement of Coláiste Mhuire, which dates from the time when the school was under the patronage of the Christian Brothers, underpins the policies and procedures that are the basis of how the school conducts its business.

The mission statement is focused on the provision of a holistic education in an environment where special concern is shown for the disadvantaged and where the uniqueness of each person is respected. The quality of relationships amongst staff and the manner in which students are cared for, as observed by inspectors during the evaluation, are examples of the mission statement in action. The atmosphere in the school is one of a busy and lively environment where teachers and students get on with their work in a positive and well-
ordered setting. The ethos of the mission statement is also reflected in the level of consultation that takes place amongst parents, staff and students and in the overall level of quality communication between the education partners.

1.2 School ownership and management

A school manager was appointed in October 2009 to manage the affairs of the school following the dissolution of the board of management by ERST. The manager has demonstrated a very high awareness and understanding of his statutory obligations and of the ethos of the school and his working methods are characterised by openness and consultation. The manager is very sensitive to the mood in the school and has been proactive in establishing, or attempting to establish, quality lines of communication with all partners and in generating trust and a positive working relationship with in-school management and staff. The manager is in frequent contact with the principal. An advisory committee on finance supports the work of the manager.

A number of development priorities were in place prior to the appointment of the manager and work has continued on these. These include completing the school’s physical infrastructure, improving the school’s information and communication technology (ICT) infrastructure and the continuing development of the curriculum in line with the needs of students. Other stated development priorities include improvements to provision in Guidance, pastoral care and learning support and also improving the quality of learning. However, at the time of the evaluation, there was no evidence of planning to progress these issues.

It is strongly suggested that the school has now reached a point where it is timely to re-examine the long-term vision for the school, taking into consideration such issues as the role and vision of the new trustees, the changing nature of the community from which students are drawn, the changing profile of the students enrolling in the school, recent legislation and the responsibilities this places on the school, and the expectations of the community. It is timely that the mission statement be reviewed in the light of changes at trustee level, the passage of time and changes within the school and in the community in general that have taken place since the formulation of the mission statement. Positive steps should be taken to promote the continued development of a trusting relationship between ERST and the staff and to underpin the development of a shared vision for the school.

It is urged that those responsible take the necessary steps to re-establish a board of management at an early date as required by the Education Act (1998). It is also suggested that the manager should arrange a meeting with parents’ representatives at an early date.

1.3 In-school management

The current principal, who was appointed in 1994, is the first lay principal of Coláiste Mhuire and the school has grown and expanded significantly in recent years during the period of his incumbency. The school’s physical infrastructure has been considerably extended and improved to accommodate the increase in student numbers and the introduction of new subjects and programmes. ICT has been introduced and the infrastructure developed significantly. New subjects, such as Art, Music and Technology have been introduced at junior cycle. Senior cycle has been transformed by the addition of both the TY programme and LCVP to the curriculum along with new subjects including Construction Studies, Design and Communication Graphics and Agricultural Science.

The administrative and managerial aspects of leadership have been very well exercised by the current senior management team. Principal and deputy have clear and complementary roles which are mutually supportive. There is a partnership approach between them and
effective teamwork is the norm. They have a shared vision for the development of the school. However, elements of the academic leadership role of senior management have been underemphasised over time and there are issues in relation to teacher competence in specific subject areas, that are impacting on the quality of teaching for students and which require urgent and decisive intervention, that have not been effectively dealt with. It is time to place a more pronounced emphasis on the leadership for learning aspects of the role of the principal and of senior management. In order to support this, it is recommended that the principal and deputy principal avail of relevant training courses provided by the Leadership Development for Schools (LDS) service.

The middle-management team has shown a great deal of commitment to the school over many years. There are many good examples of effective distributed leadership in evidence and a collaborative approach is apparent. The duties attached to posts are clear and documented. The principal and deputy principal have high expectations of post holders’ capacity to carry out their duties in a professional manner and they work very closely with the middle-management team. The principal meets with post holders as a group once each term and also meets with the year heads each week. Meetings are also held at the beginning and end of the school year and on an ongoing basis during the year to discuss progress. Senior management endeavours to ensure that post holders are accountable for fulfilling their duties. In order to enhance this process, it is recommended that post holders should complete an annual report for senior management outlining the tasks completed, difficulties encountered and enabling factors, suggestions for further development and training needs. In view of the changing needs of the school and its student cohort, a review of posts is timely and it is recommended that the duties attached to posts of responsibility are re-examined. For example, the necessity of having two posts in the planning and policy development areas should be reviewed in the light of other existing and emerging priorities. Roles and responsibilities in relation to co-ordinating Transition Year and the co-ordination of programmes in general should be formalised. There is currently no post of responsibility in relation to the support of minority, disadvantaged or Traveller students or those with special education needs.

There are good and open lines of communication amongst staff and with management. A climate of openness and trust exists between senior management and staff. Good provision has been made for continuing professional development of the teaching staff. It is suggested that, in order to disseminate good practice to the greatest extent possible, structures should be put in place to ensure that the outcomes of all professional development courses are shared appropriately with the whole staff.

There have been difficulties with the school’s admissions policy in relation to the enrolment of all students from Coláiste Mhuire’s sister primary school which is located on the same campus. In the past school year, the school manager has led the development of a revised interim admissions policy which overcomes these difficulties while reflecting the openness and inclusive nature of Coláiste Mhuire and it is anticipated that ongoing review of the admissions policy will avoid similar difficulties in the future.

There are a number of other issues regarding the admissions policy that need to be examined as a matter of priority. It is recommended that the terms and criteria of the admissions policy be amended and extended to cover the admission of repeat Leaving Certificate students in view of the significant number of students who apply to follow this programme.

