

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna
Department of Education and Skills

Whole-School Evaluation
Management, Leadership and Learning
REPORT

Saint Fergal's College
Rathdowney, County Laois
Roll number: 71520D

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**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 December 2014 in St. Fergal's College, Rathdowney. 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. Fergal's College, operates under the trusteeship and management of the Laois and Offaly Education and Training Board (ETB). The school provides the Junior Certificate, Leaving Certificate and Leaving Certificate Vocational programmes. Transition Year (TY) is provided as an optional programme for students.

St Fergal's College is the only school in the town and has very good links with the local community. The school is inclusive and it attracts students from a large number of primary schools. The current enrolment in the school is 145 boys and 127 girls.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

Key Findings

- The board of management is supportive of the school and its members provide a valuable leadership role in policy making and decision making.
- The principal and deputy principal are very effective managers of the school and provide very effective leadership for learning.
- The middle management team provides very good support to the operation of the school.
- Teachers have engaged very well with subject planning.
- The results analyses indicate a steady increase in the percentage of students taking subjects at higher-level especially in the Junior Certificate.
- The school offers a good range of subjects and programmes.
- The quality of care provided for students is excellent.
- Career Guidance and the provision for student wellbeing are very good.
- The quality of teaching and learning was very good overall with many examples of excellent practice noted.
- The school has formally adopted the *Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools* but has yet to develop a school-specific child protection policy.
- The school demonstrates very good capacity for ongoing improvement.

Recommendations for Further Development

- Training should be provided to new members of the board to ensure that they have a full understanding of their roles, responsibilities and statutory obligations.
- The senior management team in consultation with staff should conduct an audit of school needs and revise the posts on the basis of this audit.
- The very good practices in teaching and learning described in this report should be shared through collaboration, teachers providing continuous professional development (CPD), and teachers observing each other's lessons.
- The school should develop a school-specific child-protection policy, as a matter of urgency, to ensure that it is fully compliant with the requirements of the *Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools*.

1. QUALITY OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP

1.1 School ownership and management

The board of management is supportive of the school. The members provide a valuable leadership role in policy making and decision making. The board is currently in a transitional stage with some members coming to the end of their terms of office and being replaced. It is now opportune for training to be provided to new members of the board to ensure that they have a full understanding of their roles, responsibilities and statutory obligations.

The board's current priorities centre on, improving the school's infrastructure, increasing student numbers and ensuring that the school continues to provide a wide range of subjects and curricular programmes. St Fergal's College has the capacity, in terms of space and personnel, to provide alternative educational opportunities for students who have left school. It is therefore recommended that the board, in consultation with the ETB, considers the possibility of providing Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) courses.

The board communicates effectively with the wider school community. A summary report of the board meetings is provided. Members of the students' council have the opportunity to attend board meetings to discuss issues that they wish to bring to the board's attention. The views of parents and students are routinely sought in the development and review of relevant policies. This is very good practice. In addition to its role in policy making, the parents' association offers practical support to the school through its fundraising role.

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

The principal and deputy principal are very effective managers of the school. They share a common aim in ensuring that the school is a well-organised, happy, caring environment for students and staff. They have very good awareness of the students' individual needs. They collaborate very well and have clearly defined duties. They fully understand each other's roles and can assume the other's responsibilities whenever necessary. The relationships between teachers, students and the members of the senior management team are respectful and professional. The principal and deputy principal contribute significantly to the maintenance of the warm and caring atmosphere that characterises the school.

The middle management team provides very good support to the operation of the school. They have appropriate autonomy, meet regularly and capably carry out their duties. There are currently four assistant principal posts and eight special duties posts in the school. The post holders have shown flexibility in recent times in ensuring that the school needs are met by the posts. However, there will be additional pressure on the post structure in the future due to expected retirements. In addition, there is inequity in the distribution of post duties. Therefore it is recommended that the senior management team in consultation with staff conduct an audit of school needs and revise the posts on the basis of this audit. Consideration should be taken of all possible deployment options in order to ensure that the school's current needs are met and that staff are given opportunities to gain valuable leadership experience.

It was evident throughout the evaluation that the teachers share a strong commitment to the school and its students. They are actively involved in the life of the school through their work as tutors, through their participation on whole-school and subject planning consultation groups, and through their contribution to the extensive extracurricular programme provided for students. It was clear that the teaching staff view themselves as part of a whole-school pastoral care team and work together to support the students and each other. The results of the survey carried out as part of this evaluation indicated a very high level of student and parental satisfaction with the school.

1.2 Effectiveness of leadership for learning

The senior management team comprising the principal and deputy principal, provides very effective leadership for learning in the school. They have a shared vision which is to promote and facilitate development and improvement in teaching and learning. The timetable is well organised; there is very good provision of information and communication technology (ICT) and resources for teaching; professional development is encouraged and facilitated, and very good discipline and pastoral care structures are in place. In addition, the principal and deputy principal consult with teachers and value and act on their views and advice. The senior management team are open to changing practice through a process of review, evaluation and adjustment. The introduction and later amendment of the taster programme provides a good example of this. There is a culture within the school where senior management and teachers work hard as a team to ensure very high quality provision for students.

