An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Whole-School Evaluation
Management, Leadership and Learning

REPORT

Saint Joseph’s Community College
Kilkee, County Clare
Roll number: 70880F

Date of inspection: 22 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 in St Joseph’s Community College, Kilkee. 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

St Joseph’s Community College operates under the joint patronage of County Clare Vocational Education Committee (VEC) and the Mercy Sisters. Serving a large geographic area of the Loop Head peninsula in West Clare, the school is inclusive in its enrolment and provides a wide curriculum. In recent years, demographic trends have resulted in a decrease in enrolment.

1. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

1.1 Key Findings

- Considerable progress has been made in recent years, particularly through the efforts of the principal and the board of management, in improving the physical environment of the school and its surroundings.
- Teachers are committed to meeting the pastoral care needs of students.
- Senior management and teachers strive to provide fully for students’ subject preferences.
- The staff are committed to supporting students in a wide range of extracurricular and co-curricular activities.
- The quality of teaching was very good in some of the lessons observed but the standard of learning was in need of improvement in some other lessons.
- The use of information and communication technology (ICT) in teaching has increased with the installation of new equipment and teachers are committed to improving their skills further making full and effective use of these resources.
- The staff demonstrate a capacity for self-evaluation and improvement that should be harnessed by management.

1.2 Recommendations for Further Development

- The board should provide written reports on its work to the VEC, staff, parents and students in a consistent and regular way.
• The process of identifying and recording development priorities should be more formally structured with the board taking the lead role.

• To advance school planning, task teams to develop specific areas of school policy and a steering group to monitor and oversee planning activity should be established.

• A variety of teaching strategies and methodologies should be adopted in all lessons to balance the direct-teaching approach and to increase co-operative learning opportunities for students.

• The excessive use of certificate examination questions in lessons should be avoided, particularly early in the school year.

• The whole school should be involved in a collaborative process of cyclical review, self-evaluation and school improvement that focuses on teaching and learning, subject department planning, curriculum review, and general whole-school planning.

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 composition of the board is generally in line with the guidelines and procedures for vocational education committee (VEC) schools and community colleges. It is noted that the requirement that the two teachers’ representatives should be one male and one female has not been met in the present board. This should be corrected at the earliest opportunity. At the time of the evaluation, just one parent was on the board. The vacant position should be filled as soon as possible.

The board has been active in successfully overseeing major improvements in facilities in recent years. Under the considered leadership of the board and principal these developments are of strategic importance for maintaining enrolment and for future development of the school.

The board fulfils its statutory obligations effectively. Board meetings are now being held regularly. Given the urgent need for further school improvement, however, the number of meetings may need to be increased. The board works collaboratively, particularly in its internal deliberation. It has been involved to some extent in setting development priorities and in the formulation of school policy. There is a need for more defined procedures with regard to ratification and review of policies.

The board is well positioned to exercise leadership in a broader range of school development areas, in liaison with the officers of the VEC, and this needs to be a major priority. Formal records of board meetings should include agenda and principal’s reports and they should be sent, as a matter of course, to the VEC.

The board should engage fully with the compilation of an annual report from the school to the VEC. Reports to staff, parents and students, to be agreed at the end of each meeting of the board, could be the basis for an annual report on the operation and performance of the school as described in Section 20 of the Education Act, 1998.
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

Priorities for development are listed annually in the school plan together with actions to be taken towards their achievement. This sound approach should be further developed along the following lines. Essential priorities should be more clearly detailed. Timescales for completion of specific measures should be stated. Indicators of success, to be used in a formal end-of-year review, should be also included.

The identification of the priorities for development should be a main concern of the board. The process by which these priorities are identified should be clear and collaborative, involving teachers, parents and students as appropriate. The responsibility for finally agreeing the priorities should rest with the board.