It is noted that school management has agreed to remove a clause from the admissions policy regarding the conditional acceptance of special needs students.
The school’s code of behaviour, which was developed with appropriate consultation and has been recently revised, is firmly grounded in the mission statement. The code details the roles and responsibilities of members of the school community in a clear manner and there is a clear ladder of referral where difficulties arise. Guidance, counselling and care strategies are in place to support students. The school promotes positive student behaviour and attitudes through the code of behaviour and the Respect Rule which constitutes part of the code. Year heads work with class teachers to support students and deal with problems at an early stage. Positive reinforcement of both effort and achievement, by means of verbal praise, positive slips, positive notes in students’ journals and a variety of other rewards, is used to encourage students to comply with the code. Student behaviour was exemplary during the course of the evaluation.

The school’s policy and procedures on exclusion are included as part of the code of behaviour. It is imperative that more formal approach to issuing and managing suspensions be adopted. Requesting students to remain at home constitutes suspension and should be recognised as such and managed in an appropriate manner. The code of behaviour and exclusions policy should be amended accordingly. In addition, an annual letter to parents, outlining school regulations, contains a statement requiring application for re-admission to be made at the end of each academic year and suggests that breaches of the school rules may lead to unsuccessful re-application. It is strongly recommended that this statement be removed from all future copies of this letter as a refusal to re-admit a student under these conditions effectively constitutes an exclusion that is not in compliance with the Education (Welfare) Act 2000. In addition, no reference to such conditions for exclusion are included in the admissions or exclusion policies.

Students are included in the decision-making process and are fully consulted in the planning and policy-making process through an effective, vibrant, well run and representative students’ council. Each class group elects one representative to the council and the members of each new council receive training for their role. The council meets every fortnight. The agenda for each meeting is placed on the council’s notice board, in a public area of the school, in advance. Council members report back to the classes they represent, following each meeting and the minutes of the meeting are placed on the council’s notice board. The council has been involved in a variety of commendable initiatives and activities including fundraising, contributing to the management of the school canteen, providing footballs for use during lunchtime and assisting in the running of and contributing to the school’s open day. The council is currently considering the need for benches and shelters in outdoor areas of the school. It is suggested that the officers of the students’ council meet annually with the school manager and present a report on the activities of the council. Issues of mutual concern and plans for the future could also be addressed at such meetings.

Student attendance is monitored by an electronic swipe card system and by in-class monitoring and recording. While the overall level of absenteeism is of concern and is persistent in a number of instances, student attendance has not been prioritised as an issue. It is recommended that an attendance strategy be drawn up and implemented in order to improve on the present situation. Targets for improved attendance rates should be set and the outcomes of interventions monitored with a view to continued improvement.

A hard-working, effective and supportive parents’ council is in place. It is fully supported and valued by school management and is included on a partnership basis in all policy development. A variety of means of communicating with parents, individually and as a group, are in place including newsletters, the school’s website, the students’ journal, parent-teacher meetings and by post or telephone. Text messaging is used to inform parents of students who are absent and also to remind them of upcoming parents’ council meetings. Parents on the council see their role as one of support for the school in general and for
specific purposes such as fundraising, organising talks for parents, supporting parents, providing a link between parents and the school and encouraging parents to be more involved. It is notable and praiseworthy that the parents’ council meets with the students’ council on three occasions each year.

The school has developed good links with the community, business and other interests and agencies in order to support its work and to provide supports and enhanced opportunities for students.

Formal review and self-evaluation have yet to be used as major drivers of improvement and do not form elements of the normal work of the school. However, it is recognised that much of the work of the senior management team is informed by an ongoing informal evaluation of the day-to-day events and interactions that make up the school’s business. It is recommended that, in conjunction with the greater emphasis on leadership for learning, a systematic focus on the improvement of learning outcomes for students should be implemented, based on a self-evaluation process that includes teaching and learning, student supports and an analysis of student outcomes in the certificate examinations and that a whole-school plan for academic improvement and better student outcomes be drawn up and implemented.

1.4 Management of resources

Coláiste Mhuire complies with Department of Education and Skills regulations on the number of teaching days in the school year. It is not in compliance, in some instances, with the number of instruction hours in the school week. Teaching time is the most valuable resource that the school has and there are instances where its use is not being maximised. The provision of study and supervision classes, primarily for repeat students, which are supervised by teachers as part of their teaching hours, represents an under utilisation of teaching time and should be discontinued. In addition, repeat students are not being provided with the full amount of instruction time that they are entitled to. This situation should be ended and their full entitlement of twenty-eight hours of instruction time each week should be provided.

The school has been given a staffing allocation of 4.48 whole-time equivalents for the support of students with additional educational needs, students for whom English is an additional language (EAL) and Traveller students. It is evident that the arrangements in place for these students are in need of immediate review as only sixty-three per cent of the allocation provided for the support of these students is being used for the intended purpose. All teaching hours provided by the Department for specific purposes should be used only for the direct benefit of the students for whom they are provided and it is therefore recommended that an immediate review of the use of special educational needs, EAL and learning-support provision be undertaken. The review must ensure that all resources allocated to the school to support these students are appropriately used.

With minor exceptions, teachers are deployed in line with their qualifications, expertise and experience.

The school benefits from an experienced and committed team of support staff. Support staff are enabled and encouraged to make an appropriate contribution to the life of the school and in addition to fulfilling assigned duties the team provides valuable formal and informal supports and links between the students, staff and management. The work of the support staff is valued by the school community.

