

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

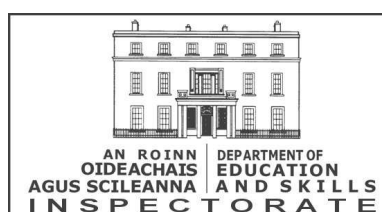
Department of Education and Skills

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

REPORT

**Ballymahon Vocational School
Ballymahon, County Longford
Roll number: 71690F**

Date of inspection: 9 March 2011



Whole-School Evaluation

Management, Leadership and Learning

A whole-school evaluation of management, leadership and learning (WSE-MLL) was undertaken in March, 2011 in Ballymahon Vocational 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.

Introduction

Ballymahon Vocational School is a co-educational school providing second-level education to students from the surrounding locality. The school is administered by the board of management, a sub-committee of County Longford Vocational Education Committee (VEC), and is involved in the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) initiative. The number of students in the school has increased in recent years and the current enrolment of 282 students includes forty-five Post-Leaving Certificate (PLC) students.

1. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

1.1 Key Findings

- The extension of curriculum provision and the emphasis placed by the senior management team on improving attainment and achieving the school's development priorities is very good.
- The strong emphasis placed on student care is a positive feature of the school.
- The move towards mixed-ability groupings at junior cycle is welcome however the evidence within subject plans and from lesson observations indicates that not all departments are fully prepared for this change.
- Communication with parents is regular and structured and in junior cycle effective use is made of the student journal as a means of liaison with the home.
- Good progress has been made on the initial DEIS priorities of attendance and retention.
- The ongoing development of the school's buildings and information and communication technology (ICT) resources provide significant potential to support students' learning.
- Students' engagement varied in accordance with the teaching methodologies used; they were most active when the mix of teaching methodologies used accommodated the range of learning styles.
- Recommendations with a whole-school dimension from previous subject inspections have been disseminated to staff. However, there is evidence that not all subject departments have incorporated these into subject and lesson planning.

1.2 Recommendations for Further Development

- The school is advised to plan for the possible introduction of the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP), building on key strengths in senior-cycle subject provision and existing resources.
- Management should ensure that the school develops appropriate strategies and systems to progress its DEIS planning priorities, in particular the school's stated priorities of literacy and numeracy.
- The school should develop a cohesive ICT plan that identifies strategies for the effective use of ICT as a tool for teaching and learning.
- There is a need to improve strategies for mixed-ability teaching, including better use of appropriate questioning strategies, classroom layout and assessment for learning strategies.
- To improve the board of management's role in leading learning, it should regularly seek inputs from those involved in school development planning and other school-based initiatives.

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 operates as a sub-committee of the VEC and meets regularly during the school year to discuss policy issues. As the administrative authority of the school, the VEC is responsible for areas such as overall financial and personnel issues. The members of the board have strong links with the school and six members are past students.

Both the school principal and the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the VEC keep the board well informed of its responsibilities and the wider implications of the range of education legislation for both the school and the board. Appropriate policies as required by legislation are drafted at school level and presented through the principal to the board for approval. It is recommended that when presenting draft policies to the board of management, a teacher involved in formulating or redrafting existing policies should give a presentation detailing the policy to the board. This will enable the board to have a greater insight into the rationale behind the policy, the decision-making processes used, its impact at school level and will also contribute to the professional development of the board. Opportunities that arise for training for board members should be availed of even where members have served on previous boards.

The operation of the board indicates its role is mainly as advisor to the senior management team. In this respect the board is advised to further inform itself of progress in teaching and learning by, for example formally reviewing students' attainment in examinations and progress with respect to the DEIS plan. Following subject inspections, the relevant subject department could present the board with an action plan as to how it is addressing the recommendations in the report.

Confirmation was provided that, in compliance with Post-primary Circulars M44/05 and 0062/2006, the board of management has formally adopted the Department's Child Protection Guidelines for Post-primary Schools (Published September 2004). Confirmation was also provided that these child protection procedures have been brought to the attention

of management, school staff and parents; that a copy of the procedures has been provided to all staff (including all new staff); and that management has ensured that all staff are familiar with the procedures to be followed. A designated liaison person (DLP) and a deputy DLP have been appointed in line with the requirements of the guidelines.

The school's priorities for development

On their appointment the principal and deputy principal identified a number of priorities for development that were agreed with the board. However, the process of reviewing these priorities is largely devolved from the board to senior management and the board should take a more proactive approach in this regard.

The main priority identified was to enhance the quality of education for students and this was supported by a number of other priorities including providing the best facilities for students, expanding the curriculum and increasing student numbers. Given the school's size and location there is a need to increase the range of subjects provided to attract students but the facility to do so is dependent on increasing student numbers. It is clear that the school's senior management has a vision for how this could be achieved, and it is also evident that the support of the VEC has been critical in ensuring that the resources have been made available to facilitate the progression of this development priority at school level.