2.2 Effectiveness of leadership for learning

Leadership of staff

Senior management provide adequate levels of leadership considering that both principal and deputy principal also fulfil significant teaching roles. The stated focus of management in the school is the empowerment of teachers as managers in their own areas of activity. This approach involves the distribution of leadership for learning. Senior management collaborate effectively in their respective roles as principal and deputy principal. Weekly meetings of year heads with senior management and the chaplain provide further opportunities for leadership distribution. These meetings should, however, be reconceptualised as student-support team meetings and should ideally include the guidance counsellor. The focus of the meetings should include the promotion of positive behaviour on a whole-school basis, ensuring a consistent and balanced approach to students displaying behavioural difficulties.

A collaborative review of duties attached to posts of responsibility should be undertaken, based on a review of school requirements. In addition, it is recommended that a planning steering group representing staff, both post holders and non-post holders, be formed. This steering group should monitor the overall process and procedures of planning, supported by task teams formed as necessary to develop specific areas of school policy.

Good evidence of effective leadership was seen in the transformation of the physical environment of the school. It is recommended that added impetus now be given to development at subject-department level, in learning and teaching and in further development of the curriculum.

Central leadership by the principal has the potential to strengthen subject department planning further. A calendar, identifying when subject groups are to meet and arranging for staff to attend meetings within the allocated planning time in each of the subjects they teach, should provide the necessary structure. Certain subject areas should be grouped from
time to time to plan for common areas. The sharing of ideas around teaching methodologies should be a core element of all subject department meetings.

A whole school discussion needs to take place on the content of subject department plans to ensure that planning for curriculum coverage and educational support makes effective use of the planning time now available. This discussion should be led and monitored by the planning steering group which is recommended. Guidance and training in subject-department planning should be provided as required to support this work.

Teachers are involved in individual continuing professional development (CPD) in their areas of interest. A CPD programme should be drawn up after consultation with the whole staff. There is significant scope for the programme, where available expertise permits, to be organised and delivered internally.

**Leadership of students**

The school’s practice regarding admission is inclusive. The school provides clear information and welcomes all prospective students.

The student council was consulted during the recent review of the code of behaviour. This consultation indicates a positive approach to the appropriate involvement of students in the running of the school. In accordance with recommended practice, students should be elected to the student council from each year group. More transparent organisation of elections, perhaps within the Civic, Social and Political Education (CSPE) programme, would provide an opportunity for further educational benefit. The role of the student council should be clarified. Procedures for regular feedback from management to the student council regarding policy review and development should be specified.

The code of behaviour includes a clear and appropriate rationale that favours encouragement and reinforcement of good behaviour. The code has been reviewed with account being taken of the observations of parents, students and teachers. The code should be further improved by including clear and detailed statements of how particular achievements by students are to be recognised. This is in line with the rationale of the code.

The school’s draft policy on special educational needs provides a clear model for further development. This draft policy should be reviewed collaboratively by each of the interested parties: teachers, parents, in-school management and board of management. A register of learning support and resource hours should be included in the documentation. The outcomes of formally scheduled, regular meetings of the special educational needs department should also be recorded. The move towards the use of team teaching is positive and should be further explored and adopted where possible and appropriate. Following review the draft policy should be ratified by the board as a matter of urgency.

Provision for guidance of students is good, led by a strong guidance department and the school’s chaplaincy. Structures for sharing information and expertise in the area of special educational needs need to be strengthened. The guidance counsellor and chaplain meet regularly and this supports effectiveness. A representative of the special educational needs and resource department should also attend these meetings as recommended in a recent guidance subject inspection report.

Procedures for checking and recording attendance are consistently implemented and effective. Further improvement in this area should be sought by impressing on students the importance of regular attendance for learning and success. The sharing of attendance data with the whole staff, together with appropriate target-setting and review, should also be used to provide leadership. All non-routine activities, such as trips outside school, should
be recorded in the school calendar and communicated to the whole staff and the parents in a timely manner.

While the school is, overall, successful in providing a balanced curriculum for the varied preferences, strengths and interests of students, review should continue to be a priority. Planned collaboration with other VEC schools around provision for minority subjects is a positive innovation. Other curricular areas that should continue to be addressed include Physical Education, which is under represented currently on the school’s timetable.

