

**An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna**

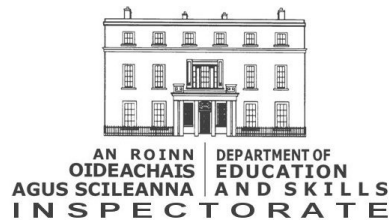
**Department of Education and Skills**

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

**REPORT**

**Sacred Heart School  
Tullamore, Co Offaly  
Roll number: 65620V**

**Date of inspection: 9 May 2013**



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

A whole-school evaluation of management, leadership and learning (WSE-MLL) was undertaken in May, 2013 in Sacred Heart School. 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***

Sacred Heart School is a voluntary secondary school with a current enrolment of 696 girls. Originally established in 1836 under the trusteeship of the Sisters of Mercy, the school is now under the trusteeship of Catholic Education, an Irish Schools Trust. On its present site since 1950, the school building has been extended on several occasions. The school provides the Junior Certificate, Transition Year (TY), Leaving Certificate, Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) and the Leaving Certificate Applied programme (LCA).

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

### ***Key Findings***

- The board of management provides very good leadership to the school and has overseen the development of a school improvement plan which will guide the work of the school over the next three years.
- The senior management team provides progressive leadership to the school and has a strong focus on continuous improvement in the outcomes for students.
- In line with the mission statement, staff are very committed to providing a fully rounded educational experience for students in a caring and supportive environment.
- Students and parents have good opportunities to give their views on the running of the school.
- The school provides a broad and balanced curriculum.
- The school's pastoral care, discipline, learning support, and guidance and counselling systems are well organised.
- The facilities are very well managed and very good provision has been made for information and communication technology (ICT).
- The quality of teaching and learning was good or very good in almost all lessons, but there is scope for sharing and more consistent use of the very good practice observed.
- Ongoing professional development of staff is supported through self-evaluation initiatives and the TEAM project in particular.
- There has been good engagement with the recommendations from previous evaluations, but there is scope for wider implementation by subject departments.
- The school has a very good capacity to follow through on review and school improvement

### ***Recommendations for Further Development***

- An extensive review of the school's timetable is required.
- The role of form teachers should be clarified and enhanced to include both pastoral care and disciplinary roles.
- With respect to teaching and learning, it is recommended that teachers review their practice with a view to more consistently implementing the elements of best practice observed in many lessons during this evaluation.
- Subject departments should share good practice with respect to subject planning, prepare a formal annual report, promote more widespread use of Assessment for Learning (AfL) strategies and develop good practice with respect to the use of ICT by students during lessons.

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

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

The board of management provides very good leadership to the school community. It is very involved in the life of the school and operates effectively to promote the ethos of the school, to support the ongoing operation of the school and to advance its developmental priorities. The effective development and review of school policies is overseen by the board. Regular meetings allow in-depth consideration of issues and external advice is sought when necessary. The members of the board bring a range of expertise and experience to the decision-making process. Good practice is evident in the preparation of an annual school report and in the development during the current school year of a school improvement plan (SIP).

The senior management team work very well in a collaborative manner. Though there is some division of everyday responsibilities, both the principal and deputy principal engage with the day-to-day operation of the school and with the longer-term strategic planning required for the development of the school. They provide progressive leadership to the school through their encouragement of new initiatives and the focus they bring to bear on continuous improvement in students' social, personal and academic outcomes. In this regard, they reflect the aspiration in the school's mission statement to provide a holistic education to the students in their care.

Clearly defined roles for assistant principals and special duties teachers provide good opportunities for leadership. The good practice of reviewing the schedule of posts in recent years has helped to ensure a better match between the posts and the needs of the school in changing circumstances. However, some further alignment of the posts to the current needs of the school is required. In addition to the duties carried out by post holders, the voluntary uptake of duties such as form teacher, subject and programme coordinators shows a professional commitment to assisting in the operation of the school. The commitment of staff to providing a fully rounded experience for students was also evident in the very wide range of co- and extra-curricular activities provided.

An active student council provides good opportunities for a formal leadership role for students, and their views have been sought in the development of policies and the SIP. In addition to these formal roles, students are provided with many opportunities to contribute to school life. A survey of students, conducted as part of the evaluation, showed that the majority are proud to be in this school, and feel safe and cared for. However, the survey also showed less satisfaction with some other aspects of school life. It is suggested that the

student council be given a role in exploring the background to these concerns in order to assist the school address any issues which require attention.

