Whole-School Evaluation
Management, Leadership and Learning
REPORT

Carrigallen Vocational School
Carrigallen, County Leitrim
Roll number: 71540J

Date of inspection: 12 May 2011
Whole-School Evaluation  
Management, Leadership and Learning

A whole-school evaluation of management, leadership and learning (WSE-MLL) was undertaken in May 2011 in Carrigallen Vocational School. 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

Carrigallen Vocational School operates under the trusteeship of Co. Leitrim Vocational Education Committee (VEC). The school was founded in 1957 and has had a number of additions to its accommodation since. It is a co-educational school catering for a largely rural community and draws its students from a wide catchment area. Current enrolment is 243 and has increased in the last two years.

1. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

1.1 Key Findings

- The current board of management of Carrigallen Vocational School is not properly appointed. Since the local elections of 2009, arrangements for the establishment of a new board have not been completed.
- The current board has supported infrastructural improvements and advocates the further development of the school facilities. There is scope for the board to become more engaged in strategic planning that focuses on a wider educational agenda and to communicate more effectively with the school community.
- The principal leads the school effectively and the senior management team works well together and maintains a prominent presence in the school.
- The care of students and a broad curriculum programme are significant strengths of the school.
- The quality of learning and teaching was in almost all cases good or very good.
- Positive and affirming relationships were evident in the classrooms visited.
- A culture of collaborative planning is evident in the school.
- Significant progress has been made in upgrading the information and communications technology (ICT) facilities. An e-learning plan is in place and teachers are using ICTs to enrich the quality of teaching and to enhance learning.
- Good progress has been made in implementing teaching and learning recommendations made in previous subject inspection reports.

1.2 Recommendations for Further Development

- Co. Leitrim VEC should, without delay, fully implement the requirement to properly establish a board of management.
• Co Leitrim VEC should arrange to provide training on the role and functions of boards of management to the newly appointed board.
• Following training, the new board, in collaboration with the school community, should devise a medium-term strategic plan for the development of the school, based on a wider educational agenda.
• The incoming board in conjunction with Co. Leitrim VEC should, as a matter of urgency, address the health & safety issues raised by the fire officer, those outlined in the subject report on Home Economics, as well as those raised by the school and the inspection team.
• A more developed role for the student council and parents’ association is recommended.
• It is recommended that a staff advisory committee be established to facilitate strategic planning and to oversee a review of curriculum provision, particularly the junior cycle programme.

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 current board of management is not properly appointed. Since the local elections of 2009, arrangements for the establishment of a new board have not been completed. Co. Leitrim VEC should, without delay, fully implement the requirement to properly establish a board of management. It is also recommended that the VEC should arrange to provide training on the role and functions of boards of management to the newly appointed board.

The current board has supported infrastructural improvements and advocates the further development of the school facilities. There is scope for the board to become more engaged in strategic planning that focuses on a wider educational agenda and to communicate more effectively with the school community. Analysis of the parent questionnaire responses indicated that fewer than half do not know about the work of the board. In order to correct this information deficit, the board should issue an agreed report after meetings. It may also prove useful to publish an annual report on the operation and performance of the school, with specific reference to the achievement of objectives as set out in the school plan, as provided under the Education Act, 1998.

The parents’ association made a major contribution to the school’s celebration of its golden jubilee in 2007 but has not played an active role in the school since then. School management should support the relaunch of the parents’ association and assist in the development of a supportive and participatory role for the association.

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
A priority for development identified by the board during its tenure has been the improvement of the school’s infrastructure. The board in its presentation outlined plans for
the future development of the school. The board has also been involved in ratifying a number of whole-school policies, notably the code of behaviour.

2.2 Effectiveness of leadership for learning

Leadership of staff
The principal leads the school effectively and has led in the areas of infrastructural improvement, policy review and curriculum development with the introduction of the TY. The senior management team works well together and maintains a prominent presence in the school. Both members display a collegial approach to the management of the school and maintain good communications with the school community. There is evidence of effective distributed leadership as year heads, class tutors, programme co-ordinators and holders of posts of responsibility all have significant roles and responsibilities in the management of the school.

The principal provides instructional leadership by encouraging and facilitating continuing professional development (CPD) for teachers and by providing for and encouraging subject and programme planning. There is scope for the principal to provide additional instructional leadership by proposing items for the agenda of subject department meetings which would focus on teaching and learning and areas for development. An audit of staff CPD needs would prove useful in planning for future professional development of staff. Senior management is encouraged to maintain engagement with the Leadership Development for Schools (LDS) programme.

