

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

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

REPORT

**Ennistymon Vocational School
Ennistymon, County Clare
Roll number: 70840Q**

Date of inspection: 11 November 2014



**AN ROINN OIDEACHAIS
AGUS SCILEANNA | DEPARTMENT OF
EDUCATION
AND SKILLS
INSPECTORATE**

Whole-School Evaluation Management, Leadership and Learning

A whole-school evaluation of management, leadership and learning (WSE-MLL) was undertaken in November, 2014 in Ennistymon Vocational School (EVS). 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

The school is a co-educational, vocational school under the management of Limerick and Clare Education and Training Board (LCETB). The school participates in DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools), the Department's action plan for educational inclusion. It is collaboratively engaged in an amalgamation process with the other two post-primary schools in the town and progress is at an early stage. The principal was appointed in 2011 and the deputy principal was appointed in 2012.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

Key Findings

- Enrolment rates of first year and transfer students have increased significantly in the past two years.
- Parents expressed exceptionally high levels of satisfaction with how the school is run and with how their children are progressing.
- During the evaluation, students expressed pride in their school, they felt fairly and respectfully treated by teachers, and they reported getting on well with their school work.
- The board of management functions effectively, is strategically focused on teaching and learning, and is committed to working with parents and students in genuine partnership.
- The principal and deputy principal work very well together toward achieving a shared vision for school development focussed on achieving high standards and on enabling students to reach their full potential. Very good leadership of staff and of students is evident.
- There is a high level of individual engagement with continuing professional development (CPD) among staff. Also, staff volunteerism has long been, and continues to be, a vital support for the provision of extra-curricular opportunities to students.
- Strong evidence of a whole-staff commitment to the provision of student support was gathered during the evaluation; some changes will be needed to current structures to ensure that the needs of the growing student cohort continue to be met.
- Weekly instruction time is short of the minimum required under Circular M29/95.
- Good or very good teaching was observed in most lessons.
- Good or very good learning was observed in the majority of lessons.

- Very effective work has been done by all in subject-department self-evaluation, leading to rising rates of higher level achievement across the curriculum.

Recommendations for Further Development

- To ensure that the resources available to the school are deployed to provide the required twenty-eight hours' instruction time per week, the board, in conjunction with LCETB, should lead a reprioritisation of the curriculum offered by the school.
- To continue to meet the changing needs of the growing school, an annual review of the documented duties of senior and middle management personnel should be undertaken.
- A more formal, hierarchical student support structure should be established.
- To ensure the changing needs of the student cohort are met, decisions about the subjects that are compulsory and those that are optional should be reviewed in consultation with all stakeholders.
- Good practice in relation to the use of active learning methodologies, differentiation, and assessment for learning should be shared within and across subject departments to support achievement of even higher student learning outcomes.

1. QUALITY OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP

1.1 School ownership and management

The board of management is appropriately constituted. It benefits from a number of valued supports from its trustee LCETB and has appropriate communication mechanisms with it. The board has very effective links with the parents' association and has established some formal links with the student council.

The board functions effectively and collaboratively. It demonstrates strategic leadership by examining aspects of teaching and learning at each meeting, by engaging in school planning, and by reviewing school progress in relation to school self-evaluation (SSE). It is highly commended that the board has planned for a formal handover of information to its successor when its term of office ends. To aid that handover, a formal register of all existing school policies, their past dates of ratification, and their projected review dates should be compiled, to ensure regular, rolling review of policies as well as the prioritisation of policies which still need to be drafted. Also, the new board should ensure that the SSE and school improvement plans it has ratified are provided to the school community.

An appropriate range of developmental priorities has been identified and that is shared by the board, senior management and staff. One of those priorities has been addressing an historical timetabling deficiency that has arisen partly owing to the school's provision of a broad range of subjects and partly to surpluses and shortages of specialist staff in certain subject areas. In this regard, the current timetabling arrangements fall short of what is required to ensure that all students have access to a minimum of twenty-eight class-contact hours per week as required by circular letter M29/95 *Time in School*. Since 2012, the board, senior management, and LCETB have been diligently engaged with this issue by pursuing curricular concessions for the school. However, this approach has not solved the instructional deficit. A new approach needs to be taken to arrive at an effective and sustainable solution. Managing the resources which the school has been allocated through a reprioritisation of curriculum is recommended. In addition, the trialling of some new and creative approaches to subject delivery where levels of uptake are low could be considered.

Survey returns gathered during the evaluation reflect great success by the school in building positive relationships with parents. Almost all parents surveyed agreed or strongly agreed that they feel welcome in the school and all parents surveyed agreed or strongly agreed that they are happy with the school. The school's plans to upload key policies to its recently re-launched website will help reinforce those links. A strong contributor to the fostering of these relationships has been the work of the parents' association which has been in operation since 2012. It demonstrates high capacity to support school developments into the future.

