

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna
Department of Education and Skills

Whole-School Evaluation
Management, Leadership and Learning
REPORT

The High School
Rathgar, Dublin 6
Roll number: 60670L

Date of inspection: 26 April 2012



Whole-School Evaluation Management, Leadership and Learning

A whole-school evaluation of management, leadership and learning (WSE-MLL) was undertaken in April, 2012, in The High School, Rathgar. This report presents the findings of the evaluation and makes recommendations for improvement. During the evaluation, the inspection team met with the school's management committee which discharges the functions of a board of management, in-school management, groups of teachers, parents and students. Inspectors also reviewed a range of school documentation and responses to questionnaires and examined other data in relation to the operation of the school. As part of the evaluation, a range of lessons across a number of subject areas was inspected. The board of management of the school was given an opportunity to comment on the findings and recommendations of the report; the board chose to accept the report without response.

Introduction

The High School was founded by the Erasmus Smith Trust in 1870 as a day school for boys. The school moved to its present site in Rathgar in 1971 and amalgamated with the Protestant Diocesan School for Girls on Adelaide Road in 1974. Students come from the local and wider Dublin area. The school has a current enrolment of 793 students and provides places in the main for students of Church of Ireland families while also offering places to those of other denominations and faiths. Fees are charged, however, parents of eligible students may apply to the Secondary Education Committee (SEC) for grants to offset fees.

1. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

1.1 Key Findings

- The school's management structures include a board of governors and a very large management committee which has an exceptionally high representation of trustees among its twenty-one members. The school's registrar is both secretary to the management committee and administrator of the school.
- A consequence of the current governance and management structures is that the principal is not assigned the range of responsibilities normally associated with the role of principal.
- The principal, deputy principal and school administrator jointly manage the day-to-day running of the school effectively.
- The section of the school plan that sets out school policies is well maintained while developmental planning and review have not as yet progressed.
- Staff members are provided with leadership opportunities, but these are generally carried out on an individual rather than collective basis. Consultative middle management structures are not in place to support the management of the school.
- In discussions with inspectors and in responses to student questionnaires, students expressed positive attitudes towards the overall atmosphere in the school, the quality of the level of care and support and the commitment of teachers.
- In a significant majority of lessons observed, the quality of learning and teaching was good or very good. There were identifiable weaknesses in teaching practices in a minority of lessons.
- An analysis of academic results reveals that overall academic attainment is very good. However, it is considered that some students who are attaining well at ordinary level in some subjects should be encouraged and supported to pursue the higher level course, where appropriate.
- Currently, students are not receiving adequate instruction in Social, Personal and Health Education, (SPHE) and Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE).

1.2 Recommendations for Further Development

- The composition of the school's management committee should be reviewed, with a view to rationalising the high number of trustee nominees and creating a smaller and more balanced structure reflecting the composition of a board of management.
- The roles and responsibilities of principal and board of management as set out in the Education Act, 1998 should inform a review of the current management structures.
- The management committee should play an overarching role in supporting and monitoring school development planning to achieve stated educational targets. In that regard, the principal should lead the teaching staff to engage in effective curriculum planning and self-evaluation activities with a strong focus on student learning.
- The school's middle management structures should be further developed with a view to promoting collaboration and distributed leadership in the school.
- The school timetable should be restructured to accommodate the inclusion of required SPHE and RSE provision in line with Circular 27/2008.

2. QUALITY OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP

2.1 School ownership and management – the Board of Management

Composition, functioning and fulfilment of statutory obligations

A board of governors manages the High School on behalf of the Erasmus Smith Trust as owner of the school. Sixteen governors serve on the school's management committee which has twenty-one members. The principal is also a member of the management committee, as are two teachers and two parents. The representation from the trustees is therefore much greater than on a standard board of management. Notwithstanding the evident good work of the management committee, the school is advised to consider rationalising the committee to create a smaller and more balanced structure reflecting the composition of a board of management as provided for in the Education Act, 1998.

