Whole-School Evaluation
Management, Leadership and Learning

REPORT

Saint Finian’s College
Mullingar, Co. Westmeath
Roll number: 63280N

Date of inspection: 26 September 2012
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. Finian’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. Finian’s College, which is under the patronage of the Bishop of Meath, was founded in 1802 and has been located in Mullingar since 1908. The school has recently undergone significant change in moving from being a boarding school to a day school; in enrolling girls, increasing student numbers to in excess of 600 and employing forty teachers; and in establishing a board of management. However, the essential character of the school as a diocesan school, dedicated to the promotion of the catholic ethos, has remained unchanged and this ethos remains fundamental to how the school is run and managed.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

Key Findings

- The influence of the trustees is evident in all aspects of how the school is managed and there is great pride in the traditions of the school.
- Substantial change in recent times has been managed in an exemplary manner.
- Effective leadership of staff is apparent with high standards and high expectations of both staff and students.
- Staff are well motivated and there is strong evidence of their notable dedication to school and to students.
- Students behaved in an exemplary manner during the evaluation. A good work ethic was evident and the quality of students’ learning, in the vast majority of cases, was very good.

Recommendations for Further Development

- It is recommended that an overarching document be developed to provide a single reference point on how the school is managed.
- It is recommended that the school examines strategically how best to manage provision for students with additional educational needs and re-organises the use of supports for these students.
- Subject department planning should be less content driven and the use of more student-centred, active-learning methodologies, the systematic use of Assessment for Learning techniques and the provision of quality feedback to students on their written work should be promoted.
- It is recommended that the board, senior management, task groups and subject departments engage in action planning as a means of planning for improvement and for implementing and monitoring change.
1. QUALITY OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP

1.1 School ownership and management

The board of management of St. Finian’s College is appropriately constituted, is aware of its responsibilities and is well informed regarding in-school activities, events and issues. The board delegates responsibility appropriately and communicates well with the school community. Decision making is by consensus.

The principal, an effective leader who consults widely, has managed significant change in an exemplary manner and has a vision for the school. The senior management team works efficiently and effectively to manage the day-to-day operation of the school. Principal and deputy principal work very well as a team, complement each other, and are mutually supportive.

Significant effort and energy goes into fostering and upholding the ethos of the school and there is great pride evident in its traditions. The influence of the trustees is evident in the ongoing management of the school and in the policies and procedures underpinning its operation. There is a very strong sense of community in the school and inclusion of all students is a strong feature of daily life. A positive and caring atmosphere, which is supportive of good quality learning, is evident.

Priorities have been identified in relation to improving teaching and learning, policy development and review, and managing change in the current environment. There is evidence of ongoing work in each of these areas. The board and senior management team monitor academic standards closely and contribute in a significant manner to maintaining high expectations.

The parents’ council is working effectively and has made sizeable contributions to supporting the school. It communicates well and works closely with senior management and with the board. While it is evident that consultation with parents and students takes place, such consultation should be highlighted and emphasised to a greater extent.

Key policies are in operation and are reviewed regularly. However, some of these need to be dated so current versions can be identified. A number of additional policies are currently under development, including a whole-school guidance plan and an information and communication technology (ICT) policy. It is recommended that an overarching document be developed to tie together all of the various policies, plans and procedures that have been put in place to date, and to provide a single reference point for all key documentation.

There is very good administrative planning and evidence of a high awareness of the issues affecting education and schools in the current climate of change. School self-evaluation is currently a major element of the developmental agenda.

Subject department planning has been a major focus for development in the past school year and substantial progress is apparent in a short time, including the appointment of subject co-ordinators, the development of schedules for course delivery in all subjects and the introduction of common examinations. Many subject department folders make reference to an analysis of state examination outcomes. Some make reference to literacy and it is commendable that teachers have been examining the literacy needs of students in relation to their specific subjects. Building on recent advances, subject department planning should now be further developed, specifically in the area of planning for improvement, in the context of school self-evaluation.
It is noteworthy that the school provides substantial additional time over and above the Department of Education and Skills allocation for the support of students with additional educational needs and the summer reading programme is a very praiseworthy initiative. However, there is a need to examine strategically how best to manage provision for these students. The means of support should be re-examined with a view to achieving a better balance between the various modes of support and introducing team teaching. The size of the special education team should be reduced in order that more focused, specialised and efficient support can be provided, maximising the use of the talents of those teachers who have the skills, training and empathy to work best with students with additional educational needs.

1.2 Effectiveness of leadership for learning

Leadership of staff
Effective leadership of staff and leadership of learning are apparent and high standards are expected. Frequent affirmation of staff is noted in the minutes of board meetings and in other documentation. Staff are well motivated and there is strong evidence of their notable dedication to school and to students.

