

**An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna**

**Department of Education and Skills**

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

**REPORT**

**Finn Valley College  
Stranorlar, County Donegal  
Roll number: 71240U**

**Date of inspection: 23 April 2015**



**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 April 2015 in Finn Valley College, Stranorlar. 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 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***

Finn Valley College operates under the trusteeship of the Donegal Education and Training Board (ETB). The school participates in Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS), the Department of Education and Skills action plan for educational inclusion. The Junior Certificate, Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP), the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) and the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme are provided for students. In addition, the school offers a number of very successful Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) courses: catering for thirty-seven students.

Current enrolment in the mainstream school is 304: 184 boys and 120 girls. The school maintains strong links with the local community and with outside agencies. It is committed to inclusion and equality of opportunity for students.

## **SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT**

### ***Key Findings***

- The school is very well supported by Donegal ETB and by the board of management.
- The school's strategic development, DEIS and School Self-Evaluation (SSE) planning processes are excellent.
- The committed and active parents' association is involved in various aspects of school life.
- The principal and deputy principal comprise a highly effective and efficient senior management team and are very well supported by middle management.
- All members of staff share a strong commitment to caring for students and to encouraging them to achieve their potential.
- Students were observed to be happy, confident and very respectful in their dealings with teachers and with each other.
- There is an exemplary, whole-school approach to student support, including the provision of very high-quality learning support.
- The quality of teaching and learning observed ranged from good to excellent, with the majority of lessons at the higher end of that range.
- The quality of assessment observed was good overall.
- The school demonstrates very good capacity for improvement.

### ***Recommendations for Further Development***

- The school should develop its own unique data protection policy.
- In the interest of forming separate higher and ordinary level classes in some subjects, concurrent timetabling should be introduced where possible.

- Consideration should be given to developing a student-mentoring programme for incoming first years and to giving students additional responsibilities.
- The student-centred approaches that were observed in the majority of lessons should be extended to all lessons.
- There should be wider use of assessment for learning (AfL) strategies in the provision of feedback to students on how they can improve the quality of their work.
- The teachers should consider peer observation as a further means of sharing expertise.

## **1. QUALITY OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP**

### ***1.1 School ownership and management***

The board of management is supportive of the school, properly constituted and fulfils its statutory obligations. The board makes a very good contribution to policy and decision-making. It has adopted and ratified all of the mandatory school policies, with the exception of a data protection policy unique to the school. While it is good that the important aspects of the school's procedures on data protection are outlined in some policies, and that the Donegal ETB has an overarching policy in place, which informs school practice, a data protection policy unique to the school should be developed.

It is evident from the minutes of board meetings that students' learning is at the core of decision-making. It is very good practice that discussions about curriculum, time allocation to subjects, and arrangements for the formation of classes take place at board level.

The board communicates with the wider school community through the various representatives on the board. Additionally, it is good that opportunities for the student council to communicate directly with the board are to be provided. However, there is scope for reporting the board's main decisions formally to staff and parents. Therefore, it is recommended that the board issue an agreed report of its main decisions after each meeting.

Donegal ETB supports the school very well through the provision of training and resources. Collaboration between teachers and between senior managers of schools under the trusteeship of the ETB is also very well facilitated.

The strategic development, DEIS and SSE planning processes are excellent. The school plan is comprehensive, and very clearly outlines the school's strategic goals, the members of staff responsible for each aspect of the plan and timeframes for implementation. There is a strong focus on looking to the school's future and to preparing for change. The DEIS plan follows the SSE planning model and it is evident that a consistent approach to gathering baseline data and to evaluation and review is in place.

Decision-making is collaborative, and there is extensive consultation between the board, the senior management team, teachers, parents, special needs assistants (SNAs), ancillary staff and students as appropriate. The committed and active parents' association is involved in various aspects of school life. Its contribution includes the organisation of events for parents and the provision of support and information at parent-teacher meetings and school information nights.