School accommodation is well maintained and is well used to cater for the needs of students and the wider school community. There is good availability of specialist
classrooms and facilities. The school has recently changed to teacher-based classrooms which has increased the potential for focussed subject-based learning environments. School facilities are made available to the local community. Management is aware of the future accommodation needs of the school and is pro-actively addressing these. Material resources necessary to support teaching and learning are provided as required and subject departments are well resourced.

The ICT infrastructure in Coláiste Mhuire is very good. It is noted that there is a strong tradition of quality planning in this area and that plans are in place for the continued development of this infrastructure. Students have good access to the school’s ICT equipment as required. It is suggested that an action plan for the incorporation of ICT into teaching and learning, to involve all subject departments, would complement the excellent planning and provision already in place. It is further suggested that all subject departments should have and make use of a shared folder on the school’s ICT system, to assist in sharing resources and to disseminate good practice. There is scope for the further development of the school’s website as an educational tool in addition to its current good use as a source of general information. It is recommended that a pilot project be set up in one subject area to explore this suggestion and that it be extended to other subject areas over time. The website could also be used to present the schools policies to parents and the general public.

An appropriate health and safety statement is in place. This statement has recently been reviewed and is up to date.

Coláiste Mhuire is involved in the Green Schools initiative and has achieved its first Green Flag award for work on the theme Litter and waste. The school is currently working towards a second award on the theme of Energy.

2. QUALITY OF SCHOOL PLANNING

2.1 The school plan

The leadership of senior management and their vision for the development of the school has given direction to the planning process and has helped shape the outcomes. The school development planning system is characterised by openness and consultation. Structures are in place to ensure that staff, students and parents are all consulted as part of the planning process. This is evidenced, for example, by the degree of satisfaction expressed by parents with the level and manner of consultation regarding planning and policy development.

The planning team comprises the principal, deputy principal and year heads. It is recommended that this team be augmented by those with an interest or aptitude in specific areas being planned for. This will ensure a broader, more representative and flexible planning process. For example, it is suggested that the special needs assistants (SNAs) be included in planning for students with additional educational needs. Much planning work is carried out at the weekly meetings of the principal with the year heads, in addition to time set aside at staff meetings and on staff days. It is important, however, to ensure that school development planning does not eat into the time reserved for the work of the year heads as a pastoral and student support group.

A comprehensive set of policies and planning documents, including all those required by legislation, has been prepared over time. It is recommended that all such documents clearly state the date of ratification by the board or manager and the date of intended review. Documents should then be reviewed in accordance with such dates. The compilation of a school development plan, which describes the school and the manner in which it carries out
its functions, has also commenced. This work should be progressed to completion and should include the full set of policies and procedures as already prepared and amended.

While clear priorities have been identified for the improvement of infrastructure, with much work successfully completed and a number of projects ongoing, it is equally important to ensure that core educational matters remain in focus. In conjunction with an increased emphasis on the role of management in leading learning, and as part of a whole-school plan for academic improvement and better student outcomes, the operation of subject departments needs to be improved. Sufficient time has been provided for subject planning purposes but the outcomes are disappointing. Subject department planning is basic in many instances and the level and quality of subject department planning is uneven. Objectives and targets for subject planning need to be defined and implemented. It is recommended that plans should include in greater detail the content to be covered in each term, linked to the learning outcomes to be achieved. Methodologies that promote active learning should be highlighted, as should differentiation strategies. It is recommended that assessment criteria be drawn up by all subject departments to match stated learning outcomes. Ways of promoting and sharing good practice should be developed.

In particular, subject planning should be extended to specifically address the needs of repeat students, for whom there was no evidence of subject planning at all, and should reflect the allocation of the full entitlement of tuition time to these students.

Subject departments and individual teachers need to examine their practice and identify areas for improvement. A greater level of ongoing monitoring of certificate examination results should be carried out by subject departments, under the supervision of senior management. Management should encourage subject departments and individual teachers to set targets in relation to improvements and to create strategies and develop action plans for improving success across the range of student abilities.

As part of the cycle of planning, the impact of these and other developments on the quality of students’ experiences should be monitored and evaluated over time and procedures should be adjusted to maximise positive outcomes. The professional needs of staff, as they become apparent, should also be addressed through this ongoing process.

A number of specific recommendations in relation to planning are made as follows. The homework policy should be amended to include the role of the teacher in monitoring and correcting homework and in providing quality feedback to students in a timely manner. The internet acceptable user policy should be amended to include all users of the system as already noted in the school’s rules for responsible internet use.

Confirmation was provided that the board of management has formally adopted the Child Protection Guidelines for Post-primary Schools as school policy. 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 and that management has ensured that all staff members 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. Due to recent and ongoing changes in staffing, it is recommended that child protection training be reviewed and updated periodically.
3. QUALITY OF CURRICULUM PROVISION

3.1 Curriculum planning and organisation

The school offers a broad and balanced range of programmes and subjects, chosen to meet the needs of the student cohort, at both junior cycle and senior cycle. School management is commended for the significant broadening of the curriculum that has occurred in recent years, including the introduction of TY and LCVP. An appropriate programme of work experience and other specific content has been provided for students following these programmes. Curriculum planning has been a consultative and inclusive process.

The school offers access to the widest range of subjects and levels, commensurate with the interests and abilities of individual students. Classes are organised on a mixed-ability basis, at all stages throughout the school, although Irish, English and Mathematics classes, in particular year groups, are banded on the basis of students’ abilities and performance.

