

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

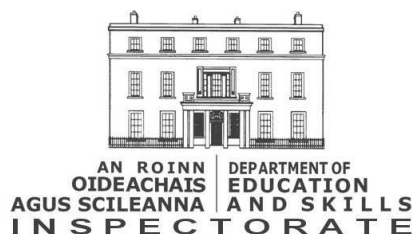
Department of Education and Skills

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

REPORT

**Saint Mary's College,
Ballysadare, County Sligo
Roll number: 65130E**

Date of inspection: 21 February 2013



Whole-School Evaluation Management, Leadership and Learning

A whole-school evaluation of management, leadership and learning (WSE-MLL) was undertaken in February 2013 in Saint Mary's College. 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 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 is a co-educational voluntary secondary school with a current enrolment of 290 students. It is the sole provider of second-level education in the town of Ballysadare which is located eight kilometres from Sligo town. The school operates under the trusteeship of Catholic Education, an Irish Schools Trust (CEIST). It has a long tradition of education provision that is rooted in the values of the Mercy congregation. In recent years the number of students attending the school has declined significantly, having been as high as 417 students in 2007.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

Key Findings

- The board displays a strong commitment to the school and is very supportive of senior management.
- A planning team is in place but a more formalised and cohesive approach to improvement planning is required to meet the needs of the school.
- A key strength of the school is its dedicated and caring staff.
- The school offers a broad curriculum given the size of the school.
- The curriculum is enhanced by a good range of co-curricular and extracurricular activities.
- A range of effective student-support structures is in place to support student wellbeing.
- The school buildings and grounds are maintained to a high standard.
- The quality of teaching and learning was predominantly good or very good; in a significant minority there were evident weaknesses.
- There is good provision for students with additional educational needs.

Recommendations for Further Development

- The board should involve all the school's stakeholders in devising and agreeing a collective vision for school improvement.
- Under the leadership of the principal, a robust whole-school planning structure based on target-setting, strategic action planning and regular review should be established.
- The duties attached to posts of responsibility should be reviewed to support senior management in driving the agreed school improvement agenda forward.

- Mechanisms to improve the quality of communication should be introduced at all levels across the school community.
- Urgent attention needs to be paid to compliance with health and safety management and documentation requirements.
- The code of behaviour and the attendance policy should be revised.
- The subject planning process, supported by appropriate continuing professional development (CPD) should be used to guide and improve teaching and learning across subjects and programmes.

1. QUALITY OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP

1.1 School ownership and management

The board of management is properly constituted and is committed to fulfilling its statutory responsibilities. The board meets regularly, demonstrates a sense of ownership of the school and is very supportive of management, staff and students. Communication with all stakeholders is evident. However, there is scope for improvement in the quality of the communication that is taking place; this includes the agreed written report to the staff and the trustee body and the principal's report to the board. To further strengthen partnership with parents, the board should establish procedures for informing parents of matters in relation both to the operation and performance of the school. Such procedures would facilitate the building of a collective vision for the future of the school.

The board discusses and ratifies school policies as they are presented to it. However, a time-bound plan needs to be established that will develop and update policies according to agreed targets in a timely and collaborative manner. The board should broaden its role in the area of educational leadership in ways that are in line with creating a learning environment as set out in the school's mission statement. For example, the board could undertake a more comprehensive review of the outcomes of certificate examinations across all subjects, discuss the findings of inspection reports in detail and track progress in relation to the recommendations made in such reports.

The developmental priorities articulated by the board include the development of the school's literacy and numeracy strategy, maintenance of ethos, development of sports facilities, student support, curriculum provision and the development of information and communication technology (ICT) including administration systems. Building on the work of the previous board, good progress has been made in relation to a number of these priorities including ICT infrastructure, the student support system, and broadening curriculum provision. However, a number of key challenges are currently facing the school which are critical to its viability. Consequently, it is necessary that existing priorities be reviewed and that new ones be included. These challenges include the need to address declining enrolment, to raise expectations in relation to student attendance, to improve student outcomes and to implement structures to support the more effective management of students. New priorities should be created to deal with these challenges and these, along with existing priorities, should be rank ordered in consultation with staff, students and parents to ensure that there is a shared understanding and unified approach to achieve the school's developmental needs for the coming years.