The principal and deputy principal comprise a highly effective and efficient senior management team. Their roles and responsibilities are clearly defined and they work well together. The day-to-day management of the school is excellent due to the very good systems that have been established. Students' learning is a high priority of the senior management team. They know the students very well and have a great awareness of their individual needs.

Their open and approachable style of leadership supports, empowers, and encourages leadership and creativity among the staff.

The middle management system provides very high-quality support to the operation of the school. The post-holders have appropriate autonomy and capably carry out their duties. Weekly meetings of the senior management team and the assistant principals are held. To ensure that the views of all members of staff inform the work of the school, each participant at this meeting has been assigned a number of members of staff to represent.

The posts of responsibility are currently being reviewed and an audit of school needs has been conducted. It was evident that there is an imbalance in the duties attached to some posts. This should be addressed at the restructuring stage of the review. It is also recommended that an annual meeting between the senior management team and each post-holder be conducted to provide an opportunity to discuss and review the operation of the posts.

It was evident throughout the evaluation that all members of staff share a strong commitment to caring for students and to encouraging them to achieve their potential. Teachers are actively involved in the life of the school through their work as tutors, class teachers and year heads, through their participation on school and subject planning consultation groups, and through their contribution to the school's broad extracurricular programme. In addition, the teachers very generously provide additional tuition after school for students, whenever this is necessary. School management, teachers, SNAs and ancillary staff view themselves as part of a whole-school pastoral care team and work together to support the students and each other.

### ***1.2 Effectiveness of leadership for learning***

The principal and deputy principal provide effective leadership for learning by facilitating teachers' continuing professional development (CPD), supporting good student behaviour, and providing resources for teaching and learning. They are committed to meeting students' needs in a holistic manner and share a common objective, which is to ensure that each student has a meaningful and successful educational experience. They have created a culture where it is routine for new instructional strategies to be used to enhance teaching and learning. In addition, the principal and deputy principal strongly value the teachers' efforts and contributions.

The school is not compliant with the requirements of Circular Letter M22/95 with regard to providing instruction time of twenty-eight hours per week for students. However, this has been recognised by the school and a restructuring of the timetable for the 2015/2016 academic year has been initiated.

In first year a JCSP group and two other mixed-ability groups are formed and are maintained throughout the junior cycle. In the interest of forming separate higher and ordinary level classes for Irish and Mathematics it is recommended that lessons in these subjects be concurrently timetabled in third year, and if possible also in second year. It is also recommended that Mathematics and Irish lessons in senior cycle be concurrently timetabled for the same reason.

The school has engaged very well with subject planning. Programmes of work for each subject have been developed and best practice was evident, where they clearly outlined the intended learning outcomes, together with the methodologies, resources, and modes of assessment to be used. It was noted that the methodologies comprised, for example, teacher exposition and the use of the whiteboard. It is suggested that only methodologies to be shared among teachers should be included in the subject plans, this will reduce the amount of detail

and will also contribute to the promotion and sharing of different and creative methodologies and resources.

Students' progress and outcomes are monitored through a very thorough analysis of student attainment compared to national norms in the certificate examinations and to standardised tests. It is recommended that attendance, application and any other relevant indicators be added to this analysis in order to provide a more comprehensive perspective on each student's achievement.

The school's code of behaviour centres on positive discipline and the pastoral care of students. The school rules are communicated clearly and the code is implemented very effectively. There is a well-structured ladder of referral for dealing with breaches of the code of behaviour. The school emphasises a pastoral approach, which includes the use of restorative justice practices and only applies sanctions, including suspension, when other measures fail. Additionally, the National Behaviour Support Service (NBSS) provides support to the school in the management of students. During the evaluation, students were observed to be happy, confident and very respectful in their dealings with teachers and with each other.