Unlike the normal practice for a board of management, the registrar of the Erasmus Smith Trust acts as secretary to the management committee. The registrar also has further management responsibility in that he acts directly as administrator to the school. Furthermore, he is included in what the school identifies as the senior management team. While the administrator discharges some of the duties normally undertaken by a school principal, the principal has sole responsibility for the appointment and promotion of teachers, a responsibility normally discharged by a board of management. Some of the roles and responsibilities which would normally be assigned to a principal are distributed to others within the management structures of the school. Therefore, the range of duties assigned to the principal is more confined than is generally the case in post-primary schools. The roles and responsibilities of principal and board of management as set out in the Education Act, 1998 should inform a review of the current management structures.

The management committee is a hard working and committed body and is actively engaged in the life of the school. Its members bring a complementary range of experiences and skills to their work and their diversity contributes to the capacity of the committee. Four representative sub-committees report regularly to the management committee and minutes of meetings record the good work, contribution and commitment of each committee - finance, education, grounds and property, and sports - to the life of the school. To more fully acknowledge the ideal of partnership, an agreed written report should be drafted after each management committee meeting for dissemination to parents and teachers. In addition, an overall management committee report should be furnished to the wider school community on an annual basis. The school is supported by an active, committed and supportive parents' association.

The management committee has met legislative requirements regarding policy formation and enactment. Policies are developed by the education sub-committee in consultation with the education partners in the school and all policies are finally ratified by the management committee. This approach is in line with best practice. The code of behaviour is currently under review and the development of a literacy and numeracy policy is being progressed. These demonstrate the important educational matters which the sub-committee has prioritised. The sub-committee should ensure that students are also consulted on such educational matters.

Confirmation was provided that the school's management committee 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*.

The school's priorities for development

In the past, the school's priorities for development were identified through surveys and discussions with the various education partners in the school and through staff meetings and committee meetings. Work completed on the section of the school plan containing school policies is good and a wide range of policies are in place. The ongoing policy review mechanism, whereby policies are reviewed every five years or earlier if the need arises, is good practice. The date of enactment and review should also be recorded on each policy. While new written policies have been introduced and existing policies have been reviewed with the education partners, there is a need to reinvigorate developmental planning in the school.

The developmental section of the school plan does not set out prioritised time-bound goals and strategies. A more strategic approach to planning is therefore recommended. In order to provide the required leadership for learning in the school, the management committee should identify clear goals and strategies to achieve stated educational targets within set timeframes. In that regard, the principal should lead the teaching staff to engage in effective curriculum planning and monitoring activities with a strong focus on student learning. It is suggested that teacher working groups be set up which could examine particular developmental, curricular or educational priorities. This should bring the views of all staff members more fully to the decision-making and development planning processes.

The management committee highlighted educational themes such as the integration of the Department's literacy and numeracy strategy at school level and preparation for the introduction of the reform of the Junior Cycle curriculum as their priorities. The school's active publicity and communication strategy has resulted in many initiatives, such as the publication of the parent and pupil information booklet, the staff handbook, the initiation of the weekly newsletter and the school website. These initiatives facilitate transparency and understanding of the school management's decision-making processes.

School management has identified necessary actions so that it can continue to fulfil its founding ethos. While upholding the school ethos and traditions, the management committee acknowledges the need to be forward-looking and focus on what will be of benefit to students.

2.2 Effectiveness of leadership for learning

Leadership of staff

The newly appointed principal, together with the deputy principal and the school administrator, jointly manage the day-to-day running of the school effectively. The school administrator who has overall responsibility for school finance, resources and maintenance of buildings, carries out his responsibilities in these areas efficiently and effectively. The principal and deputy principal display leadership qualities and bring a complementary range of skills to their different roles. The principal's articulated priorities include the development of new curricular initiatives as well as leading and supporting teachers in their work. The deputy principal supports the principal in this regard and has particular responsibility for devising the school timetable. The deputy principal also manages the day-to-day implementation of the code of behaviour across the school, while serious breaches of the code are referred to the principal and brought to the relevant discipline committee chaired by senior management.

Almost all staff members have responsibilities in addition to their teaching duties, paid for through school funds or through the Department funded assistant principal and special duties teacher posts. The question as to how these parallel structures can contribute over time to the development of a meaningful layer of delegated middle management in the school was discussed at the time of the evaluation and should be addressed in the context of development planning. While staff members are provided with leadership opportunities, these are generally carried out individually and not collaboratively. Consultative middle-management structures are not in place to support the management of the school. Some posts carry substantial responsibilities, while others carrying a similar remuneration do not carry similar weight. Equity in terms of time and responsibility should be built into the overall post structure. Therefore, the current post structure should be collaboratively reviewed both to ensure equity in distributed responsibility and to ensure that the changing needs of the school are being met.