1.2 Effectiveness of leadership for learning

The principal and deputy principal have a strong commitment to the school and maintain a central presence in the day-to-day running of the school. Together, they form the senior management team and they are engaged in ongoing externally-led CPD which can provide

opportunities to network with other schools in a similar context. They should seek out and make optimal use of such opportunities. They have a shared aspiration of promoting continuing improvement in teaching and learning and creating a vibrant school. For the school, achieving this will mean focusing on increasing enrolment, improving attendance rates, better management of students, raising student attainment, overseeing improvements in the process of subject planning and driving forward the school's self-evaluation agenda. For the principal, her role needs to be realigned to devolve key areas of responsibility to the deputy principal and the middle management team and thus, allow her to focus on her leadership and developmental responsibilities.

The middle management team comprises five assistant principals and ten special duties teachers. Members of this team show dedication in their work and there is some evidence of distributed leadership in the tasks assigned to their posts of responsibility. However, the duties attaching to a number of posts do not reflect the current needs or the developmental priorities of the school. The senior management team meets weekly with the assistant principals, most of whom are year heads. Overall, the middle management team should be utilised in a more optimal manner to collaboratively support senior management and progress the strategic priorities identified for the school. Systematic procedures should be established to monitor and to review the duties attached to each post to ensure that all resources available to the school in the form of posts of responsibility are being used to meet the needs of the school in a proactive manner.

Notwithstanding the collaboration concerning some areas of school life that currently takes place, more effective communication involving both management and teaching staff is necessary to enable the sharing of key information, adequate discussion and action planning in relation to the main challenges facing the school. The improved management of time at staff meetings would be a practical and achievable early step in bringing about the change needed.

A key strength of the school is its dedicated and caring staff. Good supports are in place to facilitate CPD among staff. The recent audit of staff training needs should be collated to inform a CPD plan over the coming years. There has been a good focus on up-skilling teachers in the use of ICT as a teaching and learning tool. The practice of sharing in-house expertise as a model of training is commended and should be further encouraged.

The school planning team comprises the principal, the deputy principal and a special duties teacher. This team has established tasks groups to work on identified developmental areas and some improvements have been effected. However, a more formalised and cohesive approach to school improvement planning, focused on action planning and target-setting within clear timeframes needs to be put in place to drive the improvement agenda in the operational and development challenges facing the school. This planning framework should provide for regular review and effective communication on the outcomes of progress through an effective steering and reporting structure. This approach to strategic planning should ensure a collective direction for the school community.

The school offers a broad and balanced curriculum. The recent addition of Agricultural Science, in response to the students' expression of interest, is reflective of the school's commitment to meeting the needs of students. Currently, the time allocation for Physical Education (PE) at senior cycle falls short of the recommended provision as does the *ab-initio* language module in Leaving Certification Vocational Programme (LCVP). Strategies to address these shortfalls should be explored in the construction of the timetable for the next academic year. Students' learning is further enhanced by a wide range of co-curricular and extracurricular activities. The goodwill and volunteerism of staff is commended in this regard.

Very good procedures are in place to support the transition from feeder primary schools. These include an open night, orientation days, good transfer of data and flexibility of subject choice built around a short taster programme. Students are offered an open choice of subjects at senior cycle with option bands generated to best accommodate students' preferences. The majority of student and parent respondents in the questionnaires indicated satisfaction with the subject choice information they received.

One of the key strengths of the school is its ethos of care. It is evident that good structures are in place to ensure that the care needs of students are supported. The existence of a care team and an anti-bullying group provide further evidence that the school prioritises the welfare of its students. These supports were very positively endorsed by parents and students. There is a strong commitment to faith development, the celebration of liturgical events and appropriate provision is made for Relationship and Sexuality Education (RSE).

The school's open admission policy is inclusive in principle and in practice. However, it should include information on the appeals process for parents and students. Overall, the code of behaviour is considered by the school community to be fair. However, concerns were raised by staff in relation to the effectiveness of the code in the management of students. Given these concerns, it is recommended that a comprehensive revision of the code be conducted at whole-staff level as a matter of priority. This revision should focus on the appropriateness and effectiveness of interventions and provide greater clarity with regard to the demerit system. There is also a need for greater consistency in the application of sanctions and in their follow-through at all levels in the ladder of referral. There is evidence of over-reliance on suspension as a sanction. This needs to be reviewed. Students and parents should be centrally involved in the recommended revision of the code of behaviour.

