Whole-School Evaluation
Management, Leadership and Learning

REPORT

Carlow Vocational School
Carlow Town, County Carlow
Roll number: 70420R

Date of inspection: 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 Carlow Vocational 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, and the response of the board will be found in the appendix of this report.

Introduction

Carlow Vocational School (CVS) is situated on the outskirts of Carlow Town. The school participates in Developing Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) planning. The school provides a wide range of educational provision for its 268 mainstream second-level students, 809 post-Leaving Certificate (PLC) students and 614 adult and further education students. As part of its mainstream second level provision, the school also offers a repeat Leaving Certificate programme that currently attracts students from the locality and surrounding areas. To add to the existing diversity the school operates an Italian education exchange programme resulting in the placement of students in the school’s senior cycle programme.

1. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

1.1 Key Findings

- The Board of management is a committed and active body.
- Through the development of a very comprehensive five-year plan a clear sense of direction has been identified for the school.
- Senior management and teachers have developed and delivered an innovative in-house continuing professional development (CPD) programme.
- The school has developed a number of inclusive and caring practices that are implemented on a daily basis.
- The school is moving towards embedding a more devolved system of student behaviour management which is underpinned by the pastoral and care systems.
- The school provides good educational and pastoral supports through the implementation of the special educational needs (SEN) and Guidance programmes.
- Almost all recommendations of previous inspection reports have been addressed, except in relation to subject planning.
- The school has embraced strategic planning and self-evaluative practices and has the capacity to continually evaluate practice and achieve improvement.

1.2 Recommendations for Further Development

- Task groups, comprising appropriate stakeholders and based upon the key areas for development identified within the school development plan, should be formed and charged with the prioritisisation and delivery of key targets, such as curriculum and
attendance and numeracy in the students’ experience and teaching and learning sections of the plan respectively.

- The board should undertake a curricular review to ensure that appropriate courses are provided for each student in the school.
- Subject plans should record the good teaching practices observed and serve as a manual for the provision of the subject in the school.
- The attention of the school authorities is drawn to the need for compliance with the following circular letters: M29/95 *Time in School*, M1/96 CSPE and 0027/2008 RSE.

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 of Carlow Vocational School is a committed and active body with a broad educational knowledge base enabling it to manage the school on behalf of County Carlow Vocational Educational Committee (VEC). The board is properly constituted with appropriate representation from the school’s education partners. The board fulfils its statutory obligations to uphold the characteristic spirit of the school, communicate with the VEC and arrange for the preparation of a school plan. County Carlow VEC has provided the board with an overarching framework to inform its operation and reporting protocols. In addition to these communication structures, agreed reports are prepared for parent and teacher bodies.

Confirmation was provided that the board of management has formally adopted the *Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-primary Schools* (September 2011) without modification. The school is compliant with the requirements of Post-primary Circulars M44/05 and 0062/2006. School authorities provided evidence that arrangements are being put in place to ensure compliance with the requirements of the recently published Circular 0065/2011 and *Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools* as a matter of priority.

**The school’s priorities for development**

A comprehensive Whole School Development Plan 2011-2016 (WSDP) has been developed in consultation with stakeholders. The plan uses a SMART model and identifies specific, measurable and time-bound targets. The work of evaluating and identifying the school’s developmental priorities was initiated by the former senior management team. This has provided an important link between the previous and new senior management. To develop and strengthen ownership of the plan within the school body, it is advisable to constitute a task force related to each of the plan’s seven areas. Where appropriate, the members of these task forces could be drawn from appropriate stakeholders. Ongoing managerial tasks should be separated from key school developmental issues to form an overall strategic plan. On a yearly basis a tactical plan that addresses the key priorities within each area should be developed and progressed. It is also recommended that the targets of the DEIS plan (2009-2012) be integrated into the WSDP and that each subject department’s plan should take cognisance of the WSDP.

The board is committed to ensuring that targets identified as part of DEIS action planning are achieved. Baseline data has been accrued for all eight areas of development. While good progress has occurred in a number of areas the realisation of numeracy and attendance targets should now be seen as a priority.
2.2 Effectiveness of leadership for learning

Leadership of staff
In the relatively short period since their appointment, the senior management team has provided a significant level of leadership and vision for the school. This team has developed a systematic approach to the completion of their individual and shared tasks and has been instrumental in devising the WSDP.

Clearly defined roles have been developed for the senior management team, year heads, class tutors, care team and subject convenors. Teaching staff have opportunities to develop leadership expertise within these roles. A distributed leadership model is being developed.

