

**An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna**

**Department of Education and Skills**

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

**REPORT**

**Saint Mary's Secondary School  
Ballina, County Mayo  
Roll number: 64520M**

**Date of inspection: 20 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 Saint Mary's 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***

Saint Mary's Secondary School established in 1890 is an all-girls voluntary secondary school. In 2007 trusteeship of the school transferred to Catholic Education, an Irish Schools Trust (CEIST). Formerly under the patronage of the Sisters of Mercy, the Mercy ethos is embedded in the school's mission statement and motto and is a lived out reality. The current principal, who is the first lay principal, was appointed in 2004. The school is inclusive in its enrolment and currently caters for over 600 students who come from diverse cultural, ethnic and social backgrounds. The school has a strong tradition in academic, cultural and sporting achievement.

## **1. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT**

### ***1.1 Key Findings***

- The school is inclusive, student-centred and offers a very broad curriculum.
- The board of management is effective, supportive and committed to fulfilling its statutory obligations.
- The parents' association supports the school actively.
- The principal and deputy principal provide very good leadership.
- There are effective formal and informal communication structures.
- Good quality teaching and learning was observed in the majority of lessons with excellent teaching practice observed in some lessons.
- The need for a new school building is a top priority.
- The school has demonstrated considerable capacity for change and improvement.
- The particular strengths of the school include the quality of pastoral care structures, the support for students during transitions, and the range of sports and other extracurricular activities.

### ***1.2 Recommendations for Further Development***

- A strategic plan to include specific action plans to advance the school's developmental priorities should be formulated.
- The special educational needs support team should be formalised and current provision should be reviewed to ensure its alignment with best practice. A whole-school policy on additional educational needs should be developed.
- The breadth of Guidance provision should be reviewed and the emerging guidance plan should be further developed collaboratively.

- All teachers should consider greater use of active learning methodologies and of differentiation strategies to promote effective learning.

## **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 is very supportive of the school and is committed to fulfilling its statutory obligations. Collectively, the board members display a wide range of expertise. The board holds regular meetings and has very good lines of communication with the stakeholders. The values of CEIST underpin the work of the board. Decisions at board meetings are reached by consensus. Board members have a visible presence at school events.

The board functions effectively in the following areas: financial management of the school; policy development and review; support for teachers' continuing professional development (CPD) and advancing school accommodation and refurbishment. The board supports high quality teaching and learning and regularly discusses student attainment and curriculum.

The principal's annual report on the operation and performance of the school is the starting point for annual review. The board supports school self-evaluation by monitoring the implementation of the school's developmental priorities. There is scope for the further development of the school's self-evaluation processes. The board should ensure that timelines are established for the implementation of developmental priorities and policy review. All policies should indicate the date of adoption and a proposed review date.

The parents' association (PA) takes an active role in supporting many school initiatives. The responses to the parents' questionnaires indicate high levels of confidence in and support for the school. Effective mechanisms to communicate with parents are evident across the school.

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**

The board demonstrates a clear vision for the school. Current priorities for development include supporting the current high quality of teaching and learning; further incorporating information and communication technology (ICT) into classroom practice, maintaining enrolment figures, developing school accommodation, maintaining breadth and balance in the curriculum, improving safety, continuing reviews of policy, and self-evaluation practice. These priorities reflect the forward thinking focus of the school and good progress has been made towards achieving many of them. The school is advised to select and focus upon on a manageable number of these.

To further advance the school's development work, the board should oversee the development of a strategic plan. This should link together the plans and policies already developed or in train and set realistic targets for the achievement of identified developmental priorities within specific time

frames. Task groups could be formed to work on each priority area. The school's plans for new accommodation should form a key part of this strategic plan. Furthermore, action plans should be developed to achieve the school's developmental priorities and performance indicators should be designed to monitor progress. This work should become a key component in the school's self-evaluation practice.

## ***2.2 Effectiveness of leadership for learning***

### **Leadership of staff**

The principal and deputy principal work in partnership, are well organised, and provide very good leadership. Their individual talents and abilities are complementary and their management style is open, collaborative and consultative. They have a shared vision for the school, both were long serving teachers at the school and they are well established in their management roles. Both exhibit great commitment to school development as they discharge an extensive range of duties and they have successfully driven and managed change over a number of years. They are professional in the way they work and they set high standards for themselves, the teaching staff and the students.