Significant progress has been made in the areas of curricular planning. Subject department plans are in place as are plans for curricular programmes. The comprehensive nature of these plans reflects the commitment of teachers and the role played by subject co-ordinators. To improve the use of planning documents as working documents that inform teaching and learning, there is scope to add learning outcomes to some of these plans. A school plan is also in place and it would benefit from some reorganisation into permanent and developmental sections.

Leadership of students
The care of students is a significant strength of the school. The majority of students surveyed agreed that they feel safe and cared for in the school. Allocations for special educational needs (SEN) and for English as an additional language (EAL) are appropriately used. The SEN department is well resourced and is effectively co-ordinated. EAL students are assessed and receive appropriate support to enable them to access the school’s curriculum. Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) is appropriately timetabled. A draft policy for Relationship and Sexuality Education (RSE) is being developed and a senior cycle RSE programme is in place. The draft RSE policy should be finalised and ratified by the board. There is scope for further collaborative planning for the senior cycle RSE programme.

The school offers its students a very broad range of subjects and provides four curricular programmes. Timetable provision is in line with Circular Letter M29/95 Time in School. Students throughout first year sample a very broad range of subjects. An analysis of the first-year timetable showed a less than optimum time allocation for some subjects and a less than optimum distribution of lessons in students’ timetables. It is now timely that the year-long sampling programme and the organisation of the junior cycle be reviewed. It is important that students are provided with a meaningful educational experience in sampling the optional subjects. In best practice situations, this is achieved with careful planning by the subject departments concerned. All members of the department should contribute to the development of a sample programme. The plan should ensure that students gain an
appropriate experience of the subject and the plans should be included in the subject department plan. It is therefore recommended that a staff advisory committee be established to facilitate strategic planning and to oversee a review of the curriculum, particularly the junior cycle programme. This advisory committee could oversee the progress of working groups in areas for improvement identified following consultation with the school community.

An inclusive admissions policy is in place which is in keeping with the ethos of the school. Some adjustments to the wording would ensure greater clarity. It is notable that the school’s mission statement is displayed at the entrance and is evident in the daily routines in the school. The school is well organised and displayed a sense of purpose. Students moved around in an orderly manner and a warm, open and welcoming atmosphere prevailed. This positive position was endorsed by parents and students. In responses to the parents’ questionnaire most agreed that the school is well run.

The recently revised code of behaviour is very positive in its approach and encourages students to take responsibility for their behaviour. There is scope to develop further the sections relating to suspension and exclusion. The roles of year head and class tutors support the caring approach to the implementation of the code. There is scope to extend the role of year head to include the monitoring of students’ academic progress. The co-signing with the principal of school reports should be considered. The clear ladder of referral and its sensitive application is a further support to students. The mentoring of first year students by senior students is acknowledged as good practice. A student council is in place as is a student liaison teacher. However, there is scope for a much greater role for the council to be developed within the school. Student questionnaire responses showed that fewer than half agreed they had a say in how to make the school a better place.

Student retention is very good and many students progress to further and higher education. The school has been proactive in promoting good attendance and recent strategies arising from a review have been effective due to the support of the principal and the attendance officer.

Very good arrangements are in place to support parents and students at the point of transfer from primary school. Almost all of parents agreed that the school makes their children welcome. Further supports are provided when students are making subject choices at the end of first year and again as they transfer to the senior cycle.

A whole-school guidance plan is in place as is a critical incident response plan. The guidance plan should be reviewed, updated and ratified by the board. The critical incident response plan is generic in nature and should be customised for this particular school.

As a means of formalising these support structures for students it is recommended that a care team be established and that is should meet on a regular basis. This team could consist of senior management, SEN co-ordinator, guidance counsellor, year heads and others as appropriate. It could monitor student progress and provide targeted interventions when necessary.

The commitment of teachers in providing an extensive programme of co-curricular and extracurricular activities is acknowledged.

2.3 Management of facilities

Significant progress has been made in infrastructural upgrade. Most significant improvements have been made in the woodwork room, metalwork room, design & communication graphics room and insulation of the building. Considerable progress has
also been made in extending ICT facilities. There are plans in place for an electrical upgrade.