The school seeks, values and acts on students' views. Students have a voice through participation on the students' council. They complete surveys on various aspects of school life and are consulted appropriately in the development of policies. Two safety wardens have been appointed from each class group to act as monitors for the canteen queue and to lead their class group when fire drills are carried out. While it is good that such leadership opportunities are provided for students, consideration should be given to developing a student-mentoring programme for incoming first years and to giving students additional responsibilities. The school has high expectations for students and teachers are very encouraging and affirming.

The students in a focus group meeting were highly appreciative of their teachers' work. Additionally, the questionnaire responses from parents and students indicate a high level of satisfaction with the school.

There is a structured, whole-school approach to student support, which is exemplary. The weekly meetings of the student-support team are very effective in ensuring that the care needs of students are met from the wide range of supports that are available. The principal, deputy principal, SEN co-ordinator, both guidance counsellors and the home-school-community liaison (HSCL) co-ordinator are members of the school's core student-support team. An extended pastoral care team provides additional support. In addition, there are very close links with agencies including Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) and the ETB psychologist.

The school is relatively small and is welcoming and warm. Students, teachers and ancillary staff eat together, for example, and this adds to the communication of the high esteem in which the students are held.

Given the size of the school, the curriculum is broad and balanced. A variety of programmes are provided and good effort is made to meet the needs of students. Transition year (TY) is currently not available. However, the curriculum section of the school's strategic plan indicates that the possibility of introducing a TY programme is being explored. In the interest of continuing to meet students' needs, and maintaining and increasing enrolment, it is good that TY is being considered.

Guidance counselling is provided for all year groups. The guidance counsellors support students very well in making programme, subject and level choices. They also play a key role

in the induction of first-year students and in supporting students in transitioning from junior to senior cycle.

The HSCL co-ordinator maintains very good links between the school and parents, with the local primary schools and with outside agencies. There is also very good communication through the school journal and the school website. In addition, text messages are sent and phone calls to homes are made where necessary. There are various events, such as information evenings and celebrations, organised for parents.

Improving students' literacy skills is given very high priority. Through the DEIS and SSE planning processes, various valuable interventions for literacy have been implemented and evaluated. Examples include: literacy support for SEN students and the JCSP class group; a weekly timetabled literacy period for all first years; the use of key words in lessons; designated library classes as part of the English provision; and Drop Everything and Read (DEAR).

Very high-quality learning support is provided for students with SEN. The main modes of delivery are one-to-one and small group withdrawal. In keeping with good practice, team teaching is also widely used. Communication between learning-support and mainstream teachers is excellent. Many students progress to the school's PLC programme; this is valuable in providing an alternate route to third-level education.

There are two classes for students with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) in the school. Students from the ASD classes are integrated into mainstream class groups in line with best practice in meeting the needs of students.

Admissions procedures are well structured and open and the school is very inclusive. There are very good systems to monitor and promote good attendance and punctuality.

Confirmation was provided that the board of management has formally adopted the *Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools* without modification and that the school is compliant with the requirements of the *Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools*.

### **1.3 Management of facilities**

The school is newly built and is maintained to a very high standard. There is very good provision of resources for teaching and learning including information and communication technology (ICT). Library facilities are very good. The sports hall is fully equipped and this valuable resource is used extensively. An application for the provision of a football pitch has been made to the Department; this would make a welcome addition to the school.

The layout of the school is conducive to ensuring that students are well monitored. The administration and ancillary staff play a vital role in supporting the students. The reception and canteen areas are open, are located in the main foyer and act as a focal point for students and teachers to meet informally; this contributes to the sense of collegiality and belonging that characterises the school.

## **2. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING**

### **2.1 The quality of learning and teaching**

The quality of teaching and learning observed ranged from good to excellent with the majority of lessons at the higher end of that range. While there were many valuable practices evident in the good lessons observed, a small adjustment in the balance between teacher input and student activity would have made them very good.

