An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Whole-School Evaluation
Management, Leadership and Learning

REPORT

Boherbue Comprehensive School
County Cork
Roll number: 81009B

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 Boherbue Comprehensive 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 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

Boherbue Comprehensive School was founded in 1973 following the amalgamation of two local schools. It is a co-educational school serving a rural population in the North Cork area. Its catchment area encompasses a wide hinterland and a large number of feeder primary schools. There has been a steady growth in enrolment in recent years and the school has a current enrolment of 337 students. The school’s motto Ó fhás go hAois emphasises the importance of the individual’s development in the intellectual, physical, social and spiritual spheres.

1. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

1.1 Key Findings

- The senior management team displays effective leadership with an emphasis on care and support for staff and students, and a commitment to high standards of teaching and learning.
- The school provides a welcoming, inclusive and caring learning environment.
- School development planning is of a very high quality and the three-year strategic plan is a key element in the ongoing process of improvement.
- The quality of teaching and learning was very good in the majority of lessons observed, with some instances of excellent practice.
- There was a very good level of engagement with learning. Students were well behaved and participated fully in the lessons observed.
- There is a high level of satisfaction among parents and students with the quality of education provided by the school.

1.2 Recommendations for Further Development

- While acknowledging the school management’s efforts to date, the board should endeavour to bring about a satisfactory resolution to the issue of broadband access.
- The schedule of posts should be reviewed in order to better support management in meeting the changing needs of the school.
• A regular scheduled meeting time for an expanded core pastoral care team is recommended.

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 is newly appointed and is appropriately constituted. The board is supportive of senior management and there is good communication between the board and the teaching staff, as well as with the parents’ association through parental representatives on the board.

In conjunction with senior management, the board plays a key role in setting out the strategic direction for the school with a focus on enhancing teaching and learning. This has led to the introduction of new methodologies such as team-teaching. The board also facilitates and supports staff professional development.

The work completed in relation to policies is comprehensive with regular evaluation, review and ratification of policies and procedures. The school’s priorities for drafting, reviewing and updating policies are clearly outlined in the three-year strategic plan prepared for the board by the core planning team.

Confirmation was provided that, in compliance with Post-primary Circulars M44/05 and 0062/2006, the school 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 identified by the board include the maintenance of the current level of subject provision in light of a large number of recent retirements and the expansion of the curriculum to include additional subjects, if possible. With regard to the school’s facilities, a key priority is the further development of information and communication technology (ICT) in order to foster an e-learning culture in the school. The school is very well equipped in terms of its own ICT infrastructure. However, further progress is dependent on the satisfactory resolution of the current difficulties regarding access to a quality Broadband service appropriate for the needs of the school.

It is noteworthy that the main recommendations proposed in this report reflect issues that have already been identified as priorities for development by the school through its own self-evaluation process.

2.2 Effectiveness of leadership for learning

Leadership of staff

The school currently has an acting principal and acting deputy principal. They work very well together with complementary roles and approaches. They demonstrate a commitment
to the welfare and support of staff and students, and a commitment to high standards of teaching and learning. They operate an “open-door” policy with an emphasis on listening and consultation, and view regular communication, meetings and feedback as key to managing and leading the school community. In this way, they foster a spirit of openness and collaboration together with a strong sense of community and respect within the school.

A culture of distributive leadership is encouraged by management whereby a number of leadership and management roles are devolved to staff. Those involved are trusted and empowered to take on new roles. In turn, this approach has led to students being enabled to take on appropriate responsibility within the school in areas such as the operation of the library, mentoring and fundraising. This approach has led to the establishment of a good organisational structure, with staff provided with opportunities to develop their skills and talents, and to contribute to policies relating to their area of expertise and interest. The effectiveness of the work of senior and middle management is corroborated by the high percentage of parents who stated in questionnaire responses that the school is well run, and who strongly endorsed the work of the school.

While the role of middle management is recognised by staff as essential to effective management, a large number of key posts of responsibility have been affected by recent retirements. This has had a significant impact on the day-to-day running of the school and on school planning in general. The commitment and dedication of the staff, including senior management, in assuming additional responsibilities in order to ensure the continuation and co-ordination of programmes and activities, is noted and acknowledged. As possible future retirements may also impact on the posts of responsibility, it is recommended that the schedule of posts be reviewed to facilitate ongoing support of school management in meeting the needs of the school.

Staff are committed to their work and focused on enabling students achieve to their full potential. The staff’s openness to change is evidenced by their embracing of new teaching methodologies and in the growth in the use of ICT for teaching and learning. Of particular note is the way in which ICT planning has been advanced through a process of auditing, evaluation and discussion, while teachers have been upskilled through in-house training and mentoring.

