Whole-School Evaluation
Management, Leadership and Learning
REPORT

Saint Louis Secondary School
Carrickmacross, County Monaghan
Roll number: 64760J

Date of inspection: 9 March 2011
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A whole-school evaluation of management, leadership and learning (WSE-MLL) was undertaken in March 2011 in St Louis 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 was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the report; a response was not received from the board.

Introduction

St Louis Secondary School, which was founded in 1888, is a Catholic voluntary secondary school for girls. In 2009, the school joined the Le Chéile Schools Trust under whose auspices it continues to reflect the educational philosophy of Abbé Louis Bautain, the founder of the St. Louis congregation. The school has a very wide catchment area and enrolment figures are on a strong upward trend. The current enrolment stands at 580 students.

1. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

1.1 Key Findings

- The board of management provides strong leadership and support to the school.
- Well developed planning processes, including collaborative review of all facets of school life, underpin the workings of the school.
- The senior management team has a clear vision for the school and they lead learning effectively in a spirit of support and collaboration.
- A broad curriculum and programme range is offered to students.
- Pastoral care is a significant strength of the school and is a reflection of its ethos.
- Very high expectations of students in relation to attainment and behaviour ensure a positive, productive learning environment.
- The teaching and learning observed during the evaluation was of a consistently high standard.
- Very good progress has been made, both by the board and by teachers, in the implementation of recommendations made in previous subject evaluations.
- The whole school community is progressive in its outlook and has demonstrated an impressive ability to reflect, review and adapt.

1.2 Recommendations for Further Development

- The timetable in senior cycle must be amended in order to ensure that all students receive their required tuition time of 28 hours per week.
A full review of the Transition Year (TY) programme should be carried out with particular reference to work experience scheduling arrangements and the obligation on students to choose their Leaving Certificate subjects prior to entry to TY.

More extensive use of differentiated teaching and learning strategies and formative assessment practices is recommended.

The board should explore the possibility of improving the work facilities for the staff.

2. QUALITY OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP

2.1 School ownership and management – the Board of Management

The board of management, which is in the final year of its tenure, is properly constituted and fully committed to the effective governance and leadership of the school. Board members have a shared vision for the future of the school, while valuing its rich heritage. The board is pro-active in a number of areas including school development planning, the recruitment and continuing professional development of staff and the management of school facilities. Good communication between the trustees and the board is ensured through e-mails, regular newsletters and by the attendance of the chairperson and principal at three Le Chéile cluster meetings annually.

Within its three-year strategic action plan, which is practical and purposeful, the board has identified six priority areas. These areas include the maintenance of the school buildings, the upgrading of information communications technology (ICT) facilities, the continued funding of the TY programme and the fulfilment of the school’s pastoral care ethos. The board also acknowledges its important overarching role in the promotion of high quality teaching and learning. To this end, it supports in-school continuing professional development (CPD) initiatives and provides a small bursary to teachers who wish to avail of external CPD. The board reviews the annual certificate examination results in order to obtain an overview of student attainment. In consultation and collaboration with senior management, the parents’ association, and various staff committees, it has led curriculum reviews at junior and senior levels. The introduction of Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) in September 2010, following consultation with other stakeholders, represents a positive response to the varying needs of the school. Similarly, from September 2011 onwards, the change in the status of Music from a compulsory to an optional subject in junior cycle shows a willingness on the part of management to take full account of parents’ views.

In spite of the valuable work accomplished by the board, the results of the questionnaire distributed to parents of second-year and fifth-year students indicate that a significant percentage of parents are unaware of its work. The inclusion of a brief annual report from the board in the parents’ newsletter and on the school website would address this perceived gap in communication. An occasional meeting of board members with student representatives would also strengthen the concept of whole-school partnership.

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.
Since 1987, the parents’ association has played an important supportive role in the school through fund-raising drives, engagement with policy and curricular review and the facilitation of seminars on parenting issues. A short report in the school newsletter on the work of the parents association would raise its profile with the general parent body.

2.2 Effectiveness of leadership for learning

The principal and deputy principal, as the senior management team, work collaboratively to provide highly effective leadership. The work of the senior management team is underpinned by a shared vision and by their mutually supportive working relationship. They promote a strong spirit of collegiality and the very good working atmosphere in the school is due, in no small part, to their open style of leadership and to their very good interpersonal skills. Of the parents surveyed, a very high number (92%) expressed confidence in the leadership team, stating their belief that the school is well run.

