An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Whole-School Evaluation
Management, Leadership and Learning

REPORT

Saint Joseph’s Secondary School
Rochfortbridge, County Westmeath
Roll number: 63310T

Date of inspection: 19 October 2011
Whole-School Evaluation
Management, Leadership and Learning

A whole-school evaluation of management, leadership and learning (WSE-MLL) was undertaken in October, 2011 in St Joseph’s Secondary School, Rochfortbridge. 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, 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.

Introduction
St Joseph’s Secondary School is a co-educational post-primary school situated in the village of Rochfortbridge, County Westmeath. The school was founded in 1954 by the Mercy Congregation, and has grown over the years to its current enrolment of 767 students. It serves a wide catchment area, consisting of the village of Rochfortbridge and a large rural hinterland. The present first-year intake comes from a total of nineteen feeder primary schools, and is varied in its socio-economic makeup. The school is a popular choice with parents and students, and demand for places is strong: the number of annual applications far exceeds the places available. The school’s accommodation consists of several buildings constructed over the years and it currently operates in rather cramped conditions. The Department of Education and Skills (DES) has recently given approval for the building of five new classrooms.

The school is characterised by an open, non-selective enrolment policy and an inclusive ethos, strongly supported by the CEIST trustees. In keeping with its strong commitment to serving the local community and to meeting the needs of the whole student population, the school offers an optional Transition Year (TY) programme, the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) and the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP), in addition to the Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate programmes.

At the time of the whole-school evaluation, the principal and deputy principal had been less than one year in their roles, although both had been appointed from among the staff and had long service in the school.

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. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

1.1 Key Findings
- The school has a long tradition of service to the local community and is a welcoming place for students and their parents.
- There is an effective senior management team and a committed, hard-working staff.
- A key strength of the school is the range of programmes, curriculum subjects and extra-curricular activities it offers.
- School development planning processes are well-established, and there is a commendable focus on improving the quality of teaching and learning.
• The quality of teaching was very good or good in the majority of lessons observed, and in some lessons it was excellent.
• In a significant minority of lessons, there was scope for improvement in the quality of teaching.
• Senior management promotes a culture of review and self-evaluation.

1.2 Recommendations for Further Development
• The board of management, along with senior management and the teaching staff and in consultation with the parents and students, should articulate a clear long-term vision for the school, with teaching and learning at its heart, and should develop a whole-school strategy to make the vision a reality.
• E-learning should be an integral part of the whole-school strategy.
• The incoming board of management should make the quality of teaching and learning an explicit focus of attention.
• A range of strategies for active and collaborative learning should be developed and implemented.
• Expertise and good practice in teaching should be shared within and across subject departments.

2. QUALITY OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP

2.1 School ownership and management – the Board of Management

Composition, functioning and fulfilment of statutory obligations
The board of management is properly constituted and meets monthly during the school year. At the time of the evaluation a new board was in the process of appointment: the inspection team met with the outgoing board at the beginning of the evaluation and with the newly-appointed board at its conclusion.

The outgoing board was conscientious in fulfilling its statutory duties, especially regarding the development, ratification and renewal of polices. One of its strengths was the long association of a number of the members with the school in various capacities. Another was the fact that several had backgrounds and experience in education.

There is scope for the board to broaden its understanding of its role in fulfilling the school’s mission as regards teaching and learning, and to make this an explicit focus of attention. For example, the board could discuss inspection reports in detail as they become available, could engage with the principal in considering how the school should respond to the report’s recommendations, and could submit a school response for publication on the DES website, as appropriate.

Confirmation was provided that the board of management has not yet formally adopted the Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-primary Schools (September 2011) without modification. 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.
The school’s priorities for development

The priorities established by the board of management and senior management are: improving the school’s physical infrastructure; developing information and communications technologies (ICT) and the e-learning plan; developing the curriculum to meet the needs of the students; improving the quality of teaching and learning; reviewing and evaluating the school plan in terms of policies and procedures; building on the strong foundations and traditions of the school; and promoting and recognising the culture of volunteerism among staff and parents.

Good work has been done in advancing these priorities, which are entirely appropriate. The new classrooms will be a significant addition to the infrastructure. As regards ICT, all classrooms are now equipped with a desktop computer and a digital projector, and a working group is developing the school’s e-learning plan. The curriculum is under constant review, even if the possibilities for development are limited at present. The new senior management team has a clear focus on the quality of teaching and learning.

