

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna
Department of Education and Skills

Whole-School Evaluation
Management, Leadership and Learning
REPORT

St Columba's College
Whitechurch, Dublin 16
Roll number: 60320H

Date of inspection: 27 September 2012



**AN ROINN OIDEACHAIS
AGUS SCILEANNA** | **DEPARTMENT OF
EDUCATION
AND SKILLS**
INSPECTORATE

Whole-School Evaluation Management, Leadership and Learning

A whole-school evaluation of management, leadership and learning (WSE-MLL) was undertaken in September 2012 in St Columba's 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, and groups of teachers, parents and students. Inspectors also reviewed a range of school documentation and responses to questionnaires and examined other data in relation to the operation of the school. As part of the evaluation, a range of lessons across a number of subject areas was inspected. The board of management was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the report, and the response of the board will be found in the appendix of this report.

Introduction

St Columba's College was established in 1843 and was originally located in Co. Meath. The school moved to its current site in 1849 and is a fee-paying voluntary secondary school with a significant emphasis on the Church of Ireland ethos. The school has a current enrolment of 282 students. The majority of students are Irish with a considerable number of students from abroad. Most of the students avail of seven-day boarding but there are also a significant number of day students.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

Key Findings

- The school is still fulfilling its founding purpose by providing a Christian education within the Church of Ireland ethos.
- The board of fellows, the board of management and senior management collectively ensure the continuity of school ethos and provide clear direction for the school community.
- Key priorities for development have been identified by management and these are progressing satisfactorily.
- There is clear evidence that the school is effectively managed by senior management.
- There is a strong culture of delegated leadership and devolved responsibility in the school.
- The school privately funds a well-maintained and unique educational environment with a vast range of educational and recreational facilities.
- The quality of teaching and learning ranged from good to very good with some examples of exemplary practice.
- The school offers a primarily academic curriculum, with some privately funded teachers contributing to a low pupil-teacher ratio.
- St Columba's College is a self-evaluative school with a high capacity for improvement.

Recommendations for Further Development

- Through focused school self-evaluation, management should lead the improvement of aspects of teaching and learning, such as increased use of active methodologies and collaborative learning, where necessary.
- As part of subject planning, schemes of work should be further developed to include details of methodologies and use of resources.

QUALITY OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP

1.1 School ownership and management

St. Columba's College has a board of fellows and a board of management. The board of fellows has a trusteeship role in the school and their function and authority are defined by college statutes. The board of fellows takes an overarching interest in the school but is primarily concerned with infrastructure, the strategic development of the college and finances. Responsibility for the overall running of the school is devolved to the board of management and warden (principal). The board of management consists of sixteen members, eight of whom are fellows, two elected parents, two elected teachers, the chairperson of the parents' association, the bursar and both the principal and deputy principal as full voting members. The board meets five times a year and gives direction to senior management in relation to curricular, administrative and academic issues. Board members bring a wealth of educational knowledge, expertise in various fields and experience to their work and show a deep commitment to the school. The board is aware of its statutory obligations and members have availed of training from relevant bodies.

The priorities for development identified by the board of management include developing closer links with feeder schools, the promotion of technology as an effective tool for learning, as well as planning and preparation for the forthcoming changes in the revised Junior Cycle. The development of a new staff information system is underway and there are plans for marketing the school in a more pro-active way in order to maintain and increase student enrolment. There are plans for further development of the boarding facilities when resources allow. The creation of bursary funds to enable students to attend the school that might not otherwise be able to do so, has been a priority for both the board of fellows and the board of management in recent years and work is ongoing in this area with the help of the Old Columban Society. There is clear evidence that all the identified priorities are being progressed.

There is a vibrant parents' association in the school. There was evidence during the evaluation that the parent body is both valued and listened to by management. Many of the association's organised events have a significant social purpose which is to include and to invite parental involvement in the school in every way possible. Parental questionnaires and a meeting with some parent representatives revealed that parents are very happy with the quality of education, care and range of supports being provided for their children.

1.2 Effectiveness of leadership for learning

St Columba's College is very well managed by senior management comprising the principal and deputy principal. Senior management has a clear and shared vision for the school. While the principal has an overarching role in leading, managing and effecting school improvement, the deputy principal is responsible for much of the day-to-day management of staff and students. The deputy principal also has a significant leadership role and senior management work together as a committed and highly effective team. The principal undertakes additional duties normally assigned to a board of management in that he is solely responsible for all staff recruitment and appointments.

A senior management team, comprising the principal and deputy principal, the bursar and the school's three allocated assistant principals, effectively supports the work of the principal and deputy principal. The school also has four special duties posts and privately funds a number of additional posts. All of these posts are used to fulfil a range of pastoral, administrative and curricular duties. Both the senior management team and middle management were observed to be effectively contributing to the organisation and

development of the school. There is a strong culture of delegated leadership and devolved responsibility in the school.

School development planning has progressed well and there is a comprehensive school plan in place which includes a range of policies in line with statutory requirements. Relevant parties in the school community are invited to contribute to policy formation and review.