Teachers new to CVS are encouraged to complete a school induction programme which seeks to develop a continuum of life-long learning. Ongoing CPD is also provided for all teaching staff through centrally provided CPD and internally through the school’s professional learning community. This innovative programme of peer-led seminars occurs on a weekly basis during lunchtime. It facilitates the sharing of in-house expertise so that a supportive learning environment is provided for students. Teachers’ commitment to delivering and attending this programme is commended and reflects the school community’s commitment to maintaining its role as an educational hub for County Carlow.

Co-operative teaching strategies are currently being piloted within the school’s educational support system. To further embed this practice senior management should identify appropriate training opportunities with a view to planning for the scheduling of this model of provision within the 2012/2013 timetable.

Clear targets have been identified in the WSDP in relation to subject planning. These targets include developing coherent schemes of work for class groups that address DEIS targets, the identification of strategies to improve students’ attainment, and the incorporation of appropriate literacy and numeracy strategies. While the subject department plans reviewed contained scheme of works, they were not detailed enough to provide a manual on how the particular subject is delivered in the classroom. To maximise the benefits of subject planning the focus should now be placed upon the identification, implementation and evaluation of best practices in lesson methodologies and student learning outcomes. The outcomes of this process should be documented in the schemes of work for each subject.

Leadership of students
The school’s second-level enrolment has remained relatively constant over the last number of years. The school’s population includes students from various backgrounds and nationalities. There are many inclusive practices in place to support all students such as the work of the Home School Community Liaison teacher and the inclusion of students with additional educational needs in mainstream lessons.

The school provides its students with access to a number of leadership opportunities. The student council’s leadership programme provides students with a forum and means to provide leadership for their peers. Out-of-school activities such as the kick-start club provided under the auspices of the school completion programme enable at-risk students to be targeted and given positive role-models and experiences of second-level school life.

The school’s code of behaviour has recently been reviewed in an effort to embed a ladder of referral system based upon a pastoral approach. This code outlines the roles and
responsibilities of key personnel in the management of students. To further enhance this good practice it is advisable to provide CPD for tutors in their newly constituted roles regarding the boundaries between a pastoral approach and progression through the school’s ladder of referral. The number of suspensions resulting from student misbehaviour has reduced significantly and this is a most welcome outcome.

Improving students’ attendance is a key deliverable as outlined in the school’s DEIS plan. Notwithstanding the significant efforts made in relation to addressing this issue, student attendance figures, including chronic absenteeism, have worsened over the past number of years. Considerable resources and time are being expended on a number of interventions. It is suggested that each intervention be evaluated for its effectiveness and a solutions-orientated approach be adopted in an effort to improve student attendance rates.

A student profiling system is operated concurrently with the Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP) profiling system. This tracking protocol identifies students’ progress in a number of non-academic areas and allows class teachers and year heads to give students the affirmation or direction required. Evidence of this feedback was observed in students’ journals giving them, and their parents, a regular and tangible record of achievements. Students and parents commented positively on these interventions and the recognition of students’ efforts. Attainment in certificate examinations in subjects varied considerably with positive findings in relation to some science, language and technology subject areas. The student profiling system could now be extended to include target setting. This could be carried out in a collaborative manner with subject teachers and monitored throughout the year.

Students and parents responded most positively when asked about the care provided within CVS. The evaluation team concurs with this view and commends the educational, student support and pastoral systems in place. Each class group has tutor time of one class period and this was observed to be an effective use of instruction time. However, the student registration and assembly time of almost two class periods per week should not be counted as instruction time. Weekly timetables are one class period short of the minimum instruction time required by the Department and this raises a significant issue regarding the school’s compliance with circular M29/95. This should be addressed as a matter of priority.

Learning support and resource hours are deployed to individual or group withdrawal systems, and in some instances, co-operative teaching methods. Elements of the school’s educational support allocations are utilised to reduce class sizes, and to provide additional class groupings and a varied subject choice for students. To further develop the school’s educational supports, senior management should endeavour to increase the number of suitably qualified resource and learning support teachers. In doing so, the scheduling of resource and learning support could be planned in conjunction with the timetabling of the mainstream student body. This model would help to further embed the use of co-operative teaching practices.

