Whole-School Evaluation
Management, Leadership and Learning

REPORT

Avondale Community College
Rathdrum, County Wicklow
Roll number: 70810H

Date of inspection: 21 September 2011
Whole-School Evaluation  
Management, Leadership and Learning  

A whole-school evaluation of management, leadership and learning (WSE-MLL) was undertaken in September 2011. This report presents the findings of the evaluation and makes recommendations for improvement. During the evaluation, the inspection team met with the board of management, in-school management, groups of teachers and students. Inspectors also reviewed a range of school documentation and responses to questionnaires and examined other data held by the Department of Education and Skills. As part of the evaluation, a range of lessons across a number of subject areas were inspected.

Introduction
Avondale Community College is a co-educational post-primary school with 487 students under the patronage of Co. Wicklow Vocational Education Committee (VEC). The school population is growing each year. The school provides for students of all abilities. The curriculum incorporates the Junior Certificate, an optional Transition Year (TY), the established Leaving Certificate and the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP). The school participates in the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) initiative. It benefits from the Home-School-Community Liaison (HSCL) scheme and the School Completion Programme (SCP). 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.

1. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

1.1 Key Findings

- The board and senior management lead staff and students effectively by setting high expectations for all and encouraging good quality leadership roles.
- Strategic plans are progressed through school development planning with evidence of significant outcomes achieved in many areas and ongoing work in others.
- The school’s core aim is to raise attainment and staff and management demonstrate unity and progressiveness in achieving this long-term objective.
- Very good whole-school approaches to improving teaching and learning and to meeting the needs of students are planned and implemented.
- Student support structures are clear and co-ordinated.
- Open communication and good networks are very well established.
- There is breadth to the expanding curriculum and range of co-curricular activities provided but there are some timetabling areas for development.
- The standard of teaching was good or very good and the quality of learning varied.
- Very good progress has been made on areas for development identified in previous inspections and the school community demonstrates good capacity for self evaluation.

1.2 Recommendations for Further Development

- Existing policies on anti-bullying and Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) should be reviewed.
- The time allocation for Physical Education should be addressed.
- The impact of DEIS interventions should be measured systematically and future planning should incorporate targets that are specific and measurable.
• All teachers should focus on developing student interaction in lessons and on the application of higher-order tasks.

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 operates effectively, is well aware of its statutory obligations and demonstrates confidence in staff and school systems. The principal provides detailed updates at all board meetings on operational issues including progress with the school plan. The VEC gives a very high level of support to the board, management and staff through a range of measures.

The board is cognisant of its leadership responsibilities and actively supports school development. It has overseen the development of a comprehensive school plan, including many policies, though the existing policies on anti-bullying and RSE should be updated. The board is committed also to improving learning and many of the priorities set out in the school plan relate to teaching and learning. School planning priorities are addressed through school development planning, a process that is systematic and productive in the school, as well as through staff continuing professional development (CPD).

The board supports a partnership approach and communicates well with nominating bodies. It invites presentations from the student council annually and encourages the involvement of parents through the work of a committed and active parents’ council. An officer from each of these councils is represented on some of the planning working groups. In questionnaires administered to parents during the evaluation, a very high number of responses indicated satisfaction with the school regarding many aspects of their children’s education. However, many parents responded that they were not aware of the work of the parents’ council or the board. More effective means of communicating the work of these bodies should be sought.

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
A key strength in recent years has been the school’s ability to plan strategically. Annual priorities are laid out in the school plan, 2007-11, and these were developed through collaboration with partners. Priorities listed are substantial and relevant. They incorporate curricular and organisational developments with a clear focus on the quality of educational provision. The setting of priorities annually and assigning responsibility for tasks has maintained continuity and led to incremental development. In addition, a whole-school approach is taken to addressing the priorities for development and many strategies have been implemented through subject department planning. It is prudent that the school has included a target for this year to evaluate the initiatives implemented in 2010. The current model of planning, implementation and review should lead to positive outcomes in the fulfilment of each identified priority.
Evidence shows significant progress has been made in achieving the objectives laid down in the school plan, including behaviour management, communication and partnership in subject departments, all of which were set as targets in earlier years of the school plan and in which the school now demonstrates strengths. Other medium-term outcomes include strategies to enhance student literacy and numeracy in subjects as well as assessment for learning. Recently, this has culminated in a valuable assessment policy. The most recently introduced initiative, that of instructional leadership, is supported by the VEC and focuses teachers on leading learning. There is much evidence of its implementation in the subject plans and in classroom practice, particularly in lesson design, mind mapping and co-operative learning. Other current priorities for development include the support systems and e-learning.

