

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

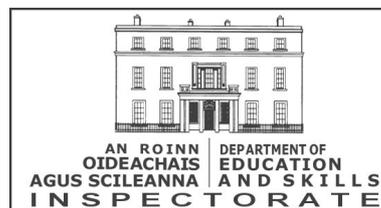
Department of Education and Skills

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

REPORT

**Ratoath College
Ratoath, County Meath
Roll number: 76088T**

Date of inspection: 8 April 2011



Whole-School Evaluation Management, Leadership and Learning

A whole-school evaluation of management, leadership and learning (WSE-MLL) was undertaken in April, 2011 in Ratoath College. 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, 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

Ratoath College is a new and developing school under the management of County Meath Vocational Education Committee (VEC). Opened in 2005, the school has a current enrolment of 768 students. The projected demand for places indicates that this will rise to 1300 in due course. The school building, occupied in 2007, was built to accommodate 850 students. The rapid growth in enrolment, while an indication of the school's attractiveness to parents, will present challenges for the school over the next few years. The school is supported by the VEC in facing these challenges.

1. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

1.1 Key Findings

- The in-school senior management team is well supported by the VEC, an experienced board of management, and a committed Parents' Association in the running of the school.
- The principal and deputy principal provide strong leadership for learning; they work as a united team and share a clear vision that informs the work of the school.
- The middle management team of assistant principals (APs) and special duties teachers (SDTs), through the effective distribution of leadership, provides essential support in the running of the school.
- The quality of school development planning, subject department planning and individual lesson planning is very high.
- The school timetable does not fully meet the requirements of Circular Letter M29/95 in relation to time in school.
- A Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) policy has not been developed to date.
- The school is innovative in its approach to motivating students and to encouraging positive student behaviour.
- The school's practice in relation to Guidance is very good.
- There is a good range of programmes and subjects currently on offer and it is planned to expand the curriculum in response to students' changing needs.
- High quality learning support is provided for students who have been identified as having special educational needs.

- Students have a valued voice in the school and are encouraged to make a significant contribution to driving school improvement.
- Very high quality teaching was observed during the evaluation and students demonstrated an interest in learning: they were clearly benefiting from the activities taking place.
- The school has excellent capacity for driving improvement. The self-evaluation process is very well established and it plays a central role in school planning.

1.2 Recommendations for Further Development

- The school timetable should be amended to ensure that students receive twenty-eight hours instruction time per week in accordance with Circular Letter M29/95.
- An RSE policy should be developed in line with Circular Letter 0037/2010.
- The school should develop a whole-school approach to literacy and numeracy.
- A whole-school approach to Assessment for Learning should be adopted.
- Strategies that differentiate learning should form an integral part of lessons.

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 board of management functions as a sub-committee of the VEC. The members of the board have a wide range of educational experience and expertise and they actively support the work of the school through their involvement in policy making and decision making. There are very good lines of communication between the board of management, the Parents' Association, teachers and students and these have contributed to the board's very good level of awareness of the day-to-day work of the school.

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

The priorities for school development identified by the board include providing additional accommodation to facilitate the growth in student numbers, expanding the curriculum to meet future needs and ensuring that the school ethos endures as the school expands.

The Parents' Association (PA) plays an important role in policy making and decision making. PA members work in the school library on a voluntary basis, they assist with open nights and school events and raise funds to support the work of the school. The majority of parents surveyed indicated that they were aware of the work of the PA.

2.2 Effectiveness of leadership for learning

Leadership of staff

The principal and deputy principal work as a united team and share a clear vision that informs the work of the school. They provide strong leadership for teaching and learning. This is achieved through the active encouragement of subject planning, ongoing career development and sharing of expertise, and through providing access to high quality resources and a physical environment that supports learning. The school's philosophy 'Mol an Óige' (praise the young) permeates planning, teaching and learning and day-to-day interactions; this contributes to the maintenance of an effective learning environment. The questionnaire responses show that almost all parents feel that the school is well run.

The middle management team of APs and SDTs plays an excellent leadership role in the school. Through the effective distribution of leadership they provide essential support in the running of the school. The APs, the principal and the deputy principal meet weekly and the minutes of these meeting are e-mailed to each member of staff. One AP acts as a link between the AP and SDT teams and each AP links with eight members of staff; this arrangement provides structured lines of communication and is very valuable. It is evident that the middle management team is committed to ensuring that the needs of the school are met by the AP and SDT posts and works very hard in this regard.

The quality of school planning is very high. All aspects of the work of the school are subject to evaluation and development through the planning process. The involvement of all teachers is facilitated by the creation of committees that focus on areas prioritised through consultation. The wider school community is consulted during policy development, planning and decision making.