The support of the board has been vital to progressing the school's refurbishment project including the sports facilities that are a community resource. Allied to this is the ongoing enhancement of ICT provision throughout the school.

2.2 Effectiveness of leadership for learning

Leadership of staff

The principal and deputy principal were appointed to their posts three years ago. Their continued involvement as classroom teachers, in addition to their development priorities, exemplifies the highly visible role they have in leading learning in the school. Of particular merit is that the needs of students, including improving attainment, were central to the priorities identified by them.

The expansion in student numbers and the ongoing refurbishment work have been critical factors in the management of the school's resources. Also relevant is the management of personnel in the context of the retirement of long-serving members of the teaching staff and the recruitment of new staff. Initial work has been undertaken on drafting a teacher induction plan that focuses on introducing new teachers to pastoral care and disciplinary structures. However, this plan needs to be developed to focus on agreed whole-school approaches to areas including assessment and teaching and learning strategies.

Retirements have also resulted in vacancies at middle management level that have necessitated the redistribution of existing duties. Management has absorbed many additional responsibilities to ensure that pastoral care functions are prioritised and the needs of students addressed.

The school has made progress on its initial DEIS plan priorities of school attendance and retention. Teachers were consistent in recording attendance during the evaluation. In progressing the plan, literacy and numeracy have been identified as key priorities. A critical success factor for the DEIS plan will be the focus that should emerge in relation to the measurement of progress and outcomes. In this respect the school will need to develop appropriate research and evaluation tools that measure the school's progress in relation to its agreed targets and objectives. What should also emerge is the prioritisation of teaching and learning as the key drivers of improving student attainment. Also there should be

further development of subject plans in line with the school's ongoing work in relation to the DEIS plan.

Given that the school's policy is to move to organising students in mixed-ability classes, as is currently the case with first-year optional subjects, it is recommended that strategies for teaching in mixed-ability settings should also be reflected in the subject plans, and included within the school's future whole-school continuing professional development (CPD) programme.

Among the resources allocated through the VEC to the school by the Department of Education and Skills is a shared post of home school community liaison (HSCL) coordinator. This position is shared with another school in the VEC scheme and one full-time coordinator has been allocated to work with both schools. However, the current deployment by the VEC of two part-time coordinators to the schools has resulted in a breach of the Guidelines for the Appointment of HSCL Coordinators and an underutilisation of teaching resources that the VEC and the Department is currently working to resolve.

Leadership of students

The school's admissions policy is clear and understood by the parents. The system for managing students' transition from primary to post-primary school includes student mentors and the year head who takes the central role in assisting students.

Good systems exist for sharing information with parents about the school and their children's progress and this was reflected in the parents' responses to the evaluation questionnaire. Very effective use is made of the student journal, especially at junior cycle, as a means of liaison with the home. This year, 'mock' examinations were corrected in-house to reduce costs which is indicative of the school's awareness of the needs of students and parents.

The school's curriculum includes the Junior Certificate and the Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP) at junior cycle and two senior cycle options, the established Leaving Certificate (LC) and Leaving Certification Applied (LCA) programmes, though there is currently no year one LCA class group. JCSP been part of the curriculum provision for the past three years and is linked to the school's DEIS priorities. Given the expansion in subject provision in recent years it is advised that the school's management profile subject uptake at senior cycle in more detail to assess the level of students' compliance with the requirements of Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) with a view to considering its introduction.

An analysis of the school's timetable reveals the extent to which school management are working within the resources available to maximise subject choice for students. In particular, the introduction of new subject options at senior cycle has been possible because of the support of the VEC in sharing specialist subject teachers between schools and careful teacher planning in instances where composite classes of fourth and fifth-year students are created, for example in Music. As the student numbers expand management will have greater flexibility in scheduling classes.

The school's management has a very hands-on approach to student care and given the school size are able to respond quickly on a needs basis to issues as they arise. As the school expands and the needs change there will be a need to formalise the care structures but care must be taken to retain the positive features of the system as it currently exists at school level, and which parents indicate are a very positive feature of the school.

The students' and parents' councils are active in supporting the school. The school's 'Discipline for Learning' code provides a useful framework for positively managing

students' behaviour. Responsibility is centred on the role of the class teacher with an associated referral system. The school is also introducing a restorative justice system and further developing its awards system.

Increased student involvement in extracurricular provision was one area identified in students' questionnaire responses as an area with scope for improvement. A benefit of the recent decision to keep first-year and second-year students onsite at lunchtime has been a gradual improvement in the range of activities available. As more students remain on-site, students' involvement with the extracurricular provision may improve.

