

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

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

REPORT

**Saint Catherine's Vocational School
Killybegs, County Donegal
Roll number: 71241W**

Date of inspection: 12 May 2016



**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 May, 2016 in St Catherine's Vocational School. Further education provision in this school was not included in the evaluation. 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; a response was not received from the board.

Introduction

Formally established in 1973, Saint Catherine's Vocational School is a co-educational school under the trusteeship of the Donegal Education and Training Board (DETB). The school offers the Junior Certificate, an optional Transition Year (TY), and the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP). Current enrolment is 317 students. At the time of the evaluation, the senior management team (SMT) was composed of an acting principal and an acting deputy principal.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

Key Findings

- The board provides good on-going support to the school; it could be more proactive in monitoring progress in some key areas.
- A strong commitment to the successful operation of the school and providing the highest standard of care was evident in the work of school management and staff.
- A strong sense of community underpins the work of the school.
- The quality of care provided for students is very good and student-support structures are well organised; class tutors play an important role in promoting positive relationships and behaviour.
- The overall quality of teaching and learning in the lessons observed was very good.
- Good progress has been made in addressing developmental priorities and school self-evaluation (SSE) themes, but future planning would benefit from a more systematic approach.

Recommendations for Further Development

- The board should develop practices for monitoring key aspects of school provision, such as policy development and review, implementation of SSE, teaching and learning, and the implementation of recommendations from inspections.
- A review of the schedule of posts of responsibility should be conducted so as to ensure that the priority needs of the school are met.
- A review of the current curricular provision would support the implementation of the new Junior Cycle Framework.
- In order to consolidate and extend very good teaching practice, formal strategies for teachers to share such practice and learn from each other should be introduced.

1. QUALITY OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP

1.1 School ownership and management

The quality of school ownership and management is good. The board of management is appropriately constituted and has a good range of expertise. The DETB works closely with the board to support the provision of education in the school. Training has been provided for board members, a psychological service is available, and the school is part of a support network of other ETB schools. The board meets regularly and gives good consideration to issues under discussion. In this way, the board provides good on-going support to the school.

While the board delegates the day-to-day running of the school to senior management and staff, it has established priorities for development in the areas of student support, communications, infrastructure, and health and safety. Good progress is being made in each of these areas. The board should develop practices for monitoring key aspects of school provision, such as policy development and review, implementation of SSE, teaching and learning, and the implementation of recommendations from inspections.

A range of mandatory policies is in place and the board has reviewed a number of these policies recently. In line with ETB guidance, the board should develop and maintain a policy-review calendar to assist with the work of reviewing and updating policies.

The board keeps a good record of its work. In addition to retaining minutes of board meetings, it would be useful for an agreed report to be prepared for dissemination to the school community. An annual report is provided to the DETB. The board should also consider publishing and circulating to the school community an annual report with particular reference to the achievement of objectives set out in the school plan.

The acting principal and acting deputy principal have a good working relationship. They communicate effectively as a team and have clearly defined and agreed roles and responsibilities. The SMT collaborates well and proactively addresses issues as they arise. A strong commitment to the successful operation of the school and to providing the highest standard of care for students was evident in the work of both team members. Results of a teacher survey show that staff are confident that the school is well run.

Various organisational and leadership roles are distributed at middle-management level. It was evident that the duties attached to the posts of responsibility are carried out competently and contribute greatly to the effective operation of the school. In light of changing circumstances, it is recommended that an overall review of the schedule of posts be conducted so as to ensure that the priority needs of the school are met. Written descriptions of all posts should provide detail on the required duties and allow for end-of-year reviews.

The school has a well-organised and active student council, which is well supported by the work of a liaison teacher. Two members of the council take on the role of head boy and head girl. The council meets regularly and has been consulted during the recent development of the 'deb's policy'. Direct contact between the council and the BOM was initiated during the current school year; this worthwhile initiative should be further developed. The students interviewed during the evaluation presented as very mature and articulate. It would be worthwhile to explore further opportunities for the council to raise its profile across the school community. The involvement of TY students in supporting incoming first-year students is another useful way of developing leadership skills.

A strong sense of community underpins the work of the school. Some facilities are shared with the local community and the school has many links with local businesses and organisations. In discussion, parents reported how welcome they feel in the school. The recent re-establishment of the parents' association is a positive step. The association has

assisted with school events and has been consulted on certain school issues. The enthusiasm and commitment of the parents interviewed during the evaluation are a good foundation for the further development of the role of the association in school life.