There is a school development planning team, consisting of the principal, the deputy principal and two special duties teachers, which meets weekly and is responsible for coordinating the implementation of the school’s development priorities. This team seeks to ensure that all members of the school community are aware of these priorities and play their part in furthering them.

In the interests of coherence in advancing these priorities, it is recommended that the board of management, along with senior management and the teaching staff and in consultation with the parents and students, articulate a clear long-term vision for the school, with teaching and learning at its heart. It should then develop a whole-school strategy to make the vision a reality. It should be clear from the strategy exactly how the vision would translate into practice in the classroom. The e-learning plan should be an integral part of this overall strategy and should serve the school’s objectives as regards teaching and learning as well as its administrative needs.

2.2 Effectiveness of leadership for learning

Leadership of staff

The leadership of staff by senior management is very effective. The principal and the deputy principal have a strong working relationship and share the same vision and priorities for the school. They inspire strong commitment from the general body of the teaching staff. They also have a very good working relationship with the board of management and the parents. They are committed to promoting continuing improvement in the quality of teaching and learning in the school, and they have communicated this commitment to the teaching staff. Aspects of teaching and learning are now on the agenda at every staff meeting, and all subject departments are expected to engage with planning for better teaching and learning.

The planning team already referred to meets weekly and is the main agent for advancing the school’s priorities regarding policies and curricular development. It establishes annual priorities and develops a strategic plan to implement them. The focus for teaching and learning this year is lesson planning, with an emphasis on learning outcomes. Templates have been provided to assist teachers in planning and structuring their lessons.

At present, there are seven assistant principals in the school and eleven teachers with special duties posts. The range of duties assigned to post holders is reviewed from time to time and is, in general, appropriate. The principal and deputy principal meet regularly with individual post holders, and there is a weekly meeting with the year heads, most of whom
are assistant principals. Post holders are focused on their individual tasks, there is no middle management structure as such, and the post holders do not meet as a body.

It is suggested that the role of the post holders could be developed so as to give at least some of them a function in collaboratively supporting senior management. At present, the responsibility for developing and implementing whole-school strategy rests largely with the planning team. While there are undoubted advantages to a having a small, compact working group, if this team were expanded to include at least some of the other post holders, the effect would be to bring together the strategic and operational functions and to make for more effective planning and implementation. Consideration could also be given to giving post holders a role, for example, in ensuring consistency regarding planning in subject departments.

Leadership of students

One of the most striking features of the school’s leadership of students is the excellent programme that it operates to support first-year students in their transfer from primary to post-primary school. The transfer procedure involves visits and ongoing liaison with the many feeder primary schools, parents’ evenings, and extensive supports for first-year students, including individual interviews with guidance counsellors and the support of sixth-year prefects.

The school offers a broad and balanced curriculum, and a taster programme for first-year students to help them make their choices from the options on offer. The fact that the school offers TY, LCA and LCVP is evidence of its commitment to meeting the needs of its varied student population. Each year, a seminar is organised for third-year students to present them with the options for senior cycle. Although students are provided with information on the LCA programme, there was insufficient demand to create a fifth-year LCA class in the current school year. Given the size of the its population and the fact that the school serves a wide range of student needs and aptitudes, it is very likely that in any given year there will a cohort of students for whom the LCA is the best option. It is recommended that the school continue to promote the LCA as a worthwhile option.

Attendance registers are well kept and the roll is called at the start of every lesson. The school is about to adopt an early warning system for potential attendance problems. Retention levels are excellent, and the school tracks the progression of students beyond Leaving Certificate.

One of the strengths of the school, according to parents and students, is its pastoral ethos: students feel that they are cared for and that their individual needs are catered for. At the time of the evaluation a draft pastoral care policy was being prepared for presentation to the board of management and the parents’ council. There is an excellent level of guidance support available to students at every level, and the targeted interventions in first year, third year and sixth year are particularly commendable. The school also has the services of a life coach, who meets weekly with the guidance counsellors and is available to work with individual students. Each class has a class teacher who meets with the class once a week for a fifteen-minute pastoral care period, and there is a year head for each year group.