1.2 Effectiveness of leadership for learning

The principal and deputy principal are highly-committed to the school and they form a very effective team. The principal is innovative and ambitious for the school, demonstrates a high level of instructional leadership, and adopts a pro-active approach to school development. The deputy principal plays an important operational role in the school and is a very effective link with the local community. They lead by example and have successfully driven and managed change across a number of areas of school life. Their involvement as classroom teachers exemplifies the highly visible role they have in leading learning in the school. Very good lines of communication have been developed across the school, supported by regular staff meetings and the weekly newsletter.

A key strength of the school is its committed and hardworking staff. There is a high level of individual engagement with CPD among them and they take opportunities to lead initiatives to support school improvement. In 2014/15, three post of responsibility holders support senior management's work. Their work is formally reviewed on an annual basis by the principal. To ensure that the changing needs of the growing school continue to be met, it is recommended that an annual review of the documented duties of senior and middle management take place.

The breadth of subjects provided by the school is valued by students and parents. It is commended that, in recent years, the provision of Physical Education (PE) has been built up from first to fifth year. This work needs to be extended to sixth year as well. Growing numbers of students have been enrolling in the school in recent years and a more equal male/female intake has been developing as an enrolment trend. To meet these students' needs, decisions about the subjects that are compulsory and that are optional for students should be reviewed in consultation with all stakeholders.

The school's Transition Year programme is highly-regarded by the school community because it strives to engage students in community service and in enterprise-focused projects. To ensure that the best aspects of the programme are further developed into the future, a review of some aspects of it is now timely. Given projections that two class groups will be completing third-year from 2015/16 onward, stakeholders should be consulted on whether the programme should remain compulsory or become optional. The formal collection of student, teacher, and parent feedback on strengths and areas for development in the TY programme is advised to support this ongoing review. Subject sampling arrangements in TY should be extended further. Finally, the practice of structuring learning through a key assignments approach which has already been established in some departments should be extended across all TY subjects and modules.

Support for students' holistic development is provided through a broad range of extra-curricular and co-curricular activities that consciously seek to appeal to females and males. The volunteerism and collegiality demonstrated by teachers in organising these activities is highly valued by students and their parents.

The school operates an open, inclusive admissions policy. Both students and parents interviewed emphasised that the transition programme for incoming students is of a very high quality. Also, students across class and year groups socialise together at break times, creating a very positive, familial atmosphere where senior students provide support to junior ones on their own initiative.

The school is pro-active in monitoring and, when necessary, intervening to ensure attendance and retention of students. A good code of behaviour is in operation, incorporating a very clear ladder of referral. Student representatives were very positive about their commitment to living out the school motto “Do your best, show respect.” Regular celebrations are organised to highlight a range of student achievements from the academic to the personal and social, creating a climate where students feel valued.

Student leadership is actively promoted through the school’s democratically elected, representative students’ council; the green schools’ committee; a TY student committee; and so on. In particular, the student council is valued by the board, senior management, and the parents’ association. It is treated as an equal partner by the other stakeholders, most recently in relation to whole-school planning and to changes to the school uniform that were originally requested by students.

Substantial evidence was gathered of the effectiveness of the school’s student support structures. Almost all students and parents surveyed agreed or strongly agreed that students are well cared for in the school. The voluntary year group co-ordinators, the pastoral care team, and the home-school-community liaison (HSCL) co-ordinator and school completion project worker constitute very valuable supports to student care. The majority of staff have undertaken student support training provided by professional and support organisations such as the HSE. A Positive Mental Health week is organised annually. Social, personal and health education (SPHE) and relationships and sexuality education (RSE) programmes are provided to all students from first to sixth year.

Establishing a formal, hierarchical student support structure is a priority need that the school itself identified for action in 2014/15, in line with National Educational Psychological Services (NEPS) guidelines. Two further developments in the area of student support are now encouraged: aiming toward gender balance in the SPHE delivery team and finalising the school’s draft social media policy, incorporating an updated mobile phone policy. When the school’s augmented student support structures and practices are established, they should then be documented in an updated whole-school guidance plan.

A number of whole-school practices are undertaken to support students’ individual guidance needs in a very conscientious manner: timetabled guidance classes for fifth and sixth years; information nights to support subject, programme, and career choices; and subject teachers’ provision of information to students interested in pursuing careers in their individual specialist areas.

A high priority is placed on supporting students with special educational needs (SEN). The fact that a number of teachers have specialist qualifications in this area is a great support to these students. The SEN team plans for the induction of these students carefully; compiles individual education plans and group education plans for them as appropriate; and allocates resources fairly to them, based on their needs.

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 senior management team has systematically planned and implemented significant enhancements to all areas of the school campus, achieving very good supports for teaching, learning, and administration. Displays of educational materials and of photographs of students' work on all available school corridors along with print-rich environments in almost all classrooms substantially contribute to the school's motivating learning environment. Environmental responsibility is promoted as a key school value through continued green flag work.

As numbers continue to grow, the school will need more space. Senior management has already identified short and medium-term actions that can be taken to address this and has communicated them to LCETB.

There are good ICT facilities in the school. During the evaluation, the concept of a virtual learning room, where a student interested in taking an optional subject not offered by the school could do so through distance learning with another school, was discussed. This might present a creative way of subject delivery that would help in the school's reprioritisation of curriculum.

