

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

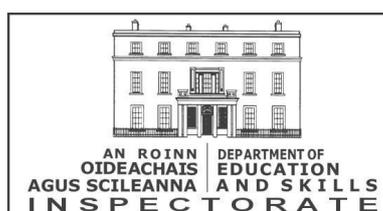
Department of Education and Skills

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

REPORT

**Mercy Secondary School, Ballymahon,
Co. Longford
Roll number: 63710M**

Date of inspection: 8 February 2012



Whole-School Evaluation Management, Leadership and Learning

A whole-school evaluation of management, leadership and learning (WSE-MLL) was undertaken in February, 2012. This report presents the findings of the evaluation and makes recommendations for improvement. During the evaluation, the inspection team met with the school's board of management, in-school management, and groups of teachers, parents and students. Inspectors also reviewed a range of school documentation and responses to questionnaires and examined other data in relation to the operation of the school. As part of the evaluation, a range of lessons across a number of subject areas was inspected. 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

Mercy Secondary school is a voluntary secondary school under the Catholic Education an Irish School's Trust (CEIST). It is one of two second-level schools in Ballymahon and it has been a co-educational school since 1959. The school currently has 501 students enrolled and enrolment is increasing. The school caters for students from diverse backgrounds and abilities.

1. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

1.1 Key Findings

- An effective and committed board of management is in place.
- Policy development and implementation are well advanced and a comprehensive annual school plan has been developed.
- The principal and deputy principal provide effective leadership.
- There is a strong sense of community in the school and a caring environment is provided.
- The school's mission statement is based on mutual respect, trust and the pursuit of excellence and is lived daily.
- There was consistently solid teaching and learning in the lessons observed.
- High academic standards are set and achieved.

1.2 Recommendations for Further Development

- While substantial progress has been made in subject planning, it needs to be less content driven and should be focussed on the further development of active methodologies, promoting literacy and numeracy and planning for improvement.
- An integrated numeracy and literacy plan should be developed.
- Students' copybook work needs to be affirmed more consistently.
- A medium-term plan for action-oriented improvement needs to be developed to support planning for self-evaluation.

2. QUALITY OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP

2.1 School ownership and management – the Board of Management

Composition, functioning and fulfilment of statutory obligations

The board of management fulfils its statutory obligations. The able, experienced and committed chairperson leads the board effectively. The board has adjusted well to the new form of trusteeship with the help of CEIST personnel. The board works well as a team and has had a key role in leading policy development. It needs to develop a more proactive role in leading teaching and learning. The fact that the previous principal is a member of the board is an addition to the team in terms of both experience and continuity. Decisions are made by consensus and after consultation. The board has ensured that whole-school planning is an intrinsic part of school life in this school. Policy development and implementation are informed by a comprehensive school plan for 2011-2012 that includes an action plan with well-defined responsibilities and timelines.

Confirmation was provided that the board of management has formally adopted the *Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools* without modification and that the school is compliant with the requirements of the *Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools*.

The school's priorities for development

The presentation to the inspection team by the board identified a number of key priorities. These include a focus on literacy and numeracy, the review of policies and catering for increased enrolments. Leading teaching and learning should be given a higher priority at board and staff meetings.

2.2 Effectiveness of leadership for learning

Leadership of staff

The principal and deputy principal are able and hard working. They work well as a senior management team and provide proactive leadership to the school community. Teachers are well motivated and morale among staff is high. There is real sense of community evident.

Posts of responsibility are allocated in a fair and reasonable manner. Teachers are given responsibility and are deployed according to their abilities, interests and subject specialisms. Post holders are well motivated and work diligently. Subject co-ordinators have been appointed and subject meetings are held regularly. Curricular plans and schemes of work have been developed for each subject. Substantial progress has been made in subject planning. However, it needs to be less content driven and should be focussed on the further development of active methodologies, promoting literacy and numeracy and planning for improvement.

Leadership of students

The school's comprehensive mission statement is learner focussed and is based on mutual respect, trust and the pursuit of excellence. There was ample evidence during the evaluation that this mission statement is lived daily. Students are educated in a disciplined, caring and calm learning environment. Almost all assistant principals are year heads and they carry out their duties effectively. A tutor system has been re-introduced to assist year heads and senior management in the management and care of students.

Effective support is given to students as they make the transition from primary to post-primary. First-year students select subject options prior to entry and option bands are then made out based on student preferences. An open night for parents of incoming first years is

held. The guidance counsellor holds information meetings for parents of senior students and also meets each student individually to discuss subject options.

A best-buddy programme, where sixth-year students mentor first-year students, is very successful. An impressive care team and a critical incident team manage challenging issues effectively. Attendance is well monitored and tracking of attendance has been improved with the use of the e-portal system. Questionnaire responses suggest students' views on bullying and access to ICT should be further explored.

An academic monitoring programme is being developed for fifth years and this should be extended to other year groups. Care should be taken that such monitoring does not put undue pressure on vulnerable students. Common assessments are being increasingly adopted and this is enhancing co-ordination and planning within subjects. There has been effective in-school support provided for hearing-impaired students and there is effective support for these students from the visiting teacher for the hearing impaired.

There is a well-organised Transition Year (TY) programme that was introduced in 1986. TY is taken by over 90% of students entering senior cycle. The varied and engaging TY programme improves student self-esteem, builds interpersonal and team skills and provides an effective bridge for students between junior and senior cycle. TY students also partake in work experience for four weeks during the year. The Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) is characterised by thorough planning and course delivery and is well scheduled.

Extracurricular activities are well developed in areas such as sport, music and debating and staff and students are congratulated for their involvement. An innovative North-South project is commended as is involvement in fundraising.