There is equity of access to programmes, subjects and levels for all students, within the limits of available resources. Students apply to follow the TY and a process is in place to select those to whom places are offered. It is recommended that the school, in the interest of ensuring openness and transparency, review and publicise the criteria for acceptance of students into the TY and work towards ensuring that the TY student cohort is representative of the general school population. In order to maximise the quality of the curriculum offered, it is recommended that a formal review of TY be carried out at the end of each school year, to include feedback from both parents and students. In addition, it is recommended that TY students are not streamed in any subject, in accordance with the ethos of the programme. In order to provide a clear understanding of the benefits of the TY, it is suggested that a long-term study of Leaving Certificate outcomes, comparing the results of students who followed the TY programme with the results of those who did not, be carried out.

The school moved to a nine period day to make provision for sports on Friday afternoons, and to minimise the potential negative academic impact on participating students. Formal in-school assessments are held three times each year and reports are sent to students’ homes as appropriate.

There are a number of instances in various subjects where double periods are timetabled across a break and it is recommended that this be avoided in future timetabling. Where this is not possible, the subject in question should be monitored to ensure that there is no negative impact on teaching and learning. Specific issues regarding the subjects and programmes evaluated as part of the WSE are reported on in the relevant subject and programme inspection reports appended to this report. The recommendations of these, and other reports, should be addressed in full.

3.2 Arrangements for students’ choice of subjects and programmes

All first-year students take a core set of subjects which comprises Irish, English, Mathematics, Science, History, Geography, Business Studies, RE, SPHE, CSPE, PE, Technical Graphics and Technology. In addition, students choose between French and German and also between Art and Music. Incoming first-year students and their parents are well informed and supported regarding subject choices through the admissions process which includes an open day for parents and prospective students, primary school visits and a follow-up open night for parents and students after the first day in school.

When entering second year, students continue with Irish, English, Mathematics, Science, History, Geography, Business Studies, RE, SPHE, CSPE, PE and either French or German.
They also choose one subject from Art, Music, Technical Graphics, Technology and Materials Technology (Wood). They continue to their Junior Certificate examination with these subjects.

Students entering senior cycle have the option of applying to follow the Transition Year. A total of twenty-four places are available and there are generally more applicants than places. TY students are exposed to a range of innovative subjects and topics where the focus is on alternative approaches to subject content, for example Mathematics Problem Solving, Discovering English and Health and Leisure Studies, in addition to a programme of student-centred activities and work experience.

A wide range of academic and practical subjects are offered to students going into fifth year in addition to the core subjects of Irish, English, Mathematics and RE. Some of the optional subjects have been recently introduced onto the curriculum, including Construction Studies, Design and Communication Graphics and Technology. The option of following the LCVP is also available to students with an appropriate combination of qualifying subjects. It is recommended that the positioning of the link modules on the timetable be reviewed in order to maximise access to qualified students.

Students in the repeat Leaving Certificate class enrol for a total of six subjects, but may also take additional subjects.

Students are supported, at all stages where subject or programme choices are to be made, through a variety of mechanisms and in a timely manner. These mechanisms include meetings with parents, open days and evenings and in-class support from subject teachers and the guidance counsellor as appropriate. Appropriate supporting literature is provided and individual counselling is available to all students. The school produces a very valuable annual senior cycle options booklet which details the programmes and subjects that are available to students and which gives very useful advice on what to consider when making choices. Parents are fully informed, consulted and included in all decision making.

3.3 Co-curricular and extra-curricular provision

It is notable that a wide range of co-curricular and extracurricular activities is offered and supported, involving all areas of instruction within the school. While the school has traditionally placed an emphasis on sports, other activities including cultural, aesthetic, community, social and charity-based activities and a number of activities which are linked to programmes and subjects and that are grounded in promoting the ethos of the school, are also supported. These activities are available to all students without restriction other than to ensure that no one is so involved as to suffer academically.

The considerable work of teachers in providing a high level of extracurricular and co-curricular activities is praiseworthy and exemplifies the commitment of staff to supporting students under their care and living out the mission statement of the school.

Management has stated the benefits they feel both teachers and students gain from participating in these activities. Students gain a greater sense of community, their social and personal development is enhanced and better staff-student relationships are fostered. Activities contribute to the holistic development of students and lead to improved self-confidence.
4. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN SUBJECTS

4.1 Planning and preparation

Subject department planning is facilitated by the provision of a number of formal planning meetings during the school year. The minutes of all these meetings should be maintained by departments as a means of supporting continuity in the planning process and to facilitate the monitoring of progress. A co-ordinator is in place for each of the subjects evaluated as part of the whole-school evaluation. It is noted that the role of subject department co-ordinator is primarily administrative in nature and is adopted on a rotational basis. This rotation is commended as it shares responsibility for the operation of the departments. In future, the role of subject department co-ordinator should be re-conceptualised as a leader of learning and the planning process should focus more on pedagogical discussion, including methodologies and differentiation strategies to enhance learning, and the dissemination of good quality teaching practice across departments.

Written plans were made available for all the subjects evaluated. These were at varying stages of development in terms of the detail provided. In some cases the organisational details of the department were documented in the plans. This is good practice and is encouraged across all subject areas. Long-term outline curricular plans have been developed for each year group in most subject areas. It is recommended that these plans should include, in greater detail, the content to be covered in each term, linked to the learning outcomes to be achieved. Methodologies that promote active learning, differentiation strategies and the assessment modes used to monitor students’ progress should also be detailed in subject plans. Relevant planning for each programme provided by the school should be included in each subject plan.

In the LCVP, the planning process should facilitate the adoption of an integrated approach to the teaching of the link modules and a broader range of activities, including an enterprise activity, should be included in the programme’s provision. The LCVP co-ordinator has a very thorough knowledge of the programme and should maintain a lead role in promoting the LCVP as a whole-school cross-curricular programme and in conducting an annual evaluation of the programme’s implementation.

