An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Whole-School Evaluation
Management, Leadership and Learning

REPORT

Villiers Secondary School
North Circular Road, Limerick
Roll number: 64310B

Date of inspection: 19 October 2011
Whole-School Evaluation
Management, Leadership and Learning

A whole-school evaluation of management, leadership and learning (WSE-MLL) was undertaken in October 2011 in Villiers Secondary School. This report presents the findings of the evaluation and makes recommendations for improvement. During the evaluation, the inspection team met with the school’s board of management, in-school management, groups of teachers, parents and students. Inspectors also reviewed a range of school documentation and responses to questionnaires and examined other data in relation to the operation of the school. As part of the evaluation, a range of lessons across a number of subject areas was inspected. 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

Villiers Secondary School operates as a day and boarding fee-paying school, under Protestant management and ethos, within the voluntary secondary sector. While it is school enrolment policy to give priority to students from Protestant denominations, those of other traditions and faiths are welcome.

The school has an inclusive enrolment of 559 students, including 110 boarders from Ireland and overseas. The additional dimension of boarding contributes to the character of Villiers. The Villiers School Parent Teacher Association (PTA) has a significant role in the school community.

1. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

1.1 Key Findings

- Students and parents indicate very high levels of satisfaction with the school’s provision.
- The school’s pastoral care; its subject sampling arrangements; its wide curriculum; its articulate, courteous student body; and the range of sports, extracurricular and co-curricular activities organised for students are particular strengths.
- The board of management, which includes all the school’s governors, engages in its work conscientiously and with effect.
- Very good leadership and management capabilities are demonstrated by the recently-appointed principal and the deputy principal. In addition, a strong middle-management capacity is at an advanced stage of development in the school.
- High levels of staff motivation, teamwork, and of curriculum development were noted during the evaluation.
- School development planning is firmly established and is quite advanced in a number of areas.
- A good deal of planning and co-ordination is invested in organising customised programmes for students with special educational needs.
- The teaching and learning observed in almost all lessons ranged from good to excellent.
- Almost all recommendations from previously completed subject inspections have been implemented or are being implemented.
1.2 Recommendations for Further Development

- The board of management should undertake a review of the implications of the changed contract for principal regarding the extra functions and responsibilities which have now transferred to the board.
- The school should continue to strengthen its self-evaluation processes to determine whether and how particular initiatives are contributing to student learning. Setting specific and measurable targets for whole-school planning priorities and broadening the school’s measures for gathering evidence of impact would help in this work.
- The sharing of in-house expertise in the use of information and communication technology (ICT) to support learning should be included as one of the key objectives of the school’s e-learning plan, on both whole-staff and subject department levels.
- The school library should be activated as a teaching and learning centre.
- In-house expertise in relation to the most suitable approaches for teaching students with English as an Additional Language (EAL) should be developed, to strengthen planning for those students in both support and mainstream contexts.
- Further sharing of pedagogical strategies within and between departments would support even higher student achievement. Areas for discussion should continue to include pair and group activities, assessment for learning approaches, and the communication of departmental standards for the presentation and organisation of student work.

2. QUALITY OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP

2.1 School ownership and management

The trustees of Villiers are its board of governors. That board is responsible for ensuring the fulfilment of the school’s aims, for managing school finances, for maintaining and developing the school’s physical infrastructure, and for upholding the school ethos. The board of governors is hard-working and exemplary in the manner in which it identifies and pursues development priorities for the school such as the recent renovation and expansion of the school’s accommodation.

Composition, functioning and fulfilment of statutory obligations of the Board of Management

As per the Education Act, 1998, Villiers has a board of management in place with the distinct function of overseeing the management of the school. The fact that the governors are also members of the board of management facilitates strategic decision-making and action. In particular, the quality of the board of management’s communication with the PTA is commended.

The board of management is actively engaged in its work and members have attended appropriate training for their role. It promotes school self-evaluation by supporting and monitoring the implementation of school priorities for development, by seeking and acting on briefings by members of staff in relation to specific initiatives, and by providing financial incentives for teachers to engage in professional development.
The previous principal’s contract, which pre-dated the establishment of the board of management, gave him powers as principal and manager of the school. The newly appointed principal’s contract does not include the powers of a manager. Hence, it is recommended that the board undertake a review of the implications of the changed contract for principal regarding the extra functions and responsibilities which have now transferred to it.

