Whole-School Evaluation
REPORT

Saint Laurence College
Loughlinstown, County Dublin
Roll number: 60262T

Date of inspection: October 2011
WHOLE-SCHOOL EVALUATION

A whole-school evaluation of St Laurence College was undertaken in October 2011. This report presents the findings of the evaluation and makes recommendations for improvement. During the evaluation, the quality of teaching and learning in three subjects was evaluated in detail, and a recent inspection of Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) also formed part of the evidence base. Separate reports are available on these subjects. (See section 7 for details).

INTRODUCTION

St Laurence College was established in 1967 on its present site by the Marianist order. It is the order’s only Irish school and is part of the United States province of the order. Marianist priests and brothers have been involved in the school since its foundation. Founded as a boys’ school, it became co-educational in 1973. The school serves a socially diverse area of south Dublin. It has a sizable repeat Leaving Certificate cohort, which includes students from a much wider catchment. It has a current enrolment of 464, including repeat Leaving Certificate students. The pattern has been that the repeat cohort numbers are buoyant, while intake to first year has declined gradually.

The school participates in the Department’s DEIS initiative (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) which includes the School Completion Programme (SCP). An evaluation of DEIS was carried out in the school in November 2010. 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.

1. QUALITY OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT

1.1 Characteristic spirit of the school

The characteristics of Marianist education are a reference point in many school documents, the student journal and the school web site. They commit Marianist schools to faith formation; the provision of a quality education; education for service, justice and peace; and education for adaptation and change. The central characteristic is education in family spirit, and references to the school community as a family were made during the evaluation by students, teachers, parents, ancillary staff and trustees.

Concern was expressed to inspectors during the evaluation that the Marianist commitment to family spirit was lacking in recent interactions between school management and others in the school community. An open and constructive discussion of these concerns would be fruitful, and could focus on resolving any possible conflict between the commitment to education for adaptation and change and the maintenance of family spirit.

Although small in numbers, the Marianist community in St Laurence College is an active and visible presence in the school, with many points of contact in and outside the classroom. The community house is used for school social events and retreats. The Marianist order promotes its educational philosophy through centrally-organised conferences for school management and teachers, and through programmes for students, both of which are held in the United States. The conferences, which the participants have found very worthwhile, are sometimes held during the school year, resulting in some loss of tuition time; this should be kept to a minimum.

1.2 School ownership and management
The Marianist order supports the school in tangible ways as well as through promotion of its ethos. It has contributed to the school’s educational and sports facilities, including funding for a school minibus. Visitations from the order’s provincial headquarters and education office personnel occur regularly, and the school prepares reports for them as required. This level of external review should be a great assistance to the school in developing robust self-evaluation practices.

The present board of management is coming to the end of its term of office, and nominations to the new board have provided a good balance of continuity and change. The trustee nominees include two members of the Marianist order who are part of the school staff and have had a long association with the school. Members of the board have received training through the Joint Managerial Body (JMB) and professional associations.

The board meets quite regularly during the school year and holds special meetings where required, for example in disciplinary cases. However, no board meeting was held between June and November 2011 and a meeting at the beginning of the school year should be scheduled in future. Special meetings should be identified as such in minutes, and paper and electronic copies of minutes should be filed in a way that allows the board ready access to its own records. A report to the staff is agreed at each meeting; a similar report to the parents’ council could be considered.

Board meeting minutes indicate that disciplinary cases, employment issues, buildings and facilities, and the principal’s report are the main business of ordinary meetings. While the board identified as priorities the need to increase enrolment and safeguard finances, it needs to be more involved in strategic planning, especially in addressing the pressing issues of falling intake and student under-attainment. The new board should endeavour to set aside some time at each ordinary meeting to consider and monitor plans of action to address priorities; this would help to ensure a co-ordinated response and more measurable progress. The board should also study at first hand the Department Inspectorate reports it receives to inform this process.

The board has clearly devoted considerable time to issues arising out of its roles as employer and as arbiter in student discipline cases. It strives to reach decisions by consensus, although this has not always occurred. Despite the good intentions of the board, it has experienced some internal difficulties, where levels of consultation and communication have been poor. Correspondence directed to the chair of the board concerning relations between staff and management within the school has not been brought to the attention of the board as a whole. While it is right that the board takes seriously its duty to support senior management in the school, the perception that staff concerns have not been attended to has, unhappily, undermined trust in school management as a whole. It is therefore commendable that school management has undertaken to arrange external facilitation to try to address the difficulties in relations between staff and management and to rebuild trust and openness.

For the board to guide the actions towards improvement discussed above, all members need to have a clear understanding of the board’s functioning as a body corporate and of their role as nominees to the board rather than as representatives of any sectional interest. To this end, training for the board as a whole would be beneficial.

1.3 In-school management
The senior management team comprises an acting principal, appointed in September 2009, and a deputy principal, appointed in 2002. The school principal is currently on secondment and was the school’s first lay principal when appointed in 2004. The senior management team presented as dealing cordially with each other and reported that they meet as needs require during the school week. A formal meeting time where school matters are discussed...
and the actions to be taken by each are decided would be constructive and is recommended. The principal and deputy principal have attended in-service with a focus on legal and resource management issues. However, they have not thus far availed of the leadership in-service sponsored by the Department through the Leadership Development in Schools (LDS) programme; it is strongly advised that they do so.