1.2 Effectiveness of leadership for learning

The effectiveness of leadership for learning is good. SMT has promoted improved quality in teaching and learning; for example, academic mentoring has been introduced, continuing professional development is facilitated, and general facilities have been improved. A unit for students with autistic spectrum disorders (ASD) has been established. The school is well organised and staff, parents, and students indicated considerable satisfaction with the operation of the school. Regular staff and subject department meetings facilitate collaborative work practices. Teachers are given an opportunity to organise and participate in a wide range of events which add greatly to students' overall academic and social development.

The school provides a broad curriculum based on students' preferences. However, numbers choosing some subjects fluctuate with the result that not all subjects are available for every year group. Students choose from a range of optional subjects for the Junior Certificate prior to entry; however, consideration has been given to re-introducing a taster programme. At the end of third year or TY, students make subject choices for the LCVP. Students and parents indicated that support for choosing subjects was an area of concern; it would be worthwhile, therefore, conducting a curriculum review with a focus on subject options and choices at junior and senior cycle. Such a review would also support the introduction of the new Junior Cycle Framework. In addition to curricular activities, the dedication of staff evident in the provision of a wide range of extra-curricular and co-curricular activities is commendable.

Support for students with additional learning needs is well organised. The team of teachers has a high level of expertise and engages in ongoing relevant professional development. Students also benefit from the support of special-needs assistants. The main method of providing support is through the creation of small groups which receive extra support in literacy, numeracy and specific subject areas. It would be worthwhile also exploring the use of team teaching as an addition to the current model of provision. The commitment to inclusion is particularly evident in the establishment and work of the ASD unit.

Students with special educational needs (SEN) are welcome in the school; they are included in school activities and well supported through the care system. The admissions policy would benefit from review to ensure that it fully reflects the actual practices regarding admission of students with SEN.

The quality of care provided for students is very good and support structures within the school are well organised. A student-support team meets regularly to follow through on particular issues and to co-ordinate actions. A key element of the support system is a daily morning meeting between each class and their tutor. This meeting time plays an important role in promoting positive relationships and behaviour, and provides an opportunity for teachers to become aware of any emerging issues. Effective systems are in place to ensure that issues are followed through appropriately. Tutors also play a key role in monitoring attendance and punctuality.

Effective systems for dealing with behavioural issues work in conjunction with the support systems already noted. Positive behaviour is promoted through a series of annual awards for achievement. The school's aim of promoting a respectful and orderly environment through the operation of its support systems is working well. An example of this success is that the school has dispensed with the usual requirement to have locks on students' lockers. During the evaluation, students were polite and well behaved.

Social Personal and Health Education is provided for all junior-cycle classes. However, in senior-cycle classes, relationships and sexuality education (RSE) is provided mainly through a series of externally provided events. The RSE policy has been noted for review; the board should ensure that the policy, and a policy on external speakers, are completed as soon as possible.

Though in its early stages, the introduction of academic mentoring for sixth-year students is working well. Teachers liaise with students to discuss their progress, give advice and set targets for improvement. Feedback from students will provide valuable insights on further development of this initiative. Students' guidance and counselling needs are also catered for, with the support of the ETB and external agencies.

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 management of facilities is very good overall. Accommodation is maintained to a high standard and specialist rooms are well equipped. The school has very good sports facilities. Very good information and communication technology (ICT) resources are provided. A school 'app' is being developed which will assist communication with parents. Subject planning is also supported through the use of ICT.

Throughout the school, a bright and attractive learning environment has been created. Student achievement is celebrated in displays of photographs and student work. In particular, students' artwork is used to very good effect. Many classrooms are arranged in a non-traditional format; during the evaluation, this was seen to allow for more variety in teaching methodologies. It would be worthwhile to give the teachers who use these rooms an opportunity to share their experience of teaching in these settings with colleagues.

Safety issues around traffic management are being addressed in collaboration with the DETB and Donegal County Council. The school has a Safety Officer and the DETB guidelines have been used to develop a health and safety policy. Though one was to be organised shortly, it was reported that a fire drill had not been held for some considerable time. The board should continue to monitor provision for health and safety.

2. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

2.1 The quality of learning and teaching

The overall quality of teaching and learning in the lessons observed was very good. Very good preparation was evident in the structured format of lessons. After recording attendance, teachers generally began by setting out the overall aim or focus of the lesson. Some very good use was made of a 'learning intentions' approach where the desired learning was set out explicitly in terms of what the students should know, or be able to do. This approach allowed students monitor their own progress and should be used more widely.

Very good preparation was also evident in the range of teaching resources used. Notes and worksheets were used in the majority of lessons. ICT was very well used in many lessons to present information; in a few cases, it was used to illustrate the lesson content by the use of images or short video clips. The use of ICT as a more interactive resource to support learning could be further developed.