In English, strategies for the integration of language and literature across all programmes should be developed. Liaison between the English department and teams that support students with additional educational needs should also be documented in the subject plan. The planned programme for Geography in first year should be reviewed and should include the development of map and photograph skills.

Separate plans for TY are in place. Good planning was evident where opportunities for experiential and independent learning were created. In some cases the curricular programme on offer should include additional components of work to facilitate the development of skills and to appropriately bridge the gap between the junior cycle and senior cycle.

Individual planning and preparation for lesson was very good in the majority of cases. Teachers had prepared a range of appropriate resources, had clear and shared learning objectives and were well structured.

4.2 Learning and teaching

Good quality teaching and learning was observed in the majority of the subjects evaluated with some very good practice in evidence in almost all. In one subject area, however, the delivery of learning experiences and course coverage were found to have significant
weaknesses. Issues regarding content delivery, the suitability of activities engaged in to further students’ learning, and the appropriateness of pitch and pace are cited in the case of a minority of lessons in two further subjects evaluated. As evident in some classes visited there is considerable expertise in almost all of the areas evaluated. In order share this expertise across subject teams it is recommended that pedagogy should be included on the agenda for subject department planning meetings and that the teachers consider the benefits that could accrue from peer observation and peer mentoring.

Very good short-term planning was evident in the majority of lessons observed. These lessons had clear learning objectives, were well structured and were suitably paced and pitched. Due attention was also given in these cases to the use of topic-specific vocabulary and to the differentiation of learning opportunities. In introducing lesson content, good practice was noted in lessons where prior learning was summarised and where the theme of the lesson was shared with the students. In keeping with recognised best practice, it is recommended that clearly defined learning objectives, appropriate to the students’ abilities and learning needs, be devised for all lessons. In this context, it is also recommended that it becomes general practice across all subjects to share the expected learning outcomes with the students at the outset of all lessons and that students are afforded an opportunity to reflect on their learning at the end of class.

A range of methodologies and strategies was employed. Best practice was evident where the activities selected allowed for a good balance between whole-class teaching and students engaging in group work, pair work, or individual assignments, to consolidate learning. A review of students’ written work in one subject revealed that a considerable amount of lesson time is given to note-taking. This should be avoided and only where necessary should be replaced with handouts or, in keeping with managements’ vision of promoting e-learning, providing students with access to supplementary materials electronically. In the area of language, best practice was noted where students were explicitly encouraged to think independently and use a more creative and expressive vocabulary and where the development of students’ knowledge and understanding of language and literature were integrated. These practices should be extended. Instances in which visual stimuli, including authentic texts, were integrated into the lessons are highly commended. In one curricular area, and in a minority of instances in two other areas, it is imperative that the age and experience of students and syllabus requirements are taken into account when selecting, designing and assigning tasks. In this context, teachers also need to be mindful that the level of teacher communication is not too advanced for a particular class group as occurred in one instance and that, with reference to a minority of lessons, teachers ensure pronunciation and use of vocabulary are always modelled correctly.

Some examples of differentiated learning were observed across the subjects evaluated. These were very effective in a small number of instances and included language use and group-based tasks. Given that the school has embraced and is extending the good practice of placing students in mixed-ability classes, it is recommended that a more conscious application of the principles of differentiation and co-operative learning be implemented in the delivery of learning experiences across the curriculum.

Questioning was effective in most classes and served a variety of purposes. In most instances, a good balance was achieved between global and individual questioning. Particularly commended are those instances in which higher-order questions were used and in which students were given sufficient time to formulate responses.

In many of the subjects evaluated, there was strong evidence of very good levels of planning and preparation of resources to support learning. The school’s very good range of resources, along with teacher-generated resources such as worksheets, was appropriately employed in almost all of the classes visited to support and enhance learning. In one subject
evaluated, the physical classroom space available, which offered excellent potential, had not been properly exploited to support and benefit student learning. It is strongly recommended that management takes the necessary steps to ensure that this room is appropriately used. Some very good examples of the use of ICT as a learning tool were observed in almost all curricular areas evaluated and its use should be extended.

Classroom management was very good in almost all lessons observed. Classroom atmosphere was positive and was overall characterised by mutually respectful interactions between students and teachers. It was noted, in one instance, that very good use was made of the classroom space and furniture to facilitate group work. This flexibility in the organisation of classroom space should be adopted in other classrooms as appropriate. Students willingly engaged in their work in almost all cases and were affirmed for their contributions. Concerns were raised regarding the health and safety implications of the physical condition of one specialist classroom. It is imperative that management addresses the health and safety issues identified as a matter of urgency.

Generally, students displayed a good level of knowledge and understanding of the content being studied. Overall, student learning expectations are high as indicated by the good level of uptake at higher level in state examinations. Attainment is good in many areas. However there is scope for improvement in attainment levels at higher grades at both ordinary and higher level in a number of subject and programme areas. It is strongly recommended that subject departments conduct a thorough review of students’ achievement in state examinations and that they use the outcomes of analyses conducted to inform planning and to set learning targets.

4.3 Assessment

There is a good culture of assessment across the subjects and programme inspected as part of the whole-school evaluation. The school sends out reports of formal summative assessment three times each year. Furthermore, communication of students’ progress is enhanced by annual parent-teacher meetings for all year groups. The principal is available to parents by appointment at any time throughout the school year to discuss concerns or issues in relation to assessment outcomes.