The acting principal has sought to implement a programme of change, aimed at raising academic standards, improving discipline, increasing enrolment, and introducing efficiencies as directed by the board. However, although many of the key personnel interviewed during the evaluation are substantially in agreement with these aims, it was evident that change has not been well managed. A pattern of conflict and resistance has emerged and issues have become personalised. This militates against the implementation of an improvement agenda that would be beneficial for students and would create a more positive working environment for all. Since the Inspectorate is committed to identifying constructively areas for improvement, this report will focus on issues to be addressed and the steps recommended in addressing them. These are summarised below and some are dealt with in more detail in other sections.

The over-arching issue is one of leadership. Addressing the current problems will present specific and significant challenges for the board, for senior management and for those with posts of responsibility. In order to manage change successfully and thereby lead the school, the various layers of school management need to consider how they themselves have to change. The board should commit to the greatest possible openness in its dealings with its employees. A positive step has been taken in seeking external facilitation to improve relations within the school, as little progress can be made without mutual trust and respectful communication. The principal has conceded that some changes may have been too swiftly introduced. However, the manner in which decisions have been taken has led to a real perception that changes have been imposed rather than being undertaken as a collaborative enterprise. It is the responsibility of the principal as leader to manage change in a manner that engenders willingness and empowers those he is leading. There is equally an onus on all post holders to assume leadership responsibilities at the appropriate level so that leadership can be distributed in line with good standards of trust and accountability.

The school has seven assistant principals, a programme co-ordinator at assistant principal level, and eleven special duties teachers; it has been minimally affected thus far by the moratorium on promotional posts. However, the potential of this resource is not being realised in the current schedule of posts. The allocation of duties is inconsistent; for example, assistant principals who act as year heads do not have additional responsibilities over and above those of special duties teachers with similar year head roles. The schedule also requires considerable rationalisation; for example, three posts are devoted to transition year (TY), which is the smallest year in the school, while the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) lacks a post-holder co-ordinator.

A working group to review posts and to advise school management on amendments and changes was set up in January 2011. Progress has been slow. In order to ensure that this essential review is carried out carefully and in a timely manner, the remit of the group should be agreed, along with a timeframe for its work and an efficient consultation structure. The group should be guided by the relevant circulars, in particular the 2002 circulars relating to in-school management structures and the programme co-ordinator post. A root-and-branch review of posts is clearly required and, in order for it to succeed, post holders should engage constructively with the process to meet the existing and emerging needs of the school and create a cohesive layer within the school’s management structure. Further observations relating to specific posts are made elsewhere in this report.
The school has a system of year heads, who are post holders, to assist with the management of students. The role of the year head is not clearly defined and different practices have developed, although weekly meetings of junior cycle and senior cycle year heads support some level of consistency. This significant role should have a clear job description, which should include its place in the ladder of referral for disciplinary issues, as well as its function as monitor of students’ progress and promoter of high expectations. This latter aspect of the role merits particular emphasis, given the general agreement within the school on the importance of raising student attainment. The helpful practice that a year group retains the same year head throughout a cycle has been recently reintroduced.

Two year head meetings were observed, and reflected a conscientious undertaking of duties. Students’ behaviour and personal difficulties were the main focus of discussion. Members of the school’s care team also attend year head meetings. Given that the care team also meets every week, it would be useful to review the respective remits of these teams to avoid unnecessary duplication and to establish clear lines of communication between them. The deputy principal’s attendance at year head meetings is helpful in supporting the year heads’ work; a report to the acting principal would obviate the need for his attendance and would represent good delegation.

Each class group has a tutor, a role that teachers are asked to take on voluntarily. A weekly tutor period is timetabled, and these take place concurrently within each junior cycle year to facilitate assemblies and contact with the year head. The tutor’s duties are to check student journals, thereby monitoring homework and behaviour, and note any communications to or from the home. However, the tutor role was described as more pastoral than disciplinary. Some tutors prepare activities for the tutor period or encourage students to read but its use as instruction time varies. A focus for the tutor period within the school’s developing literacy and numeracy strategy could be considered; it would require careful planning and monitoring to ensure consistent implementation and worthwhile outcomes.

The code of behaviour has been reviewed and updated in line with the National Education and Welfare Board guidelines and following a good consultation process. It places an emphasis on positive behaviour and outlines sanctions for misconduct, including ‘bad notes’, being placed on report and detention. Students showed a good understanding of the system. The responsibilities and actions appropriate to each stage of the ladder of referral could be more clearly set out in the code, with a view to ensuring that incidents are properly recorded and are dealt with at the lowest appropriate level. With regard to serious sanctions, the very high level of suspensions was raised as a concern during the 2010 DEIS evaluation. The deputy principal reported that procedures have been reviewed but the most recent annual figures for suspensions (2010/11) show an increase and merit urgent action. Students were generally very well-behaved, and were friendly and helpful in their dealings with the inspection team.