A strong link exists between the school and the parents' association. As well as supporting the school through fundraising, they provide a valuable sounding board with regard to new initiatives or policy developments. The majority of parents feel that discipline is good and that there is a good atmosphere in a well-run school, where their child feels safe and well looked after. Improving communications with parents has been identified as one of the strands of the SIP. The need for this is confirmed by the findings of a survey of parents conducted during the evaluation. Concerns identified in the survey should be explored further in conjunction with the parents' association.

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

The senior management team are strongly committed to quality improvement across all areas of school life. In particular, they have a commendable focus on promoting the highest standards and innovation in the quality of teaching and learning. To further this aim, teaching and learning is on the agenda of all staff meetings, teachers' participation in continuing professional development (CPD) is facilitated, and the school has been actively involved in a variety of educational initiatives. A literacy plan has been in place, and reviewed twice, since 2009.

Supportive leadership is evident in initiatives such as the TEAM project, where staff have been facilitated to work in groups on issues which they themselves have chosen, such as subject-specific literacy needs and the use of apps in teaching. Another example of very good leadership was the support given to the development of the Teen Aware project, a forum devoted to raising the awareness of young people of mental health issues.

Regular staff and subject department meetings facilitate collegial and collaborative work practices. Good coordination is facilitated by the formal meetings of groups such as the pastoral care and TY committees. It is commendable that a great deal of organisation and coordination of activities occurs informally.

The school provides a broad and balanced curriculum which has evolved over time. The LCVP and LCA cater well for the needs of students. The TY programme blends a mix of academic and non-academic experiences and has been found to be a very positive experience for students.

The school timetable appears to provide for a minimum of 28 hours instruction as required by circular M29/95. In practice, however, an initial bell intended to act as a warning that the end of lesson time is approaching actually marks the end of lessons. Thus, lessons finish five minutes early. In addition, first year students are given an extra five minutes' break at lunchtime and at the end of the school day. In effect, these allowances reduce tuition time considerably. For example, first years have only 20 minutes for the last lesson of the day. It is strongly recommended that the school review the current practice with a view to maximising the tuition time for students.

Examination of the timetable also showed a number of anomalies, such as classes having more than one teacher for a particular subject or having the majority of lessons scheduled over one or two days of the week. While acknowledging the efforts made to minimise such anomalies, it is recommended that an in-depth review of the timetable be completed with a view to ensuring that time is allocated for each subject in line with syllabus guidelines and best practice.

When surveyed, a significant minority of students and parents disagreed with a statement that they had very few 'free' lessons each week. One contributing factor is the number of competitive sporting fixtures that have to be played off site. However, it is recommended that every effort be made to minimise the number of free periods and to ensure that when they do occur, students are provided with appropriate learning experiences.

The school provides tuition in instrumental music during the school day by withdrawing students from other subject lessons. A fee is charged for this tuition. Since it is not good practice to withdraw students from one subject to study another subject area, it is recommended that the school review this arrangement with a view to organising this extra tuition outside of timetabled hours. The board should also review the financial and contractual implications arising from providing this service.

The school makes good use of the designated hours for learning support and resource teaching. The special education needs provision is very well organised and has clear links with the pastoral structures in the school. Students in need of assistance are given the opportunity to participate in a skills development programme which supports their literacy and numeracy needs.

The school has a clear admissions policy and has implemented an attendance strategy for the past few years. This strategy provides a comprehensive analysis of attendance and punctuality, which has allowed the school to target problem areas with great success. For example, afternoon attendance has improved greatly.

Clear, well-organised pastoral care, discipline, and guidance and counselling systems are in place. A pastoral care committee meets weekly to coordinate provision. Form teachers, whose remit is mainly pastoral care, meet with their designated classes every week to teach SPHE. They may also, in some cases, fulfil a disciplinary role. However, currently there are just three formal layers to the discipline system: class teacher, year head, and senior management. In order to help resolve issues at the lowest possible level, it is recommended that the responsibility of form teachers be clarified and enhanced to include both pastoral care and disciplinary roles.

The students encountered during the evaluation were unfailingly polite, well spoken, confident, and mature young people.

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 has identified a need for extra specialist rooms and a new gymnasium in its plans for improving the facilities. The current facilities are very well maintained through the efforts of management, caretaking staff, and students. Very good provision has been made for the installation of ICT facilities and this provision will be enhanced in the near future with improved broadband access.

The success of the Green School committee in receiving multiple awards of the Green Flag demonstrates the school's commitment to environmental matters.

The school has a health and safety policy and the provision of a safe workplace is facilitated through regular fire drills and the provision of first aid assistance. The health and

safety policy could be enhanced by the inclusion of procedures for dealing with an accident involving a staff member.