Guidance provision in the school is scheduled on a weekly basis for fifth and sixth-year students and as part of junior-cycle students’ SPHE programme. Currently TY students do not receive timetable guidance support; this should be addressed. Students have access to counselling services through a referral system. A relationships and sexuality education (RSE) programme runs as part of the SPHE programme at junior cycle. Currently the RSE programme is delivered at senior cycle in an ad hoc manner. The RSE policy should be clearly outlined at senior cycle and an appropriate programme developed and delivered.

Students are offered a broad range of subjects particularly in relation to European languages, sciences and practical subjects. In some instances class groups have a reduced range of subjects in order to cater for their specific learning needs. The composition of
these groups and choices available within these groups’ curricula should be reviewed as part of the overall curriculum review outlined below. Currently, Civic, Social and Political Education (CSPE) is not a core subject for all of the school’s junior cycle students. This deficit should be reviewed in light of the Department of Education and Skills’ circular letter M1/96.

At junior cycle all students follow the JCSP. At senior cycle, an optional Transition Year (TY) programme is provided. At Leaving Certificate three curricular programmes are provided. However, no student in CVS has availed of the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme since 2009. This is a cause for concern as students who may successfully complete the JCSP, but display deficits in relation to literacy, numeracy, communication and life skills would benefit from a well-organised and effectively-operated LCA programme. To address this concern, the school should undertake a focused curricular review. The key areas of investigation should include curriculum design and subject choice at junior cycle and educational progression, programme accessibility and suitability at senior cycle. This process should be an inclusive exercise involving all stakeholders.

2.3 Management of facilities

The school’s success in attracting students to its various strands of provision has resulted in complex resource allocation procedures. The management of these resources, particularly the human and physical resources, places considerable strain on the school’s timetable. The efforts to balance these resources must be continued with every possible consideration of the impact of decisions for second-level students. While operating to capacity, facilities are very well maintained in the school. Recent improvements include the provision of new sports facilities and the development of information and communication technology (ICT) resources which are available to students and teachers. Plans are progressing in relation to the realisation of a new school building on a greenfield site. The proposed larger site would provide the school with additional modern facilities.

3. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

3.1 The quality of learning and teaching

The quality of learning and teaching during the twenty-five class periods observed was student-centred and of a very high standard. Lessons were characterised by a good balance of teacher and student activity, interactivity and practical engagement in tasks.

At the beginning of most lessons the desired learning outcomes were shared with students. In almost half of the lessons observed learning outcomes were reviewed at the end, further reinforcing student learning. It is recommended that all teachers adopt this approach, in keeping with the principles of assessment for learning.

Lessons were appropriately planned, paced and structured. Teachers prepared a range of resources and materials to support students’ engagement and learning. ICT was rarely utilised as part of the students’ learning experience. In most cases this was not an issue as student activity and participation levels were good. However in a few instances, lessons would have benefited from the integration of innovative and effective excerpts of short audio-visual or interactive ICT resources.

Subject-specific terminology was reinforced in many lessons observed. Effective use of the JCSP keyword support posters and highlighting of new terms on the blackboard was evident in some lessons. To further develop students’ subject terminology repertoire a
whole-school approach should be adopted to maximise literacy objectives. Interventions aimed at improving students’ numeracy skills occurred in only four of the lessons observed. Improvement in numeracy is a target of the DEIS action plan and a whole-school cross-curricular approach should now be seen as a priority to improve students’ numeric competencies.

In the language lessons observed there was an appropriate emphasis on students’ use of the relevant target language as a medium of communication. Students were encouraged to converse in the language of study and teachers used the target language as the language of instruction. Good practice was observed in lessons where the grammatical similarities and differences between English and the chosen language were discussed. This enabled students to identify and reinforce their learning in both areas.

Students received very good levels of oral feedback in the lessons observed. There was also evidence of written formative feedback on students’ work in almost half of the lessons visited. The further implementation of assessment for learning practices should be developed throughout the school.

Exemplary behaviour and a good rapport between students and their teacher was a common feature of all lessons observed. The learning atmosphere in all lessons was caring, positive and encouraging.

4. IMPLEMENTATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS FROM PREVIOUS EVALUATIONS

4.1 Management
Since 2006, inspections of English, Mathematics, Science and Biology, and Physical Education have taken place. The resulting inspection reports contained recommendations relating to timetabling, retesting students to assess progress, and the appointment of teachers with subject-specific qualifications. School management has implemented most of these recommendations; however some areas, including subject department planning, have not yet been addressed.