The SCP provides an attendance officer to the school. An electronic attendance system was introduced in 2010 and appears to be working well. Students’ attendance records are noted in the school reports sent home during the year and parents found the school very vigilant in notifying them of absence. A ‘late pass’ system is also in place and is well implemented.

The student council is well supported by the board and by the parents’ council. Students are elected to the council from each year from first to sixth. A teacher has responsibility for developing student leadership in the school. The student council presented as committed and articulate young people who displayed enterprise and initiative and could point to improvements they had brought about in the school environment. There is also a student leadership team, involving head and deputy head boy and girl and a number of prefects. All students should be encouraged to avail of the opportunities to take leadership roles within the school, and to take a meaningful part in student council initiatives.
The parents’ association has become more active of recent times. It has renamed itself the parents’ council to complement the student council, and has had some involvement in the development of policies. While it devotes considerable energy to fundraising, it supports specific initiatives that directly benefit students, such as the financing of educational trips. The parents’ council shows commendable commitment and aims to involve many more parents than heretofore. Regular communication with all parents through the school newsletter and website would assist the council in this aim. A parents’ room in the school provides a venue for its meetings, a welcoming environment for parents, and a venue for the breakfast club.

Communication within the school includes noticeboards in the staffroom and year-specific noticeboards in designated areas. A public address (PA) system is in place. While it is used relatively sparingly, two aspects of its use are worth reviewing. Firstly, no notices concerning staff should be made via PA, and notices concerning students should be sensitively delivered. Secondly, the ‘thought for the day’ from the chaplain and prefects should be broadcast at a time when the school community can give it proper attention, preferably before lessons begin or at an agreed break time. The school newsletter issues periodically and should be used fully to update the whole school community on events and achievements. The school yearbook, The Voice, is handsomely produced and succeeds very well in marking and celebrating all aspects of school life, although more direct participation of students in its production is suggested. Some differences of opinion concerning its purpose and audience have arisen, specifically its use as a prospectus as well as an annual record. These need to be resolved.

1.4 Management of resources

The school calendar and timetable comply with the requirements of Department Circular M29/95, Time in School, with regard to the school week and the school year. However, school management should ensure that the dates set for the beginning and ending of the school year for different year groups do not compromise the required minimum 167 days of tuition time for all students.

Individual teacher timetables fulfil contractual obligations. However, no permanent whole-time teachers are timetabled for a full twenty-two hours, and some are considerably below this number. The time concession to the programme co-ordinator exceeds what is warranted by the numbers in the programme for which the teacher is responsible. Judicious action to ensure the optimal use of the resources available should be taken where necessary.

The Department has allocated to the school a total of 35.59 whole-time teacher equivalents (WTE) including ex quota allocations for the principal, the home-school-community liaison (HSCL) co-ordinator, one WTE which is allocated for learning support, 0.77 WTE for guidance and counselling and 0.5 WTE for disadvantaged area status. An additional concessionary allocation of 4.97 WTEs has been given to cover special educational needs, hours allowed for programme co-ordination, and the fact that the school is at present over quota based on the current ratio of teachers to students. Not all the hours allocated for learning support and special educational needs could be accounted for during the evaluation (see Section 5 below). At present, the actual pupil-teacher ratio is 13.09:1. As some redeployment of teachers may occur, future staffing needs should be a focus of the school’s strategic planning.

Teachers are generally deployed in line with their subject specialisms; however, the report on Mathematics recommends the building of expertise as few members of the mathematics department have the subject to degree level. To the greatest possible extent, teachers should be deployed in a way that builds the subject department’s capacity so that, for example, all teachers have appropriate experience of teaching a range of years, levels and programmes.
A specific recommendation in this regard is made in the report on Science. There is some team teaching involving the co-timetabling of two teachers for one class group in some subjects. As this is a resource-heavy but potentially valuable arrangement, it should be subject to focused collaborative planning to ensure optimal benefit to students.

The main school building is of distinctive design and has been adapted in various ways over the years. Department grants, the Department Summer Works Scheme and financial assistance from the trustees have enabled maintenance and development of the buildings and grounds. However, there is considerable scope to develop classrooms as more stimulating learning environments. A health and safety policy is in place, and the Health and Safety Authority carried out an inspection during the 2010/11 school year. The school buildings appear well maintained, and the staff and students are commended for their work in securing a Green Flag for the school. The school has fine sports facilities, which are used by students and also, out of school hours, by local clubs. Since they are a very prominent part of the school site, the recently-planned initiative to have a ‘day for the community’ using these facilities and thus raising the school’s profile in its catchment area deserves whole-school support.

2. QUALITY OF SCHOOL PLANNING

2.1 The school plan
A number of policies and school planning documents including the current school plan were made available at various stages of the evaluation. Good-quality school planning results in a high level of preparedness for teaching and learning and for self-evaluation, and this was not generally evident to the inspection team. More importantly, while some statutory policies were worked on collaboratively, there was limited evidence of strategic planning of a collaborative and reflective nature. In general, the evidence suggested that school planning is more reactive than proactive and is driven by senior management. Therefore, the overarching recommendation in the area of school planning is that the school develop strategic planning practices based on the involvement and collaboration of the key stakeholders, in particular the teaching staff; strategic planning should identify and address priorities for development in a co-ordinated and timely manner. Some more detailed observations on policies and the planning process are made below.