The support of management for teacher continuing professional development (CPD) is praiseworthy. Thematic staff in-service addressing identified school needs should be provided during the next academic year.

Leadership of students

In its mission statement, the school emphasises the pursuit of excellence. Analysis of examination results indicates that overall academic attainment is very good. School management and staff undertake ongoing and targeted reviews of assessment results. One of the substantial responsibilities which the role of year head carries is the monitoring of student academic progress. This is good practice.

The development of new curricular initiatives is a stated priority of senior management. However, a review of how the curriculum is delivered at present is a matter for immediate attention. Currently, students are not receiving adequate instruction in Social, Personal and Health Education, (SPHE) and Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE). The school timetable needs to be restructured to accommodate the inclusion of required SPHE and RSE provision in line with Circular 27/2008. The Transition Year (TY) programme, while substantially meeting student needs, also requires review to include a broadening of the curriculum and a restructuring of the TY plan in line with Department guidelines. The High School offers students a very broad curriculum. However, first-year students have quite a restricted choice of subjects. The way in which students make subject choices both at junior and senior cycle should be examined in the context of curriculum planning for the future.

Almost all parents surveyed as part of the whole school evaluation expressed the view that teaching is good in the school, that their child is doing well and enjoying school and that they are happy overall with the school. Parents also stated that the school is well run and agreed with students that their child feels safe and well looked after in the school. Some areas where parents were less satisfied included the level of advice from the school regarding subject choice, the quantity and checking of homework and the level of school consultation if their child needs extra help. School management should address issues raised in student and parent questionnaires when making decisions for the next academic year.

The school's pastoral care system for students, working in co-operation with school management, parents and teachers, is central to the fulfilment of its mission. A further responsibility of the year head includes liaising with parents and looking after the pastoral needs of students. The guidance and the learning support departments play a key role in the care and support of students. Adequate guidance and expert counselling is provided to each year group. Learning support is provided through individualised teaching and differentiated classroom strategies.

In discussions with inspectors, students expressed positive attitudes towards the overall atmosphere in the school, the quality of the level of care and support and the commitment of teachers. Results from student questionnaires supported this overall view. This is a very positive acknowledgement of the efforts of teachers. Areas where students were less satisfied included the provision of helpful advice and information from teachers when choosing subjects, and the level of consultation with students in making the school a better place.

The system governing the management of student behaviour is outlined in the code of behaviour. It is very praiseworthy that positive reinforcement is a key feature of school policies. The mentoring role of the prefects with first-year students and their overall contribution to the school is praiseworthy. The student council is increasingly active and is making a meaningful contribution to promoting self-discipline and individual responsibility among students. Leadership skills are developed in TY by students who complete the 'Gaisce' challenge. Parents and students praised the quality of the TY programme for its diversity and life skills. The voice of parents and their feedback on TY would be strengthened by the provision of a TY parent-teacher meeting.

2.3 Management of facilities

School facilities and resources are well managed by the school administrator in collaboration with the principal and deputy principal. Marked improvements in the school's infrastructure in recent years have impacted very positively on the working environment for teachers and the learning environment for students. Further development is planned. Recent focus has been on the expansion of resources, in particular information and communication technology (ICT) in classrooms and specialist rooms. Further initiatives in this regard will be necessary so that students and teachers can increasingly integrate ICT into their everyday educational experience and teachers can collaboratively share resources. Environmental sustainability is promoted through various initiatives.

3. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

The quality of learning and teaching

Thirty five lessons were observed covering all years and programmes and including core, optional, practical and non-examination subjects. In a significant majority of lessons observed, the quality of learning and teaching was good or very good and in some cases practice was exemplary. High levels of student learning were achieved in many lessons. There were identifiable weaknesses in teaching practices in a minority of lessons.

The majority of lessons were well planned and structured. A number of teachers set clear learning objectives for each lesson, shared them with students at the outset, and then used them at the conclusion of the lesson to summarise and to evaluate learning. In the well-planned lessons, teachers had prepared good resources which in many instances included the use of ICT as a teaching and learning tool. In these lessons, ICT sought to stimulate and deepen students' learning by providing good visual and audio resources. However, in some lessons the potential to use ICT was not availed of. Therefore, it is recommended that best practice regarding the effective use of ICT be shared between teachers and subject departments through in-school training and the development of a shared bank of resources.