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

The quality of teaching and learning in almost all the lessons observed was good or very good. In nearly half of the lessons the quality was very good. However, in a small number of lessons there were significant weaknesses.

It was evident in lessons where the quality of teaching and learning was very good that thought had been given as to how student learning would be facilitated. Students were aware of what they were meant to achieve. Their prior knowledge and skills were activated so that they were ready for new learning. Content was communicated clearly, in a lively engaging manner, and developed in a logical phased sequence. Progress was well monitored, so that the pace of the lesson could be altered as necessary. There was a high level of active engagement by students in a variety of tasks. The lessons were well managed in a positive, caring atmosphere, but also purposefully and with high expectations of what students could achieve. Appropriate resources were well used, both to communicate content and to assess progress. Two particular features which were common to all the very good lessons were the way in which students were required to think for themselves and the opportunities or challenges they were given to demonstrate their learning.

The quality of teaching and learning in lessons which were less than very good could have been improved by a more consistent implementation of the features listed above.

Where lessons had significant weaknesses, students tended to be passive in terms of receiving instruction on new content and there was insufficient assessment of their progress during and at the end of the lesson.

In light of these findings, it is recommended that teachers review their practice with a view to implementing more consistently the elements of best practice identified above.

An end-of-year self-evaluation initiative where students' views on teaching and learning are sought and an annual analysis of outcomes in certificate examinations demonstrate a commendable focus on improving the quality of teaching and learning. Some subject plans showed a well-developed reflection on the data collected from these sources and identified specific actions to be carried out. However, other plans showed less evidence of follow through. Therefore, it is recommended that, in future, subject departments prepare a formal report for school management on the outcomes of their self-evaluation initiative and their analysis of certificate examination outcomes.

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

### ***3.1 Management***

Careful consideration has been given to recommendations from previous evaluations. Reports have been considered at board level and in the case of a recent English subject inspection a formal response from the subject department was submitted to the board.

ICT infrastructure was referred to in a number of reports and the school has made good advances in this area. Timetabling issues were also referred to in a number of reports. As mentioned previously, this is an area which still requires attention. The quality of subject plans was another theme in reports. Although the involvement of senior management in

reviewing subject plans is intended to promote a consistent approach across subject departments, there is still scope for greater consistency. It is recommended that subject departments should share good practice with respect to subject planning. For example, an agreed set of criteria could be used to benchmark subject plans. It would also be useful for subject departments to look at plans from other subject areas.

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

Recommendations from previous inspections relating to teaching and learning focused on AfL strategies such as the use of learning outcomes and formative comments, and on the use of ICT in the classroom.

In most lessons, some reference was made at the outset to the overall topic to be covered. Explicit discussion or sharing of the intended learning outcomes was seen in over half the lessons. However, a clear assessment of students' progress in achieving the learning outcomes was less common. Extensive use of verbal formative comments to guide and support student learning was evident across all lessons. However, the use of formative comments in the correction of written work was less evident and observed in only about half of the sample of students' written work examined. It is recommended that all subject departments consider how to further embed the good use of AfL strategies in their practice.

The extensive use of ICT as a resource to support teaching and learning was observed in most lessons. However, ICT was mainly used by teachers with few students having an opportunity for hands-on or in-depth engagement with the resource. Some very good examples of the interactive use of ICT which enhanced student engagement and learning were observed and it is recommended that more widespread use should be made of such good practice.

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

Self-evaluation and review are well embedded in the planning processes of the school. Examples of good practice include the annual review of the TY programme, reviews of the literacy plan, and the consideration given to inspection reports. Careful research, consultation and consideration of issues have informed planning by board and senior management.

With regard to self-evaluation, the most significant development in recent times has been the preparation of a school improvement plan. The inclusion of students, staff, parents and board in the process is to be commended, as are the establishing of developmental priorities and the development of concise action plans. As it has only been formally adopted in recent months, it is too soon to measure the success of the plan. However, the board and senior management are committed to closely monitoring its implementation.

In light of the school's record of successful implementation of various initiatives, it is clear that the school has a very good capacity to follow through on the actions it has set out for 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 wishes to acknowledge the diligent yet courteous manner in which the WSE was carried out. The experience was a most positive one and provided sincere assistance and guidance in the guise of the many positive comments made during this period.

We are particularly pleased that the extensive planning and innovation has been recognised and that the quality of teaching and learning and the calibre of our students was recognised and commended.

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

- Timetable has been reviewed and amended
- Curricular audit presented to the Board in October 2013-11-29. Music Tuition removed to outside of school hours.
- Contractual and financial issues have been dealt with accordingly.
- Peer Mentoring Initiative commenced August 2013 with a view to sharing best practice.