

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

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

REPORT

**O'Carolan College
Nobber, Co. Meath
Roll number: 719800**

Date of inspection: 13 November 2013



Whole-School Evaluation

Management, Leadership and Learning

A whole-school evaluation of management, leadership and learning (WSE-MLL) was undertaken in November 2013 in O'Carolan 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 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

O'Carolan College is administered by the Louth and Meath Education and Training Board (ETB). It is a multi-denominational school catering for 583 students. The school has more than doubled its enrolment over the past decade. The school provides the full range of curricular programmes including an optional Transition Year (TY) programme. O'Carolan College participates in Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS), the action plan of the Department of Education and Skills for educational inclusion.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

Key Findings

- A broad curriculum and a wide range of extracurricular activities are supported by the school management.
- Staff development and empowerment are priorities within the school, as evidenced by the support for continuous professional development and the structures that promote staff involvement in school-wide initiatives.
- Well organised and accessible student support structures, that promote partnership between students, parents and the school, have been established.
- The quality of teaching and learning in almost all the lessons observed was good or very good, with some exemplary practice noted.
- The atmosphere in the school is supportive and positive; student leadership is facilitated and supported.
- The school has a very good capacity for managing and implementing improvement as evidenced by its engagement with recommendations from previous inspections, DEIS planning and school self-evaluation (SSE).

Recommendations for Further Development

- Weekly year head meetings would facilitate the management of the academic, pastoral and disciplinary issues.
- The school's health and safety statement should be updated to reflect the current school environment.
- Good practice identified in areas of teaching and learning should be shared and implemented across all subjects, and curricular provision should be reviewed.
- The DEIS and school self-evaluation plans should be integrated and aligned.

1. QUALITY OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP

1.1 School ownership and management

The board of management is appropriately constituted and is supported by the Louth and Meath ETB in the operation and management of the school.

The board has a clear understanding of its role and operates as a unit to provide collaborative support to the principal and deputy principal of the school, both of whom were new to the school in the 2012 – 2013 academic year.

The board has overseen the development of a range of policies and plans. The school's Child Protection Policy and the DEIS plan for 2013 – 2016 were both ratified by the board in 2013. Procedures are in place for the review and development of policies, with parents and other stakeholders contributing to the process. A list of policies is maintained in the School Plan and the Action Plan for the current school year prioritises a set of policies for review. A systematic process of rolling review should be established and a review date set for all policies.

The board communicates regularly and informally with the school community through the principal and the parent and teacher representatives on the board. A formal agreed report should be available to support the communication of board business to the key stakeholders following each board meeting.

The school publishes an extensive annual report which names the school management and teaching teams, and documents the academic and extra-curricular activities of the school. It is distributed to all prospective parents and to the current school community. The board of management could consider reporting on its own contribution to the management and successes of the school through this publication.

An active and engaged student council has been instrumental in making changes that have a direct bearing on students' everyday lives in the school. This is recognised by the majority of surveyed students who felt they have a say in how to make the school a better place. The board is supportive of the student council and should now find ways to promote its further development, including opportunities to interact directly with the board.

The Parent-Teacher Council comprises two elected representatives from each year group in the school, the Home School Community Liaison teacher and a teacher who acts as secretary. It is chaired by the principal of the school. Parents are involved in many aspects of school life and have a particular involvement in the promotion of literacy. The board reported that parents have expressed interest in setting up a Parents' Association in accordance with the provisions of the Education Act (1998). This should be encouraged. Ways of improving communication between the parents' representative body and the full parent cohort should also be explored.

1.2 Effectiveness of leadership for learning

The principal and deputy principal work well as a team with a complementary distribution of clearly defined roles and responsibilities. Informal meetings are held each morning and at the end of the school day.

Assistant principal post-holders meet weekly with senior management. These meetings support a collegial and collaborative approach to many issues relevant to the whole school. Weekly meetings for year heads would facilitate the management of the academic, pastoral and disciplinary issues relevant to this pivotal role.