School development planning over the years has led to the creation of a range of policies, both statutory and voluntary. Different methods have been used to develop the policies in place, but in most recent cases, task groups have drafted policies which have then gone through a consultative process involving staff, parents and students where appropriate, before approval and ratification. This is good practice. However, the co-ordination of planning is one of a range of tasks currently carried out by senior management rather than a responsibility devolved to a post holder. Since further work is required on both the permanent and developmental sections of the school plan, a designated post for the co-ordination of planning is recommended and should be factored into the current review of the schedule of posts.

In response to the DEIS evaluation in November 2010, which urged the school to prioritise the development of a DEIS plan and to review and evaluate all aspects of DEIS provision, the board approved a pausing of work on other policy development to focus on DEIS planning and on other recommendations of the DEIS inspection team. The board’s decision was made before it had received the Inspectorate’s written DEIS record, and was informed solely by the principal’s report on the oral feedback given. The written DEIS record was not given to the teaching staff, and this is not good practice. The decision to pause other planning work suggests that planning is viewed as a compartmentalised rather than an integrated process. For example, continuing work on the guidance plan and the TY plan
would support DEIS provision in the school, provided that the respective task groups were to bring a DEIS focus to their work.

No DEIS plan has yet been drafted, although a committee was formed to address DEIS planning and it has progressed to the identification of targets. While the committee was designed to be role-specific, most of its members also serve on the care team. This may give the misleading impression that DEIS relates only to students experiencing difficulty, whereas its supports are applicable to all students attending a participating school. The composition and function of the DEIS committee should therefore be reviewed. Its work should have a practical focus on the planning of initiatives to raise student expectation and attainment. The DEIS committee should have a much clearer link with the work of year heads and subject departments, and the DEIS plan should be viewed not as a stand-alone document but as an integrated map linking all the inputs that aim to deliver improved student outcomes. As recommended in the DEIS evaluation, a co-ordinator post should be established to lead DEIS planning. The principal has taken on this role but it should be delegated.

The school has most statutory policies in place. An attendance strategy should be drawn up to comply with the terms of the Education (Welfare) Act, 2000. The current admissions policy should be reviewed to ensure that it complies with Department requirements on inclusion of students with special educational needs and that it accurately reflects the school’s inclusive practice. Admissions procedures should also be reviewed; documents relating to 2011 admissions indicate that prospective students underwent an assessment process prior to being offered places in the school, and this is contrary to the school’s stated policy.

The board of management has not formally adopted the *Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-primary Schools* (September 2011) without modification. However, the school is compliant with the requirements of Post-primary Circulars M44/05 and 0062/2006. School authorities provided evidence that arrangements are being put in place to ensure compliance with the requirements of the recently published Circular 0065/2011 and *Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools* as a matter of priority.

In order to support a more dynamic and reflective culture of planning, it is recommended that a framework for policy development, implementation and review be drawn up. A simple record can then be maintained indicating the current position of all statutory policies within this cycle.

3. **Quality of Curriculum Provision**

3.1 **Curriculum planning and organisation**

The school provides a broad range of programmes, comprising the Junior Certificate and the Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP); an optional Transition Year (TY); the Leaving Certificate; the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP); and a one-year repeat Leaving Certificate. The range of subjects offered in junior and senior cycles represents a good balance of academic, applied, practical and vocational areas.

Class groups are generally of mixed ability, except in some cases for core subjects, and where formed on the basis of examination level. Whole-school in-service on differentiation has been undertaken, but the evidence suggests that the use of differentiated methods varies. Subject planning and delivery should be informed by good differentiation practices in order for mixed-ability class formation to succeed as intended, in encouraging high expectations across the range of abilities. While some analysis of student outcomes in
certificate examinations has been carried out, it is strongly recommended that each subject
department look critically at the patterns of uptake of levels in its own area, as well as at
individual student and class group outcomes. This analysis necessitates co-ordination
across all subject departments to fulfil requirements under DEIS and to assist reflective
practice. The focus of such analysis thus far has been on Leaving Certificate students.
However, attention to junior cycle outcomes would be very timely and informative.

A decision has recently been made to enrol all junior cycle students in the JCSP, once
parental approval has been given. Prior to this, the programme was offered to targeted
students, although these represented quite a large proportion of each year cohort. The
change was in part a response to a finding in the DEIS evaluation that teachers were not
always aware of which students were in the JCSP. However, placing all students in the
JCSP will not ensure that the JCSP support structure is used for the benefit of all, unless all
teachers have a thorough understanding of how it is intended to work. Therefore, it is
important that the rationale for this decision be clearly communicated to all teachers,
especially in relation to how it is intended to support student learning and attainment. This
rationale should be clearly reflected in curricular and subject plans; for example, the JCSP
statements should be included in the collaborative planning of learning outcomes.