There is evidence of exemplary practice in the area of school development planning. This work has had a significant impact on many aspects of the school since school planning was initiated in the 1990s. A core planning team is in place under the leadership of a co-ordinator with a clear brief to research, review and plan for the future. The team’s weekly meeting is recognised as a pivotal element in progressing work on policies and in forward planning. The inclusion of school development planning on the agenda of every staff meeting and board of management meeting promotes good communication with the school partners. The three-year, strategic-plan framework is organised in terms of action planning with three areas of focus, namely organisation, curriculum and resources. The planning is rooted in research and data collection which then informs the goals and direction taken, with a focus on teaching and learning outcomes. This is very good practice.

The focus on curricular planning has ensured that subject department planning is well-advanced with significant progress made in the integration of ICT into classroom practice, in self-evaluation, and in assessment for learning (Afl) techniques. In order to build capacity and expertise among staff with regard to the whole-school planning process, it is suggested that an additional member be co-opted on to the core planning team on a rotational basis each year.
While senior management maintains a visible presence within the school, more formal structures for communication with staff include monthly meetings with the year heads, staff meetings, the use of plasma screens and the school website.

A parents’ advisory council is in place. It meets regularly and provides a forum for discussion and feedback in addition to its work in supporting the school community. The council is active in many areas of school life, including fundraising, and is consulted on all major changes of policy. Communication between parents and the school has been strengthened through the introduction of a text messaging service in addition to the regular newsletter, progress reports and parent-teacher meetings.

**Leadership of students**
The school operates an open admissions policy and is committed to ensuring that students are welcomed and cared for. In their responses to questionnaires and in interviews, a high proportion of students and parents agreed that there was a good atmosphere in the school and that the students felt safe and well looked after.

The code of behaviour promotes positive behaviour and mutual respect, and is reviewed regularly. It is based on restorative justice with a clear ladder of referral in disciplinary matters. The year heads play a key role in encouraging students to take responsibility for their behaviour. The school’s annual awards ceremony is used to highlight and reward positive student behaviour and achievement during the year.

The structures and strategies in place to support students are a visible strength of the school. The work of the guidance counsellor, and of the pastoral care team led by the school chaplain, are central in ensuring a high level of care for students as befits the school’s ethos. A formal Guidance programme provides educational, vocational and career guidance for all students through in-class and one-to-one sessions, while the role of the chaplain encompasses the promotion of Christian values, pastoral care, and counselling support. The significant involvement and contribution of a large number of staff to the pastoral care of students is acknowledged, in particular the work of the year heads, programme co-ordinators and special needs co-ordinator.

While a formal meeting of the guidance counsellor and the chaplain is timetabled for the start of each term, the provision of a regular scheduled meeting time is recommended, as it would allow for the expansion of the team to include other members of staff who are already involved in pastoral care, and would ensure continuity and the sharing of expertise.

Support for students with additional educational needs is well established, and involves a number of staff, one of whom has recently undertaken the role of co-ordinator in a voluntary capacity. Following consultation and review, some aspects for improvement have been identified and plans are under way to implement the changes and to expand the core team as a matter of priority.

Attention is paid to supporting students during periods of transition in their school career. A successful first-year induction programme has been developed involving a mentoring programme and specific attention to homework strategies. A further system is in place to support students after they leave school, with contact maintained with each Leaving Certificate student. In the intervening years, support is centred on the student’s personal, social, spiritual and holistic development through a range of liturgical celebrations, and the fostering of a sense of community both within the school and with the wider community. Links are established with the relevant outside agencies, local charities, businesses and support groups such as Integrated Rural Development (IRD) Duhallow.
The curriculum on offer is broad and balanced as befits the ethos of a comprehensive school. It is reviewed regularly in order to ensure that it meets the needs and interests of students. Additional subjects are offered to students on an after-school basis, where required. The Transition Year (TY) programme has been successfully re-introduced in recent years. Students are afforded an opportunity to participate in a wide range of co-curricular and extracurricular activities. Following a survey, the school has recently sought to address any perceived gender imbalance in the activities available by introducing new sports targeted specifically at girls.

There is an active and well-informed student council in the school. It meets regularly with management and is consulted as appropriate in the formulation of policies. During the evaluation, students commented favourably on the level of interest and care shown by management and staff, both for students on a personal level and also for their academic attainment. The students view the sense of camaraderie, care and respect evident in the school as one of its key strengths.

2.3 Management of facilities

The school was built in 1973 and the buildings and grounds are very well maintained. The work and attention of the school’s caretaking and administrative staff, the respect shown by the students, coupled with a commitment to the ongoing development of the facilities by management, has ensured a bright and attractive school environment. Art work and photographs adorn the corridors while many classrooms include displays of posters, charts and examples of students’ work. A recent extension has provided additional classroom space, while the creation of a Sli na sláinte walkway within the grounds has created a resource which is appreciated both by students and by the local community. The school maintains strong links with the community through making its facilities available for activities and events. There is a health and safety statement in place and the school carries out a risk assessment audit as part of this policy. This is in accordance with good practice.