The staff of the school demonstrates commitment to working hard, high levels of professionalism and a strong sense of care for students. The changed profile of the staff in recent years, due to retirements and the appointment of new teachers, provides both opportunity and challenge for management. High priority is given to the continuing professional development. The board makes a financial contribution towards the cost of further studies and over half of the teachers have undertaken post-graduate studies.

Posts of responsibility are reviewed regularly in a transparent manner at whole-staff level. Teachers' interests and expertise are reflected well in the posts and opportunities to change posts are provided. Duties attached to posts are undertaken in a diligent manner. Distributed leadership is facilitated at all levels. In the current context of the reduction in the numbers of posts of responsibility, senior management, the post holders and teachers have shown flexibility and willingness to share burdens as duties have been redistributed to serve the needs of the school. Opportunities are also created for non-postholders to develop leadership skills. In order to build leadership capacity for the future, all key areas of school life should be reflected in the post structure.

The school community is engaged in ongoing collaborative planning. Regular curricular reviews are undertaken to inform planning. The permanent section of the school plan outlines the school's operating structures and includes all policies ratified by the board. A systematic whole-school approach to policy review should be established. The developmental section of the school plan requires further expansion.

The emerging guidance plan, along with plans for curricular programmes and subject department plans which are at varying stages of development, are other valuable elements of school planning. While a culture of review and self evaluation is evident in some plans, others need to be further developed collaboratively. Subject planning is generally well advanced and could be further developed through the inclusion of developmental priorities, learning outcomes, specific resources to support learning, and target setting based on certificate examination results to enhance student performance. Subject departments should submit reports on their discussions on students' attainment to senior management annually.

Communication among staff and management is very good and includes regular staff meetings as well as the recently developed staff handbook. Collaborative approaches to the running of the school ensure that meetings are well planned and regular, both at the whole-school level and at the

subject department level. The goodwill of staff is evident in the significant work that is accomplished informally, in addition to formally convened meetings.

### **Leadership of students**

Inclusiveness is a key value of the school. The school's inclusive admissions policy results in a diverse range of ambitions, academic abilities and additional educational needs among students. There is evidence of excellent support for students and their parents at key transition times in students' schooling.

Practices in relation to the management of students are very good and are facilitated well through the school's code of behaviour which is fair and effective. Attendance and retention strategies employed by the school are also effective. There have been a number of suspensions among a small cohort of students. The school should consider alternative strategies to promote positive behaviour in the management of these students.

Student leadership is promoted effectively through mechanisms such as the mentoring system and senior leaders. At the time of the evaluation the student council was not in operation. When re-established, formal links should be established between the student council and the parents' association with a view to pursuing common issues.

Students' welfare and educational needs are at the heart of St Mary's and various student-support and pastoral-care structures support students very well. This finding was endorsed by parents and students in their questionnaire responses. Year heads and tutors play a pivotal role in this structure and their inputs are valued by students. It is recommended that the formal programme for the tutor period and the occasional year head assembly be revised and then, delivered. While nurturing school ethos in daily school life, the school chaplain also co-ordinates the Social, Personal and Health (SPHE) and Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) programmes which are appropriately delivered. A range of liturgical celebrations is undertaken in line with the school ethos. The school is planning to reintroduce Recognition Day.

School has a substantial allocation of additional teaching hours for learning support, special educational needs, Traveller Education and English as an Additional Language (EAL). Management should ensure that the identified learning needs of individual students are prioritised in relation to the use of this additional allocation. It is commendable that a number of teachers have formal qualifications in various aspects of additional educational needs. The co-ordinator of additional educational needs works well informally with key personnel and subject teachers. Existing good practice in additional educational needs should be further developed through the formalisation of a special educational needs support team. Time for co-ordination and regular formal meetings of this support team is recommended. The support team should then review current provision for additional educational needs to ensure that it is aligned with best practice guidelines. This review should provide for the implementation of an updated whole-school policy and approach to additional educational needs. This should also include a whole-school approach to literacy and numeracy. Planning and provision for students with EAL should also be formalised. Team teaching should be reintroduced at the earliest opportunity.