Student retention levels are very good but there are some significant concerns with regard to attendance issues. While student attendance is monitored each morning by year heads for their respective year groups, there is no centrally generated absence list across year groups available to staff members. It is recommended that such a list be compiled at an early stage in the morning and updated as necessary for the afternoon so that absent students can be readily identified at any stage during the day. The school should undertake an in-depth analysis of non-attendance data and gather baseline information to support target-setting and strategic action planning to address the attendance concerns that were reported during the evaluation. Strategies in relation to improvements in attendance should seek to forge closer partnership with parents and students. As part of this awareness-building process the school should consider tracking the impact of attendance on student achievement and disseminating this information to all the relevant stakeholders.

A democratically elected and representative student council engages in numerous school activities, often working with the parents' association. Significantly, in the questionnaires administered during the evaluation, the vast majority of students reported that they do not have a say in making the school a better place. This evidence points up the need for the student council to work on developing its role as the voice of the student body. It is recommended that the board consider seeking the views of the student council early in the development of policies that directly affect the student body and inviting council representatives to present an annual report at a board meeting.

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*.

1.3 Management of facilities

The school buildings and grounds are maintained to a very good standard. The work of the school's caretaking staff and the commitment to the ongoing development of facilities by management is commended. A good range of student artworks are on display in addition to photographs and student awards.

The school has prioritised the development of ICT for many years and it has a very well developed ICT infrastructure. The school has recently introduced E-portal. However, further training needs to be undertaken so that it can be utilised to its maximum capacity in supporting the school's data management systems. Specialist rooms are well equipped.

The school buildings are clean and litter free. As a means of building on this commitment to environmental awareness, consideration could be given to participation in the Green Schools Programme.

The school's operational health and safety statement is out of date and is need of urgent review in line with the Health Safety Authority's 2010 *Guidelines on Managing Safety and Health in Post-Primary Schools*. Risk assessment audits of all teaching areas should be carried out on an annual basis and submitted to the health and safety officer. More comprehensive evacuation procedures should be displayed in all classrooms and clearly defined assembly areas should be outlined outside in the hard court areas.

2. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

2.1 The quality of learning and teaching

The subject and programme planning documentation reviewed showed significant variations between the departments in the level of engagement with subject planning. Best practice was observed where there was a focus on learning outcomes linked to methodologies, resources and assessment modes. In many cases plans were primarily content driven. It is recommended that a system be put in place to ensure that the subject planning process is utilised effectively as a vehicle to guide and improve teaching and learning across subjects and programmes. This process should provide a means to build capacity and skills, share methodologies and develop agreed procedures in relation to literacy and numeracy and *assessment for learning* (AfL) practices.

In the majority of lessons observed the quality of teaching and learning was good with some very good practice observed in a number of lessons. However, there was considerable scope for improvement in one fifth of the lessons observed.

In almost all cases planning and preparation for lessons were effective. Teachers had prepared a range of teacher-generated materials to support learning. Some very good use was made of ICT to enhance learning. However, its potential as an effective teaching and learning tool should be further utilised in some classes.

In the main some very good efforts were made to vary the teaching strategies used and this helped optimise student engagement. Where task-based activities were not part of the lessons the students were less engaged and more passive in their learning. In a number of cases there was scope for the greater use of active learning approaches and for cooperative learning by students. It is recommended that the development of strategies for active and collaborative learning become a specific focus within subject department planning.

Questioning techniques were generally appropriate and included a good mix of lower-order and higher-order questions. The greater use of directed and differentiated questioning strategies is recommended so that all students are challenged and that lessons provide for the full range of abilities.

There were some very good examples of differentiated learning outcomes in almost half of the lessons. As students undertook tasks set during the lesson the teachers used the opportunities provided to scaffold the needs of individual students and to support them in completing these tasks. The further differentiation of learning outcomes and lesson tasks is recommended to cater for the variety of learning needs in the mixed-ability classroom setting, giving particular attention to more able students.

