An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Whole-School Evaluation
Management, Leadership and Learning

REPORT

Saint Anne’s Community College
Killaloe, County Clare
Roll number: 70901K

Date of inspection: 14 January 2015
Whole-School Evaluation
Management, Leadership and Learning

A whole-school evaluation of management, leadership and learning (WSE-MLL) was undertaken in January, 2015 in St Anne’s Community 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 of the school 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 Anne’s Community College is a co-educational post-primary school, with a current enrolment of 553 students. The school opened on its current site in 1987 and trusteeship is vested in Limerick and Clare Education and Training Board (LCETB), formerly Clare Vocational Educational Committee (VEC). The school’s identity is intrinsically linked to its position within the community and school management fosters strong links with the wider school community. Students are drawn mainly from nine local feeder primary schools.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

Key Findings

- The board is well informed of its role and has an active interest in developing the school.
- The board and senior management are committed to progressing the school’s developmental priorities.
- The parents’ association has been re-established and its members are committed to improving its profile with the wider parent body.
- The principal and deputy work very well together.
- The school provides a broad curricular programme for students, including a wide range of optional subjects.
- The duties attached to posts of responsibility have been reviewed and focus positively on supporting the school’s student support systems.
- The upcoming development of the school’s buildings and of the existing information and communication technology (ICT) resources provides significant potential to support students’ learning.
- Teachers are committed to supporting students through their engagement with the student support structures and their promotion of extra-curricular and co-curricular provision.
- The quality of teaching and learning was good or very good in most lessons observed.
- There was scope for development of the teaching strategies used in one-fifth of lessons observed.
As students’ engagement varied in accordance with the teaching methodologies used, there is a need for greater use of collaborative learning strategies in lessons.

The school has a good level of engagement with school development planning and has made good progress in developing its school self-evaluation process.

**Recommendations for Further Development**

- The criteria for the selection of students to the Transition Year (TY) programme, as currently outlined in the school’s admissions policy, should be refined.
- The board should develop a greater oversight role in relation to the quality of teaching and learning.
- Efforts should continue to be made to enhance the effectiveness and the quality of communications with parents.
- The school’s code of behaviour should be reviewed in order to align it more closely to the school’s student support structures.
- A review of curriculum provision at junior cycle is necessary in light of the available resources and current educational developments.
- A number of whole-school and subject-specific approaches to active learning should be selected, agreed and adopted for use in all relevant lessons.

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

1.1 *School ownership and management*

The board of management is currently in transition and the new board is due to commence its term in April 2015. The existing board has a well-established relationship with LCETB, and its predecessor Clare VEC. It was reported at the meeting that the ETB plans to develop a range of training opportunities for boards and in this respect it is advised that incoming board members avail of these opportunities, even if they have served on previous boards. During the term of the board it agreed a set format for the recording of board minutes. This is good practice and provides a useful framework for the development of an agreed written report to supplement the current oral report given to the parents' association and staff.

The rise in student enrolment in recent years has been a significant contextual factor influencing the work of this board. In particular, the need to expand the school’s accommodation and develop the school’s additional facilities to accommodate the growing student population has been a priority. It has been involved in the development of the recently completed astro-turf facility. Funding for additional classrooms and the sports hall has been secured and this work is ongoing. The board has successfully worked in partnership with the wider school community and a range of local agencies to achieve its objectives in this regard.

The commitment of the board to its functions is evident in the high level of attendance at meetings. The board meets once a term except in exceptional circumstances when it meets more regularly; it does this, for example, when dealing with student management issues. Its relationship with the in-school management team members, who were appointed during the board’s tenure, is very strong and there are good lines of communication in place.

Existing and new policies are reviewed by the board on an ongoing basis. To support this work the board receives presentations on the draft policies; this is a good mechanism for aiding the work of the board. While the board is kept informed of developments at school level, through the principal’s report, there is scope for the board to further inform itself of,
and engage with, relevant initiatives in relation to teaching and learning, including for example, whole-school literacy and numeracy initiatives and detailed analysis of attainment in the certificate examinations.