LCETB are organising a support service for all its schools, to help staff conduct health and safety risk assessments, as per the HSA's 2010 *Guidelines on Managing Safety and Health in Post-Primary Schools*. This is commended and will help the school update its health and safety statement, which was last reviewed in 2009.

2. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

2.1 The quality of learning and teaching

Twenty-two lesson periods across a range of subjects were observed by the evaluation team. Good or very good teaching was observed in most lessons. Preparation for lessons to ensure good pace and structure was generally good. Classes were generally well managed, with positive interactions between students and teachers. Feedback from a focus group meeting and from questionnaire findings was that students strongly feel that their teachers encourage them to do the best they can do.

Where teaching was good or very good, very high expectations were set for students and a range of approaches was used. These included: activating students' prior knowledge, using audio/visual/digital aids to support student learning, incorporating active learning opportunities into lessons, engaging in good quality questioning to connect new learning with real-life contexts, utilising good literacy-support strategies, and engaging students in critical thinking to lead to their own formation of concepts.

Practices to deliver differentiated learning noted during the evaluation included: the preparation of some handouts, simplifying material in a textbook chapter and the organisation of pair/group work where timeframes, roles and responsibilities were set and feedback was gathered in a systematic manner.

Good or very good learning was observed in the majority of lessons. This was aided by learning to learn tools such as mnemonics and graphic organisers. Some good assessment for learning practices also supported learning in those lessons, including the formal sharing of criteria for assessment with students when setting substantial tasks and teaching students how to use those criteria to assess their own and others' work.

There was scope for improvement in supporting student learning in a small, but significant, number of lessons. When this happened, the focus of lessons was on content delivery. Furthermore, questioning was poor; there was very little variety of approach; and students were largely cast in passive roles, allowing a few students to answer all the teacher's questions.

Homework was assigned and monitored in most lessons and some use of written formative feedback was observed in a number of lessons. In some other cases, Edmodo and email were used to provide feedback and this was working well. It was reported that in a few subject areas, more independent, research-oriented homework is assigned for more able learners, along with standard reinforcement exercises. This is good practice and is encouraged as a whole-school approach.

3. IMPLEMENTATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS FROM PREVIOUS EVALUATIONS

3.1 Management

The school has very diligently implemented all recommendations related to whole-school provision made in the five previous subject inspections conducted in the school. This very good progress is highly commended.

It is commended that short reports were compiled by all subject departments evaluated, setting out their progress on all inspection recommendations made. If this were established as a whole-school practice, such reports could be provided to the board as evidence of ongoing school improvement.

3.2 Learning and teaching

The practice of all subject departments preparing an annual strategic improvement plan, incorporating targets, success criteria, evaluation measures, timescales, and actions is well developed in the school. The principal meets with subject department co-ordinators annually to discuss these plans, and this initiative has been very successful in improving higher-level uptake and student attainment in the Junior and Leaving Certificate examinations. This is exemplary practice.

Recurring pedagogical recommendations were made in previous reports, in relation to the further development of active learning, assessment for learning, and differentiation methodologies. A structured sharing of in-house expertise in these areas, accompanied by external inputs as necessary, would be very helpful in securing even-higher engagement gains for all learners.

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

The board, senior management, and staff are well placed to continue to embrace change and to lead school improvement. In August 2011, targeted school self-evaluation (SSE) activity took place through staff meetings, where four targets for school improvement were agreed and concrete actions with specific timeframes were agreed to achieve them. The school has made substantial progress in these areas. Also, the school's DEIS action planning has led to strong improvements in attendance, retention, progression, attainment and partnership.

Through its work in preparing a self-evaluation report and school improvement plan for raising students' literacy skills, the school has made good progress in working through the recommended six-step SSE process. It has gathered a mix of quantitative and qualitative data and has compiled the views of staff, parents, and students. Learning from this SSE process should be utilised to help the school in its future DEIS and other school improvement planning.

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 Ennistymon Vocational School is pleased to receive the Department of Education and Skills independent validation of the high standards of teaching and learning in our school. The Board found the exercise to be a positive and affirming one for all stakeholders of the school community.

The following points made by the Inspectorate are particularly noteworthy:

- The Board of Management functions effectively, is strategically focused on teaching and learning, and is committed to working with parents and students in genuine partnership.
- The Principal and Deputy Principal are highly committed to the school and they form a very effective team. They work well together toward achieving high standards and on enabling students to reach their full potential. Very good leadership of staff and of students is evident.
- A key strength of the school is its committed and hardworking teaching staff. There is a high level of individual engagement with CPD among them and they take opportunities to lead initiatives to support school improvement. Also, staff volunteerism has long been, and continues to be, a vital support for the provision of extra-curricular opportunities to students.
- Parents expressed exceptionally high levels of satisfaction with how the school is run and with how their children are progressing.
- Students expressed pride in their school, they felt fairly and respectfully treated by teachers.
- Good or very good teaching and learning were noted in the majority of lessons.

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 suggestions and recommendations of the inspectorate have already been incorporated into our on-going School Self Evaluation(SSE) process and have either been completed or are under review by both the board and the senior management team.