After each of its meetings, the board of management agrees a short report, outlining the key discussions and decisions from its meeting for dissemination to staff and to the PTA. In addition, an annual board of management report is compiled. It is suggested that approved school policies and the board of management’s annual report be posted on the school website, to facilitate wider dissemination of information to the school community.

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

The school’s priorities for development

Five main priorities for school development were articulated at the time of the evaluation. First was the completion of building projects and ongoing safety-related and environmentally-sustainable improvements to the campus. Second was school-wide installation of ICT to support learning and administration. Third was the review of the code of behaviour emphasising the positive. Fourth was the ongoing professional empowerment of teachers, with continued investment in and encouragement of staff development. Fifth was the school continuing to develop self-evaluation techniques. These priorities are well chosen and highly relevant. Most importantly, it is evident that a shared understanding of the school’s priorities for development has been established through dialogue between the board of management, board of governors, senior management, a core staff steering group, PTA and student council, with some surveys of students and parents having been conducted.

2.2 Effectiveness of leadership for learning

Leadership of staff

Continuing a tradition of strong leadership in the school, it is evident that the newly-appointed principal and the deputy principal are focusing firmly on creating a collaborative working environment for all. This is very positive. The culture of encouraging and facilitating staff professional development is strongly embedded in the practices of senior management, and this is a key way in which a high level of staff motivation, of teamwork, and of curriculum development is nurtured in the school.

Due to the high level of collegiality and trust that exists in the staff, the practice of peer observation and feedback among teachers in classes has been established in some subject areas and in-house professional development inputs from individual staff to the whole staff regularly take place. These methods for sharing good teaching and learning practices are highly commended. Building on these foundations, it is recommended that the sharing of
existing in-house expertise in the use of ICT to support learning now be included as one of the key objectives of the school’s e-learning plan, on both whole-staff and subject department levels.

Leadership of staff has also been shown in the manner in which middle management have been guided to function in the school. Reviews of the school’s schedule of posts of responsibility were led through whole-staff task team deliberations three years ago and again last year, resulting in changes to post types and assignments, to support the changing needs of the school. Within their posts, staff members are encouraged to problem-solve and to innovate as necessary, thus acting as leaders in their own areas of responsibility. Hence, a strong middle-management capacity is at an advanced stage of development in the school.

Senior management invests considerable effort in promoting high quality communication with staff through measures such as providing a weekly newsletter of upcoming events to staff, making changes to the organisation of subject department meetings to enable teachers to attend in-house planning meetings for all the subjects they teach, and posting minutes of task team meetings on the staff notice board. To further aid communication, it is advised that the school plan be transformed into a single electronic unit.

School development planning is firmly established and is quite advanced in a number of areas. The level of team planning, co-ordination, and evaluation that has been invested in continually improving the Transition year (TY) programme is very impressive. Subject department planning incorporates action planning that is improving student learning in tangible ways and this is praiseworthy. The school’s ongoing engagement with focused “Learning School” projects in conjunction with Limerick Education Centre testifies that planning operates as a process for improvement in the school, and not just as an end in itself. This is very good practice.

Looking toward the future, it is recommended that the target setting and evaluation elements of whole-school planning be more specific and measurable. Before specific targets are set, the school is advised to collect and analyse baseline data associated with that action area and to review school initiatives already in place relevant to that area. To date, the school has evaluated its initiatives through qualitative self-reflection by teachers, students, and parents. Quantitative data should also be sought to determine whether and how initiatives have improved students’ learning. As whole-school procedures are agreed for the collection and storage of such data, the use of these data to inform reviews in a consistent manner will become more embedded.

Leadership of students

Substantial evidence was gathered of the school’s pastoral care of students. Almost all students and parents surveyed agreed or strongly agreed that students are well cared for in the school. During the evaluation, staff members’ commitment to supporting students’ wellbeing was very apparent through their attendance at pastoral care and crisis response meetings, often in their free time. Also, all teachers see themselves as having responsibility for student welfare, arising from the fact that all form teachers are teachers of Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) and from their involvement in boarding duty. The role of prefects and members of the student council in promoting self-discipline and individual responsibility among students is also valued. While nurturing school ethos in daily school life, the chaplain is also a leader in promoting positive, whole-school pastoral approaches. These investments of time, energy, and commitment to supporting students’ development are highly commended.