There is a united educational and living community in St Columba's College. Staff members, many of whom live on campus, give their time and expertise to support the school and to foster student academic and sporting attainment and personal development. There is a palpable atmosphere of mutual respect and common purpose among management and staff and there was a unique sense of community inherent in all aspects of school life observed during the evaluation.

The school offers a primarily academic curriculum, with some privately funded teaching staff contributing to a low pupil-teacher ratio. Classes are generally of mixed ability with some division between higher and ordinary level for Mathematics and languages. Management and staff provide a carefully organised programme of support for academic attainment. Academic results in state examinations in the vast majority of subject areas are consistently high. Students with special education needs are well supported through individual and group withdrawal and by significant individual support from subject teachers. Students and parents who were interviewed during the evaluation were particularly complimentary about the Transition Year (TY) programme in the school. While school documentation describes the programme as being "academically rigorous", lessons observed during the evaluation visit and the TY plan showed that the TY programme is in keeping with the philosophy of Transition Year and Department circulars.

Daily attendance at Chapel services before the school day for both students and staff members is seen to be an integral part of the ethos promoted by St. Columba's College. The ritual and ceremony combined with the religious and moral messages of the services are considered extremely important by management and staff and were also respectfully spoken of by students and parents. The school community are justly proud of these traditions which can be traced through St Columba's long history.

The school has a privately paid full-time chaplain who plays a key role in supporting and maintaining the school ethos. There is comprehensive guidance and counselling support available to students underpinned by the pastoral support of the boarding school staff most of whom teach in the school. Management and staff have been pro-active in highlighting and pre-empting issues around bullying. Plans are in place to establish a new care team in order to formalise the current student support structures and this is commended as an addition to the pastoral support programme.

Social, sporting and personal development are effectively catered for in St. Columba's with a very comprehensive sporting programme for all students and a wide range of social, artistic and co-curricular events. All students are strongly encouraged to take part in numerous activities and the diversity of the school day is one of the educational principles on which the school is founded.

There is an effective students' council in place. Students are given a range of opportunities, both in the day school and in the boarding school, to get involved in leadership roles in relation to student mentoring and support. The results from student questionnaires and from discussions with a focused group of students showed significant levels of satisfaction with life in school, subject choices, the support structures and the extracurricular activities available both sporting and social.

Confirmation was provided that the board of management has formally adopted the *Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools* without modification and that the school is compliant with the requirements of the *Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools*.

1.3 Management of facilities

The school campus and buildings are very well maintained. Reports from the bursar and the principal to the board of management show an on-going and sustained programme of developmental and maintenance work to enhance classrooms, specialist rooms, boarding houses, staff housing and sports facilities.

The school buildings have developed organically on the campus as the school has grown. Many staff members reported that improvements to the standards of living and comfort for students and staff over recent years have contributed greatly to the atmosphere of well-being in the school. A wide range of ancillary staff contribute in diverse ways to the effective running and maintenance of the campus as a whole.

St. Columba's school privately funds a unique educational environment with a vast range of educational and recreational facilities.

QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

2.1 The quality of learning and teaching

During the course of the evaluation a total of twenty-one lessons were observed across all year groups and a wide range of subject areas. The quality of teaching ranged from good to very good with some examples of excellent practice. Three areas for development were identified in the lessons observed and these included the development of co-operative learning, the identification and sharing of explicit learning outcomes for each lesson and the further development of graphic organisers as a tool for teaching and learning.

The level of planning and preparation for the lessons observed was of a consistently high standard. Teachers integrated appropriate resources and teaching aids into lessons effectively. Good examples of prepared resources included visual presentations that were used to describe and display subject matter, artefacts that allowed students to examine physical specimens and software applications that enabled students to investigate and learn in an experiential manner. The way in which teachers incorporated well-chosen resources into teaching and learning activities, varied and improved students' learning experiences overall.

Lesson activities were structured appropriately and their sequencing helped to reinforce students' learning in many cases. In a small number of lessons, explicit learning outcomes were identified at the outset and were then explored and reviewed at the end of the class. While very good practice was observed in one lesson where students carried out an end-of-lesson review, only a minority of lessons observed included a focused summation of learning. All teachers should endeavour to include a structured recapitulation, including the assessment of identified learning outcomes at the end of lessons.

There was a variety of teaching methodologies observed in the lessons. Student engagement was very good overall and lessons were characterised by students' willingness to contribute to discussions and their participation in planned activities. In the examples of best practice observed, teachers facilitated students' learning through the organisation and structuring of focused student-led activities. These activities included practical experimentation, paired learning tasks and group work. Where effective group work was

observed, characteristics such as individual accountability, face-to-face interaction, collaboration, reflection and positive interdependence were evident. To further develop these good practices across the curriculum, all subject departments should prioritise the sharing of expertise in facilitating co-operative learning.