Lessons were very well managed. Classroom routines were well established and students worked well with their teachers. The allocation of teachers to base classrooms has allowed for the creation of purposeful subject-specific learning environments.

The majority of lessons were characterised by a high level of active student learning. A good balance of teacher versus student-centred focus was achieved. Students were required to engage with lesson content; tasks were set which required students to think about what they were doing and thus engage with the material more deeply than just listening or taking notes. In some lessons, well-organised group work helped to develop students' understanding of the relevant material. In many lessons, purposeful questioning challenged the students and required more than simple recall.

Observation of class work and good questioning allowed teachers to give formative feedback. The correction and assignment of homework featured in most lessons and some very good written constructive feedback was observed in students' copybooks. There is further scope for using written work to identify areas for improvement for students.

Differentiated support for individual students was very evident in the one-to-one interactions observed during all lessons. In a few lessons, content was also differentiated to provide for a range of abilities. Generally, students were well able to manage the tasks set for them. However, there was scope for more challenge or extension activities for some learners. In some cases, a greater level of scaffolding of lesson content was needed to assist all learners to achieve to their potential.

In a majority of lessons, learning was ably supported where new content was clearly linked with prior learning or general knowledge. In a few cases, clear links were made with other subjects or with future learning. The strategy of linking new content with other curricular areas assisted students to place the new material in a wider context.

In many lessons, a particular emphasis on developing literacy skills was evident. Many classrooms contained displays of key words and other literacy-related materials. Key words were used in different ways; in some subjects, students maintained vocabulary notebooks and, in other cases, students noted key words as part of classwork. In many lessons, there was a particular emphasis on teaching subject-specific terminology. Attention to developing numeracy skills was not as evident as that devoted to literacy.

It was evident that teachers work closely with one another and that there is a high level of ongoing informal sharing of practice. In addition, a mentoring programme assists newly qualified teachers. In order to consolidate and extend the very good teaching observed, more formal strategies for teachers to share good practice and learn from each other should be introduced.

Subject planning is of good quality. The practice seen in many schemes of work of linking the intended learning outcomes with resources, teaching strategies and assessment should be extended to all subjects. All plans contain statistics on student outcomes in state examinations. In a few plans, comprehensive records of reflection on those outcomes and issues such as higher-level uptake are documented. The SSE model of action planning should be used to bring a greater focus to planning for improvement.

3. IMPLEMENTATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS FROM PREVIOUS EVALUATIONS

3.1 Management

Very good progress has been made with respect to previous recommendations. Though it was

deemed not possible at the time, the board gave good consideration to the introduction of Geography as a core subject; this should be kept under consideration as part of a curriculum review. A health and safety recommendation regarding the technology rooms has been implemented. The timetable provision for Irish has also been amended following an inspection.

3.2 Learning and teaching

While a number of general areas for development in subject planning remain, good progress has been made with respect to previous recommendations regarding planning. For example, map reading has been introduced in first-year Geography and the subject plans for Materials Technology have been expanded.

The observation of lessons during this evaluation shows that good progress has been made with respect to previous recommendations regarding classroom practice. It was found that homework was being assigned regularly and a variety of strategies that promote active learning was in use across all subject areas. Some very good use of group work was observed in a variety of lessons.

Subject departments have followed through on previous recommendations and senior management has encouraged all subject departments to take account of the recommendations in their planning. However, it would be worthwhile for the board to develop practices for monitoring the implementation of recommendations from inspections.

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

Several aspects of the SSE process have been effective; there are a number of aspects that need further attention. It is clear from the records reviewed that management and staff review the progress of school planning for specific priorities on an ongoing basis. It is good practice that parents and students have been consulted on some specific issues. In addition to various policies, the school plan identifies clear priorities for school development and progress is being made in addressing these priorities. As noted previously, the board should consider publishing an annual report with particular reference to the achievement of the objectives set out in the school plan.

Specific themes of literacy, numeracy and the new Junior Cycle Framework have been chosen for school self-evaluation. While senior management has led these initiatives, staff shared ideas for areas for improvement and suggested actions that could be taken. For example, in literacy, all teachers agreed to focus on key words. However, future planning would benefit from a more systematic approach. Evidence should be gathered from a wider base, specific targets should be set, and review mechanisms should be established at the outset. In line with the requirements of Circular 40/2012, the board should ensure that SSE summary reports and improvement plans are published to the school community. In order to assist senior management in its SSE work, it would be useful to establish a core team of staff to oversee the process.

Published September 2016