One of the key strengths of the school is its broad curriculum. The subject sampling arrangements in place for students in first year and in TY are particularly valued by
students, parents, and staff. Senior management and individual teachers make every effort to support the study of subjects with low-uptake in any given year.

The school is committed to continually reviewing and improving its leadership of students. In the current school year, the school is reviewing its code of behaviour to make it more positive, is introducing Positive Behaviour Intervention System training for staff, and is developing broader rewards for student behaviour outside existing academic prizes. Also, arrangements for the delivery of more guidance information to certain year groups are being put in place this year, in response to survey feedback from students and parents.

In recent years, a particularly useful document was compiled in-house and disseminated to support senior cycle students’ planning for the timely completion of coursework requirements across different subjects. To aid TY portfolio planning across the subjects, it is suggested that a task team comprising teachers who prepare students to present coursework materials for the Certificate examinations be convened and asked to identify and disseminate key strategies and skills that help students complete independent learning assignments.

A committee was formed this year to guide planning for students with EAL. In-house expertise in relation to EAL principles of support should be developed. Those principles should then be incorporated into support planning for students with EAL, and into subject department and programme planning.

A good deal of planning and co-ordination is invested in organising customised programmes for students with special educational needs. In some subject areas, team teaching arrangements have been established and were reported to be supporting the learning of students with special educational needs effectively. It is recommended that the school extend this team teaching model further, where appropriate.

2.3 Management of facilities

The focused development of the school’s campus by the previous principal, board of governors, and staff, together with the support of parents, has created very good conditions for learning.

Management of school facilities is very good, thanks largely to an active caretaking team. A staff safety representative has completed relevant training, and is engaged in compiling and seeking remediation to whole-school risks. It is recommended that the existing health and safety statement (2008), be revised in line with the Guidelines on Managing Safety and Health in Post-Primary Schools (2010) and then presented to the board of management for ratification.

The school is very progressive in the way it is blending student learning with its management of facilities. Thanks to a very active committee comprising representatives of students, PTA, and staff, the school has already achieved a Litter and Waste Green Flag, its application for an Energy Green Flag is pending, and it has also completed some work toward a Water and Travel Green Flag. It is suggested that heat loss in the older general classroom block be reviewed by the Green Flag committee, after the planned replacement of external doors has taken place.

The school library has been redeveloped in recent years, overseen by a professional librarian. It is mostly used as a study centre during the school day. As part of the school’s plan to further develop students’ literacy and numeracy skills, it is recommended that the library be activated as a teaching and learning centre. It is advised that professional development training specific to running a second-level library be facilitated for the
librarian, that the librarian be invited to join relevant subject department planning meetings, and that reading challenges be incorporated into the junior cycle English programme.

3. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

3.1 The quality of learning and teaching

In all lessons, teachers and students were very respectful of each other and positive student engagement and participation were noted. The teaching and learning observed in almost all lessons ranged from good to excellent.

Lessons were prepared and planned diligently. Effective practice was characterised by teachers pre-teaching keywords, using varied multi-media resources, linking new learning with students’ relevant prior knowledge and experience, clearly modelling processes or skills, and using the board to record key information in a clearly organised manner. Learning was conducted in attractive, print-rich environments facilitated by the school’s teacher-based classroom policy.

Teaching methods included the use of pair and group activities in some lessons. Those activities provided valuable active-learning opportunities for students and were generally managed with significant expertise. If teachers could share and model those good practices with each other, then that would support the incorporation of pair and group activities in all subjects.

Teacher questioning consistently elicited higher-order thinking and articulate personal response, grounded in evidence, from students. In-class questioning was two-way, demonstrating students’ comfort in asking questions to clarify their understanding or to offer an alternative viewpoint. Where very good practice was observed, teachers referred to student contributions from previous classes or from the observed class, using them as teaching tools.

Evidence was gathered of some very good oral and written formative feedback being provided to students, where the specific strengths of a piece of work and specific areas for development for that student were identified. The practice of sharing task-specific criteria for assessment with students, so that they can understand why specific comments and or marks are given for a piece of work, should be extended across all lessons. So too should the use of exemplars of student work to help students visualise what a completed piece of work could look like and the greater promotion of explicit peer and self-assessment practices.