The senior management team, together with the board of management, are committed to staff development. Staff are involved in a range of activities such as membership of the school's anti-bullying committee and the school self-evaluation team. Teachers are encouraged to participate in continuing professional development (CPD) and give feedback to their colleagues following attendance at training programmes. This very good practice is supported through the use of formal review sheets, examples of which were observed in the subject folders. Peer observation is encouraged as part of teachers' professional practice.

Subject department planning is well established and some exemplary subject plans were observed. Those plans that link learning outcomes with resources, methodologies and assessment reflect very good practice. This approach should be implemented for all subject plans.

All subject departments are provided with the opportunity to examine and analyse state examination results relevant to their own subject area. Some subject folders showed good evidence of planning based on the analysis of results. Teachers should ensure that DEIS attainment targets are explicitly referenced as part of this analysis.

The school provides the full range of curricular programmes to meet the needs of a diverse student cohort. After a gap of some years, the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme is being taught to groups of fifth and sixth year students. The Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) is followed by nearly half of all Leaving Certificate students. The Junior Cycle School Programme (JCSP) is available and, commendably, teachers use the JCSP framework and learning statements to support teaching and learning for all students.

Learning support provision is co-ordinated by qualified and specialised staff. The school has developed strong links with feeder primary schools to ensure that relevant information is communicated to support students' learning needs in the transition from primary to post-primary school. Team teaching, small group and one-to-one lessons are facilitated through careful timetabling to enable provision by teachers, with support from special needs assistants, to meet the needs of all students. Exemplary team teaching practice was observed during the evaluation.

An Autism Centre caters for the particular needs of a small number of students. These students are integrated with mainstream classes for many of the core subjects and have personalised timetables to ensure that maximum benefit is derived from their school experience.

A broad range of subjects is provided for students, including an extensive choice of science subjects at senior cycle. In first year, students study a core set of subjects including French and Science and two optional subjects. Prior to entering fifth year, students select three optional subjects as well as English, Irish, Mathematics and French.

The school places a high value on modern language acquisition. French is compulsory in both junior and senior cycle. German is offered as an option for first-year students but has not had sufficient uptake to warrant its timetabling. In TY, students study two modern languages, French and German, for half a year each. LCA students study German for the first year of the programme. German is not timetabled as part of the Leaving Certificate programme. The school should review its language provision to ensure that it meets the students' needs in terms of subject choice, continuity and availability.

A majority of senior cycle students follow the LCVP. Of the students following the established Leaving Certificate programme, most study more than seven subjects. This

unusual situation should be examined through a review of curricular strategy and timetabling practice.

Parents are provided with regular reports on student progress throughout the year. Monthly reports for senior cycle students are made available. Student records and reports may also be accessed through the school's electronic information systems. Parent-teacher meetings are held annually for each year group, with meetings for 6th year parents in November and March. Senior cycle and third-year students may attend parent-teacher meetings with their parents. This very good practice encourages students to take responsibility for their own learning and progress. Parents have confirmed through the parent survey that the majority are satisfied with the level of contact between the school and home.

Attendance is a key value of O'Carolan College. The school recognises the connection between attendance and attainment and rewards students who achieve complete or nearly complete attendance each year.

The school operates a year head and tutor system to support both the academic and pastoral needs of students and to support the code of behaviour. Almost all students surveyed understand the school rules and a similar proportion of surveyed parents know about the code of behaviour. Most parents and students agreed that discipline in the school is good. In the context of the planned review of the code of behaviour the school should consider issues such as the recording of disciplinary actions, the overlap in role between the tutor and the Year Head, the protocols around contacting parents and the discretion around disciplinary sanctions that is in the remit of the tutor. The balance between students' rights and responsibilities identified in the code of behaviour is a key value which should be preserved.