Following a recommendation in a previous inspection report, the principal and board prioritised the re-establishment of the Parents’ Association (PA). A core group of parents has committed to actively engage with the association. The PA is involved in a range of activities, including reviewing draft policies, and as an additional task has provided support to the school’s fund-raising initiative linked to the development of the astro-turf facility. The PA meets regularly and is well-supported by the principal. One area identified for possible development is to broaden the mechanisms by which the school communicates with the wider parent body. In this respect the recent re-development of the school’s website, especially the parents’ interest section, provides a mechanism which can support the achievement of this objective. Also, the school is currently working on a web-based initiative to make more information available to parents.

1.2 Effectiveness of leadership for learning

The principal and deputy principal were appointed four years ago and each individually brings a range of valuable experience to the management team. In the period since their appointment they have developed a very good working relationship. In particular, they have contributed significantly to the development and progression of school development priorities. In co-operation with the board and staff they have led a number of key areas of development within the school including, policy review and development, review of the posts of responsibility and whole-school approaches to attendance monitoring. The management team is keenly aware of its role in leading learning and it is currently developing a number of learning-focused initiatives, including consolidating subject planning, and implementing the eLearning plan.

A review of the duties attaching to the posts of responsibility, conducted in 2012, led to significant alterations in the duties mainly at assistant principal level. The incorporation of the year head role within the duties of assistant principals demonstrates the school’s and post holders’ commitment to promoting the development of the school’s student support structure. Of additional significance is the high level of volunteerism among staff who take on the role of Class Director, as a support to the work of year heads. Consideration should be given to renaming this role to more closely reflect its pastoral purpose.

Following a whole-school evaluation completed in 2005, it was recommended that the length of the school week be brought in line with the requirements of Circular Letter M25/95. The length of the school week has been increased and is now almost in line with requirements.

The school’s curriculum is very broad and the challenge of providing for such a wide subject range places some limitations on the structure of the school’s timetable. Key stakeholders including the guidance counsellor are involved and a number of improvements have been made such as reducing the occurrence of double periods for practical subjects scheduled either side of the morning or lunch break. However, additional work is required to prevent the current situation where some subjects are scheduled several times on the same day, and some students lack daily contact in key subjects including Mathematics, a specific requirement of Circular Letter 25/2012. Additionally, consideration should be given to establishing a group to review the school’s curriculum and subject provision in light of current educational developments and resources available. The review group could comprise of key stakeholders including senior management and representatives of the board, subject co-ordinators and the ETB.
Some subjects are proving very popular with students including the technical subjects and the sciences. On entry to first-year students indicate their preference in the case of optional subjects and this then informs the creation of the subject bands. Notwithstanding the availability of support in a number of forms such as access to the school’s guidance service, information packs and talks, and the facility for students to move between options; the results of the parents and students surveys indicate that there is a demand for additional information to inform decision-making in respect to subject choices.

In the past the school organised students on a streamed basis for class groups in junior cycle. More recently classes are organised on a mixed-ability basis and in the case of Irish, English, and Mathematics, set from second year onwards. The criteria for the allocation of students to set groups should be kept under review to ensure that the number of students taking subjects at higher level is maximised.

The TY programme is a well-established feature of the school’s curriculum. Based on current trends, the number of students wishing to partake in the programme will likely increase in forthcoming years and the refinement of admissions criteria for the programme is advised in the likelihood of oversubscription. A review of the way in which the journal is used in TY should also be implemented with an increased focus on its use as a reflective journal and log of learning.

Student support is a whole-school priority and good systems in place at school level to support students. The school is fortunate in that it has the services of both a guidance counsellor and chaplain available to it. Very good formal systems are in place and policies have been developed in key areas to support the work of the teams. In light of the development of the student support system in recent years, and the specification of the roles of year heads and class directors, a review of the school’s code of behaviour to reflect the new system with an increased emphasis on positive behaviour should be undertaken. This would also take into consideration the range of positive behaviour initiatives that the student support team and the school have been developing; for example a positive comments page has been included in the student journal.