There is scope for more whole-school sharing of learning outcomes at the beginning of lessons and checking with students whether those outcomes have been achieved at the end of the lesson. Building time into the lesson structure for the teacher to explain and record the homework task on the board and for students to record that task in their journals is also advised as a whole-school classroom routine. Furthermore, it is recommended that subject-specific expectations and routines for the organisation and presentation of student work be agreed by departments and taught explicitly at the beginning of every academic year, and that they be consistently communicated to students. Incentivising adherence to those routines by awarding some marks towards end-of-term results for copybook and folder maintenance could help in this regard.
4. IMPLEMENTATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS FROM PREVIOUS EVALUATIONS

Very diligent actions have been taken by the board of governors, by the board of management, and by staff in response to recommendations made in previous subject inspection reports. Almost all recommendations have either been implemented or significant progress has been achieved in relation to them. Given the pedagogical nature of some of the recommendations, work is continuing to address them into the future.

In relation to Junior Science, the introduction of credit for students’ participation in practical work in class groups other than Transition year is pending. Through action planning, work is also progressing in relation to the recommendation made in the Geography report.

In relation to the recommendation to review school policies and procedures regarding students’ absences on school activities made in the Junior Science report, a number of actions have been undertaken to date. Staff who attend the weekly fixtures meeting work with the Academic Co-ordinator to try to reduce such absences where possible. The school is hoping to establish a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), as part of its current e-learning drive, to enable students to remotely access their homework assignments and teacher presentations in future. Monitoring this element of school life should continue to be a priority for school self-evaluation.

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

The school has a high level of management and leadership capacity. It is commended that the school has established the practice of using survey feedback to inform its priorities for improvement. It is now recommended that a consistent, annual or biannual review cycle of parent, student, and staff responses be established, moving toward electronic collection and processing, to make information gathered as useful as possible. In time, the school should also seek to broaden its self-evaluation techniques to include focus groups and case studies. In this way, a balance of both quantitative and qualitative evidence would be available to aid decision-making.

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Appendix

School Response to the Report

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

The Board of Management welcomes the Inspection report as an independent affirmation of the high standards of Villiers School. The report is a comprehensive document capturing the caring ethos, the holistic approach to education and the broad curriculum on offer to our students. We welcome that the report acknowledge the entire Villiers ‘family’ whose outstanding commitment to excellence leads to the high standards of our School. This includes the teaching staff, the administrative staff, the facilities staff, the pastoral staff and of course our articulate, courteous student body.

We are particularly pleased with the key findings of the report which recognised:

- Very high levels of parent and student satisfaction with the School
- The broad range of educational opportunities afforded to our students though both curricular and extra curricular activities
- Staff members’ investment of time and energy in their commitment to supporting the School’s pastoral care of students
- Strong, focused, capable, effective management and middle management
- High levels of staff motivation, teamwork, curricular development
- Customised programmes for students with special educational needs
- High quality teaching and learning
- Advanced, firmly established school development planning
- Very impressive level of team planning, co-ordinating and evaluating of Transition Year
- High level of implementation of recommendations from previous subject inspections

In addition we are pleased that the diligent and communicative relationship that exists between the Board of Governors, Board of Management, Parent Teacher Association, and Student Council has been favourably verified by the inspectorate and that the exemplary work they do for the benefit of our School has been noted.

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 are happy to continue to lead the implementation of the recommendations contained in the report.

- The Board has recognised the implications of the changed contract for Principal and is already engaged in additional functions and responsibilities. For example an interview committee has been recently established for the appointment of new teachers.
- The Board is committed to the ongoing ICT initiative. The school plan is in the process of being transferred into a single electronic unit. Subject coordinators will be appointed to facilitate the measurable use of ICT into subject areas. Inhouse expertise is being used to upgrade ICT skills for all staff members.
- Sharing of pedagogical strategies within and between departments is being facilitated through in house training and presentation at staff meetings. In addition the School will use its involvement with the Learning School Project 3 and with the DES Literacy and Numeracy initiative to develop strategies, approaches and
standards applicable in both a whole school sense and in a coordinated subject approach.

- A revised EAL strategy has been devised and is in the early stage of implementation with a specific targeted approach for all EAL students.
- The library is being activated as a centre of teaching and learning within the school. The librarian will be included in relevant subject department meetings and will be utilised through the Literacy and Numeracy strategy. It will be used as a venue for invited guests such as local authors to present to students and we have plans for our first book launch. It will also become the meeting place for our student book club.

The Board of Management is pleased the recommendations of the inspectorate support current school development and planning and recognise that these recommendations will assist in the continuation of the best possible educational provision for our students.