4.2 Learning and Teaching
Assessment practices and differentiated teaching practices have been developed and implemented as per recommendations from previous reports. A small number of recommendations related to subject department meetings. It was recommended that the agenda include discussions among department members as to what is best practice in teaching and learning. However it was not evident from the minutes of subject department meetings what discussions had taken place formally or informally on best practice. Much work remains on the recommendations relating to subject planning and these now need to be progressed in all subjects.

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

County Carlow VEC has good systems in place to promote ongoing improvement in provision in its schools. Senior management and teaching staff adopt a reflective approach to their work. The senior management team operate in a reflective manner and, through the development of the comprehensive and strategic five-year plan, all aspects of school life have been examined and areas for improvement identified. The involvement of stakeholders on task committees will progress the implementation of prioritised targets in
the plan. The continued cyclical review of WSD and DEIS planning with target attainment measured against achieved results and ongoing professional development will progress the reflective and developmental practices of the school.

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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 of Carlow Vocational School welcomes the positive and encouraging response to the WSE - MLL, and the fact that the tradition of excellence in Carlow Vocational School is affirmed in this report. We attribute this to the strong sense of partnership that the BoM has created with Co Carlow VEC, the senior management team (SMT), staff, parents, students and all stakeholders.

We are heartened that the inspectorate commended the quality of learning and teaching in our school stating that it is “student centred and of very high standard”, and that the response of students and parents to the caring ethos of the school is valued and noted.

The commendation of our implementation of strategic planning and self-evaluative practices is very reassuring, together with the appraisal of our distributed leadership model and vision for the school.

We are steadfast in maintaining our role “as an educational hub for County Carlow.”
Area 2: Follow-up actions planned or undertaken since the completion of the inspection activity to implement the findings and recommendations of the inspection

1.2 Summary of Findings - Recommendations for Further Development

- The BoM has:
  - ratified an Annual Operating Plan devised by the SMT and staff based on the WSDP
  - undertaken a comprehensive curriculum review and is confident that the provision meets the needs of each student – see 2.2 leadership of students

- The BoM is confident that:
  - Subject Planning is currently being developed to include the recommendations
  - CVS is addressing compliance issues relating to M29/95, M1/96 and 0027/2008

2.1 School’s Priorities for development

The BoM confirms that the following recommendation areas are being addressed:
- the targets of the DEIS plan are now integrated with the WSDP
- subject plans are related to the WSDP
- the realisation of numeracy targets is embedded as part of subject planning
- attendance targets – see 2.2 Leadership of Students

2.2 Leadership of staff

The BoM confirms that:
- the SMT has identified and introduced measures to embed further co-operative teaching practices
- subject planning is led by an Assistant Principal in a whole-school context

Leadership of students

- The BoM is pleased to note that CPD opportunities for Class Tutors are scheduled as part of the Professional Learning Community.
- Where the report refers to chronic absenteeism, the BoM confirms that an evaluation of attendance interventions was undertaken this year, and this process is now rationalised, with positive outcomes.
- The BoM notes that the recommendation to extend student profiling to include target setting for students is already an intrinsic feature of the student profiling process and includes all academic subject outcomes.
- Compliance with M29/95 – the BoM is satisfied that this matter is being addressed – see 1.2 above.
- Learning Resource Teachers – due to DES allocation cuts, the response to this recommendation will be more limited than the BoM had hoped. Through CPD, teaching staff will be trained and up-skilled to enhance their professional capabilities to provide additional resource teaching capacity. The BoM supports the SMT’s programming of resource teachers as a constant feature of timetable and planning.
• The BoM recognises and values the importance of guidance provision as part of the bulwark of its school programme and supports the SMT in their endeavour to provide guidance but this will be to a more limited extent, due to DES allocation cuts.
• The BoM directs an annual curricular review.

2.3 Management of Facilities
The BoM of CVS is delighted that the DES has announced that a new school will be built for 70420R in 2015-16.

3.1 Quality of Learning and Teaching
The BoM confirms that:
• the Mathematics Department is leading a programme of numeracy into all subject planning and teaching
• ‘Assessment for Learning’ practices in relation to student feedback within lessons are being developed through subject planning, the Professional Learning Community and the JCSP programme

4.1 Implementations of recommendations from previous evaluations – management
See 2.2 above – subject planning.

4.2 Implementations of recommendations from previous evaluations – learning and teaching
The BoM confirms that subject planning meetings will be formalised, to include agenda, minutes and items on pedagogy, methodology, assessment for learning, ICT, numeracy and literacy.