An RSE programme is in place in the senior cycle. An RSE policy should be developed in line with Circular Letter 0037/2010. The school timetable does not fully meet the requirements of Circular Letter M29/95 in relation to time in school. This should be addressed as a matter of priority.

Leadership of students

The school's practice in relation to Guidance is very good. A whole-school guidance plan has been developed and it is evident from the review of documentation that there is a whole-school approach to Guidance. There are two guidance counsellors in the school catering for the pastoral and careers advice needs of students. There are good structures in place to support students at transition points, including an induction and mentoring programme for first year students. There was very strong parental agreement with the questionnaire statement that the school made their child feel welcome when first enrolled.

There is a good range of programmes and subjects currently on offer and the expansion of the curriculum is planned to meet students' changing needs. The school has a unit catering for students with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD), 'Aonad Arkle'. This valuable unit provides for the special needs of students with ASD while allowing them to access as much of the mainstream curriculum as possible.

The school has a positive behaviour strategy for managing students. There is a clear ladder of referral and a code of behaviour has been developed. The student diary, known as 'dialann' is routinely used to send positive notes home and to record student learning achievements. Award stamps, stars, certificates and postcards home are used to promote positive behaviour, good attendance, punctuality and effort in learning. The morning

assembly provides an important means of giving additional recognition for a wide variety of student contributions. The school's ethos of student praise, summed up in the school motto '*Mol an Óige*' (praise the young) is evident in the 'good news Friday' announcements that ensure an encouraging end to each week. Overall, the school is innovative in its approach to motivating students.

A very good pastoral care system is in place, involving the '*moltóirí*' (year heads), '*caomhnóirí*' (class tutors), guidance counsellors, chaplain and class teachers. In responding to the questionnaires administered in the evaluation most students agreed with the statement that they felt safe and cared for in the school and a clear majority of students indicated that they understood the school rules.

High quality learning support is provided for students who have been identified with special educational needs. The models used to deliver learning support are team teaching and small group withdrawal. In keeping with very good practice teachers have received training on the appropriate use of team teaching.

Students have a valued voice in the school and make a significant contribution to driving school improvement. In many classrooms there is a suggestion box and teachers periodically ask students for a 'one minute comment' on the lesson and how it could be improved. The student council is consulted on policy formation and its members have addressed the parents' association and the board of management in recent times. In addition, students are surveyed for their opinions on various aspects of school life. Students representing all year groups make announcements and read the prayer at morning assembly. Throughout the evaluation students demonstrated a sense of confidence, responsibility and maturity. While there are many very good strategies in place to encourage students' contribution the questionnaire responses indicate that less than half of students feel that they have a say in how to make the school a better place. Therefore, ways to increase awareness among students of their involvement in school self-evaluation and to publicise the impact of the student voice should be explored.

2.3 Management of facilities

Physical facilities and access to resources to support learning are excellent. The integration of information and communications technology (ICT) enhanced learning for students in the lessons observed. Teachers in the school possess a very high level of expertise in the effective use of ICT and are creative in using ICT to engage students.

An application for an extension to the school has been submitted to the Department with a view to making provision for the increasing enrolment numbers.

3. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

3.1 The quality of learning and teaching

Very high quality teaching and learning activities were observed during the evaluation. This is borne out by the questionnaire responses with almost all students indicating that teachers encourage them to work to the best of their ability. The classroom visits involved observing twenty-nine lessons over thirty-four class periods. The wide variety of methodologies and learning strategies used contributed to the high levels of student participation and engagement observed. There was very effective and widespread use of ICT in exploring lesson material. Best practice in this regard was observed where students themselves engaged independently with the ICT in the classroom. Classroom atmosphere was very positive and it was evident that there are positive relationships between students

and their teachers. Overall, students demonstrated an interest in learning and were clearly benefiting from and enjoying the activities taking place.

In most of the lessons observed effective strategies were used to differentiate learning. These included the provision of support through individual attention, the facilitation of group or pair work, and team teaching. Where appropriate the tasks completed by students ranged in difficulty and teachers encouraged students to choose tasks that matched their ability; this is very good practice. However, there was significant scope for the inclusion of differentiation strategies in some of the lessons observed, for example, where whole-class teaching was the only methodology used for class groups with a wide range of ability. It is therefore recommended that the good differentiation practices observed in most lessons be extended to all lessons. In particular teachers should be conscious of including material and activities that provide appropriate levels of challenge for all members of the class group including better able students.

