

**An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna**

**Department of Education and Skills**

**Whole-School Evaluation  
Management, Leadership and Learning**

**REPORT**

**Saint Mary's Secondary School  
New Ross, County Wexford  
Roll number: 63620L**

**Date of inspection: 7 February 2014**



**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 February 2014 in St Mary's Secondary School New Ross. 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 Mary's Secondary school is a voluntary post-primary school under the trusteeship of Catholic Education, an Irish Schools' Trust (CEIST). It provides post-primary education for girls from the town of New Ross and its hinterland and currently has 597 female students. This reflects a consistent enrolment over recent years. The school offers four programmes: the Junior Certificate, the Transition Year (TY) programme, the established Leaving Certificate and the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP).

## **SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT**

### **Key Findings**

- The board of management is strongly committed to the welfare of the school and is very supportive of the senior management team.
- The principal and deputy principal are a dynamic and cohesive leadership team with a clear vision for the future of the school.
- Devolved leadership practices have resulted in teachers taking greater ownership of school development and improvement processes.
- A number of high-quality student support systems are in place.
- The code of discipline is structured to promote positive behaviour among students.
- The overall quality of teaching and learning was good or very good.
- Senior management and the teaching staff have actively embraced the school self-evaluation process.

### **Recommendations for Further Development**

- The board should adopt a greater leadership role in articulating the long-term vision for the school in conjunction with the senior management.
- Assistant principals should work towards further developing their integral role in the in-school management structure.
- Provision for learning support and resource teaching should be reviewed in favour of strategies such as team teaching which would allow for students to continue with their full range of subjects.
- A centralised system of tracking and monitoring academic progress should be considered to help ensure that all students reach their full learning potential.
- Students should be further challenged and encouraged to take greater responsibility in the learning process.

## **1. QUALITY OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP**

### **1.1 School ownership and management**

The board of management is properly constituted, meets regularly and works as a united team to support the principal and deputy principal in leading and managing the school. The board is strongly committed to the ethos of the school. Members of the board demonstrate a strong commitment to the welfare of the school and its students and are assiduous in carrying out their work, overseeing the school finances, ratifying policies and dealing with other matters that are brought to their attention. They maintain good communications with the teaching staff, the parents' association and the student council.

There was evidence to indicate that the members of the board understand their role to be supportive of the senior management team rather than to be proactive in matters concerning the overall governance of the school. Current practice, for example, is that the principal instigates policy development and review and that the board discusses and ratifies the policies in due course. Given the board's accountability for ensuring that all relevant policies are in place and up-to-date, it is recommended that greater responsibility for policy instigation and review be delegated to the board. To support this process, the members of the board should draw up a document, listing the policies in place and the dates on which they have been ratified, reviewed or are due for review. It is also recommended that the board take on a greater leadership role in articulating the long-term vision for the school and, in conjunction with the senior management team, identify priorities that will fulfil this vision. The board should also engage further with teaching and learning through more active enquiry into curriculum change, progress regarding school self-evaluation and analysis of student outcomes in the certificate examinations.

The criteria for selection of students, as outlined in the school's enrolment and admissions policy, make for complex reading. As part of the enrolment procedures, a meeting is held between the student, her parents and the principal after the acceptance of a place in the school. The enrolment policy, as currently worded, indicates that offers of a school place are conditional on this meeting. The enrolment policy should thus be amended to ensure clarity and alignment of policy with practice. The parents of prospective students are also required to fill out a short educational profile and a more lengthy personal profile regarding their daughter for the purpose of identifying their educational and pastoral needs. However, some of the information sought should be dissociated from the student enrolment form, as it could be perceived as a barrier in relation to equity of access.

There is a small but vibrant parents' association who engage in a number of activities to support the students. Of particular note is the organisation of additional supervised study each night for Leaving Certificate students. Members are also consulted as appropriate in relation to school policy development. To expand membership of the parents' association, consideration should be given to organising a guest speaker for their Annual General Meeting.