In Geography, there is ongoing formative assessment of students’ work in lessons. Homework is regularly assigned to consolidate learning. It is important in all year groups that there is variety in the homework tasks assigned in order to build competencies in a balanced way across the syllabuses. Where summary work is set for homework, it is important that students are provided with a framework to assist them in developing the skill of summarising textbook content. In some lessons there was a good focus on examination techniques which provided clear guidelines for structured student answering. A significant proportion of students at both Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate level take higher level in state examinations. Common assessments are in place for first-year and second-year students. This is good practice as it ensures consistency and standardisation of provision for the planned curricular programmes. It is recommended that this approach to assessment be extended to third year.

In the LCVP, formative assessment of students’ work is carried out on an ongoing basis by questioning in class, through correction of homework and portfolio work. Fifth-year students are assessed at the end of the school year on the basis of their portfolios and a mark, accompanied by comment on their progress, is included in their summer report. They are assessed again in sixth year by means of a mock examination in February and once again a mark and progress report is included in the ensuing report. It is recommended that formal, written, link module assessments are carried out more frequently, in line with assessments in all other subjects at senior cycle, that is during November, February and
May in fifth year and November and February in sixth year and that assessment results and a relevant comment or progress report are included in all reports sent to students’ homes.

The LCVP co-ordinator keeps records of students’ attendance and of their subject groupings. Consent forms for the activities carried out by students and records in relation to work experience are also kept. It is recommended that such detailed records as are necessary to build up a complete profile of each student are kept in order to inform students and their parents regarding progress and career options.

There is little information recorded in English department documents to indicate the variety and purpose of assessment methods used and standards expected. It is recommended that the whole area of assessment be reviewed in the plan for English. The department should share the good practice that currently exists and agree and then document clear and specific guidelines for both teacher assessment and student presentation of written work. There was commendable emphasis on assessment for learning in many English lessons observed. The quality of teacher assessment of written homework varied. Very positive affirmation of students’ efforts was observed in some samples and this is highly commended. It is commendable that high standards of presentation were expected in some cases. However, there was also evidence of very low expectations in a minority of cases, with poorly presented work and little evidence of monitoring.

Based on evidence from students’ journals and copybook samples, homework appears to be regularly set and homework was set in all classes visited during the evaluation. Homework also appears to be regularly assessed. It is recommended that in English, common papers be set for all year groups in first and second year with differentiation integrated into the assessment instrument. In third year and in the Leaving Certificate programme, common levels should have common papers.

The Art inspection took place just prior to the Easter holidays. Students had already been given tests and the students of one year group were each individually given their test results verbally by the teacher, along with comment and some discussion. The tone of this feedback was supportive and featured advice and encouragement. This was very good practice. However, no documentation about assessment criteria was available. End-of-term and end-of-year tests are administered by the department and results of these are made known in the formal school report to parents and guardians. Records are kept of student marks and grades. Homework was set in one instance and while this was laudable, it is advised that homework should always be linked clearly with previous learning. Art homework should be strongly referenced to the age, aptitude and previous attainment of the students and should be planned and defined in a systematic way, taking syllabus requirements into account.

While there is a homework policy in operation in the school, there is much variance in how the different subject departments set, organise and monitor the homework given. A more consistent approach across all subjects would ensure that the good practice of some teachers or departments would become the standard practice, with agreed procedures in operation.

Common assessment policies for year groups need now to be further progressed across the school. Where appropriate common papers should be used to help to ensure consistency of syllabus delivery and thus contribute to whole-school improvement of student outcomes.
5. **QUALITY OF SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS**

5.1 **Inclusion of students with additional educational needs**

Coláiste Mhuire has developed and implemented a special educational needs (SEN) policy to define and organise the supports for students who have additional educational needs. This policy is firmly grounded in the mission statement of the school and in current legislation and it has clear aims and objectives for the support of students with additional educational needs. There is a co-ordinated process to identify those students who have additional needs. This is primarily achieved as part of the admissions and enrolment process, with appropriate consultation with parents, primary schools and other relevant agencies. Teachers continue to monitor students after enrolment and interventions to support learning are made on an ongoing basis as deemed appropriate. It is recommended that the special educational needs policy be extended to include exceptionally able students in order to ensure that they are challenged to achieve their full potential.

Students with additional educational needs are encouraged and facilitated to access and participate fully in school life

There is a SEN team in place which is ably led by the learning-support co-ordinator. There is evidence that the team has been pro-active in planning for the future anticipated needs of incoming students and for the resources required by the SEN department to meet these needs. The team works to provide literacy and numeracy support for students identified as needing such support. Management stated its intention to make provision for frequent and regular meetings of this team in the future to improve on current provision. It is recommended that time be set aside, for example on staff days or before staff meetings, to allow the SEN team to meet with the co-ordinators of English and Mathematics in order to facilitate closer links between the SEN team and mainstream teachers of these subjects. The work of the team is augmented by a number of English and Mathematics teachers and by two SNAs. It is recommended that, as a matter of good practice, whole-school literacy and numeracy policies be developed to guide the work of the SEN department and the supporting teachers.

A learning-support classroom is available. It is equipped with a computer and relevant software and, in addition, the learning-support and resource teachers have priority access to the school’s computer rooms. It is intended to improve provision in the near future with the allocation of a specific room to the SEN team, in the newly renovated section of the school, for the support of students with additional educational needs and the provision of a number of additional computers.

Supports may be provided on an ongoing or a short-term basis as appropriate. The predominant model of support is withdrawal of students from Irish and RE classes for individual or small group tuition. It is recommended that, in the best interests of students, the models of support be broadened to include team teaching. It is commendable that the SEN team have begun the process of preparing and using individual education plans to assist in providing tailored supports to students and it is recommended that this process be fully implemented at as early a date as is possible. There is full and open consultation with parents at all stages of the support process.