Good structures, including guidance provision, are in place to support the pastoral care of students. The care team meets weekly to review current needs and issues as they arise. Each class group has a tutor who has both a pastoral and a disciplinary role. The school has established an anti-bullying committee and both students and parents reported a positive atmosphere relative to bullying. The provision of a lunch-time "drop-in" service through which all students can access support related to any area of their personal or academic lives is highly valued by students and parents alike.

SPHE (Social, Personal and Health Education) and RSE (Relationships and Sexuality Education) is provided at both junior and senior cycle and is taught by the class tutors. While it is recognised that some relevant training programmes have been undertaken by the tutors, best practice in the delivery of SPHE and RSE suggests that a core team of teachers that participates in systematic and incremental CPD should be developed.

There are many supports to help first-year students make the transition to post-primary school. The Cairde programme that involves fifth-year students acting as mentors for first years has been highly successful. TY students who are participating in the Gaisce programme give support to first-year students who attend the homework club. Prior to the beginning of the first term, first-year students are given an opportunity to visit the school to familiarise themselves with the new environment.

The school is participating in the Jigsaw initiative to support mental health. A committee that comprises members of the teaching staff, students and parents has been established to further this development. The partnership of teachers, parents and students in this area is highly commended.

The school aims to ensure that the school community is kept well informed of school activities. The school diary, which provides continuity during the junior cycle years and

also at senior cycle, is central to the communication between parents and the school. In addition, the homework journal, electronic and traditional reports, parent-teacher meetings and a texting system are used. The school's website is currently being redeveloped and will support the school's communication strategy.

The formal curriculum is complemented by a wide range of extracurricular sporting and cultural activities. Students' achievements are affirmed and highlighted as part of the daily life of the school.

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*. The school needs to ensure that all students and parents are aware of the name of the Designated Liaison Person for Child Protection.

1.3 Management of facilities

The school's enrolment has increased dramatically over the past decade with consequent pressure on the physical infrastructure of the school. All staff are involved in monitoring and managing the efficient movement of students within the school environment. Strategies to deal with actual and potential bottlenecks are being developed and implemented.

The school is conscious of the need to promote environmental responsibility. The Green Schools initiative and an anti-litter strategy could be developed as part of a whole school campaign.

A comprehensive health and safety statement, based on a risk assessment, was ratified in 2008. However, it does not reflect the current school environment and should be updated appropriately as a matter of urgency.

2. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

2.1 The quality of learning and teaching

Twenty lessons over twenty-four class periods were observed during the course of the evaluation. The overall quality of teaching and learning was good with many examples of very good and, in some instances, exemplary practice. In a small number of lessons there was scope for development of opportunities for student learning.

Lessons were well planned and some very good resources were sourced, prepared and developed as aids to learning. In all cases the teacher communicated the lesson content with students. This good practice should be developed so that the planned learning outcomes are expressed in terms of what the student should know or be able to do, and are revisited during the lesson so that learning can be evaluated.

Teachers used a range of active methodologies which facilitated both independent and collaborative learning. Pair and group work were used to good effect in some lessons. Co-operative learning practices were observed where students were facilitated to take responsibility for their own learning. Teachers should ensure that good practice is shared and implemented wherever practicable.

Classroom interactions were respectful and students were encouraged and affirmed.

In some lessons, teachers provided challenges for all students across the full ability and knowledge spectrums. In these lessons teachers used differentiation strategies to ensure that

all students had learning opportunities. These opportunities should be provided to students in all lessons.

Questioning was the main form of assessment observed in lessons. Teachers used a range of higher order and probing questions to assess and develop student's learning and understanding. In some lessons, assessment criteria were shared with students and opportunities for self-assessment and peer-assessment were facilitated. These good practices should be extended where practicable.

Homework is monitored by teachers and some good examples of formative and constructive feedback were observed in copybooks. Teachers should ensure that all assessment of students' work is used to support learning and improvement.