### **1.2 Effectiveness of leadership for learning**

The principal and deputy principal are a strategic, dynamic and visionary team whose complementary skills ensure quality leadership and management across all aspects of school life. Their vision for the future of St Mary's is to create a reflective and active learning community, identifying areas for development and instigating strategies that will enable both management and staff to bring these priorities to fruition. This should allow the members of the school community to affirm their identity as providers of quality education

and to better prepare for future challenges such as the forthcoming Junior Cycle reform. Many of the priorities identified relate to teaching and learning, with school self-evaluation as the main vehicle for change and improvement. The approach adopted by the senior management team is to build capacity in an organic way, providing leadership opportunities for all members of staff through participation in the subcommittees formed to deal with the different issues arising in the school. Of particular note is the advisory board of studies, comprising teachers from a range of disciplines, who come together on a voluntary basis to discuss curricular issues and to advise senior management accordingly. Work undertaken to date or still in progress, includes reviewing the school's taster programme, the introduction of teacher-based classrooms and a review of entry into Transition Year. This devolved leadership has resulted in members of the advisory board taking very good ownership of the school improvement agenda. It has also provided teachers with the opportunity to broaden their own professional development beyond subject specific expertise.

The practice, whereby the work of the advisory board is brought to the senior management team, then to the general body of staff and back to senior management, indicates the good level of communication that exists between senior management and staff. Established practices such as the principal's 'open door' policy and the daily updates provided to teachers further enhance the very good communications between senior management and staff. The use of the school website and newsletters is effective in keeping parents and other members of the wider school community informed of all that is happening in the school.

Assistant principals (APs), through their work as year heads, are primarily involved in the care and management of students. They are effective in carrying out their work monitoring students' behaviour and progress. Their implementation of the school's discipline structures coupled with their concern for students' personal welfare has resulted in very good compliance with the code of behaviour and few instances of serious sanctions such as suspension. The principal is currently year head of two year groups. Given the onerous nature of senior management duties and to ensure the robustness of the ladder of referral, it is recommended that these year-head responsibilities be devolved at the earliest possible opportunity.

The work of the APs is primarily to support senior management in the smooth day-to-day running of the school, while the focus for the advisory board of studies is on future development. It is recommended that the APs, in conjunction with senior management, should reflect on their roles and on possible changes that would ground their work more within a middle management structure.

There is very good support for and participation in continuing professional development (CPD) both at whole-school level and individually. Recent whole-school CPD has focused on assessment for learning (AfL), differentiation and the use of information and communication technology (ICT). To maximise the benefits of in-service training provided, it is recommended that initiatives of direct relevance to teaching and learning in the classroom be included on the agenda for staff meetings in order to allow teachers discuss progress and share ideas regarding their implementation.

There are very good student support systems in the school. The whole-school guidance plan ensures that all students have access to appropriate guidance, through the provision of timetabled and individual vocational guidance. Effective implementation of the Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) curriculum supports educational guidance provision, while personal guidance is facilitated as required through individual counselling sessions. The guidance service also meets weekly with the senior management and learning support teams to identify and provide additional help to students in need.

To complement the high-quality pastoral supports afforded to students, consideration should be given to developing a parallel system of tracking students' academic progress from entry into the school. An analysis of student outcomes in the certificate examinations, conducted as part of this evaluation, indicated that some students are achieving very favourably at ordinary level in the Junior Certificate in some subject areas. Greater vigilance in this regard is recommended to ensure that students are taking the level most appropriate to their full potential. To this end, it is recommended that a centralised system of tracking and monitoring academic progress, where students would be involved in target setting that challenges them to aspire to and reach their full learning potential. Such a task might be considered as a means of strengthening the role of APs in relation to the overall management of students.

The members of the team responsible for learning support and special education needs (SEN) are strongly committed to the welfare of these students and carry out their work diligently. However, current practice regarding the delivery of learning support is problematic as it requires students to drop one subject in order to access required support. It is recommended that alternative strategies such as team teaching be considered as this would allow for students to continue with their full range of subjects while at the same time being supported in the classroom. This would also facilitate provision for students who may only require short term interventions and would support differentiation.

The code of discipline is structured to promote positive behaviour among students. There is a merit-demerit system with clear guidelines as to the range of behaviours which culminate in detention and demerits that could result in suspension. The end-of-year award ceremony celebrates student achievement in a range of areas including good behaviour. These are all good practices.