A guidance plan has been drafted and is currently being finalised. During the evaluation parents and students indicated high levels of awareness of the impact of subject choice as early as junior cycle on third-level options, indicating early interaction with students in relation of guidance.

2.3 Management of facilities

In addition to the recently completed refurbishment, the school has also upgraded its ICT resources. This provides significant scope to support teaching and learning however, the available resources are not being fully utilised. The focus currently is on developing ICT use as a tool to support the school's administration systems, specifically through the operation of the ePortal system. While this will prove effective for administrative purposes there is scope for its further development within the classroom.

The development of additional laboratory facilities should be prioritised by management given the expansion in curriculum provision in the sciences. The inclusion of Science on the core curriculum at junior cycle and the availability of four senior-cycle science options results in significant pressure on the use of the existing laboratory.

The school is involved in *Green Schools* for the past five years and acknowledges the support of students and staff, particularly the school's support staff, in achieving the relevant targets.

3. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

3.1 The quality of learning and teaching

A total of twenty-five 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. In a number of lessons the teaching was excellent and in a minority of lessons there was significant scope for improvement.

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 lesson objectives and outcomes. There was evidence that teachers shared resources and there were many examples of good preparation of additional resources for use in lessons.

Many lessons observed were teacher-centred with an emphasis on whole-class teaching. An outcome in teacher-centred lessons is that students are passive and not actively engaged with lesson content. In lessons where the teaching approach promoted active and co-operative learning, students were more engaged with the lesson content, asked more questions of their teachers and were challenged in their learning. Very good methodologies were observed in a number of lessons where teachers integrated key approaches including, assessment for learning (AfL), the use of keywords and differentiation. These teachers had

established very good learning routines. Language teachers were consistent in their integration of the four key skills in the lessons observed.

In general, a range of questioning strategies was used in lessons including global and directed questions however, there was a tendency for lower-order questions to dominate. As effective questioning strategies are important in mixed-ability settings as a tool for differentiation, greater attention should be paid to ensuring that an appropriate range of questions and questioning styles is used in lessons.

Practice varies between teachers in relation to the correction of homework and there was limited evidence of AfL. Teachers are not consistent in noting homework completed and annotating copybooks. Where best practice was observed the homework was reviewed with evaluative comment. There were some examples of peer and self-assessment observed. In subject departments where this practice is more established, it is used effectively to support students' learning. Overall, the school is advised to develop a whole-school assessment policy to establish an agreed approach to assessment practice.

ICT was used in many lessons but predominantly as a means of presenting material rather than as a learning tool. Given the school's investment in ICT it is advisable that the school plans for the development of ICT as a teaching and learning tool.

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. Teachers' expectations of students' ability to engage with the lesson material were good. In many lessons however, there were 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-focussed. 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.

4. IMPLEMENTATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS FROM PREVIOUS EVALUATIONS

4.1 Management

In a number of previous inspection reports recommendations were made relating to subject planning. Subject departments have been established on a formal basis and it is clear from records of meetings that whole-school recommendations in relation to teaching and learning have been disseminated by the principal to all staff. However, key aspects of subject planning including the need to formalise assessment strategies and planning for special educational needs (SEN) have not been incorporated within subject department plans.

The school's management has ensured that recommendations in relation to improving resources available for teaching the subjects have been addressed including the dedication of a base room for Art and the provision of data projectors. In addition, work has already commenced on the recent science inspection report recommendation to move to mixed-ability class groups at junior cycle.

4.2 Learning and Teaching

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

A varied range of active teaching methodologies was used in many of the lessons observed. However, approximately one-third of the lessons were teacher-centred with insufficient opportunities for students to actively engage with the lesson content.

While questioning was evident in all the lessons observed it was evident that in only half of the lessons observed was the range of questioning styles used inclusive and accommodating of the range of student abilities within the group.

A number of subject inspection reports made reference to developing assessment modes that incorporated AfL techniques and principles. Progress has not been uniform across subjects departments and efforts should be made to incorporate AfL within subject and lesson planning and assessment policies.

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

5.1

The role of the principal has been central to the development and progression of the school's planning priorities. To date the board has mainly had an overseeing role and is advised to take a more proactive role in relation to progressing the school's development priorities, especially those specific to the role of leading learning.

At school level the capacity within subject departments for self-evaluation varies though it is strong in some departments as indicated by their progression of inspection recommendations and subject planning. As the school develops its self-evaluative processes and advances its development priorities, it would be useful to identify key subject departments to lead the progression of specific development priorities for example, AfL, differentiation strategies and ICT integration.

The board of management was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the report; a response was not received from the board.