Communication with mainstream teachers and with subject departments tends to be of an informal nature. It is recommended that this communication be improved and formalised in order to facilitate structured liaison with subject departments and to provide enhanced support for students in a wide range of subjects. It is recommended that subject department planning be enhanced by including details of arrangements for students with additional needs and the manner in which subject teachers will dovetail their arrangements for
students with additional needs with the supports provided by the learning-support and
resource teachers.

There are a number of Traveller students in the junior cycle. These students tend to have a
high absentee rate and to leave school early. The school needs to plan for the support and
retention of Traveller students and to examine the most appropriate way to use the teacher
allocation to achieve improved attendance and greater retention. Appropriate policies
should be examined and developed and consideration should be given to allocating a post
of responsibility to this area.

A significant number of students for whom English is an additional language also attend
Coláiste Mhuire. These students are well integrated into mainstream classes. English
language classes are provided to these students to support their inclusion and facilitate them
in accessing the curriculum.

5.2 Guidance and student support in the whole-school context

A whole-school approach is taken to the provision of Guidance and appropriate
interventions have been planned and put in place for students at all stages of their progress
through the school. Full and appropriate use is being made of the staffing allocation for
guidance and counselling to provide personal, educational and vocational guidance.

A guidance room is available and is equipped with a computer. In addition, students have
good access to the school’s computer rooms to carry out research on college and
employment opportunities. A separate counselling room is also available.

Planning for the delivery of guidance and counselling services is very good and reference to
all stages of a student’s passage through the school is included. A guidance-planning group,
whose membership includes the principal, deputy principal, the guidance counsellor, the
school counsellor, year heads, RE and SPHE teachers and the school policy co-ordinators,
drew up the plan. Guidance is well linked to the schools pastoral care system and the
members of the students’ council expressed their appreciation of the support provided by
the guidance department.

All students can avail of one-to-one time with the guidance counsellor and personal
counselling is also available to students through a school-based counselling service,
provided by a member of staff who is appropriately qualified. Parental involvement is
actively encouraged and parents are kept fully informed of all interventions and initiatives.
Links are also maintained with other relevant outside support agencies for the purpose of
providing specific forms of individual support which are beyond the remit or capability of
the school to provide. Parents are fully included in the referral process.

A variety of approaches is used to provide in-class Guidance. SPHE classes are used
extensively in the junior cycle to deliver aspects of the guidance programme. In addition, at
appropriate times, extra guidance classes are provided, by negotiation with subject teachers.
TY students are allocated a weekly guidance class period. Fifth years are provided with a
short guidance module from February to April and sixth-year students are allocated weekly
guidance classes from September until the end of February. The time slots for all fifth-year
and sixth-year classes are negotiated with subject teachers.

It is recommended that consideration be given to providing more formal and regular
guidance classes to students from second year through to sixth year in order to provide
more regular and consistent class contact time. It is further recommended that the initial
destinations of all students leaving the school are tracked and that the information gathered
be used to contribute to the ongoing evaluation of subject and programme provision. In
addition, it is recommended that link module syllabus requirements should be closely linked to guidance and there should be greater liaison between the two departments.

A variety of other relevant activities and visits are arranged as appropriate. For example, study skills seminars are provided to students in third year and sixth year.

There is a good student support and pastoral care system in operation in Coláiste Mhuire, in keeping with the ethos of support as expressed in the school’s mission statement. It is managed primarily by a care team consisting of the principal, deputy principal, the year heads and guidance counsellor. It is important to ensure that the support and disciplinary roles of the year heads do not come into conflict to the detriment of students. This team meets each week.

The work of the care team is supported by the class tutors who have been appointed to first-year and second-year class groups and by the level of care for students evident amongst staff across the whole school. The school is encouraged, in the interests of students and in keeping with its stated ethos of care for students, to examine the possibility of extending the class tutor system to all class groups. Parents’ council members were appreciative of the caring ethos of the school and of the care provided for their sons. However, although there is relevant reference in the guidance plan, the work of the care team is not supported and guided by a comprehensive policy document. Therefore, it is recommended that an overarching pastoral care policy be drafted in order to tie together the various strands of student supports and present them as an integrated process. This will ensure that a systematic approach is taken and will help to identify any blind spots in existing provision. A formal plan will also help develop the identity of the pastoral care team more clearly, define their functions and interactions with other staff members and outline clearly the procedures to be followed in such difficult cases as may arise from time to time and where set procedures must be followed.

There is a good transition system in place to help incoming first year students settle in to the school and its routines. In addition a very good mentoring system for supporting incoming first-year students is in place, with the TY students acting as mentors to small groups of students. Mentors receive appropriate training.

The school provides opportunities for all members of the school community to share and celebrate success and an awards system is in place to recognise and reward students who have made significant positive contributions to school life.

6. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Coláiste Mhuire has a long history of service to the people of Mullingar and surrounding areas and tradition is a very important part of the ethos of the school. The school is characterised by the high level of consultation that takes place amongst parents, staff and students and by the overall level of quality communication between the partners.
- The school has grown and expanded significantly in recent years under the current principal. The school’s infrastructure has been considerably extended and improved and the curriculum has been widened to accommodate an increase in student numbers.
- The administrative and managerial aspects of leadership have been very well exercised by the current senior management team. Principal and deputy have clear and complementary roles. There is a partnership approach between principal and
deputy and effective teamwork is the norm. They have a shared vision for the development of the school.