The school offers a broad and balanced curriculum to meet the needs and interests of the students and there is good allocation of time for and timetabling of the subjects offered. Very good provision is also made for students who wish to take on subjects that cannot be offered in the school, through reciprocal links built up with the neighbouring boy's school. Links have also been developed with another neighbouring school for the purpose of further enriching the comprehensive Transition Year programme offered in St Mary's.

High quality student leadership is actively promoted through the activities of the democratically elected student council. Considerable work has been undertaken to develop the student council in such a way as to support students in a number of ways. One such initiative has been the recent 'natural beauty' day to promote confidence among students about their own appearance. The student council has also engaged in meaningful negotiations with the board of management regarding the students' desire for healthy eating and how this will impact on the school canteen. There is also a very effective and highly acclaimed 'Meitheal' programme, where sixth-year students provide peer support to the incoming first-year students.

The extensive range of co-curricular activities provided in the school is further testament to the commitment of teachers to promote the holistic development of the students and to enable them to give full expression to their varied talents.

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 very well maintained and the corridor displays of photographs and samples of student art-work create a warm and welcoming environment for all. The good ICT infrastructure supports effective use of technology as a tool for teaching and learning and there was evidence to indicate that ICT has been well integrated into the work of most lessons.

The recent move from student to teacher-based rooms is proving successful in terms of preparation for the use of technology and other materials in lessons. Seating arrangements have been revised in some rooms to support the effective organisation of paired or group activities. The introduction of teacher-based rooms has also facilitated the creation of a stimulating subject-specific environment. Posters relating to the school's literacy initiative concerning key words are also displayed in classrooms.

Students' environmental responsibility is effectively promoted through the work of the green school committee and their success in being awarded a Green Flag is acknowledged.

The school has a health and safety statement which is currently being updated.

## **2. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING**

### **2.1 The quality of learning and teaching**

The quality of subject planning was, in almost all cases, very good. Collaborative subject plans are available for all subjects and the majority of these clearly outlined learning outcomes and appropriate methodologies for each year group and aspects of the course. They also included an outline of assessment practices for various aspects of the course and at various times of the year. In the best plans, assessment practices included reflection and analyses of students' performance in certificate examinations. Subject departments are urged to analyse in particular the achievement in certificate examinations of their top performers.

Lessons were, on the whole, very well prepared. Relevant resources, materials and equipment for the lessons were at hand and well utilised.

The quality of teaching and learning was good or very good in almost all of the lessons evaluated. The aims of the lesson were articulated by the teachers from the outset. In some instances they were communicated as intended learning outcomes. It is recommended that all teachers communicate their lesson plans in terms of what the students should know or be able to do by the end of the lesson, thereby making students more aware of teaching and learning as a shared process. Most lessons were very well structured with a clear introduction and development stage. However, a review stage is recommended in order to check students' learning. Lesson content was appropriate in almost all lessons. However, there were a few instances where the work programme did not sufficiently challenge the students or else insufficient work had been prepared.

Technology was effectively used along with other resources in many lessons. Teaching approaches observed during the evaluation ranged from whole-class teaching to collaborative student work. In many lessons, it was noted that students were quite passive and were not given adequate responsibility for their own learning. While these lessons were purposeful, there was a strong focus on summative testing, teacher demonstration or teacher talk and recall type question-and-answer sessions. Teachers should seek ways to challenge the students and to encourage them to take more responsibility in the learning process. In lessons where students were encouraged to work collaboratively or to engage in discussion and debate about the topic to hand, the student voice was more equal to the teachers and

there was less teacher talk. These students also engaged in more higher-order thinking activities.

A commendable feature of many lessons was the individual attention given to students when work was assigned. Such a differentiation strategy is commendable. Useful strategies observed in some lessons included naming students to answer questions and giving time for students to ask questions.

Classroom interactions were respectful throughout and students were affirmed and encouraged for their efforts. Students' behaviour was exemplary and they were focused learners.