There is evidence of consistent improvement in the timetable in recent years. The timetabling of a small number of study periods for some sixth-year students results in less than the minimum twenty-eight hours per week instruction time being provided for these students. School management should monitor this in order to avoid erosion of the instructional week for these students.

2.3 Management of facilities

High quality management of facilities is a strength of the school. A very effective cleaning and maintenance team keeps the buildings and surroundings in top condition.

Recent installation of interactive data projectors in most classrooms is a major ICT development that has been very effectively managed under the guidance of the VEC. The provision of similar equipment, with appropriate software and peripheral devices, in the base classrooms for learning support and resource teaching should be considered. Further development of these classrooms should also include the development of a print-rich environment and provision of appropriate reference materials and learning resources.

3. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

3.1 The quality of learning and teaching

Overall, the standard of teaching was found to be good and the standard of learning was adequate. The quality of teaching was very good in some lessons while the standard of learning needed further improvement in certain lessons.

An appropriate range and variety of teaching methodologies was observed generally. However, where this was not the case, the quality of learning gave cause for concern. The predominance of a whole-class teaching approach in these lessons, without adequate differentiation for the varied abilities and learning styles of students, did not support high-quality learning. More varied teaching strategies and methodologies should be adopted to complement and balance the direct-teaching approach and to increase opportunities for cooperative learning. The pair and group work activities undertaken to provide this balance should be carefully structured to achieve the planned outcomes.

Collaborative planning at subject-department level should focus on identifying and adopting a broader range of teaching methodologies. These methodologies should support the broad learning of students and should be specifically linked to subject content in programmes of work.

While lesson content was generally appropriate, the over-use of certificate examination questions was a cause of concern in a small number of lessons. The inappropriate and exclusive use of an examination-driven approach so early in the school year tended to support only lower-order learning. This approach did not give students sufficient scope to
develop higher-order thinking and independent learning skills or to experience the full richness of the subjects. Examination questions, when they are appropriate, should be presented in the context of real-world applications and the experience of the students.

ICT was generally observed to support effective teaching. Teachers expressed their desire and intention to further improve their ICT skills to make effective use of the very good facilities that have been made available recently. However, in a small number of lessons where the effective use of ICT would have greatly enhanced learning, it did not feature. The teachers are urged to make efforts to ensure that the good practice observed is extended appropriately to all lessons.

Some good practice was observed in the display of subject-related materials, sometimes produced by students, in classrooms and in other areas of the school. This practice should be developed further, specifically to provide print-rich environments to support literacy development.

The management of classrooms was generally good. Classroom routines were consistent and clear instructions were given before undertaking classroom activities. Students’ awareness of learning should be further focused by sharing expected learning outcomes with them. This sharing should become standard practice at the start of all lessons followed by a review at the end.

The atmosphere in lessons was consistently positive, supported by mutual respect and rapport between teachers and students and among students.

Some good support for literacy development was observed. However, awareness of specific measures to be taken in support of student literacy skills needs further development. Targeted measures such as the activation of students’ prior knowledge, pre-teaching of keywords and clear organisation of board work should be a consistent part of lessons. The introduction and implementation of such measures should form part of subject-department planning. The preparation of charts displaying newly encountered terminology and vocabulary is an opportunity to involve students and reinforce learning according as these words are encountered. Each subject department should create keyword lists for particular topics to share with teachers involved in learning support and resource teaching.

Questioning was used to check students’ learning and was generally effective. Some good practice was observed where assessment for learning (AFL) techniques were used to gather students’ feedback on their level of understanding during lessons. The use of such techniques is particularly effective when students are involved in collaborative learning exercises. Staff should collaborate in providing consistency in the organisation of group work by different teachers and in different subjects. In particular structured sharing of information between teachers should be used to support more effective collaborative learning by students.

Good systems for tracking the completion of homework were noted in a few instances. A whole staff discussion should be initiated to bring consistency to the systems being used, being mindful of the danger of homework overload.

4. IMPLEMENTATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS FROM PREVIOUS EVALUATIONS

4.1 Management
Clear and decisive action has been taken regarding some of the recommendations made in previous evaluations and in most cases some progress has been made. The provision of twenty-eight hours of instruction time per week for students has been met. Timetable provision and redistribution of lesson periods for certain subjects have largely been met. The provision of subject base rooms has been progressed.

Colour-coding of the chemicals stored in the science preparation area should be completed. Arrangements have been made with the VEC regarding the disposal of chemicals as advised in the science subject inspection report. This work should be concluded as a matter of urgency.

Further clarification is needed of the roles and responsibilities associated with the care, management, support and guidance of students. Some staff with student-support roles who do not participate in relevant meetings should be enabled to do so.

4.2 **Learning and Teaching**

The provision of more varied active-learning opportunities for students remains a priority. Such learning opportunities need to be more fully incorporated into day-to-day classroom life.

Notable progress has been made regarding the upgrade repair and maintenance of ICT equipment. The further enabling of teachers to make full use of improved digital equipment is being addressed.

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

The school has a capacity for improvement that should be redirected to engage more fully with the specifically educational aspects of its work. The board which focused until now largely on the improvement of facilities has started to engage in self-evaluation. The board should provide direction and leadership in establishing self-evaluation as a fundamental driver of more broadly based school improvement. The self-evaluation process, which should be evidence-based and systematic, should involve the whole school. Every effort should be made to build further capacity for self-evaluation and improvement.

Students have been involved in some limited review activity through the student council. This is a start on good collaborative and inclusive practice. Some work has been done on providing parents with review questionnaires that could play a useful role in the self-evaluation process. The annual administration of consistent questionnaires for parents could provide valuable indicators of success in achieving identified planning goals over time. A similar questionnaire-based approach should be considered for teachers. Consideration should be given to the best means of integrating the responses of teachers, students and parents within a whole-school review process.

5.1

As a next step school self-evaluation needs to focus on teaching and learning, subject department planning, curriculum review, and general whole-school planning. Targets for improvement should be time-limited and feedback on their achievement should be evidence-based and recorded in a consistent format from year to year to inform further planning. The school should work closely with the VEC in planning for the future.
There is capacity for self-evaluation within the staff that should be harnessed to produce a shared vision of school priorities, to inform annual review and to advance the school’s agenda for improvement.

*Published October 2012*
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. Joseph’s Community College, Kilkee welcomes a most positive report on Management, Leadership and Learning in the school. The Board will use the report to review, evaluate and inform best practice and the challenging roles that we face as educators in our school community. The Board would like to thank the entire school community who were involved in the process and wishes to acknowledge the professional manner in which the members of the inspectorate carried out their duties.

The Board feels affirmed by the report which acknowledges: the clear information presented and the welcome extended to all prospective students; the support for students in a wide range of extracurricular and co-curricular activities; the extent to which management and teachers strive to provide fully for students’ subject preferences; the mutual respect and rapport between teachers and students and among students.

The Board welcomes in particular positive comments about school leadership which has taken clear and decisive action in a number of areas: the code of behaviour and discipline; the guidance of students; school attendance and the school’s success in providing a balanced curriculum. We are affirmed by the acknowledgement of the high quality of facilities and the top class condition of the buildings and surroundings.

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

- A school planning coordinator has been assigned and planning task groups will focus on curriculum review and school self-evaluation.
- The SESS provided whole school training on differentiation and mixed ability teaching as part of school planning and teacher professional development at the start of the new school year 2012-13.
- The promotion of a variety of teaching strategies and methodologies will be further enhanced with an Assessment for Learning (AFL) workshop planned for Autumn 2012.
- To ensure that all staff are familiar with up to date child protection procedures, whole school training was provided by the national SPHE support service on Student Welfare and Child Protection in August 2012.
- The colour coding of chemicals in the science laboratory and the disposal of chemicals as advised in the science inspection report is completed.
- The provision of subject based rooms has been further progressed with the installation of ICT equipment and 100meg broadband.
- The Special Education Needs policy has been adopted and accepted.