Generally teachers have high expectations of students and the classroom environment supports and encourages students' learning and achievement. In some classrooms excellent displays of students' work were observed.

Students worked well in lessons and demonstrated very good knowledge of their subjects. In many lessons, students were given opportunities for interaction and discussion through which learning was demonstrated, consolidated and extended. Teachers should maximise the opportunities for students to develop their own learning.

In many lessons teachers emphasised the development of literacy. In one lesson, keywords specific to vocabulary that is used in examination questions was the focus of attention. Neat presentation of written work is an element of the whole-school literacy strategy. This very good objective should be reinforced for students across all subject areas.

In some lessons, students were encouraged to reflect on their work and identify how to improve. In some subject folders students' assessments of modules were observed. Teachers should extend these good practices to facilitate students to reflect on and understand their own learning styles.

Attainment in state examinations positively reflects teachers' efforts to raise students' expectations and to promote higher level uptake as appropriate. Targets for third level progression and the reduction in the number of students taking foundation level exams are particularly noteworthy.

3. IMPLEMENTATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS FROM PREVIOUS EVALUATIONS

3.1 Management

Good progress is evident in the effective implementation of recommendations. Resources have been increased and timetabling adjustments have been made where necessary. The DEIS plan has been enhanced to include measurable and attainable targets.

The development of the LCA programme is currently being progressed.

A system for recording and monitoring the status of recommendations could assist the tracking of progress of all recommendation from previous evaluations.

3.2 Learning and teaching

Recommendations in a number of areas relevant to teaching and learning were made in previous evaluations: the use of learning outcomes in lesson planning, greater use of higher order questioning, use of a broader range of methodologies, orderly presentation of work,

extension of differentiation strategies, more opportunities for oral assessment in language lessons and the integration of whole group teaching in practical subjects. Many of these have been addressed and their implementation was observed in lessons. The definition of learning outcomes and planning for their assessment are areas that need continuing attention.

The school has a well-defined strategy for following up on the implementation of recommendations from previous subject inspections. Inspection reports are initially considered by the relevant subject department and the resulting action plans are reported to senior management. Senior management brings findings and recommendations that may have general application to the attention of all subject departments. This good practice should be further developed to assess uptake and progress where relevant. It is also suggested that subject departments be given the opportunity to present evaluation findings, action plans and outcomes to the board of management.

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

The school has adopted a proactive approach to the introduction of school self-evaluation (SSE). A very enthusiastic SSE committee has been established and is driving the process forward. Literacy and numeracy are the current focus and a school improvement plan has been developed. The work of the SSE committee should be aligned and integrated with the school's DEIS planning process. Further information about the relationship between DEIS action planning and SSE is available on www.schoolself-evaluation.ie

It is clear that the school has very good capacity for school improvement as evidenced by its engagement with DEIS planning and target setting and its enthusiastic response to the school self-evaluation process.

Appendix

School response to the report

Submitted by the Board of Management

Area 1: Observations on the content of the inspection report

The BOM of O'Carolan College and LMETB welcome the WSE-MLL's positive and encouraging report.

We are especially pleased with the comments relating to: the good teaching practices and learning in the school, the supportive and positive atmosphere in the school, student support structures, and also the structures that promote staff involvement in school-wide activities.

The board welcomes the positive comments in the report regarding our emphasis on a broad curriculum, attendance and extra-curricular activities.

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 opportunities will be investigated with a view to providing Year head meetings alongside the already timetabled assistant principals' meetings.

Already a recent risk assessment has been completed as part of the process of up-dating our Health & Safety statement.

Good practice identified in areas of teaching and learning are already shared both formally and informally through subject planning meetings and student evaluation responses. In order that this be implemented across all subjects it is proposed to highlight good practice during staff meetings and to encourage and extend further peer observation across subject departments.

Progress has already been made in integrating and aligning DEIS and SSE planning. In-service recently provided by the PDST on this issue has been attended by the relevant personnel.