Teachers have engaged very well with subject planning and are currently designing a template for whole-school use. This template outlines the content to be taught together with a section for assessment and evaluation. The methodology and the resources to be used in teaching the content are included in some subject plans but not in others. It is recommended that a section be added to the template to provide for the inclusion in all subject plans of methodologies and resources alongside the learning outcomes to be achieved by students.

An analysis of the students' achievement in the certificate examinations compared to national norms is included in all subject plans. In keeping with very good practice this analysis is used to inform action planning for the subject departments. It is recommended that data from yearly standardised tests and attendance, application to study, and any other relevant indicators be added to this analysis in order to provide a more comprehensive perspective on each student's achievement.

The results' analyses indicate a steady increase in the percentage of students taking subjects at higher level, especially in the Junior Certificate, over the last number of years. In particular, higher-level uptake is relatively better in subjects where students are kept in mixed-ability groups for as long as possible. This arrangement communicates higher

expectations to students for longer and is very beneficial and should be extended where appropriate.

The school offers a good range of subjects and programmes. First-year students sample optional subjects for fifteen weeks before making subject choices. This taster programme and appropriate advice provide them with the assistance they need to make informed decisions. However, the length of the taster programme is currently under review and the school is considering the possibility of shortening it.

The policy and procedures for general admissions are well structured and open. Students who transfer from other schools are welcomed into the school. However, this is not reflected in the transfer policy. Therefore, it is recommended that the transfer policy be reviewed to address this. Students are very well supported during the transition from primary to post-primary school. In particular the student mentor system is very effective in supporting first years. Very good systems are in place to monitor and promote good attendance and punctuality.

The school's code of behaviour is based on respect, is positively framed and centres on the pastoral care of students. There is a clear ladder of referral which facilitates the appropriate management of students. In addition, both members of the senior management team maintain a high profile in supporting good student behaviour. Throughout the evaluation students were observed to be very well behaved, confident and happy. They have a strong voice in the school through the student council. The school also conducts an exit survey with sixth-year students when they are leaving school as an additional means of promoting improvement. The results of this survey and the recommendations made by students are taken very seriously by teachers and school management. The teachers are affirming and encouraging.

The quality of care provided for students is excellent. The school's pastoral care system is well supported by the care team, tutors, class teachers, special needs assistants and ancillary staff. The learning support provided for students with special educational needs is of very high quality. It is based on thorough understanding of students' requirements and takes an individualised approach.

Guidance is formally timetabled for senior cycle students and individual careers advice is provided by the guidance counsellor. The school also funds a counsellor who is available to support students experiencing personal difficulties. Social Personal and Health Education (SPHE) and Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) are provided within the curriculum. In addition, the school takes a holistic approach to promoting student wellbeing. For example, students study meditation and mindfulness as a way of helping them to cope with stress.

The board of management has formally adopted the *Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools* without modification. However, a school-specific child protection policy has not been developed. Therefore the school is not compliant with the requirements of the *Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools*. A school-specific child protection policy should be developed as a matter of urgency, to ensure that the school is fully compliant with the requirements of the *Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools*.

1.2 Management of facilities

The school is maintained to a very high standard. Specialist rooms are well equipped and all rooms have very good access to ICT resources. An application has been submitted to the

Department of Education and Skills for the provision of a new sports hall. This would be a welcome addition to the school.

The building has been well equipped with relevant health and safety equipment and regular fire drills are organised. There is an up-to-date health and safety policy.

2. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

2.1 The quality of learning and teaching

Twenty one lessons were evaluated. The quality of teaching and learning was very good overall with many examples of excellent practice noted. Recommendations for improvement were made in most lessons.

The standard of preparation for teaching and learning was very high. A range of resources including ICT were used. In most cases the planning for student engagement and understanding was also very good. For example, where teachers used a variety of explanations to explain difficult concepts or where music was used to encourage student response on a deeper level. However, in some lessons there was scope for improvement in this area.

A good range of methodologies was observed. These included teacher exposition and demonstrations, games, brainstorming, group and pair work, listening exercises, reading, and practical activities. Teacher explanations and instructions were clear. The quality of student learning was highest in the lessons where students were thinking, doing, discussing, and collaborating. In their meeting with the inspectors the students highlighted the value of this type of engagement and indicated that an increase in the variety of methodologies would facilitate improvement in their learning. Some teachers are trained in Instructional Leadership and have shared their expertise by providing peer CPD; this is evidence that the use of active methodologies is being developed in the school. However, it is recommended that the good practices described above be extended through teachers visiting each other's lessons and engaging in peer collaborative review.

The school has identified promoting students' confidence in making oral presentations as a focus area in the school self-evaluation (SSE) process. Students were given opportunities to report the outcomes from group or pair work to their classmates, in some lessons. However, there was significant scope for more widespread implementation in lessons of this aspect of the school's own improvement plan (SIP). This should be addressed through teachers' planning more opportunities for students to speak about their learning.