Post holders work effectively to complete the tasks assigned to them. The recent loss of a number of posts has been managed well and current post duties are in keeping with the needs of the school. The task-group system, used primarily in whole-school planning and policy development, works very well, with the support of the deputy who plays a critical role in this regard.

Teamwork is apparent in how the year heads, all assistant principals, collaborate and work with senior management. However, it is suggested that a means of facilitating post holders, as a tier in the school community, to contribute to the strategic development of the school be sought. This will support the development of distributed leadership amongst the post holders. Formal collaboration amongst staff, through subject departments, is working very well and much informal collaboration and sharing of expertise also occurs.

Leadership of students
Students were courteous and behaved in an exemplary manner during the evaluation. High expectations of students were apparent at all times and students responded accordingly.

The school’s admissions policy is working satisfactorily. Ongoing monitoring of this policy is encouraged to ensure that it continues to deliver on the school’s ethos of inclusion and diversity. Admissions procedures are appropriate and communication with parents of incoming students is good. Transition of students from primary to post-primary school and to senior cycle is well managed. Appropriate guidance support is provided at critical stages in students’ progress into and through the school.

The school is open for the required minimum instructional hours each week and for the minimum number of days each year. However, the practice of releasing third and fourth year students a week early in advance of the summer holidays should be discontinued.

The code of behaviour, which is subject to biennial review, is working effectively and contributes to the good order observed during the evaluation. There is a clear ladder of referral for dealing with students in breach of the code and sanctions are clear and appropriately graded. However, there are elements of the code in need of revision. A number of statements relating to suspension effectively constitute exclusion which is not in compliance with the Education (Welfare) Act 2000 and should be removed from the code. Some statements relating to the dress code are too prescriptive and open to challenge on equality grounds and should also be omitted.
Minority students and those with additional needs are well enabled to participate in the school as equals. Students with disabilities are well catered and cared for and the very good work of the team of special needs assistants (SNAs) is acknowledged.

An active students’ council represents the interests of students and the principal attends all meetings. Members are satisfied that their voice is heard. A team of mentors, all fourth-year students, plays a prominent and commendable role in supporting first-year students. An annual meeting of the officers of the students’ council with the board is suggested as a means of raising the profile of both groups amongst students.

Students’ attendance is well monitored and there is an appropriate and immediate response to inform parents if students are absent without explanation.

The work of the class tutors and year heads contributes substantially to student welfare. A care team is in place to monitor and support students with difficulties. In-school supportive counselling is available to students and outside counselling referrals can be arranged where appropriate.

The timetable is generally well managed and appropriate. It is suggested that the time allocation to PE, Sciences and Home Economics be kept under review. A good range of subject options is available at all levels, driven by student choice at senior level. It is commendable that mixed-ability classes are formed to the greatest extent possible.

The academic curriculum provided by the school is well balanced through the provision of a wide variety of co-curricular and extracurricular activities including social, cultural, academic and sporting activities and, notably, activities and events to celebrate success within the school community. It is acknowledged that such activities can only take place with the significant support, hard work and dedication of staff. In addition, the commendable work of the Schola Cantorum contributes substantially to broadening the curriculum.

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 is accommodated in a very large old building which is well maintained and which has been largely adapted to accommodate the needs of a modern school. The building, which is well respected by students, is situated in extensive grounds, which are tastefully maintained. The required safety statement is in place.

The school is engaged in the Green Schools initiative and is currently working towards achieving its first green flag.

The level of upkeep of the school and its grounds is a credit to maintenance staff and to the entire school community.

2. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

2.1 The quality of learning and teaching
Almost all lessons observed were well prepared. Teachers were working to agreed term plans and resources were prepared in advance.

Good or very good teaching was evident in most lessons with many elements of very good teaching frequently observed. A variety of methodologies was appropriately used in almost all lessons. There was an obvious examination focus in many classrooms. The school’s good information and communication technology (ICT) and audio-visual infrastructure was effectively used in many lessons, both in a stand-alone manner and in conjunction with other methodologies. Teaching was very imaginative and very student centred in some lessons. However, there were occasions when a more student-centred and interactive approach would have served students better.

There is a need, in a number of lessons, to create opportunities for students to engage in a more two-way teaching-and-learning process which facilitates greater interaction, more student ownership of the process, is more affirming and ultimately is more motivating and rewarding for students. In those lessons where opportunities existed and were made use of, the level of teacher-student interaction was very good, the quality of these interactions was of a high standard and the resulting quality of students’ learning was very good.

Classroom management was good in all lessons observed. Rapport between teachers and students was positive. A good work ethic was evident and students made significant contributions to many lessons. The quality of students’ learning, in the vast majority of cases, was very good as evidenced by their level of engagement, the questions they asked as well as answered, the quality of interactions in the classroom and the positivity of the learning environment.