Two class groups are formed in TY, and the current year group has forty-one students. The
TY programme offers students a broad curriculum. Contact with core subjects is
maintained, and students have an opportunity to sample a range of possible Leaving
Certificate options, and to explore co-curricular areas, including journalism and first aid.
Each class group has an extended timetabled slot for a range of off-campus activities
covering outdoor pursuits and cultural outings. The programme is evaluated annually by
participating students and their parents, and teachers are also surveyed. This is good
practice but it would be beneficial to extend the formal evaluation process to subject
departments also. Some recommendations arising from an Inspectorate evaluation of the
programme in 2010 have yet to be addressed; those relating to planning are especially
significant, as the existing plan is in draft form only.

The school’s provision for LCVP merits review. In reflecting on student outcomes in the
state examinations, school management has found that many candidates have performed
poorly in the LCVP links modules, and has reduced the intake to the programme from two
groups to one in the current fifth year. However, the relevance of LCVP to particular
students and its value in giving them greater access to choices at third level should not be
underestimated. The programme does not have the benefit of a permanent co-ordinator,
although the school has a programme co-ordinator post. This deficit should be addressed
before any further decisions on the programme’s future in the school are made.

The established Leaving Certificate programme in the school offers students a relatively
broad range of subjects, including a number of languages, science subjects and other
practical subjects. However, a broader range of subjects is offered to students in the
school’s repeat Leaving Certificate programme. Since all the teachers deployed in the
repeat programme also teach in the mainstream school, the school currently has the
teaching capacity to extend the range of subjects offered to its mainstream Leaving
Certificate students. In addition, there are subjects with low uptake among mainstream
students and higher uptake among the repeat cohort. The possibility of combining Leaving
Certificate and repeat Leaving Certificate provision for these subjects should be
investigated in a bid to maintain these subjects in the mainstream senior cycle. In addition,
the provision of the practical element of some subjects in the repeat year does not comply
with syllabus requirements and this has to be addressed.

The repeat Leaving Certificate programme has been offered for over twenty years in St
Laurence College, and it attracts repeat students from a wide catchment. There are ninety-
five students in the present cohort, representing just over one-fifth of total enrolment. Entrants to the year are interviewed and pay a substantial fee. Issues relating to the recognition of these students, in accordance with the terms of the Department circulars M2/95: *Repeat of a year at post-primary level* and 0065/2010: *Free Education Scheme*, were raised during the evaluation and are being considered by the school and the relevant sections of the Department.

The repeat year, or ‘seventh year’ as it is known in the school, is included on teachers’ timetables as part of their regular teaching commitment. It is intended that most teachers will teach the seventh year on a rotating basis, with a view to offering teachers an opportunity to interact with a highly focused and ambitious cohort. School management hopes that this will raise teachers’ expectations of all students and facilitate innovation in teaching and learning approaches. While it is good practice to ensure that teachers have the widest possible experience of teaching the full range of students within a school, the methods appropriate to students repeating the Leaving Certificate will not always be applicable to other year groups, and may indeed significantly differ from the active learning methods advocated by subject inspectors during the evaluation. Additional means of supporting innovative and challenging teaching approaches, including the sharing of good practice within the school, should therefore be facilitated.

The school does not offer the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme and views on it were mixed. Some students and staff believed that the introduction of the LCA would provide a too-easy option for able students and were therefore not in favour. Other members of staff, and the officers of the parents’ council, were more favourably disposed and felt that the programme could provide a good educational experience for certain students. Future discussion of this issue could most meaningfully take place in the context of DEIS targets for attendance, retention and progression. The establishment of a board of studies to consider this and other questions of curriculum provision could be considered.

Timetabling is generally compliant with subject and syllabus guidelines with regard to the number of lessons allocated, although some instances of poor distribution of lessons and deployment of teachers were noted in the junior cycle. The board of management may wish to consider sourcing some external assistance with regard to constructing the timetable, so that the best possible provision for subjects, programmes and option blocks can be offered.

### 3.2 Arrangements for students’ choice of subjects and programmes

Incoming first-year students are offered a choice of one subject from each of three option blocks. This includes a language option block with Business Studies as the non-language option; placing Business Studies in this block may result in a skewing of the ability range of students taking the subject, and also excludes a language and business combination that would support progression to LCVP. This arrangement should be reviewed. The option blocks are generated following a survey of students’ subject preferences prior to entry. The material given to students and their parents at all decision points to inform their choices should be reviewed annually by all subject departments involved to ensure that it is up-to-date, informative and appealing.

It was reported that various forms of subject sampling in first year were tried in the past and were found to be unsatisfactory. However, this issue should be re-examined, especially in the light of the stated aim of raising student attainment. This aim is more likely to be achieved where students are studying subjects for which they have discovered an aptitude or a liking. In the current year, first-year students were given an opportunity to sample the two modern languages offered, but only after the initial language option groups were found to be very unbalanced in size. A proactive rather than a reactive measure would be preferable to this situation, and a planned sampling programme, ideally involving all optional subjects, should be given open-minded and serious consideration.
School practice up to 2008 was that almost all students took up TY but a selection process involving an interview is now in place, and numbers are restricted, reportedly to facilitate off-campus activities among other considerations. Arrangements for access to the programme should be reviewed as it appears that the aims of TY with regard to student maturation and remediation may not be given sufficient weight in the criteria presently applied. The school should guard against the de facto creation of a two-tier senior cycle, based on students who do TY and those who do not. It was noted, for example, that all the prefects and senior student council members whom the inspectors met were in or had been in TY. A number of one-year students from outside Ireland are also enrolled in TY; there are six in the current year. This raises further issues of equity of access, if the school’s full-time students cannot gain admission to the programme.