Students participated very well in the lessons observed. Highest levels of engagement occurred where they collaborated in groups, pairs or as a whole to discuss the lesson's ideas or to undertake practical activities. It was evident that through engaging in these activities that the students developed a deeper understanding of the concepts taught, demonstrated higher quality learning and also the necessary subject-specific language. In some lessons there was scope for activities to encourage students to explore the content in more depth by addressing misconceptions and examining the core underlying ideas. Therefore it is recommended that strategies to facilitate deep understanding be included in all lesson planning.

Questioning was used effectively to monitor and assess learning in every lesson. Skilful questioning and discussion strategies were noted in some lessons. In these cases teachers

used carefully selected questions to encourage students to explore each new idea presented and had good strategies to include all students. The questions used were open and required students to think. Further use of strategies that optimise the learning potential of questioning is therefore recommended.

Almost all lessons opened with teachers sharing the expected learning outcomes with the students and this enhanced the focus and the structure of lessons. Best practice was observed where there was a strategy for checking that students had achieved the learning outcomes throughout the lesson or as the lesson closed. In some cases time was allocated for a recap or consolidation of learning. All of this is very good practice.

Progress in learning was monitored well through questioning and observation. Some teachers provided students with valuable information on how to improve the quality of their work through oral and written feedback. In some lessons students evaluated each other's work. While some or all of the above good practices were evident in all lessons, it is recommended that they be extended as appropriate.

The school has chosen improving students' literacy as part of their SSE process. In most of the lessons observed attention was given to highlighting key words and their meanings to introduce new language and to enhance explanations. This very good practice should be further developed.

The teachers have an excellent knowledge of the students and have a very good awareness of their individual learning needs. The size of the school, the teachers' high level of interest in their students and the quality of student care, have contributed to this. Teachers differentiated learning by choosing activities that allowed students to work at their own pace, providing additional work for those students who required it, and by providing individual attention for students. Students experiencing difficulty were very well supported. In some lessons additional challenge was provided for more able students, there was scope for this practice to be extended. It is therefore recommended that such students be provided with further opportunities to develop and demonstrate their talents.

3. IMPLEMENTATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS FROM PREVIOUS EVALUATIONS

3.1 Management

The whole-school recommendations made in previous evaluations have been implemented. For example, the LCVP report recommended that the school expand its links with outside community and voluntary enterprises, education providers and businesses. The school hosted the 2014 'Rathdowney Expo', where local businesses and student mini-companies displayed their products and services. Local business, Manor Stone, sponsors an Enterprise competition for students, and local business people have visited the school to encourage the development of entrepreneurship. Therefore this recommendation has been exceptionally well implemented. In addition a taster programme for first years has been introduced and provision for Mathematics and LCVP French has been improved, on foot of previous recommendations.

3.2 Learning and teaching

It was recommended, in previous evaluations, that students be encouraged to think for themselves and to become more independent learners. It was evident in the current evaluation that this recommendation has been implemented to an extent. However, there

remains scope for an increase in the opportunities for students to develop independent thinking skills.

Some previous inspection reports recommended that differentiation strategies be developed and implemented and that higher expectations for student achievement be maintained. Very good differentiation strategies are highlighted in this report and the standard of student achievement has enjoyed an upward trend over the last number of years. Therefore very good progress has been made on these recommendations. However, it is recommended that the school examines the strategies that have led to the improvement in higher-level uptake and that it extends these good practices to all subjects.

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

The school demonstrates very good capacity for ongoing improvement. There is a culture of action planning in the school which has been developed through a well-established process of target setting. The principal and deputy principal are open to feedback on current practice and ideas for improvement from all members of the school community. The school monitors and measures student outcomes in a systematic way and uses information to direct and drive improvement. The school has engaged very well with the SSE process and has documented a comprehensive SSE report and SIP. Whole-school involvement in this process is evidenced by the incorporation of the SIP in all subject plans. The strategies outlined in the SIP were observed to be implemented in some lessons but there was scope for fuller implementation. This is particularly true of strategies to develop students' oral presentation skills. The school's willingness to embrace change and to drive improvement has contributed significantly to encouraging students to reach their potential.

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, on behalf of all parents and the school community, is delighted to welcome this report. The positive nature of the comments reinforces our belief that this is a caring, well run school with high expectations for our students which lead to excellent results. We would like to take this opportunity thank all members of staff for their hard work and to compliment them on their caring, inclusive manner.

We are pleased that the inspectors noted the implementation of all previous recommendations and assure them that the current recommendations will be addressed promptly. We wholeheartedly endorse their comments on the need for a gym.

Our school plays a very important role in the local community and we thank the inspectors for highlighting this. We are also very proud of, and appreciate greatly the involvement of local businesses and entrepreneurs with our school.

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 school specific policy on Child Protection has been completed and was passed at the most recent Board meeting. It is available on the school website and will be included in the Parents' Handbook 2015-2016.

The sharing of best practice among teachers will continue to form a significant part of school based CPD.

A review of the posts structure is underway.

Laois and Offaly ETB will provide training for new school boards this year.