The central focus of all planning has been to raise student attainment. Management and staff acknowledge that the school is on a long-term continuum of development in this regard and that continued efforts are required. Outcomes from certificate examinations over the past four years indicate considerable variety in the trend of uptake of higher level for subjects; for some subjects it is upward, for some the trend has been downward and in others it is fluctuating. This needs ongoing consideration at all levels and the school should also examine numbers achieving high results at ordinary-level junior certificate.

The school has a separate DEIS plan. DEIS resources and interventions support academic and social inclusion including attendance monitoring, breakfast and homework clubs, SCP and HSCL. It was reported that these are proving effective. However, the success of these interventions should be measured and supported with comparative data that builds on the baseline data used to identify DEIS targets. In addition to improving tracking, the targets set in the forthcoming review of the DEIS plan should be specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time bound (SMART).

2.2 Effectiveness of leadership for learning

Leadership of staff
The principal and deputy principal provide confident and proactive leadership. They place clear focus on improving learning and have high expectations of students and staff. These aims have guided their vision and the development of a professional learning community. Their leadership is characterised by very good two-way communication with the school community and the ability to listen to and act on feedback.

There is a positive working environment and staff are mutually supportive as evidenced by meeting minutes, sharing of resources and the quality of collaborative planning. Decisions relating to strategic and operational management of the school are made in a transparent manner and all contribute to decision-making. Scheduled planning meetings for teams and regular meetings of assistant principals ensures a unified approach to managing students and leading change. The provision of good quality templates for planning and tracking is further evidence of leadership in bringing about improvement.

The principal enables staff to lead and take responsibility for priorities for development as part of, and in addition to, the post structure. Staff members demonstrate high levels of skills in their roles and contribute to school development. The skills of teachers are utilised in leading initiatives, internal CPD, leading subject departments, policy development, the student support system and work with parent and student councils and the board. Teachers’ accountability for the fulfilment of their various roles in the school is inbuilt in communication with senior management who keep themselves fully informed of progress made and issues encountered. Senior management also encourages subject departments to reflect on the outcomes of the state examinations when planning.
Leadership of students
Leadership of students is based on the school’s mission *Learning to grow through respect and trust*, and is supported by policies and structures that ensure a caring and learning environment. Teachers work purposefully to promote positive interactions and to give praise and encouragement. The school places notable emphasis on recognition of student endeavour and achievement in all aspects of educational provision. Use is made of multiple avenues for positive reinforcement including the student journal, announcements, website and a greatly valued awards night.

The outcomes of questionnaires administered to students revealed strongly that they have a positive attitude towards behaviour management, believe there is a good atmosphere in the school and that they get on well with others. During the evaluation, students demonstrated excellent behaviour and punctuality, and co-operated at all times with instruction and the expectations of school systems, such as uniform compliance and use of the journal. The principal and deputy principal monitor students as they move around the school setting a disciplined social order.

Opportunities for students to lead include the student council, committees and community work. Prefects are given responsibility for promoting care and are trusted in supervision tasks. The contributions of these groups to enhancing school life are valued highly and those involved undertake their tasks with maturity and pride.

Monitoring of students’ well-being and progress are the responsibility of class tutors and year heads. They meet students daily in morning tutorial. The student support systems provide additional effective layers in leading students.

The monitoring of academic outcomes is systematic and teachers use these as indicators of the effectiveness of lesson planning. A number of strategies have been put in place to raise attainment for all abilities and to provide opportunities for students to study subjects at higher level. Evening study is provided and the class formation system allows access to all levels. Teachers measure student attainment by administering frequent tests. A common tracking and target-setting system is in use across the school for students to record the outcomes of assessments and reflect on how they can prepare for the next test. This encourages responsibility. Individually, sixth-years are encouraged to strive for higher outcomes through three motivational meetings with the guidance counsellor and principal. Third years also attend a similar motivational meeting.