The students’ learning and holistic development is supported by an extensive range of extra-curricular activities. These activities are made possible by the remarkable commitment of teachers in giving of their own time, evidence of the spirit of volunteerism which characterises the school.

The level of home-school communication is very good. Teachers and senior management are readily available to students and their parents to discuss any issues that may arise. The
book rental scheme, which has been in operation for a number of years, is a real support to students and their families.

Students’ behaviour, as observed during the inspection, is very good. There are clear procedures and structures for dealing with misbehaviour, and the school’s code of behaviour has recently been revised in line with NEWB requirements.

2.3 Management of facilities
The school makes the best use of the facilities which it has. It is fortunate to have a gymnasium and playing fields, thanks to the generosity of the Mercy Congregation, and it also has the use of the GAA Astro Turf playing field. New windows have recently been provided, part-funded by the DES, and the building has been re-insulated. First-year students have been provided with their own locker room with tables and a meeting area. Students’ movement around the buildings between classes is safe and orderly, in spite of the cramped accommodation. Good attention is paid to health and safety, which are regular items on staff meeting agendas.

The buildings are clean and well cared for. There is a very good level of environmental awareness, and the school has been awarded two Green Flags. The next objective to be achieved is water conservation.

3. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

3.1 The quality of learning and teaching
A total of thirty-two lessons were observed during the course of the evaluation, across a range of subjects, years and programmes. Overall, the quality of teaching was very good or good in the majority of lessons observed, and in some lessons it was excellent. Very good lessons were characterised by high expectations, clear learning outcomes, good pace and varied, imaginative teaching methods. In a significant minority of the lessons observed, there was scope for improvement in the quality of teaching.

The planning of lessons observed was good or very good in most cases and lessons were well-structured. In many lessons, the teachers had prepared a written plan, using one of the standard templates agreed for use in the school. Commendably, lesson content was almost always dictated by the syllabus, and rarely by textbooks. Neither was the content dictated by examination requirements, except where appropriate.

One of the focuses of staff development has been the use of learning outcomes in lesson planning, and the sharing of these outcomes with the students. In most of the lessons observed, the learning outcomes were shared with the students at the beginning of the lesson, and were often written on the board. Best practice was observed where the attainment of learning outcomes was checked as the lesson progressed and at its conclusion. In some cases, the learning outcomes could have been more specific; where they were specific, it was easy for teacher and students to know whether or not they had been attained.

Teachers’ organisational and classroom management skills were generally very good. The management of time in lessons was also very good in most cases. The white board was used very well, and there were many examples of good teaching resources prepared by the teachers themselves. In just over half of the lessons, ICT was used—usually presentation software and sometimes video clips.

There was a very good atmosphere in all of the lessons observed, and a very good student-teacher rapport was evident. In a number of cases, however, there was scope for greater use
of active learning approaches and for cooperative learning by students. Greater use could have been made of group work and pair work to complement whole-class teaching, and the student voice could be heard more often in lessons. It is recommended that developing strategies for active and collaborative learning should become a focus for subject department planning.

Due attention was paid to individual students’ needs, especially in English and Mathematics. Good use was made of key words as a support to literacy, and attention was paid to numeracy where appropriate. In general, however, there was scope for greater differentiation in teaching, to take account of the mixed-ability composition of class groups and to provide greater challenge for all students, especially for the more able.

Homework was given in all lessons observed and students’ journals were used in all classes to record homework. Written work in copybooks and folders was usually of a very good quality and was well presented. The quantity of written work was very good for the time of year. Written work was regularly checked by teachers, in some cases with written comments and suggestions for improvement.

4. IMPLEMENTATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS FROM PREVIOUS EVALUATIONS

4.1 Management
Senior management carries out an analysis of inspection reports and shares the recommendations with the staff with a view to whole-school improvement of teaching and learning. In a number of recent inspection reports, recommendations were made regarding subject planning, and the inclusion of detailed learning outcomes in the yearly plans of work. During this evaluation it was noted that some subject departments had made more progress than others in implementing this recommendation. In a few cases, for example, it was noted that very good short-term planning for the lessons observed contrasted with poorer quality long-term plans, which consisted mainly of lists of topics without clear indications of learning outcomes, teaching methodologies or assessment practice.

The whole-school approach to subject and lesson planning being promoted by senior management, and the sharing of expertise across subject departments should help to improve the overall quality of planning for teaching and learning. The practice of peer observation, both within and across subject departments, is recommended as one way of sharing expertise and disseminating best practice.