An open evening for rising fifth-year students and their parents is held each year in the last term, and subject information is presented. Subject options are outlined with some information on progression and careers. Following initial indications of subject preferences, option blocks are drawn up. Students interviewed were generally satisfied with the process and the choices open to them. However, uptake of some science subjects and modern languages should be a cause for concern, and indicate that a review of the supports available to students and their parents to inform choices would be worthwhile. The subject specialist capacity within the school should be exploited as fully as possible in the options offered at fifth year, in a manner similar to the options offered for seventh year.

### 3.3 Co-curricular and extra-curricular provision

The school has a draft policy on extracurricular activities which sets out the rationale for their provision within the Marianist educational ethos, the roles of various sections of the school community, and guidelines relating to student safety. The school offers an extensive extracurricular sports programme and guidelines for coaches have also been drawn up. These are helpful practices.

Co-curricular and extracurricular activities available within the school include a wide range of sports, musical events, the faith-based LIFE programme, and a number of subject-related activities. Many teachers are involved in sports coaching and other activities and, while a declining rate of teacher participation in activities outside the classroom was reported, issues that impacted on student participation, including support from home, were also mentioned. Teachers are commended for their efforts to extend students’ experience of various subject areas through participation in competitions and other co-curricular activities. The ways in which the school recognises students’ participation in areas outside the classroom are also very supportive of students and of Marianist educational principles.

### 4. Quality of learning and teaching in subjects

A total of thirty-three lessons were observed by individual inspectors. The subjects evaluated included Mathematics, Science and Biology, and SPHE. English and Mathematics lessons for students with additional educational needs were also observed as part of the evaluation of special educational needs provision. There was wide variation in the quality of teaching and learning. Good or very good practices were observed in some areas, while in others the quality of teaching and learning ranged from exemplary to fair, with some instances of significant weakness. Strategic planning with a specific focus on improving student attainment, classroom management and the use of appropriate methodologies were the areas identified for improvement.

### 4.1 Planning and preparation
Plans in the subjects and areas evaluated are at different stages of development. In some subject areas good collaboration has been established in the development of common plans and schemes of work for the different year groups, as well as evident co-ordinated approaches to aspects of provision. Teachers involved in the delivery of support lessons are assisted in lesson preparation by planning work undertaken and disseminated by the special educational needs co-ordinator. However, the current co-ordination arrangements in Mathematics have resulted in the absence of common schemes of work and no synchronisation of topics across levels. This issue need to be addressed as a matter of priority.

In order to establish consistency in curriculum planning across all subject areas, subject departments should document the learning outcomes, resources, teaching methodologies and assessment protocols necessary to support the varied needs of all students. A common template in a format that shows the links between these aspects of subject planning could be a useful tool. Subject-relevant policies are in place in some instances, although some need to be further embedded into practice. Strategic planning aimed at improving examination attainment is recommended in Mathematics and the sciences, and this recommendation should be noted by all subject departments. The development of whole-school policies on both literacy and numeracy is also recommended.

Well-prepared individual lesson plans as observed in some lessons contributed to good teaching and learning. The use of a common template is recommended in some instances to improve the quality of individual or group lesson plans.

4.2 Learning and teaching

Varied practices were observed across and within subject areas. Some practices resulted in good or very good quality teaching and learning, while improvements are recommended in others to bring about the learning outcomes necessary for student progress and attainment.

The purpose of the lesson or learning outcomes were clearly articulated in many lessons and further good practice was noted where the lesson content was linked to prior learning or to students’ life experiences.

Methodologies observed included whole-class teaching, group work, question-and-answer sessions, the use of information and communication technology (ICT), and team teaching. Whole-class teaching was the dominant methodology in Mathematics, but was effective in most instances. Direct instruction, skills being taught explicitly and an emphasis on clear instructions and repetition were effective in supporting students with special educational needs in all lessons.

Question and answer sessions were most effective where there was an appropriate balance of higher-order and lower-order questions and where questions were directed at individual students resulting in active listening. Good practice was also noted where questions asked by teachers and students contributed to increased understanding or effective investigative work. Recommendations were made in some instances where the questioning practices did not facilitate higher-order thinking and resulted in some students remaining passive and unchallenged.

ICT was productively used in many lessons to engage students, provide visual supports and summarise information. In instances where students over-relied on note-taking from slides, alternative strategies are recommended to ensure more active learning. Strategies which facilitate a more active and personal approach to investigative work is also recommended in Science in order to comply with syllabus guidelines for the completion of coursework.

Student-based tasks included worksheets, some of which were differentiated and pair or group work activities. These were most successful when well prepared and, where in SPHE they facilitated a personal engagement with the topic in question.
The practice of team teaching to support students with special educational needs was effective and should be expanded. Strategies to support numeracy were noted in Mathematics but need to be further progressed. The literacy and numeracy strategies included in the monthly subject plans for Science were not integrated into teaching and learning in the lessons observed.