The most appropriate learning environment for students of various aptitudes is considered. Mixed-ability groups are formed for most subjects with banding from second year in Irish and English and earlier in Mathematics. Incoming students sit diagnostic tests to determine aspects of learning that require attention and the findings are shared to support whole-school approaches. Plans are underway to re-administer these tests to measure progress on baseline data; this is advisable as it will provide evidence of the effectiveness of interventions and inform a review of DEIS targets. There are some in-class models of support for students with special educational needs through team teaching. Learning-support teachers advise subject teachers on literacy and numeracy promotion and on meeting special educational needs, and this was evident in both the lessons visited and in subject plans. To further enhance this, a strategy-of-the-week approach could be adopted.

Curriculum planning reflects students’ needs and guides recruitment and resource allocation. Management pays attention to the curriculum as the school expands, with Accounting and Chemistry recently added and increased allocation to Physical Education. There is breadth to the curriculum and available co-curricular activities.
The weekly timetable is generally well constructed and, including daily tutorial, meets the required twenty-eight hours and management should continue to ensure all of this is used in tuition. Areas requiring attention include the impact of study periods on instruction time, an uneven spread across the week for some subjects and the appropriateness of double lessons for languages and single lessons for Physical Education. Management is actively planning for these and is also reviewing the optional status of the modern language. Senior management and the board should continue to safeguard the full integrity of the school year and ensure a minimum of 167 days tuition for all, including TY students. Achieving this has been enhanced this year with additional planning time.

TY provides enhanced opportunities for experiential and self-directed learning. Students sit school examinations in subjects as well as the European Computer Driving Licence. There is a need to introduce a broader range of assessment modes into subjects during TY.

The system for checking attendance is administered by teachers and the data are monitored by an attendance officer. National Educational Welfare Board (NEWB) data reveal a high number of students reaching an accumulated twenty or more days absences. This issue merits refocus. Specific targets should be set for this group in the DEIS plan. The school should work with the NEWB’s Integrated Approach and review existing interventions. To monitor progress, the principal should provide cumulative data on this group of students in reports to the board.

2.3 Management of facilities
Extensive school facilities are modern and very well managed with good attention to safety. A continuing programme of improvement is evident and this is driven by provision for an expanding population. ICT is integrated into the infrastructure enabling teachers to access resources and utilise the internet, while also supporting planning, administration and monitoring. Internal communication is enhanced with the use of electronic notices and boards in the staff room. The canteen provides a valuable service and provides healthy options. Developments have taken place with regard to energy saving and the environment and the school is pursuing the Green Schools award. Classrooms and corridors have vibrant displays of students’ work and this supports learning and promotes esteem. Teachers have greatly enhanced the learning environment in their base rooms.

3. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

3.1 The quality of learning and teaching
Twenty-four lessons were observed. Overall, the quality of teaching and learning was good or very good. However, greater opportunities for student interaction are recommended in many instances in order to encourage independent thinking among students, enhance their learning and further raise attainment. Student behavior was exemplary throughout and a secure learning environment was fostered.

Planning and preparation was of a very high quality and resources used were appropriate to the work of the lesson. Lesson purpose was shared with the students at the outset, either verbally or written on the board. Some teachers communicated this in terms of intended learning outcomes and this practice should be extended as it will make students more aware of teaching and learning as a shared responsibility.

A wide range of teaching methodologies was observed. In some instances, the varied teaching strategies facilitated good opportunities for active learning by students. In the lessons where varied methodologies were not used, whole-class teaching dominated and
this merits review. ICT, when used, was used well and supported learning. Other effective methodologies included brainstorming, mind-mapping, and practical activities.

Well-planned lessons resulted in a range of tasks for student collaboration and engagement. Pair or group work activities were observed in a majority of lessons. This facilitated cooperative learning and good student engagement. Of particular note were the lessons where activities devised were interactive in nature and the students were used to working together and voicing their opinions. These practices should be extended.