The school's guidance personnel are committed to the enhancement and the further development of the guidance service. During the evaluation management was in the process of addressing the issue that the full ex-quota allocation for Guidance for 2011/12 was not being used for its intended purpose. It is recommended that guidance provision be reviewed. In so doing, systems around referrals to the guidance service should be formalised.

The guidance department should be provided with an office space for individual counselling and storage of confidential records. An outline guidance plan is in place. It is recommended that the

guidance plan and programmes delivered be further developed collaboratively to reflect a whole-school approach to Guidance. Upon its completion the guidance plan should be ratified by the board. Stronger links should be forged between Guidance, special educational needs, SPHE and Chaplaincy to support the general provision for pastoral care. A student support team involving key school personnel should be re-established to facilitate this. In the context of self-evaluation, mechanisms for ongoing review of the guidance service should also be developed.

The school offers a broad and balanced curriculum and a good variety of co-curricular and extracurricular activities contributes to students' holistic development. The spirit of collegiality and volunteerism demonstrated by teachers supports school activities well.

Students and parents were very positive in their comments about the broad curriculum. The curriculum is reviewed regularly. The next review should focus on the subjects and programmes available and the capacity to provide them in terms of the reduced teacher allocation to the school.

Teachers are deployed according to their expertise. Timetabled allocation to subjects is generally appropriate. However, where resources allow, an additional class period could be scheduled for English and Irish in second and third year in order to support literacy. The timetabling of languages classes would benefit from greater distribution across the week. While all students have access to Physical Education (PE), some sixth years have two single PE classes instead of a double and this should be kept under review. Currently the Link Modules of the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) are timetabled against a study period; this should be kept under review to ensure that all students have twenty-eight hours class tuition time per week (Circular M29/95).

### ***2.3 Management of facilities***

The school building is currently over its maximum capacity. The Department of Education and Skills approved a new school building on a green field site in 2006. However, progress has been delayed due to planning issues. Over the past few years there has been ongoing expansion of the current facilities, consisting largely of prefabricated buildings, to cater for increased enrolment. It is recommended that all available means be actively explored to secure adequate accommodation to meet the needs of the school population.

The main building is maintained to a high standard with a noticeable absence of litter. However, the same standard should be extended to other units of accommodation. Through re-establishing the Green-Schools programme the school could raise environmental awareness. Management's willingness to prioritise the expansion and re-development of the staffroom reflects its appreciation of the key role of teachers in the school. Specialist rooms are generally well equipped. Classrooms are student-based as it is considered to be the safest arrangement. However, the advantages of teacher-based classrooms should continue to be further explored. There is very good access to local sports facilities through synergies with local clubs and schools. The school canteen provides a good service.

Provision of ICT facilities throughout the school is very good, and there are plans to further enhance broadband connectivity. Google Apps, as a school virtual learning environment, is at an early stage of development.

The school should develop procedures for regular review of its health and safety statement in line with current guidelines and legislation.

### **3. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING**

#### ***3.1 The quality of learning and teaching***

Good quality teaching and learning was observed in the majority of lessons and in some instances excellent teaching practice was noted. The very good standard of preparation and planning observed was reflected positively in established routines, lesson pace, lesson structure, the sharing of learning outcomes and quality of students' engagement.

A good variety of teaching strategies was used to stimulate students' interest. There was scope to improve the quality of students' learning through the use of more active learning methodologies for differentiation. Greater use of textbooks is recommended in certain contexts as a measure to reduce unnecessary photocopying. The more widespread use of strategies to support literacy and numeracy development was recommended in the case of some lessons observed.

ICT was used in just over half the lessons and was most effective where it was used to enhance students' understanding of abstract concepts, and in the correction process. The sharing of existing in-house expertise in the use of ICT to support learning should be organised.

The learning environment in many junior classrooms was well enhanced and this good practice could be extended to all classrooms. Classroom management was excellent in all lessons. Students were very well behaved and engaged well in lessons. Teachers were encouraging and affirming and a positive, student-centred learning environment was evident.

In almost all lessons homework was regularly assigned and corrected. This should be extended to all lessons. Very good systems are in place for students to maintain records of their class work and homework. Students are provided with useful feedback to support them in improving the quality of their work. Procedures for summative assessment are good and supported by ongoing assessment of learning. This is supported by a whole-school homework policy and should be further developed into an agreed policy on assessment to reflect best practice on the ground. The school informs parents of students' progress through school reports and annual parent-teacher meetings. Students achieve very well in certificate examinations and this reflects the high expectations that are set for learning.