The school is very inclusive of students. Students in need of learning support are initially identified from standardised tests. Teachers are provided with specific information and strategies for teaching students with learning needs. This is commended. The process of introducing individual education plans (IEP's) has begun. The provision of learning support is working to a documented plan based on inclusion.

The provision of student guidance is well planned for and is well delivered. The guidance counsellor has a key role in the guidance and welfare of students. The student council is democratically elected and is representative of all year groups. The student council meets regularly with the principal to discuss matters of mutual interest. The council also meets with the board of management which is a very welcome development.

Communication with parents is good and there is a supportive parents' council. An up-to-date and informative website and texting are used to communicate general information to parents. An attractive school prospectus has been produced. Responses to questionnaires showed that parents are generally very positive about the school. More assistance regarding subject choice and the need to remind parents to sign student journals regularly are suggested in the questionnaire surveys. Perceived gaps in communication with parents that were identified in the parent questionnaire survey could be partially filled by the production of a newsletter two or three times a year. The production of a year book could also be considered.

2.3 Management of facilities

The facilities of the school are well maintained. Classrooms are clean and tidy. Classrooms contain displays of resources and students' work. Digital display boards are used effectively to communicate information both in the staffroom and in the corridors. Canteen

facilities are excellent. A full-time caretaker and contract cleaners are employed to maintain the building and its facilities to a high standard. The roof of the school was being refurbished at the time of the evaluation.

3. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

3.1 The quality of learning and teaching

Teaching and learning in all classes observed were good or very good and some excellent teaching was observed. Consistently solid teaching was notably student focussed. There was a high level of staff competence and empathy with students was very evident. High expectations of students were evident. Classrooms were well managed. The quality of interaction between teachers and students was very good. Team teaching was observed in some classes and was working well.

There was a good structure to lessons and strong classroom routines were evident. Pupils showed a good knowledge of key concepts and skills. Learning objectives were outlined at the start of lessons and were generally returned to at the end of lessons. Encouraging students to ask more questions would reduce the amount of teacher-directed learning in some classes.

There was inconsistent practice in relation to the correction of homework. Homework and copy work needs to be affirmed more consistently in writing as well as orally. Suggestions for improvement should be written on students' copies on a more consistent basis.

Substantial progress has been made in the use of data projectors and visualizers to enhance teaching and learning. Students, who were surveyed, indicated that there should be more regular use of information and communications technology (ICT) by students. Differentiated teaching was achieved in most classes though directed questioning and individual attention. The appropriate use of the target language was evident in all the language classes observed. A French assistant helps with the development of oral language skills in French.

Literacy and numeracy development was evident in a number of classes visited and there was helpful material displayed in classrooms. There is a need for a comprehensive literacy and numeracy plan that builds on existing good practice within the school and one that is based on the recently developed national strategy. High academic standards are set and achieved. Examination results are strong. They are analysed and compared to national norms.

4. IMPLEMENTATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS FROM PREVIOUS EVALUATIONS

4.1 Management

The board of management should take a lead role in overseeing the implementation of the recommendations outlined in this report. The board of management outlined to the inspection team the progress made in addressing the recommendations of previous subject inspection reports. Many of these recommendations have been implemented. Where recommended changes have not been implemented, the inspectors are satisfied that sufficient consideration was given to them. English is now taught in a mixed-ability setting as recommended in a previous inspection. The continued use of streaming in Mathematics

in TY, which was raised in a previous subject inspection report, should be kept under review.

Senior management has addressed a number of timetabling issues in TY. A further review of the subject inspection reports in conjunction with the recommendations of this report should inform future planning especially in the areas of learning and teaching.

4.2 Learning and Teaching

The most notable recommendation of previous inspection reports, where substantial progress has been made, is the greater use of ICT to enhance learning and teaching. Considerable progress has also been made on subject planning but more needs to be done to co-ordinate, subject planning across subjects. Differentiated teaching is another area where teachers are making good progress. Common assessments are being introduced in a range of subjects in line with recommendations of previous inspection reports.

Most teachers shared the learning outcomes with students at the beginning of lessons and reviewed them at the end of lessons. The recommendation from previous reports that is in most need of attention with regard to teaching and learning is the inclusion of comments towards improvement on students' written work. The use of active methodologies involving increased student participation is another area where some improvements were noted but there is a need to continue to develop student engagement in their own learning.

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

5.1

There is considerable evidence that the board of management and senior management have the necessary abilities, to manage and lead self-evaluation. The development of an annual school plan, the substantial progress in policy development and review and improved subject planning has already promoted a culture of co-operation and reflection.

There is now a need for an action-oriented medium-term plan for improvement that sets targets and outlines strategies to achieve them over a three-year to five-year period. Key areas for development should include further improving teaching and learning and planning for literacy and numeracy development. Greater emphasis should be put on monitoring and improving students' written work and on the further development of active methodologies and student engagement. The review of the Junior Certificate programme will be a key challenge in the years ahead.

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 Mercy Secondary School welcomes this positive Whole School Evaluation/Management, Leadership and Learning Report. We would like to acknowledge the courteous and professional manner in which the inspectors carried out the evaluation.

We feel affirmed by the Report which acknowledges the great work done by all the stakeholders in our School. The Board of Management is delighted that the Report recognises that the school's mission statement is learner focussed and is based on mutual respect, trust and pursuit of excellence and most importantly that there was ample evidence during the evaluation that this mission statement is lived daily.

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 of Management is committed to addressing the recommendations contained in the report. The Board and Staff have already made progress in the following areas:

- 4-5 newsletters per year will be issued to parents keeping them informed of school matters in addition to what is provided on the school website. Already parents have received two newsletters.
- Work is continuing on developing a numeracy and literacy plan.
- The Homework policy is being reviewed