The level of differentiation was generally good, with only a small few exceptions, and was mainly achieved through teacher movement throughout the classroom, questioning of students and the use of discussion. Positive teacher-student relationships were a key element in enabling this type of differentiation. In the more teacher directed lessons, the level of differentiation was somewhat less. The use of graduated, differentiated worksheets was not evident and there is scope for development here.

Lessons were generally well structured with a clear beginning, middle and end. Best practice was seen where lesson objectives were shared with students at the start and reviewed at the end of the lesson. Lesson objectives were shared with students at the start of a little over half of lessons and were reviewed at the end of most of these.

In a few lessons, it is highly commendable that homework was assigned at the beginning of or during the lesson. However, there was a notable tendency to allow insufficient time to finish off lessons, leaving little time for review and leading to a rush in assigning homework. More thought should be given to time management of lessons, allowing time for a review of learning outcomes and giving greater priority to homework, thereby ensuring that students are clear of what is expected of them.

Students made good use of their journals to record homework and to convey messages to and from homes. However, there is much scope for teachers to use journals to support positive discipline by regularly writing positive comments and notes.

In almost all lessons observed, students were well affirmed for their effort in class. A small number of lessons lacked appropriate affirmation. In these instances, it is important to remember the significant contribution to motivating and encouraging students that positive comments from teachers can make.
Students’ written work was well affirmed in some classes and, in still fewer instances, good quality developmental feedback was given. Written work was best where good quality feedback towards improvement and affirmation were regularly and frequently provided to students. In addition, while elements of Assessment for Learning were evident in a few classes, there is no systematic use of this approach. Overall, these are areas of weakness and procedures need to be examined and agreed at whole-school and subject department level to ensure that students receive good quality developmental feedback on their written work.

3. IMPLEMENTATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS FROM PREVIOUS EVALUATIONS

3.1 Management

The board and senior in-school management have given due attention to the recommendations of previous evaluation reports. For example, in a number of subject inspections, reference was variously made to the need to set up subject departments, to develop subject plans and to appoint co-ordinators. This work has been completed and has been promoted by senior management. Collaboration amongst teachers, in a formal manner, has been enhanced in the process. The time given at staff meetings and otherwise to discussing subject inspection reports has facilitated further collaboration and sharing of good practice. Time has been allocated for subject department meetings from the Croke Park hours.

3.2 Learning and teaching

It is evident that teachers have embraced the formalisation of subject department structures and have contributed, in their specific departments, to the development of planning documents and schedules of work. The introduction of common assessments is a very positive development and all concerned are highly commended. Substantial improvements in the service provided to students have resulted from these changes.

While the developmental work listed above has been prioritised in the recent past, there are some outstanding issues. The whole-school promotion and use of more student-centred, active-learning methodologies, the systematic use of Assessment for Learning techniques and the provision of quality feedback to students on their written work have all arisen in this evaluation as areas for development. It is encouraging to note, from classroom observations and discussions, that expertise is already available in the school in each of these areas. Sharing best practice in these methodologies and approaches to teaching and learning should be promoted and enabled, ideally as part of the school self-evaluation process.

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

The board of management has demonstrated its capacity to proactively examine, review and develop the systems and procedures by which the school is led and managed. Ongoing formal and informal evaluation is evident from documentation provided as part of this inspection, at many different levels within the school community.

Some of this work has been in response to outside factors, such as the changing environment in which the school is operating, the need to follow up on recommendations of subject inspection reports, and legislation. Some work has been initiated within the school.
For example, the idea of the board engaging in a review of its own performance is very encouraging and should be pursued. Policy development and review, with the engagement of task groups, is another example of this process. To a lesser extent, consultation with the students’ and parents’ councils has also contributed to reflective processes.

The senior management team has demonstrated the necessary skills, knowledge and outlook to manage and lead a complex and constantly changing organisation during a time of significant change, with the co-operation of both staff and students. There is very good capacity to initiate and promote change within the school with the ultimate aim of improving the service provided to students and to the community that the school serves.

It is recommended that the board, senior management, task groups and subject departments review their methodology for managing change and engage in action planning as a means of efficiently planning for improvement and for implementing and monitoring change. This methodology of action planning is at the core of school self-evaluation as currently promoted by the education partners and the Department of Education and Skills.

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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. Finian’s College acknowledges the most positive WSE/MLL report completed by the Inspectorate. The whole school community has been uplifted by its comments. They wish to thank the inspection team for their professionalism and courtesy, for their report and for all their hard work and commitment.

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 of Management will work with parents, pupils and staff to implement the findings and recommendations contained in this report. They note that doing so using School Self Evaluation can only enhance further the existing very positive educational experience of the students in St. Finian’s College.