Student engagement varied in accordance with the teaching methodologies used and the quality of individual classroom management. Recommendations include the use of more active methodologies, a review of seating arrangements and clear expectations in relation to student behaviour.

4.3 Assessment
The monitoring of student progress varied in accordance with the subject and individual practices. Practices include in-class questioning, homework and formal tests. Good practices were noted in science subjects where homework is regularly assessed and written feedback and guidance provided. However, additional support is recommended to afford students opportunities to improve their writing skills when completing laboratory reports. In other subject areas, a common and consistent approach to the monitoring of work and the recording of student progress is recommended, as the ongoing tracking of student progress is essential to improve overall student attainment. The progress of students in receipt of additional support is tracked through observation and successful task completion and is recorded by teachers on a weekly basis.

5. Quality of Support for Students

5.1 Inclusion of students with additional educational needs
The school engages in a number of inclusive practices and offers all students a broad and balanced curriculum. However, the school’s draft special educational needs policy requires further development so that it outlines the school’s principles of inclusion, serves as a guide for future development and practice, and details designated roles and responsibilities. The school does not have a whole-school literacy policy and it is recommended that one be created. This policy should be developed in conjunction with the development of the school’s DEIS literacy action plan.

The school has established effective information-gathering practices to support the entry of new students. Standardised measurements of reading and cognitive ability are used to assess enrolling students. This data along with information from feeder schools should be used to establish groups for targeted literacy interventions. Low-scoring students should be further assessed on diagnostic instruments to inform this planning. During the evaluation many teachers referred to students’ reading ages as an indicator of limited ability. This points up a drawback to the use of reading ages, as they can be viewed as defining students’ potential rather than as an explanation of why students’ progress may be slow or impeded. Standardised reading tests that are age-appropriate and allow students’ reading to be recorded and monitored using percentile scores rather than reading ages are much less open to misinterpretation, and their use is advised.

Most support teaching is delivered by a core team of special education teachers in two well-equipped specialist classrooms. The special educational needs co-ordinator has the significant role of overseeing the organisation and monitoring of the provision and is ably supported by the team. This team should be facilitated to meet on a more regular basis to assist collaboration, planning and evaluation. Four qualified special needs assistants (SNAs) are assigned to meet the care needs of specific students. They are flexibly deployed and welcomed in classrooms. SNAs should collaborate with class teachers regarding the
support of students and their access to the curriculum. Regular formal meetings with the co-ordinator should be re-established.

The school receives a significant number of resource teaching hours in addition to its learning-support allocation of one *ex quota* WTE. It was unclear how all of these hours were used. Utilisation should be clearly documented to verify that they are used for their intended purpose. The co-ordinator should be consulted to ensure that all known hours are factored in when the timetable is constructed.

Learning support classes in literacy, numeracy and subject support are provided for students with Irish exemptions. Support is also given in the development of self-management, organisation, and social skills. The school has engaged in various literacy initiatives and some students receive literacy intervention through a National Behaviour Support Service programme.

Plans are in place to re-assess the literacy skills of first to fifth year students. This evolving good practice will contribute to the school’s efforts to monitor progress and evaluate interventions. Student progress is tracked through observation and successful task completion and reported to parents through meetings and journal comments. Assessment and progress records are kept by the co-ordinator. Support teachers file weekly records of work completed. These records should inform the measurement of outcomes. Applications for reasonable accommodations are made on behalf of eligible students; the school endeavours to provide these accommodations during school exams.

The school has engaged successfully with an individual planning process led by the co-ordinator. The current planning format appears sufficient for the needs of the present cohort of students, but the school is advised that more detailed planning will be necessary for students who present with more complex needs. The school is also advised to consider how the involvement of parents and students themselves can be further developed in the process.

Pertinent information is disseminated to mainstream staff to inform planning. Findings and recommendations from psychological reports are summarised and accessible to all staff on the school’s intranet. Staff has participated in some relevant professional development activities with the support of the school. Management should conduct an audit to ascertain staff professional development needs in providing inclusive instruction.

5.2 **Guidance and student support in the whole-school context**

Three teachers work in the guidance service. One is a fully qualified guidance counsellor and works with students from first to sixth year. The other teachers have been assigned to work with the seventh-year students. Thirty periods are provided each week for guidance in seventh year. This allocation is disproportionate to these students’ needs, given that seventh-year students will already be familiar with many aspects of guidance such as university requirements, applications to the Central Applications Office (CAO) and other such information. It also has considerable resource implications since it limits the availability of these teachers to teach their subject specialisms. It is thus recommended that the current guidance provision be reviewed in order to offer all students appropriate guidance in a resource-effective manner. The use of the hours allocated to guidance and counselling should be documented, in line with good practice.

The work of the guidance service involves both careers guidance and personal counselling. The school’s chaplaincy service supports this work in providing bereavement counselling for students in need. Teachers involved in the delivery of guidance in seventh year also liaise with the school chaplain when issues of personal counselling arise. In order to afford students the supports best suited to their needs and to maximise the available resources, it is recommended that all requests for personal help or counselling are processed by the
guidance counsellor who can then allocate personnel as appropriate, including the onward referral to specialist services that is current practice in the school. A streamlined co-ordination of support services which involve one-to-one contact will also support good practice in complying with the school’s child protection guidelines.