A strong culture of distributed leadership permeates the workings of the school. The posts of responsibility system is a key element in the efficient organisation of the school and the middle management group of post holders support senior management in the day-to-day running of the school. The national moratorium on the filling of posts of responsibility has created difficulties for the school and has the potential to continue to do so. Accordingly, there may be a need to review and adapt the existing posts, where appropriate, to ensure an effective response to the ongoing needs of the school.

While the senior management team leads the whole-school planning process, all teachers are encouraged and enabled to participate in the various school committees. In turn, their contribution to the decision-making processes gives staff members a strong sense of ownership. The principal and deputy principal have a sound understanding of the benefits of collaborative subject planning. Formal meeting time is allocated to subject departments for the sharing of best practice. On occasions, the principal or the deputy principal participate in such meetings and contribute to the agenda. A review of subject folders indicated that most subject departments have made excellent progress in planning for optimum learning outcomes.

The admissions policy is inclusive and very much in keeping with the ethos of the school. Some minor adjustments to the wording will ensure greater clarity. The school has developed a robust set of procedures to facilitate the transition of students from the primary to the post-primary sector. Clear guidance for parents on the enrolment process, together with an information evening and an induction programme for students, make the transition considerably less stressful. In particular, the contribution of the school’s innovative peer ministry programme in assisting first-year students to adapt to secondary school is acknowledged.

The allocation for special educational needs (SEN) students is being used appropriately. Support for SEN students is very well organised by the learning support (LS) co-ordinator. Additional support is delivered by the LS team through small group work, individual tuition and, most recently, team teaching. Further use of team teaching is encouraged. Newcomer students, who comprise just four and a half percent (4.5%) of the student cohort, are well integrated in the school. Where appropriate, they receive additional language support from teachers and peer mentors.

Guidance provision is good, particularly in senior cycle, where students have weekly timetabled access to career guidance. The whole-school guidance plan, which was reviewed
in 2007, could now be updated in consultation with the wider community and presented to
the board for ratification.

The school has successfully created a warm and caring environment for its students. The
pastoral care team which comprises, inter alia, class teachers, year heads, peer mentors,
counsellors, the school chaplain and prefects, offers extensive support to all students. This
high level of care is corroborated by both student and parent questionnaires. Ninety-five
percent of parents stated that their daughters were well looked after in the school.

In keeping with the holistic approach to education practised by the school, it is suggested
that the inclusion of Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) and Physical Education
(PE) on junior-cycle school reports would validate the important role both subjects play in
the personal development of students.

The code of behaviour is fair and balanced. One indicator of its effectiveness is the fact that
data from the National Educational Welfare Board shows that no student was suspended
during the school year 2009-10. Student behaviour, as observed during the evaluation was,
without exception, exemplary. The wording of the code of behaviour could be altered
slightly to reflect the very real emphasis placed on positive behaviour in the school and to
stress the centrality of student responsibility, as per the school’s Mission Statement. There
are effective procedures in place, including a mobile phone text service to parents, to
monitor students’ attendance and punctuality and these have contributed to the very good
student retention rates over the six-year cycle.

The long-established student council has a strong profile in the school. It is guided by a
liaison teacher and is fully representative of the student body. The council has been
involved in three Green Flag projects and has reviewed school policies, where appropriate.
It has frequently effected change, one recent example being the improved school canteen
arrangements.

In junior cycle, all subjects other than Irish and Mathematics are taught in mixed-ability
settings. First-year students are assisted in choosing optional subjects through a sampler
programme which is judged by the school to be helpful for new students. While a sampler
programme can help students to make a more informed choice of subjects, it is suggested
that the length of the sampling period of one full school year should be reconsidered. Parent
and student questionnaire responses indicate the need for more focused advice around
subject choice, both in junior cycle and in senior cycle.

A wide range of programmes, including Transition Year, the established Leaving
Certificate, The Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) and the Leaving
Certificate Applied (LCA) cater for the varying needs of senior students.

Analysis of the timetable indicates that the school is compliant with Circular M29/95 in all
areas except in relation to tuition time for fifth-year and sixth-year students. That circular
stipulates a requirement of 28 hours tuition for all students. A significant number of senior
students have up to six timetabled study periods per week over a two-year period. This
shortfall in required tuition time must be addressed as a matter of urgency. A review of all
option bands should form the basis of a substantial amendment of the senior-cycle
timetable. In the context of this review, the possibility of offering French as an optional
rather than a core subject for Leaving Certificate could be considered.

A general review of the Transition Year programme is recommended. There is overlap in
some modules and a more integrated approach across academic subjects would be more in
keeping with the principles of TY. The programme offers the potential for innovation and
team-building, an excellent example of which already exists in the in-house production of
the annual school musical. As TY is compulsory in the school, the practice of requiring students to choose their subjects for Leaving Certificate at the end of third year, rather than at the end of TY, needs to be reviewed. TY students undertake a two-week work experience placement in the final fortnight of May, immediately before the summer holidays. This arrangement should be reviewed as it does not allow for feedback, group discussion or meaningful reflection on the students’ experiences in the work place until the following September when the students return to fifth year.