The student council works with a liaison teacher and has a defined role in the life of the school. The members are elected democratically and have been involved in recent reviews of draft policies. Students in senior cycle have also the opportunity to work as mentors with incoming first-year students. This approach is beneficial as it allows for leadership among students to be developed.

The transition of students from primary to post-primary is managed by the principal, guidance counsellor and the special educational needs (SEN) co-ordinator. The SEN co-ordinator is commended for upskilling for the role and work is ongoing on developing systems and processes including the compilation of an SEN register. This work will provide parents and the school with enhanced communication systems in relation to supporting students with special educational needs.

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

As previously stated the school is at planning stage for its new building which will expand the facilities to meet the requirements of the projected increase in student enrolment. The school’s development programme will address the ongoing capacity issues that affect
specialist rooms in providing for the range of subject options. It will also provide the school with the opportunity to review the basis on which rooms are allocated. In this context some consideration should be given to moving to a mix of teacher-based classroom and curriculum-themed areas. This will help progress the school’s objectives in relation to supporting literacy and numeracy through the development of print-rich environments.

ICT resources are widely available and teachers were consistent in their use of the administration software to monitor students’ attendance. The completion of the all-weather astro-turf pitches support the provision of appropriate access to Physical Education (PE) for all students and reflects the school’s commitment to PE provision.

2. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

2.1 The quality of learning and teaching

A total of twenty-three lessons were observed during the evaluation from a range of subjects and levels across the school’s curriculum. The quality of teaching and learning was mostly good to very good. In a few lessons there were weaknesses in the teaching approaches that need to be addressed.

Subject planning is well advanced in the school. There is consistency in the presentation and contents of each plan. Of particular merit is the work done by subject departments in the development of short-term schemes of work. In almost all cases these are presented in a tabular format and in a significant number of instances have been updated to include both the whole-school and subject-specific strategies for literacy and numeracy development. Additional areas for development include linking specific methodologies to learning outcomes in the schemes and to provide commentary to support the statistical analysis of performance in the certificate examinations.

The lessons observed were generally well planned. In instances where teachers were advised to improve individual lesson planning, these improvements should focus on setting and reviewing appropriate learning intentions. On occasion the learning intentions for the lessons were overly focused on information dissemination and were not sufficiently varied to provide for active learning. Framing lesson intentions to include both a learning and a doing dimension will ensure that lessons are more balanced and less teacher centred. This will also assist in adapting the teaching methodology to reflect the range of students’ learning styles.

Overall, questioning approaches used were good or very good and well suited to the mixed-ability groupings. Where questioning approaches were weaker, there was insufficient wait time provided, and only a small number of students responded to the open questions used. In general, a range of questioning strategies was used in lessons including global and directed questions. Commonly, a good mix of lower and higher order questions was also used and some evidence of the use of the traffic light approach to check students’ understanding.

ICT was used in many lessons but predominantly as a means of framing the lesson and for delivering text-based material rather than as an interactive learning tool. This finding is supported by the results in the student questionnaires. In a number of lessons observed ICT was not used but the quality of teaching observed was of a high standard as the skills of the teachers were very good. However, given the school’s investment in ICT it is advisable that the school further refines it existing plans for the development of ICT as a teaching and learning tool, within the context of the eLearning plan.

A pastoral approach to the management of students was evident in the majority of the lessons observed and this was complemented by very good student behaviour. However, a
review of student journals during the inspection found that teachers’ commentary seldom included positive comments on students’ behaviour or attainment. This is an area which could be further developed. Teachers’ expectations of students’ ability to engage with the lesson material were good. In many lessons however, there was not enough co-operative learning opportunities or differentiation within teaching or assessment practices to allow for more able learners to be challenged.