A recommendation to integrate ICT is one which requires whole-school implementation led by management. The ongoing work on developing an e-learning plan is an appropriate response to this recommendation.

4.2 Learning and Teaching
During the lessons observed, the inspectors focused on a number of recommendations made in recent subject inspection reports regarding Assessment for Learning (AfL). In most of the lessons observed, the lesson objectives were shared at the start of the lesson. However, the learning objectives were reviewed and checked in just over half of the lessons. In fewer than half of the classrooms visited was there evidence in students’ copybooks of affirmative comments or recommendations for improvement.

One inspection report recommended extending the range of question types used by teachers, to promote higher order thinking skills. In about half of the lessons observed in
this inspection, there was evidence of a range of question types that were inclusive and that accommodated the range of abilities within the class group.

These findings underline the need to maintain a focus on the improvement of teaching and learning.

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

5.1
Senior management is clear on the importance of self-evaluation, and there is a strong culture of review in the school. Programmes, policies and procedures are constantly under review, and parents and students are consulted as appropriate. One example of the school’s self-evaluation process is the annual report to the trustees, which is published on the school website. Another is the recent survey of staff carried out at the end of September. The annual analysis of examination results by management is an important tool for school self-evaluation. Each subject department returns a written comment on the analysis to principal and outlines how it views results in the subject and what, if anything, needs to change to maintain or improve the level of achievement.

Parent and student questionnaires formed part of this whole-school evaluation. The results of both were overwhelmingly positive, and expressed appreciation of the work of the school’s management and teaching staff. An analysis of these questionnaire results could usefully be incorporated into the school’s self-evaluation process.

Published 19 April 2012
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 Joseph’s Rochfortbridge welcomes the findings presented in this WSE-MLL Report, which was undertaken in the school during October 2011.

It is the view of the Board that the process was carried out in a supportive, constructive and professional manner, where good practice was recognised and affirmed over a wide range of areas and recommendations for improvement were clearly identified. The Board also acknowledges the professionalism of the entire staff and the cooperation of students and parents in the work of the school. The Board was very pleased with the overwhelmingly positive response of the parents and students in the questionnaires which formed part of the evaluation.

The Board, which comprises a body of lay people, representing the parents, teachers and trustees, who operate in a completely voluntary capacity, recognises that it does not have an executive role in the day to day administration of the school. The Board delegates this responsibility to the Principal, Deputy Principal, post holders and teaching staff of the school. At Board meetings the members are kept informed by the Principal on all areas of school activity, including programmes and initiatives undertaken to improve the quality of teaching and learning. Board members will always engage with the Principal on developments in this area, which they regard as central.

The Board finds it most reassuring to read the Report findings on the quality of leadership provided by the Senior Management, built on strong working relationships and shared vision around priorities, which inspires commitment from staff to face the challenges of continuing to improve practice.
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 and Senior Management are committed to promoting improvement in the quality of teaching and learning in the school as recommended in this report.

School Management will be guided by the recommendations of this WSE MLL report in the ongoing task of school development planning.

Further training on differentiation and team teaching has been organised and expertise in teaching methodologies and good practice is being shared. A pilot project in Peer Observation has been organised. Circular 0065/2011 re. Child Protection Guidelines has been fully implemented. The work to date on lesson planning, both short term and long term, and the effectiveness of the use of learning outcomes has been evaluated. Lesson planning will continue to incorporate differentiation with the purpose of meeting the needs of pupils who have special needs as well as pupils who would benefit from greater challenge in their learning.

While the LCA programme had to be withdrawn as an option for 2011/12 due to lack of numbers, it is planned to run the programme for 2012/13. Programme options and subject options are student demand driven so options will vary from year to year. Work is continuing on developing an e learning policy. The Pastoral Care Policy has now been finalised.

Due to the impending cuts in the Guidance Allocation to the school, the Board is greatly concerned that this excellent resource, which includes a well developed counselling service for pupils, which is highly valued by pupils, parents and staff, may not be maintained into the future. Even with the five new classrooms, the conditions for teaching and learning remain cramped, particularly with the recommendation for active and collaborative methodologies. Work is ongoing with all the partners in articulating a clearer, long-term vision for the school, with teaching and learning at its heart