The school has prioritised the development of ICT for many years. It has invested considerably in its ICT infrastructure, and an active e-learning team is in place that has been instrumental in setting future priorities for ICT, and in ensuring that the classrooms are equipped to a very high standard. However, the single biggest obstacle to the integration of ICT across the curriculum is the lack of a satisfactory broadband connection. The current 2mb Satellite Broadband connection is insufficient to meet the needs of the school. Even though management has been pro-active in addressing the issue through funding an additional service from a broadband provider, the school is limited in what can be achieved until such time as a satisfactory broadband connection is provided through the National Broadband Scheme. The school’s efforts in this regard are acknowledged and it is strongly recommended that they maintain their efforts to bring about a resolution to this issue.

3. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

3.1 The quality of learning and teaching

The quality of teaching and learning was very good in the majority of lessons observed with some instances of excellent practice. Students and parents were also very positive about the quality of teaching and learning. Students said that they were challenged to work to the best of their ability. Outcomes in certificate examinations were observed to be very good.
Lessons observed were well planned and structured, and teachers had established very good learning routines. A range of resources, including ICT and graphic organisers, was utilised effectively to enhance the learning experience and to engage students’ interest. The intended learning outcomes were shared with students, instruction was clear and key terms were well explained.

The use of higher-order questioning was a prominent feature of most lessons and the questions encouraged a thoughtful student response. Questions were posed globally and then directed to individual students. A problem-solving approach was also employed. Strategies such as pair work, discovery learning, peer-mentoring and co-operative learning encouraged student engagement and participation. Particular attention was paid to subject-specific language. Very good practice observed included the linking of theory and practical work, examples of high-quality team-teaching, and opportunities for students to engage in self-evaluation. In many lessons, learning was made enjoyable, challenging and interesting and students responded with enthusiasm to the active-learning methodologies employed.

There was ongoing monitoring of students’ learning and many teachers attended skilfully to the individual learning needs of students. The assigned homework was well-prepared in class and was used to advance learning. There was some good evidence of the use of constructive comments and suggestions for improvement in copybooks, and this is an assessment for learning technique that could be further developed.

Good classroom management supported the creation of a calm and orderly learning environment. Teachers’ expectations for students were high and consequently students were focused and on task. The student-teacher rapport was positive, often good-humoured, and underpinned by mutual respect.

4. IMPLEMENTATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS FROM PREVIOUS EVALUATIONS

4.1 Management

The recommendations made in previous subject inspection reports have been fully addressed and implemented. Procedures are well established whereby following a subject inspection, each department analyses the report, and prepares and implements a collaborative plan. The progress made is re-evaluated regularly and reports are prepared for the board of management. It is very positive that the subject inspection process has been used as a self-evaluation tool within the school resulting in ongoing improvements in areas such as subject department planning, access to subjects, and in ensuring a safer working and learning environment.

Learning and Teaching

In addition to identifying strengths in teaching and learning practices, the reports highlighted some areas for improvement, notably increased use of ICT and a focus on teaching strategies. These recommendations have been addressed by the board and by senior management both at subject department level, and through a whole-school approach to developing teaching and learning. This has led to the introduction of strategies such as team-teaching, a greater integration of ICT into classroom practice, developments in assessment, and the creation of a student-results tracking system in some practical subjects.
5. THE SCHOOL’S SELF-EVALUATION PROCESS AND CAPACITY FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

5.1

The board, senior management and staff are committed to ongoing school improvement. The practice of self-evaluation is already firmly established across all areas of school life, and the school partners are encouraged to become involved in school planning and evaluation. The staff’s willingness to embrace new approaches to teaching and learning is indicative of its openness to change in order to meet the evolving needs of students. The leadership and commitment shown by management and staff together with the achievements to date are evidence that the school is in a very strong position to bring about further improvement.
Appendix

School response to the report

Submitted by the Board of Management
Area 1  Observations on the content of the inspection report

We welcome the positive feedback and the acknowledgement of the hard work, commitment and dedication of the whole school community. The report highlights the positive ethos of the School as outlined in our Mission Statement and the communication and collaboration of all the stakeholders. We take on board the recommendations. We would like to acknowledge the professionalism of the inspectorate who affirmed good practice and shared their expertise with us.

Area 2  Follow-up actions planned or undertaken since the completion of the inspection activity to implement the findings and recommendations of the inspection.

- Our effort to bring about a satisfactory resolution to the issue of broadband access is ongoing.

- A review of the schedule of Posts is being undertaken at the moment.

- We will endeavour to schedule a regular meeting of the Pastoral Care Team for the coming school year, resources permitting.

- We recognise the value of building capacity and expertise among the staff in relation to school planning and we will endeavour to include additional staff members on a rotational basis.