There was a positive working atmosphere in all classrooms. Teachers' classroom management, together with student behaviour observed during the evaluation, were very good overall and helped to create a collaborative learning environment. Better organisation of learning time in a minority of lessons was recommended. The use of appropriate resources, including ICT, could facilitate this process. Teachers were knowledgeable about their subject areas and this engendered student confidence, enthusiasm and motivation.

In the majority of lessons, teachers held high expectations for both student achievement and behaviour and students strove to meet these expectations. Students were willing to engage with key concepts and become autonomous learners. In almost all lessons, teachers expertly supported student learning by providing students with challenging activities. Students are encouraged to aim for high academic standards and, where possible, to take subjects at the highest possible level in the certificate examinations wherein attainment levels are very good. However, the high attainment of some students at ordinary level in some subjects merits attention in relation to appropriate challenge and expectation. The uptake of ordinary and higher level courses by students should be carefully monitored to ensure that students are encouraged and supported to take the level commensurate with their ability.

A range of appropriate and varied teaching methodologies was used to engage students in their learning. These included well planned and purposeful activities including student engagement in practical work, projects, debates, student presentations and lively classroom discussions. Some teachers successfully included all students through a range of practices including differentiated instruction. This was noted particularly in the use of both higher and lower-order questioning, and the individual attention afforded to students. This good practice should be extended to include greater use of differentiated tasks. In some lessons, the lack of differentiated instruction resulted in a lower level of student participation and engagement.

During language lessons teachers employed the target language for communication and instruction extensively and effectively. This encouraged successful student engagement. In the most successful lessons, there was a good focus on pronunciation and the provision of co-operative learning activities that allowed students to practise the spoken language.

A range of assessment modes was employed including questioning, oral feedback and teacher facilitated discussion. Teachers maintained good records of student attendance and attainment. Homework was assigned regularly in most subject areas. The standard of maintenance of the school journal varied considerably between different students and class groups. It would be worthwhile addressing this difference in practice to ensure that the journal is an effective resource for teachers, students and parents. Teachers frequently gave verbal feedback to students. However, the practice of giving written, formative feedback was not always evident. This is an essential assessment for learning (AfL) practice and the school should strive to implement it in every subject area. Themes for future continuing professional development for teachers should include the promotion of AfL and further integration of computers as classroom learning tools.

IMPLEMENTATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS FROM PREVIOUS EVALUATIONS

4.1 Management

Actions taken by management in response to recommendations made in previous subject inspection reports include the promotion of subjects to increase uptake, some changes to teacher deployment in first year and the revision of some subject department plans. Further development of subject plans including the setting of medium and long-term goals for each subject should inform future planning. Key areas outlined which still require the attention of school management include a review of subject choice options for first year, deployment of teachers at both junior and senior cycle and a review of the practice of timetabling two teachers to a particular class group.

4.2 Learning and Teaching

The quality of teaching and learning in the subjects previously evaluated was generally high. Teachers have attended well to the implementation of many of the recommendations made in previous subject inspection reports. Subject departments have taken a range of actions in response to these recommendations. Specific improvements include better use of the target language, the introduction of pair and group work, and more focus on active and cooperative learning. Assessment strategies have also improved. However, further development in this area is needed. Other areas for future improvement include the integration of AfL strategies into lessons and improvements in the recording, quantity and correction of homework.

The impact of previous subject inspection recommendations on some generic aspects of teaching and learning has yet to be fully realised. It is recommended that school management put appropriate structures in place to increase staff awareness of prior recommendations.

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

5.1

The school's management committee and senior management team share a clear commitment to the development of the school and to supporting excellence in teaching and student learning. Review of the current structure of the composition of the management committee would enhance its capacity to support school self-evaluation. The work of its sub-committees demonstrates willingness, expertise and considerable commitment to review and evaluate. In order to capitalise on the potential within the school, the management committee and senior management should maintain an openness to change and a willingness to lead the school forward in line with the school ethos and in keeping with its commitment to excellence.