A committee has been established and work has begun on the development of a whole-school guidance plan. However, progress has been slow. The co-ordinator for SPHE is not a member of this committee, and should be, as work carried out in SPHE can make a significant contribution to meeting the guidance needs of the students in junior cycle, not least in the area of making informed choices. The development of a whole-school guidance plan should be prioritised and completed within a specified time-frame. The aspects of whole-school guidance planning which relate to overall student attainment should also help to expedite the school’s DEIS plan, and a co-ordinated approach in this area is advised.

Among the educational supports offered to students is the provision of a homework club for junior cycle students, and of evening study for which there is a charge and which is dominated by seventh-year students for whom it is compulsory. As part of its commitment to raising attainment, the school should look at how these supports could be improved. Mentoring initiatives, whereby third-level students work with students in the school, have proved very successful in other DEIS schools, and should be considered here.

The school care team has been in place for many years and links the various elements of student support provision in the school: special educational needs; the chaplaincy service; the HSCL service; the JCSP programme; and the guidance service. The team meets every week and meetings are generally attended by the principal and deputy principal who are also members of the team. As with the year head meetings, the need for both members of senior management to be involved to this extent should be reviewed. The inclusion of the SPHE co-ordinator would bring an additional and useful perspective to the team’s work.

The care team operates conscientiously. It has established a number of systems to support students, including an ‘in/out’ system whereby the teaching staff is notified of students requiring positive attention and students who need to be allowed some space. While this system has great merits, it is worth ensuring that students who are being given ‘out’ time in class are not allowed to fall behind with their work to any serious extent. In addition, while confidentiality is quite properly maintained, professional collegiality should also be supported through a sensible level of communication.

The trustees support the spiritual life of students through provision of a chaplain for much of the school week, and through initiatives such as the LIFE programme which involves the active participation of students in faith development activities, and the Mission Integration Team, which acts as a guide in the spiritual life of the school community. The regular reports on these aspects of school life represent good reflective practice.

6. **SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The Marianist order provides practical support to the school in addition to guiding its educational ethos.
- The school has a considerable number of post-holders, with the potential to become a cohesive and significant layer within the school’s management structure.
- Students were generally very well-behaved, and were friendly and helpful in their dealings with the inspection team.
• The school provides a broad range of programmes, and has the teaching capacity to offer a very wide range of subjects.
• Positive steps have been taken in recording and monitoring students’ attainment.
• The school care team operates conscientiously and links the various elements of student support provision in the school.

As a means of building on these strengths and to address areas for development, the following key recommendations are made:

• The incoming board of management should commit itself to addressing the present difficulties in management and leadership in the school, and to leading and monitoring strategic planning.
• The various levels of school management need to demonstrate a willingness to change their own practices where the report indicates it is necessary to do so, and to lead change in a manner befitting their levels of responsibility.
• The school should develop strategic planning practices based on the involvement and collaboration of the key stakeholders, in particular the teaching staff; strategic planning should identify and address priorities for development in a co-ordinated and timely manner.
• Inspectorate reports, including this and any future reports, should be used as a guide to school improvement, and the board should oversee the timely implementation of recommendations.
• The curriculum offered and the arrangements for students’ choice of subjects and programmes should be reviewed to ensure that they support the raising of students’ attainment and the optimising of their opportunities for educational progression.
• All subject departments and individual teachers should reflect on their planning and teaching practices in the light of this report, and amend them where necessary in order to improve the learning experience for all students.

Post-evaluation meetings were held with the staff and board of management when the draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation were presented and discussed.

7. RELATED SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORTS

The following related Subject Inspection reports are available:
• Subject Inspection of Mathematics – 19 October 2011
• Subject Inspection of Science and Biology – 20 October 2011
• Subject Inspection of Social, Personal and Health Education – 11 May 2011
• Subject Inspection of Special Educational Needs – 18 October 2011

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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 takes seriously the findings of this report and will work strenuously towards implementing the recommendations. As can be seen below this work has already begun.

The Board of Management wishes to assure, that despite the issues existing in the college, the staff at all times put the care and education of their students to the forefront of everything they did. This is in line with their own professionalism and the Maranist Ethos of the 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

Steps/ Measures Taken Since WSE

- **Repeat Leaving Certificate Programme.** School management is working closely with DES to clarify/resolve any matters.
- **LCVP:** LCVP always had a coordinator (voluntary). This post has now been added to the Programme Coordinator post.
- **Programme Coordinator (p6, P9):** Compliance issues addressed immediately by the Principal.
- **Year Heads:** Principal has delegated responsibility for liaising with Year heads to the Deputy Principal.
- **DEIS:** The role of DEIS coordinator was delegated to the Deputy Principal pending the Post of Responsibility Review.
- **P8: Admissions Policy:** The recommended revisions have been made and ratified by the Board of Management.
- The Board of Management formally adopted the Child Protection Procedures for Post Primary Schools.
- **The Principal established A Board of Studies.**
- **The SPHE coordinator** has been installed as a member of the Guidance Committee.