Good use was made of key words as a support to literacy and attention was paid to numeracy where appropriate. It is timely that a whole-school approach to literacy and numeracy be developed so that agreed cross-curricular strategies can be implemented in line with the school's identified priorities for school self-evaluation.

Notwithstanding that the setting of homework was a feature of lessons observed, a review of a random sample of homework journals across the year groups indicated that homework is not set regularly in all subjects. This is an area for development. Good quality student work was observed where high expectations were set in relation to the completion of homework and to the presentation and quality of this work. In some cases an effective system was in place whereby students maintained an organised record of their work from year to year throughout the cycle. Very good practices were observed where students' work was appropriately monitored, regularly checked by teachers and provided with formative written feedback to support learning. The good practices noted in relation to homework and assessment should be an integral part of classroom practice in all subject areas. In order to support this improvement a whole-school assessment policy that would incorporate best practice in relation to homework should be developed. Furthermore, the practice of students maintaining records of work should be developed and implemented across the school.

The learning environment in many classrooms was enhanced with image and print-rich displays. In almost all lessons observed there was very good classroom management and a positive atmosphere was evident, characterised by pleasant and respectful teacher-student rapport.

3. IMPLEMENTATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS FROM PREVIOUS EVALUATIONS

3.1 Management

The four most recently published subject inspections reports were taken into consideration during this evaluation. All recommendations made in these reports relating to subject provision and whole-school support have been implemented.

3.2 Learning and teaching

The recommendations made in previous subject inspection reports in relation to subject planning, the use of active learning methodologies and AfL strategies require further attention across all subject areas. The evaluation team examined subject planning documentation for the subjects concerned. It was evident that the recommendations made in relation to improving planning documentation had been addressed in only one of the subject departments concerned. In Geography, student outcomes in certificate examinations have not been analysed and action planning for improvement was not evident in the

documentation viewed. The increased use of AfL practices and the greater implementation of active learning strategies continue to be areas in need of development across subject areas. The sharing by teachers of best practice in these methodologies should be facilitated as a means of enhancing and improving teaching and learning.

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

School management and staff are committed to the school and they demonstrate a readiness to engage with progressing the school's developmental priorities. To harness this goodwill and to bring about effective change and improvement in areas of most need it is recommended that a much more focused, formalised and progressive approach be developed. This is needed to drive change and bring about improvement in an effective and expedient manner.

To promote a culture of self-evaluation across the school, all subject departments should carry out an analysis of certificate examination results on a yearly basis. This should be used to inform their target-setting and their action planning for improvement in relation to student attainment and the percentage uptake of higher level in certificate examinations. To create and maintain momentum, the analyses of student outcomes and the plans for improvement should be submitted to senior management and to the board for both information and discussion.

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 College welcomes the positive and encouraging WSE-MLL report. It acknowledges the goodwill of the inspection team and the manner in which all the stakeholders participated positively in the inspection process.

The Board welcomes the key findings which emphasise

- The commitment of the Board of Management
- The caring spirit of the school
- the school's robust student support structures
- the dedication of teachers and the senior management team
- the wealth and breadth of the curriculum
- the range of extra- and co- curricular activities
- the provision for students with additional educational needs
- the high standard of maintenance of the physical environment

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

Follow –up actions undertaken since the completion of the inspection activity:

- Revision and ratification by the Board of Management of the Code of Behaviour.
- Ratification by the Board of Management of an amended admissions policy.
- Systematic analyses of results in State examinations that are incorporated in subject department plans.
- Expansion of the duties of tutors to include a focus on student achievement and homework.
- Enhancement of the system for monitoring and tracking student attendance.
- Compliance with inspection recommendations of the time allocation of the *ab initio* language component of the LCVP.
- A programme for teacher CPD with a focus on teaching and learning.
- A review of middle management duties.
- Distribution of leadership responsibilities to the Deputy- Principal.
- Establishment of a strategic planning group.

Follow-up actions planned:

- Prioritisation of policy development by the Board of Management.
- Development of an effective steering and reporting structure.
- Student Council development.
- Mechanisms to improve the quality of communication among all stakeholders.
- Health and Safety compliance.