Homework was assigned in almost all lessons and it was evident from an examination of students' journals that they get written as well as learning homework in most lessons. Such practice consolidates learning. Students' work was maintained to a high standard. Homework was monitored in many lessons by the teachers circulating and checking students' work. Students are frequently tested by teachers on their work through summative classroom assessments. Formative assessment, especially in the form of commentary on students' strengths and areas for improvement, was noted in about half of the lessons observed. These assessment for learning strategies are essential if students are to improve their work. They should also be encouraged to reflect on their own work and identify what they need to do to improve.

This year there is a focus as part of the SSE process on identifying key words related to subjects and on improving spelling. Such a focus was evident in a minority of the lessons evaluated. Teachers are encouraged in all subject areas to implement these valuable literacy strategies during lessons and in the correction of student homework.

### **3. IMPLEMENTATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS FROM PREVIOUS EVALUATIONS**

#### ***3.1 Management***

It was evident that management shares recommendations made during incidental and subject inspections with all staff, regardless of the lessons or subjects evaluated. This leads to good practice being extended across subject departments. For example, teachers now have their own base classrooms and have succeeded in enhancing the learning environment in the school as a result. However, there is still scope to improve the layout of most classrooms to facilitate collaborative learning.

#### ***3.2 Learning and teaching***

The good practice of subject departments embracing recommendations made during subject inspections can be seen from the very good quality subject planning that was noted. Following on from a range of recommendations about planning, most subject departments have identified key learning outcomes, teaching methodologies, resources and assessment practices for each year group and section of the course. Another recommendation made during some subject inspections was the integration of ICT into teaching and learning. It is evident that this recommendation has been fulfilled. A recommendation regarding students being encouraged to use the target language is work in progress and individual teachers are commended for the efforts they have made in this regard. A number of recommendations were made during previous reports about improving formative assessment and assessment for learning practices. This too is work in progress and further work on assessment for learning strategies is recommended.

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

Senior management and the teaching staff have been very proactive in embracing school self-evaluation in recent years and considerable work has been achieved to date. This is in part due to the devolved leadership practices which have empowered teachers to work more collaboratively and take greater ownership of the school improvement agenda.

Significant work has been completed to date in gathering data to inform the school of their strengths and areas for further development. Information has accrued not only from surveys and questionnaires completed by students and parents, but also from the findings and recommendations contained in recent inspection reports and from the work of the advisory board of studies. This blend of both externally and internally sourced information has served to initiate many of the improvements already referred to in this report.

The consultative processes that are in place and the willingness of senior management and staff serve to further enhance the very positive teaching and learning environment that already exists within the school. This indicates very good capacity for ongoing school improvement.

## **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. Mary's Secondary School, New Ross welcomes the very positive report on the recent WSE-MLL. The report affirms the high quality of teaching and learning and management practices that permeate all aspects of our school culture. The board is pleased that the report acknowledges the dedicated roles played by all members of our school community, students, staff, parents and management.

The board notes and upholds the key findings:

- The board of management is strongly committed to the welfare of the school and is very supportive of the senior management team.
- The principal and deputy principal are a dynamic and cohesive leadership team with a clear vision for the future of the school
- Devolved leadership practices have resulted in teachers taking greater ownership of school development and improvement processes.
- A number of high-quality student support systems are in place.
- The code of discipline is structured to promote positive behaviour among students.
- The overall quality of teaching and learning was good or very good.
- Senior management and the teaching staff have actively embraced the school self-evaluation process.

## **Area 2: Follow-up actions planned or undertaken since the completion of the inspection activity to implement the findings and recommendations of the inspection**

- A new Board of Management will be in place from October 2014 and will take on the task of articulating the long-term vision for the school in conjunction with the senior management.
- The Board is undertaking a review of the enrolment policy with a revised policy being presented at the next Board meeting.
- Work has commenced on developing the role of Assistant Principals in the in-school management structure and this will include the tracking and monitoring of academic progress.
- The Board is glad that the WSE-MLL process has enhanced our self-evaluation and is engaging with the PDST to continue with this process to ensure continued high educational standards for our present students and for future generations of students.
- The Board lauds the work of our Learning Support department and will consider the engagement of team teaching within resources issued by the allocation section.
- Within the implementation and development of all teaching and learning initiatives students will be challenged to take greater responsibility in the learning process.