- The school promotes positive student behaviour and attitudes through the code of behaviour, which includes a clear ladder of referral where difficulties arise. The considerable work of teachers in providing a high level of extracurricular and co-curricular activities is praiseworthy and exemplifies the commitment of staff to supporting students under their care and living out the mission statement of the school.

- The ICT infrastructure in Coláiste Mhuire is very good. The development of this infrastructure is underpinned by the strong tradition of quality planning and plans are in place for the continued development of this infrastructure.

- Good quality teaching and learning was observed in the majority of the subjects evaluated with some very good practice in evidence in almost all areas. Classroom management was very good in almost all lessons observed. Classroom atmosphere was positive and was overall characterised by mutually respectful interactions between students and teachers.

- There is a SEN team in place which is ably led by the learning-support co-ordinator. There is evidence that the team has been pro-active in planning for the future anticipated needs of incoming students and for the resources required by the SEN department to meet these needs.

- A whole-school approach is taken to the provision of Guidance and appropriate interventions have been planned and put in place for students at all stages of their progress through the school. There is a good student support and pastoral care system in operation, in keeping with the ethos of support as expressed in the school’s mission statement.

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

- The school is now at a crossroads and it is time to re-examine the long-term vision for the school, taking into consideration such issues as the role of the trustees, the changing nature of the community from which students are drawn, the changing profile of the students enrolling in the school, the responsibilities placed on the school by recent legislation and the expectations of the community.

- It is urged that those responsible take the necessary steps to re-establish a board of management at an early date as required by the Education Act (1998).

- It is recommended that the admissions policy is reviewed on a continuous basis to ensure that recent difficulties do not re-emerge.

- It is recommended that an attendance strategy be drawn up and implemented. Targets for improved attendance rates should be set and the outcomes of interventions monitored with a view to continued improvement.

- It is recommended that a systematic focus on the improvement of learning outcomes for students should be implemented based on a self-evaluation process that includes teaching and learning, student supports and an analysis of student outcomes in the certificate examinations.

- All teaching hours provided by the Department for specific purposes should be used only for the direct benefit of the students for whom they are provided and it is therefore recommended that an immediate review of the use of special educational needs, EAL and learning-support provision be undertaken. The review must ensure that all resources allocated to the school to support these students are appropriately used.

- Objectives and targets for subject department planning need to be defined and implemented. It is recommended that a more conscious application of the principles of differentiation and co-operative learning be implemented in the delivery of learning experiences across the curriculum and, in particular, subject planning
should be extended to specifically address the needs of repeat students who should be allocated their full entitlement of tuition time.

- It is recommended that an overarching pastoral care policy be drafted in order to tie together the various strands of student supports and present them as an integrated process.

Post-evaluation meetings were held with the principal and the school manager at which the draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation were presented and discussed.

7. RELATED SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORTS

The following related inspection reports are available:

- Subject Inspection of Art – 25 March 2010
- Subject Inspection of English – 24 March 2010
- Subject Inspection of Geography – 25 March 2010
- Programme Inspection of the LCVP – published May 2010

Published, June 2011
Appendix

School response to the report

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

The Whole School Evaluation Report was considered by the Board of Management at the Board meeting of 12 April 2011. In preparation for the Board meeting, the chairperson met with the Principal and Deputy Principal to discuss the Report. The Board recognises that the main thrust of the Report is very positive and congratulates the school leadership team, the teaching, secretarial and other staff members for their sterling work in providing the large cohort of students at Coláiste Mhuire with an excellent education service. The Board accepts the report and will implement its recommendations.

The Board wishes to respond to various recommendations and references in the Whole School Evaluation Report as follows:

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

Since the inspection the following has occurred:

• A Board of Management has been re-established as from 01/01/2011 and has met on a number of occasions since.
• Increased hours for guidance classes, L.C.V.P modules for guidance and extra tuition classes for repeat students have been provided. The Learning Support timetable has also increased. It is school policy to continually encourage students to reach their potential.
• The Admissions Policy has been re-evaluated, redrafted, and approved at a Board of Management meeting on the 13th January, 2011.
• The Principal and Deputy Principal are currently involved in the Leadership Development Programme. Two teachers are also involved and feedback is given to all staff after each session and further training is proposed for post holders.
• Since September 2010 a teacher has been employed to address the needs of travellers and to liaise with the visiting teacher and the N.E.W.B on their behalf. This initiative is working very well. The recommended review of posts of responsibility is taking place. The review committee is in place.
• The recommended amendment to the Admissions’ Policy in respect of repeat Leaving Certificate students is being implemented at present.
• The code of behaviour and the annual letter to parents have been amended to incorporate the suggestions made.
• The revised homework policy has been signed by parents and students, thus reinforcing the school’s position that homework must be completed to a high standard. This should contribute to improved academic results.
• The Board of Management intends to consider ways in which to evaluate other key processes in the school apart from academic performance.
• Subject department planning will receive a high priority in the context of the extra 33 hours which result from the Croke Park agreement.
• Staff are encouraged and supported to up-skill and financial assistance is given by the Board of Management for any relevant CPD where possible. To give a further impetus to CPD, the Board is willing to pay teachers’ fees for membership of subject associations.
• A formal review of Transition Year takes place towards the end of the school year. Teachers, parents and students take part in this review.
• Our first group of T.Y. students are due to sit their Leaving Certificate in 2011 and it will be interesting and informative to compare their results with the results of students in the school who have not completed Transition Year.
• An over-arching Pastoral Care policy involving Principal, Deputy Principal, Guidance Counsellor, Year Heads, Class Tutors and other staff, will be formulated during the
2011/12 school year. The Board of Management, in consultation with all of the education partners at Coláiste Mhuire, will re-examine and reflect on the long term vision for the school.