Teacher explanations were clear and concise. All lessons were well planned and structured. Most teachers took account of prior knowledge when introducing new material and included a recapitulation of learning as the lessons closed. Best practice was noted where the recapitulation included a task or worksheet to facilitate a comprehensive reflection on learning.

ICT in the form of presentations, online maps and video clips was used to enhance lessons. Activities such as well-organised group or pair work, active methodologies, discovery and investigation, *hot seating*, and graphic organisers were very effectively used to engage learners. In addition, teachers provided well-designed tasks and appropriate levels of support to students to optimise their level of attention and participation. It is recommended that these student-centred approaches be extended where necessary.

Very good use was made of questioning to involve students and to assess learning. Best practice was seen where higher-order questions were used to facilitate thorough exploration of the concepts taught and where appropriate *wait time* was given to allow student to think and formulate answers. Strategies such as: the inclusion of lively warm-up exercises; the provision of additional teacher encouragement; and the assignment of individual roles for group work were used very effectively to facilitate optimum student participation. However, there was scope, in some lessons, for an increase in the use of such strategies.

In keeping with good practice and the whole-school literacy policy, the key words of all lessons were highlighted, students read aloud or to themselves, and opportunities for students to discuss the work of lessons were provided. Examples of the very good numeracy strategies observed include problem-solving activities, discovery approaches and measuring exercises. These numeracy strategies are very valuable, not only in encouraging mathematical thinking but also in promoting deep learning, and their extension is recommended.

The quality of assessment observed was good overall. AfL practices were evident with clear advice on how to improve and encouraging comments included on written work. Additionally, some peer assessment was evident; this practice allows students to reflect on their own work through the lens of assessing other's and provides a very valuable alternative perspective. The use of AfL practices should be extended, as appropriate.

There is a strong culture of sharing methodologies and teachers have presented to each other on a range of topics, for example literacy and numeracy. The teachers should consider peer observation as a further means of sharing expertise.

Teachers have created very secure learning environments for students and the atmosphere in all classrooms visited was conducive to learning.

### **3. IMPLEMENTATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS FROM PREVIOUS EVALUATIONS**

#### ***3.1 Management***

The whole-school recommendations that were made in previous evaluations have been implemented. Examples include the introduction of Geography at senior cycle, the improvements made in the timetabling of Irish, and the increase in the number of students taking higher-level English. In addition, teachers of English now teach the subject at all levels.

### ***3.2 Learning and teaching***

Overall, the implementation of the recommendations made in the area of teaching and learning is progressing well. It was previously recommended that the learning objectives should be shared with students and their achievement assessed in all lessons; this is now being done. An increase in the use of ICT was also recommended; ICT was effectively integrated into the majority of the lessons observed, however, there remains scope for improvement. Good implementation of the recommendation to improve the quality of students' written work was observed in most lessons.

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

The school demonstrates very good capacity for improvement. This is evident in the comprehensive manner in which data is used to inform and support teaching and learning, in the school's engagement with SSE and in the variety of student surveys conducted. There are very effective and well-established systems in place to capture the views and ideas of all members of the school community. The senior management team encourages innovation in the classroom by facilitating, for example, participation in Teaching and Learning in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (TL21). The school is continually evolving and adapting to ensure that it continues to meet students' needs in a comprehensive and holistic manner.

## **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 Finn Valley College welcomes the publication of the WSE Report. The Board wishes to record its thanks to all of the stakeholders in the school who contributed to such a positive report. The Board views the report as a positive affirmation of all the important work that occurs to provide meaningful and successful educational experiences for our students. The Board intends to implement as fully as possible all recommendations.

### **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 unique Data Protection Policy has been drafted for the school
- The school has introduced concurrencies for all core subjects
- The school has moved to a 28-hour week
- The school is actively promoting student-centred approaches in all subjects
- The school is seeking to develop a student-monitoring programme
- While some teachers engage in informal peer observation and collaboration, the Teacher's Union of Ireland is still opposed to Peer Observation