A safety statement is in place, fire drills are held and fire evacuation notices are prominently displayed throughout the school. Safety notices are in place in the woodwork room. The fire officer has raised concerns in relation to evacuation procedures and access to the grounds. School management has raised concerns in relation to toilet facilities, and staff and administration facilities. The inspection team raised concerns in relation to the school bell, the supply of gas to both science laboratories, the storage of chemicals and it was noted that health and safety concerns expressed in a previous report on Home Economics have yet to be addressed. The incoming board, in conjunction with Co. Leitrim VEC, should, as a matter of urgency, address the health & safety issues raised by the fire officer, those outlined in the subject report on Home Economics, as well as those raised by the school and the inspection team.

A Green School committee is in place and the school was awarded a Green Flag in 2010. The school demonstrates an awareness of its environmental responsibility and the contribution of students, teachers and caretaking staff is acknowledged.

3. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

3.1 The quality of learning and teaching

Twenty-one lessons across a range of seventeen subject areas were observed. In almost all of the lessons, the quality of teaching ranged from good to very good. All lessons were well planned and teachers had prepared a range of resources which were used effectively to support teaching and learning. A notable feature was the use of ICTs by teachers to enrich the learning experiences of students. Questioning techniques encouraged students to develop higher-order thinking skills and to contribute to class discussions. Lessons were appropriately paced and teacher exposition was very clear.

Best practice was observed where specific learning outcomes were shared with students at the start of lessons and were then revisited at the conclusion to reinforce learning. The use of this strategy in all lessons is encouraged.

Teachers used a good variety of teaching strategies that actively engaged students. Where group work was used, clear tasks were set and support materials were provided. Peer learning was evident in some lessons. Good practices in relation to health and safety were noted in practical lessons. During the completion of set tasks, teachers moved around classrooms offering encouragement and frequently provided one-to-one support for students. There is scope to further develop differentiation strategies and discussion of these at subject department meetings is encouraged. Team teaching should also be considered as a means of providing support where appropriate.

Samples of students’ written work were reviewed and it was noted that the quality of monitoring by teachers ranged from light touch ‘tick marking’ to more detailed and constructive feedback. There is scope for more specific and detailed comment to students as a means of improving the quality of their written work and of improving student attainment. It was noted in the students’ questionnaire responses that the majority agree that teachers encouraged students to work to the best of their ability and fewer than half disagreed that teachers told them how they can improve. While the quality of students’ written work was in some cases very good, there is scope for teachers to encourage students to improve both the quality and accuracy of their written work.
It was noted that subject departments are maintaining records of students’ grades in certificate examinations and comparing these with national norms. This is good practice. However, a more careful analysis of these outcomes is recommended as a means of identifying good practices and strategies that could be used to improve student attainment. This would also support the development of strategic planning in the school.

4. IMPLEMENTATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS FROM PREVIOUS EVALUATIONS

4.1 Management

Some progress has been made in implementing recommendations from previous subject inspection reports. These include issues in relation to health and safety in the woodwork room. Changes have been made in relation to the timetabling of practical subjects and to staff deployment. However, there is still need to address issues in relation to provision for Art and health and safety issues in relation to Home Economics. It is recommended that the board in collaboration with the VEC seek ways to address these issues as a matter of urgency.

4.2 Learning and Teaching

The majority of recommendations have been implemented. These include a review of department plans and an increase in the diversity of design projects undertaken by students. These were evident during the evaluation. There is scope to include learning outcomes in some subject department plans and to share these with students at the start of lessons. The development of a policy on assessment for learning (AfL) should be undertaken as recommended. This could be incorporated into the school’s assessment policy.

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

There is clear evidence of the school’s capacity for self-evaluation and its ability for improvement. The introduction in 2010 of a well planned and delivered TY programme is a major curriculum development. Parents and students were asked to evaluate the TY after the first term and this evaluation was used by the school to review the programme and resulted in the introduction of a new module suggested by parents.

It was evident that a collaborative culture exists in the school and this was effectively used in the recent review of the code of behaviour, in planning for the TY, and in subject department planning. It is also noteworthy that this review of the code of behaviour involved evidence-based research on which policy was developed suited to the context of this school. Discussions have also taken place in relation to the introduction of a Post-Leaving Certificate course on Art and Drama.

During the evaluation the school community demonstrated an openness and willingness to discuss proposed changes and identified areas for development, such as the need for a more active role for the student council and the parents’ association.

Published December 2011