2.3 Management of facilities

The maintenance of the school represents an ongoing challenge as it occupies a large extended area, comprising buildings of various age and design. Nevertheless, the school is immaculately maintained by a dedicated ancillary staff team. Classrooms and corridors are clean and bright. The school has a library, a concert hall and good facilities for practical subjects. The board has availed of grants from the Department of Education and Skills to improve heating and insulation in the oldest sections of the building. ICT facilities are of a very high standard and all classrooms are equipped with data projectors. The spacious indoor sports facility was gifted by the sisters of St. Louis in 2007. Due to the dispersed nature of the buildings, it is not practical to have teacher-based classrooms. Therefore, the storage and transportation of equipment and teaching materials prove difficult for staff. Furthermore, the staffroom is very small for the number of teachers in the school. It is recommended that, when finances permit, the work facilities for the staff be upgraded.

There is a comprehensive safety statement and a designated safety officer in place. Fire drills are held regularly and exits are signposted on corridors. As a further safety precaution, it is recommended that notices indicating the correct evacuation route be displayed in each room.

3. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

Twenty lessons across a range of fifteen subject areas were observed. In almost all of those lessons, the standard of teaching and learning ranged from very good to excellent. All lessons were well planned and clear learning outcomes were shared with students at the outset. Appropriate resources were used effectively to support teaching and learning. In a small minority of cases, a more judicious choice of age-appropriate material would have served better to engage young learners. In more than half of the lessons observed, ICT was used to enrich the learning experience of students. Very good questioning techniques challenged students to offer explanations, express opinions and develop their answers more fully.

In almost all lessons observed, productive teaching strategies that actively engaged the learners were employed. Group work and pair work exercises, when well prepared and monitored by the teacher, encouraged and enabled students to interact with their peers. Lessons were, for the most part, appropriately paced. The writing of key words and phrases on the board proved to be a helpful strategy to assist students’ understanding and to support literacy. In all language lessons observed the use of the target language was exemplary. Good examples of the use of differentiation in terms of content and approach were noted in some lessons and this merits further development. A very good work ethic and a positive, affirming atmosphere were noted in the classrooms visited.
Students were progressing well and were able to recall previous learning and use correct subject-specific terminology. Teachers set high expectations for their students and the uptake of higher-level courses for certificate examinations is very good. It is commendable that each subject department maintains records of student attainment in certificate examinations in relation to the national figures obtained from the State Examinations Commission. It is recommended that each subject department analyse these results annually to ascertain which particular teaching approaches have worked well and to identify strategies to further enhance student attainment.

The quality of teachers’ record keeping was very high. In accordance with the homework policy, teachers regularly assign and correct homework. Care needs to be taken to ensure that all students are recording their homework assignments in their journals. Some teachers are implementing the principles of assessment for learning (AfL) in the provision of very good, formative feedback to students. The next planned phase of CPD for staff will focus on the AfL approach to correcting students’ work and this should further enhance their learning experience.

4. IMPLEMENTATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS FROM PREVIOUS EVALUATIONS

4.1 Management

All recommendations made in previous evaluations around health and safety issues have been implemented by the board. The ICT facilities throughout the school have been upgraded considerably and ongoing training is provided to staff. The streaming of junior-cycle mathematics classes is now deferred until second year. The concept and practice of department subject planning have been progressed significantly.

4.2 Learning and Teaching

The majority of recommendations regarding learning and teaching across a number of subject areas have been put into practice. Key areas highlighted for development in previous evaluations included: the sharing of learning outcomes with students, the use of a wide range of questioning techniques and active, participative teaching methodologies to engage learners. All of the above characterised most lessons observed during this evaluation. Furthermore, the recommended integration of ICT into lessons has been advanced considerably and an e-learning committee has been set up to guide the process. Differentiation in the classroom and good practices in relation to the correction of students’ work are being progressively developed and deployed.

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

All members of the school community have participated in significant self-evaluation since 2004 and their engagement with this process has resulted in positive action. As referred to earlier in this report, several reviews involving all stakeholders have been carried out and acted upon for the betterment of the school. Staff members have embraced new technology and new teaching methodologies. The school community has shown that it is open to new ideas and has consulted with other schools to explore best practice and to implement a model best suited to the school. Through its sound working partnership model, St. Louis Secondary School looks to a future of innovation, collaboration and continuous improvement.

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