Questioning was effectively used throughout to introduce new material and to track student comprehension and progress. Good practice was noted in lessons where teachers asked directed rather than global questions, as this resulted in greater participation, and when personal responses were encouraged. Students were challenged to think more deeply when higher-order questions were used. Overall, students’ confidence in verbalising their learning varied and this needs appropriate attention. Questioning strategies, as a current element of the most recent whole-school initiative on instructional leadership, should be extended. To enable more students to take higher level, greater emphasis on engaging students in application, analysis and evaluation-type tasks is recommended.

There were lessons where the methodologies used resulted in very good quality learning. This is reflected in the trend of increased uptake of higher level in those subjects. In lessons where there was a high quality of interactive student participation, students demonstrated the skills and confidence necessary for higher level.

Homework was assigned in all lessons and student recording of homework was exemplary. Very good practice was noted in the varied forms of homework correction, with evident attention to assessment for learning principles, and a high level of formative feedback.

4. IMPLEMENTATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS FROM PREVIOUS EVALUATIONS

4.1 Management
Very good actions have been taken on previous recommendations. Changes successfully accomplished and confirmed through observation include provision of a comprehensive library, the introduction of a TY communications module and amendments to the first-year subject-choice system. Unfortunately, discontinuing double periods for some language lessons has not been possible so far due to timetabling exigencies, but this is under review.

4.2 Learning and Teaching
Subject department have taken a considered approach to actions on recommendations. Good examples of changes to teaching and learning in subjects were observed. These include use of ICT, monitoring and correction of homework with the application of assessment for learning, use of more challenging texts and improvements to students’ ability to ask questions in some areas. It was evident from observations of language lessons that good efforts are being made to extend the use of the target language by the teachers, with the application of methodologies that reduce the use of translation. Emphasis on extending student interaction in the target language is still desirable.

5. THE SCHOOL’S SELF-EVALUATION PROCESS AND CAPACITY FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT
The capacity for self evaluation was well demonstrated. The student support system, curriculum, timetable, communications, student progress and the physical environment are regularly monitored and discussed. Self evaluation is evident in the work of the board in policy review and strategic planning; the whole-school review conducted in 2007 informed the current strategic plan. The recommended improved monitoring of progress with the themes in the DEIS plan will enhance its effectiveness. Teachers showed ability to build on engagement with CPD. Reflective processes and collaboration are embedded in subject department planning and these have enhanced teaching.

The whole school is working collectively towards raising academic standards and demonstrated progressiveness in its strategies to meet this challenge. All involved regarded the findings of this evaluation, including the outcomes of questionnaires administered, as important in informing ongoing development. The attention to high standards and the implementation of productive initiatives will result in measurable benefits for students.

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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, senior management and staff of Avondale Community College welcome the findings of the MLL inspection which took place on Monday 18 to Wednesday 20 September 2011.

The Board of Management wishes to acknowledge the positive affirmation of the entire school community emanating from the report.

The report identifies one of the key strengths of the school as the ability to plan strategically and it acknowledges the significant progress made in achieving the objectives laid out in the school plan.

The Board, senior management and staff wish to acknowledge the recognition by the inspectorate that the school is in a continuum of development in its quest to raise student attainment and that staff and management demonstrate unity and progressiveness in working towards this goal.

The Board wishes to acknowledge the many commendations regarding positive and proactive leadership; the many references to the setting of high expectations of all members of the school community and the recognition of the significant and complex communication network which has been developed in the school community.

The report highlights whole school approaches to improve teaching and learning with particular reference to Instructional Leadership, a recently introduced initiative, which enhances the learning environment.

The report affirms the strong work ethic, the sense of industry and order which permeates all aspects of school life, the positivity and the caring environment which is palpable in accordance with the school’s mission, ‘learning to grow through respect and trust’.

Finally the Board of Management, senior management and staff wish to commend the inspectorate for the professionalism and collaborative manner in which the inspection was conducted. We found it a most positive experience and we valued the sharing of ideas.
Area 2: Follow-up actions planned or undertaken since the completion of the inspection activity to implement the findings and recommendations of the inspection

The Board of Management will ensure that the recommendations will be addressed through the School Development Planning process with the inclusion of all partners.

Some of the recommendations have already come under review through School Development Planning.