### **4. IMPLEMENTATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS FROM PREVIOUS EVALUATIONS**

#### ***4.1 Management***

All subject departments submitted progress reports in relation to the recommendations made in the five previous evaluations. The school has made very good progress in the implementation of recommendations related to whole-school provision. This finding reflects the high levels of support given by school management to subject provision.

#### ***4.2 Learning and Teaching***

Almost all recommendations made in previous reports have been implemented or significant progress has been achieved in relation to them. Given the pedagogical nature of many of the recommendations, continuing work is necessary to address them into the future. Therefore, areas such as supporting the integration of ICT, upskilling of teachers and the use of active learning and of differentiated learning outcomes to support learning are ongoing.

The board of management should lead a whole-school approach to monitoring the implementation of existing and future recommendations and assessing the impact of their implementation on other subject areas.

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

### **5.1**

The school has considerable capacity to initiate change and drive school improvement. The very good leadership of the principal has been central to the development and progression of the school's current planning priorities. The school has engaged in various aspects of self-evaluation across a number of areas of school life. These include subject planning reviews, regular curriculum review, end-of-year programme evaluations, policy review, ascertaining ICT training needs, staff and student surveys, and diagnostic interpretation of 2011 certificate results in some subjects.

Structures should be further developed to further advance school self-evaluation with a focus on a certain number of key priorities in each academic year. The self-evaluation process should be underpinned by realistic target setting, action planning with time-bound steps, and progress reviews. The reestablishment of a school planning co-ordinator, or a steering committee, would support this work.

The school is proactive in anticipating and responding to the evolving needs of students and is well placed to implement the recommendations of this report. The shared vision for the school held by all the main stakeholders will be essential to the school's ongoing development.

# **Appendix**

**School Response to the Report**

**Submitted by the Board of Management**

## **Area 1 Observations on the content of the inspection report**

The Board of Management of St Mary's Secondary School Ballina welcomes a most positive and encouraging report on Management, Leadership and Learning in the school. The Board believes that the whole process was a very worthwhile experience – energising all the stakeholders and facilitating their participation in the review, reflection and evaluation of the many dimensions of our school life. The Board would like to thank the whole school community who contributed to the process and also wishes to acknowledge the very courteous and professional manner in which the inspectorate members carried out their duties.

We feel affirmed by the report which acknowledges excellent practice and also the high level of commitment of all staff in embracing their diverse and challenging roles as educators and in achieving such parallel success in co-curricular and extra-curricular activities. It welcomes in particular the positive comments in relation to leadership, the quality of teaching and learning, of subject and department planning and of discipline and classroom organisation. We appreciate the recognition of the quality of our Pastoral Care structures and the support for students and parents during periods of transition –all indicators of the dedication and professionalism that prevails within the whole school community.

## **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 specific item of 'School Development Planning' has now been included on all Board of Management agenda and the Board is committed to supporting the further development of the school's self-evaluation processes leading to the formulation of a revised strategic developmental plan.
- A review of our Code of Behaviour is under way and will endeavour to identify alternative strategies to promote positive behaviour management – including the introduction of a reward system and revival of our Annual Recognition Day.
- To enhance our Pastoral Care Programme the teaching hours of SEN Co-ordinator, Guidance Counsellor and Chaplain have been reduced and the Student Support Services Team re-established. This team is working to ensure that stronger collaborative links will be forged between Guidance, SEN, SPHE and Chaplaincy. Furthermore, a review of the timing of the Tutor and Year Head classes is under way.
- A dedicated SEN resource team, with timetabled meetings, will be put in place in September 2012 to formulate policy in relation to the timetabling and delivery of resource hours for 2012/13. All other resource allocation issues have been addressed.
- A review of Guidance provision is underway and the evolving Guidance Plan will be further developed collaboratively. In light of the loss of ex-quota provision for Guidance it is hoped that this collaboration will include some Guidance provision being delivered within the SPHE classroom.
- Application has been made to the SESS to provide whole school training on differentiation strategies and mixed-ability teaching.
- The promotion of active teaching and learning methodologies continues to be part of our school policy.