Guided discussion was a key methodology utilised in a number of lessons. This strategy was particularly effective when supported by resources like audio-visual clips and text-based materials. One example of excellent practice was observed where a thematic approach was used to explore atmospheric writing. In this lesson, the teacher facilitated student engagement using focused inputs and suitable audio-visual resources to direct students' exploration of the topic which resulted in an active, enjoyable and productive lesson.

Differentiated teaching strategies were employed in lessons where students' ability ranges varied. In some lessons, tasks were structured to enable all students to achieve to at least a minimum required level and subsequent tasks increased in difficulty with an additional problem sometimes posed for homework to further challenge more able students. In some lessons, student activities were self-differentiating. In these cases teachers varied their expectations and provided appropriate levels of feedback to students of all abilities. In one lesson observed peer-assessment was used to encourage all students to identify strengths and areas for development in their own and others work. This strategy motivated students of all abilities to strive to achieve their full potential.

The quality of questioning was consistently high during the lessons observed. An appropriate blend of lower- and higher-order questions helped students to develop subject matter and to elicit deeper and more developed answers. In one lesson observed, a graphic organiser was used to help students to structure their answers and to develop their understanding of the literary character being studied. This strategy can be very useful in helping students to formulate their ideas and to structure their thoughts. The further development of graphic organisers as a learning tool should be considered as a means of improving students' independent learning and organisational skills.

Teachers' use of the target language in language lessons was excellent. While students' use of the target languages was good, opportunities for students to participate and contribute in lessons could have been more effectively availed of. Strategies to enable students to use the target language should be developed with an emphasis on structured pair work activities and with the support of appropriate information and communication technology (ICT) resources.

Students' copybooks, portfolios and oral skills were appropriately assessed during the lessons observed. Teachers provided students with excellent levels of formative written assessment and also high levels of oral feedback.

Classrooms are well maintained. Examples of high quality student work are displayed in some classrooms resulting in high standards and expectations being set. Subject specific posters and materials are also displayed thereby helping to develop a learning environment where subject-related resources, graphics and prints are accessible and integrated into teacher and student activities easily. Alternative seating arrangements have been integrated into a few classroom settings. These arrangements facilitated the seamless integration of collaborative learning exercises into lessons. The further development of these alternative layouts should be explored with a view to maximising student interaction and opportunities for further co-operative learning.

A positive rapport was evident between students and teachers throughout the evaluation. Student behaviour was very good and was underpinned by effective classroom management strategies and positive interactions between students and teachers.

IMPLEMENTATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS FROM PREVIOUS EVALUATIONS

3.1 Management

Work has progressed well in this area following a number of subject inspections in these subjects: Physical Education, English, Technical Graphics, History and Science and Biology. The principal brings the outcomes of subject inspections and other evaluations to the board's attention. Measures to effect change and improvement, when needed, are clearly documented and brought to the board by the principal. Although subject departments discuss findings and recommendations within their own subject areas, and with the principal, the good practice of dissemination of information should be extended to all staff in order to share affirmation of good practice and generic recommendations to improve teaching and learning. The provision of Physical Education for all senior cycle students and the deployment of Physical Education teachers are areas that are still to be developed.

3.2 Learning and teaching

Recommendations from previous subject inspection reports have largely been addressed. The biology TY programme has been comprehensively reviewed. The history department work effectively and collaboratively for the delivery of History. There has been considerable development of the use of ICT in lessons in line with recommendations in the reports and in line with the school priorities for development. There has been some use of peer in-service in this area also and this is commended. The English subject plan has been further developed in line with recommendations.

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

St. Columba's College is a very reflective school. School self-evaluation has been supported by the use of a survey of parents (2008), by an independent body, and the staff and fellows consultation day (2006). There are plans to hold another discussion day in the near future to look at priorities and future direction for the school. The practice of including all of the stakeholders in the school community in such discussion forums is commended. The possibility of including the current student voice in such discussions should be explored.

The principal periodically observes teaching and learning in classroom settings and there is some peer review within subject departments. School management and staff undertake rigorous analysis of state examination results annually and these results are disseminated to the fellows, the board of management and the parent body and are published on the school website. There is continual tracking of student academic progress, as needed, and comprehensive oral reports on student progress are given at monthly staff meetings. The school has begun work on a numeracy policy and this is progressing well. Management and staff have engaged well with evaluative processes. The school is excellently placed to engage in the school self evaluation process as presented in recent Department of Education and Skills publications.

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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 of St. Columba's College welcomes this report and wishes to record its thanks to all who played a part in its success: pupils, staff, parents and Board members. We also wish to thank the Inspectorate for its thoroughness and professionalism.

The College is pleased to note the warm and appreciative tone of the report and, in particular, its highlighting of good practice in the school in the fields of:

- management and leadership
- quality of teaching and learning
- school self-evaluation
- progress on the implementation of previous recommendations.

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 Board acknowledges and accepts the two recommendations made in this report for further improvement in the College.

Preliminary discussions have been initiated in a number of forums at various levels and staff training will be organised to implement our response.