There is good practice in relation to assessment. Teachers use questioning very well to assess learning, encourage discussion and explore ideas. 'Traffic lights' are also used for students to communicate their level of understanding to teachers. Some very good examples of peer assessment and students tracking their own progress were observed. Some teachers explicitly provide students with the criteria for success and this was observed to work very well. In some cases Assessment for Learning (AfL) principles are used to provide encouragement and motivation for students. There is scope for AfL practice to be extended to the use of advisory comments on written work that provide advice to students on how to improve the quality of their work.

Very good lesson planning contributed significantly to the success of classroom activities in achieving the learning objectives. The topic to be explored in the lesson was explicitly shared with the students at the start of some lessons and the achievement of the learning outcomes was checked at the end; this very good practice added structure and focus for students. Some of the lessons observed would have benefited from this approach and it is recommended that it be included in lesson plans where appropriate.

The quality of subject department planning is very good. Self-evaluation is a strong feature of the subject planning process in the school and it is evident that this has had a very positive effect on the quality of planning. Excellent collaboration and communication between members of subject departments, thorough the sharing of resources electronically and through participation at frequent meetings, has contributed to the degree to which planning has had a positive impact on teaching and learning throughout the school.

It was evident during the evaluation that students are very well supported, particularly those with special educational needs and that the school is inclusive in this regard. It is recommended, however, that the school adopt a whole-school approach to literacy and numeracy. The use of key-word charts, the provision of word banks and strategies to optimise opportunities to enhance numeracy skills across subjects are recommended.

Valuable opportunities are provided for students to engage in extracurricular and co-curricular activities. A large majority of students participate in a wide range of activities. This is evidence of teachers' commitment to providing positive educational experiences for students.

4. IMPLEMENTATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS FROM PREVIOUS EVALUATIONS

4.1 Management

A total of four whole-school provision recommendations were made in the five subject inspection reports on the school that have been published to date. All four have been implemented; this is an indication of senior management's attention to evaluation recommendations.

4.2 Learning and Teaching

Action has been taken on most of the recommendations made in previous evaluation reports relating to planning. The recommendation made in the 2010 Science and Biology evaluation relating to the compilation of experiment kits has been implemented quickly. However, work remains to be done on the recommendation in the 2008 report for English with regard to planning for the skills to be acquired by students in their study of the subject.

Targeted questioning was used in the art lesson observed thus addressing the recommendation made in the art evaluation in the area of teaching and learning. There was one other recommendation in the area of teaching and learning, that students should be encouraged to engage more with each other in class discussions; this recommendation was made in the English evaluation. In the majority of the lessons observed opportunities for students to engage with each other were used very well, particularly through the facilitation of group or pair work. There was scope in a small number of lessons observed for students to become more engaged as learners and the use of strategies to facilitate this are encouraged.

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

The school has excellent capacity for driving improvement. The self-evaluation process is very well established and it plays a central role in school planning. All aspects of school life are subject to review and evaluation. Teachers evaluate students, students evaluate lessons, subject departments evaluate their own work and committees are established to evaluate various areas of school life. In addition, a form is included in the student '*dialann*' that facilitates parental feedback on student performance at school. The principal and deputy principal play an important role in this process through providing a structure for the evaluation activities and through encouraging full participation.

The school has been active in embracing new initiatives for learning. This currently involves two of the core subjects of Mathematics and Irish. Ratoath College is one of the initial twenty-four *Project Maths* schools and has also participated in the *Fón Project*, both initiatives developed by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). The school is also involved in *Dissolving Boundaries* and *My Study Mate*, initiatives that use ICT to connect learners.

Evaluation of student achievement is carried out through analysis of the school's attainment data from the certificate examinations against national norms every year. The school should consider comparing its attainment in the certificate examinations to student intake data to provide an additional perspective on achievement.

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 Ratoath College and Co. Meath VEC welcome the findings of the MLL.

We are particularly pleased that the inspectors mentioned the very high quality teaching, the very high quality of school development planning, the high quality of learning support for SEN students, the excellent capacity that the school has for driving improvement and the effective distribution of leadership throughout the school.

We are happy that the inspectors noted that the school motto “Mol an Óige” permeated planning, teaching and learning and day to day interactions within the school.

The Board would like to thank all members of the school community for their hard work and commitment to 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 week was increased by 5 minutes in this academic year.

The senior RSE policy is currently being developed.

All departments are working on literacy and numeracy policies with a view to producing a whole school policy within the next year.

All staff meetings will include a section on Assessment for Learning and staff have been encouraged to embed the practise of differentiation into all their lessons.

The English department have amended their documentation regarding planning for skills as outlined in the NCCA Junior Certificate English Syllabus.