In some classrooms the layout was traditional and teacher-focused. Where feasible and appropriate to the lesson objectives and outcomes, classroom layout should be adapted to promote the use of more active learning and teaching methodologies.

Very good methodologies were observed in lessons where teachers integrated key approaches including, assessment for learning (AfL), the use of keywords and differentiation. A number of good examples of pair and group work were observed that incorporated active and co-operative learning approaches. On occasions, where class groups were small, the most effective teaching approach observed was where the teacher adopted the role of facilitator and encouraged students to work co-operatively. This approach should be more widely used in small group contexts.

As part of its literacy strategy there is a focus on developing classroom environments as print-rich, including the use of keyword boards. Many examples of students’ own work were on display which is very good practice. There was also some evidence of the use of the agreed strategies for literacy in lessons, particularly the use of keywords. In addition, there were a number of very good examples of teachers using word substitution or word decoding approaches with students.

Practice varies between teachers in relation to the correction of homework and there was limited evidence of the provision of written formative feedback to students on their work. Teachers are not consistent in noting homework completed and annotating copybooks. Where best practice was observed the homework was reviewed with some evaluative comment inserted. There were some examples of peer and self-assessment observed, though in these instances the approach would have been more effective if clear criteria were in place. In subject departments where this practice is more established, it is used effectively to support students’ learning. Overall, the school is advised to develop its whole-school assessment policy to establish an agreed approach to assessment practice.

3. IMPLEMENTATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS FROM PREVIOUS EVALUATIONS

3.1 Management
Good progress has been made in implementing recommendations with a whole-school dimension. Further work is required to address the remaining difficulties in relation to timetabling.

3.2 Learning and teaching
Following a review of previous inspection reports a number of areas were selected for attention in the evaluation.

Specific learning outcomes were generally shared with students but there is a need to ensure that these are reviewed as part of the lesson structure. Overall, there was a good balance between teacher instruction and student activity in lessons.

A number of subject inspection reports made reference to developing assessment practice to incorporate AfL techniques and principles, especially checking students’ work and
providing them with formative feedback. Progress has not been uniform across subject departments and efforts should be made to incorporate these approaches in lessons.

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

The school has been actively engaged with the self-evaluation (SSE) process. There is a co-ordinator in place and teams working on both themes of literacy and numeracy. Additionally, SSE reports and school improvement plans are available in relation to each theme. Data gathering and analysis is a feature of both normal decision making and decisions in relation to literacy and numeracy strategy. Opportunities should be explored to engage parents more formally and seek their views when developing or introducing initiatives with a teaching and learning focus.

The school demonstrates strength and capacity to engage in self-evaluation. Among the indicators of this are: the commitment of staff to implement literacy strategies as part of SSE; the teams that are in place to lead planning for the school’s literacy and numeracy strategy and the systems and practices that have been established for tracking students’ attainment.

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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 report states that the further/additional work is required to address the remaining difficulties in relation to timetabling. There are huge constraints on the timetable due to issues linked to demands on existing infrastructure which will in the main be addressed when our new extension is completed.

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

- Transition Year students will have a specific journal which will support its use as a reflective journal and log of learning. The journal also contains a section to develop AFL (Assessment for Learning) techniques.
- Since the inspection staff have received training in the use of Google Apps.
- The LCETB is organising training for members of the new board of management next term.
- The code of behaviour will be reviewed in 2016.
- We will continue to work with the parents association to further enhance communication with all parents.
- We will be engaging in a leading teaching and learning initiative within the LCETB which will incorporate the new Junior Cycle programme.
- We plan to have more teacher/subject based rooms once we have our new extension which will support the development of a print-rich environment.
- Assessment is our third theme for our current school self-evaluation (SSE) programme. We will work on an agreed approach to assessment practice as part of this.
- In addition to further CPD on assessment, we plan to arrange in-service on teaching methodologies to ensure greater use of collaborative/active learning.
- The board welcomes the WSE-MLL report and thanks the inspectors for their cooperation during the process. We look forward to implementing the recommendations.