An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Whole-School Evaluation
Management, Leadership and Learning

REPORT

Coola Post-Primary School
Riverstown, County Sligo
Roll number: 72310U

Date of inspection: 19 October 2011
Whole-School Evaluation
Management, Leadership and Learning

A whole-school evaluation of management, leadership and learning (WSE-MLL) was undertaken in October 2011 in Coola Post-Primary 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, 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
Coola Post-Primary School is a co-educational school in the County Sligo Vocational Education Committee (VEC) scheme. Opened in 1954, it has adapted well to changing needs. Subject choice has been greatly expanded and the school now offers an optional Transition Year (TY) programme, the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) and the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) in addition to the established Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate. Enrolment has steadily increased: the current figure of 401 is double that of ten years ago. A six-classroom extension was under construction at the time of the evaluation.

1. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

1.1 Key Findings

- Instructional leadership is a key strength of school management. Expectations of a high work ethic are communicated effectively to members of staff who respond well to these expectations.
- Senior management delegates authority effectively and middle management feels trusted and affirmed, and makes an excellent contribution to the running of the school.
- School development planning work is very well advanced although understated in the documentation.
- The quality of management of students is very good.
- The high quality of curriculum development has played a significant role in school improvement.
- While students are taught in mixed-ability groups in first year, streamed classes are formed at the beginning of second year.
- The quality of learning and teaching showed significant strengths in most lessons observed.
- All management and planning recommendations in subject inspection reports have been considered and most have been implemented.
- School self-evaluation is well directed by senior management though informal in nature.
1.2 Recommendations for Further Development

- The senior management team should plan regular ‘time out’ from the demands of day-to-day management to reflect on future priorities and long-term plans. Attendance at school leadership conferences would provide one such opportunity.
- A coherent school plan document should be drafted that will make the VEC five-year plan doable. This should list achievements to date and the agreed short, medium, and long-term SDP goals. The parties with responsibility to lead and review the implementation of the plan should be identified.
- Subject department plans should include clearly identified learning outcomes, linked to resources, methodologies and modes of assessment. All plans should include analyses of attainment in the certificate examinations, show evidence of review and include future action plans.
- The formation of streamed classes in second year should be reviewed with the aim of providing all students with the experience of a mixed-ability learning environment, alongside concurrent timetable arrangements for core subjects, as required.
- The preparedness of teachers for a fuller move to mixed ability should be reviewed, bearing in mind continuing professional development (CPD) needs such as differentiated teaching methodologies.
- Timetabled provision for core junior certificate subjects should be reviewed.
- An integrated literacy and numeracy policy to ensure consistent practices across all departments should be agreed.

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 of management is properly constituted, is well supported by the VEC, and plays a very supportive role in the management of the school. Not all current members have received training on the functions of a board, however, and this deficit should be addressed. The opportunity to self-evaluate the effectiveness of the board, as explored during the evaluation, is urged for further consideration.

There is clarity among board members about their priorities. The board has been active in contributing to the VEC educational plan 2011-2016, the ratification of policies, the expansion of the curriculum, the development of facilities, and the implementation of previous evaluation recommendations.

The quality of communications between the board, teaching staff and parents’ association (PA) is very good. The board has an excellent working relationship with senior management and has high confidence in, and strong support for, the principal and the newly appointed deputy.

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
The board’s priorities are clear and relate to the support of all improvement initiatives that will raise the school profile. The ultimate aim is to make Coola Post-Primary School the school of first choice of all parents in the community. To that end the board has pursued the enhancement of resources, evident in the current building programme. The board has also promoted and supported curricular expansion. Staff development has also been well supported by the board.

There is a confluence between the board’s priorities and those of management, staff and parents. Staff morale is positive. Students and parents are in turn loyal, supportive and ambitious for the school. In the immediate future there is strong ownership of, and commitment to, the five pillars to support teaching and learning set out in the VEC five-year plan – integrated literacy, innovation and creativity, co-operative learning, information and communications technology (ICT) and professional development.

School development planning work shows significant achievements to date, notably the creation of subject departments, the introduction of a pastoral care system with year heads and tutors, the addition of Music, History, Accounting, Chemistry and Agricultural Science to the curriculum. The school planning documentation provided, however, does not do justice to the scale of improvement achieved nor the scale of ambition evident among all parties encountered. The blueprint for this ambitious SDP agenda of school improvement should be set down in a coherent school plan. Achievements to date should be recorded. Future goals should be set out as immediate, medium and long-term. Those with responsibility to lead and review the implementation of the plan should be identified.

2.2 Effectiveness of leadership for learning

Leadership of staff
An effective senior management team is in place. Both principal and deputy principal model an exemplary work ethic. Leadership for learning is a shared priority and is a key strength of the school. It has been central to the principal’s vision for school improvement throughout his tenure and has been promoted effectively in those ten years. Almost the entirety of the teaching staff has been recruited in that time. For the newly appointed deputy principal it is a core focus among the school’s priorities for development.

High expectations are set for members of staff. Posts of responsibility carry very significant duties and year head positions are prioritised. Middle management feels trusted and affirmed and makes an excellent contribution. Meetings of year heads and senior management are carefully planned throughout the year. The commitment of staff to activities beyond teaching duties is very evident. Teachers are positive about the challenge set by the school’s priorities and confident in their ability to contribute to the success of those aims. The staff view of the quality of leadership provided by senior management was extremely positive. The valuable contribution made by ancillary staff was an unprompted observation made by all parties.

Staff development, appraisal and affirmation are embedded features of the leadership of staff. The capacity of the school to deliver improved academic performance is a strongly promoted aim of senior management. Significant advances have been made with uptake levels at higher level in many subjects greatly increased during the tenure of the principal.
Senior management has retained an emphasis on improving professional teaching quality through support for CPD. The promotion of assessment for learning (AfL) principles and practice is a good example. The enhancement of ICT facilities as tools in teaching and learning, together with staff upskilling, has resulted in significant improvement. Subject networking is a feature of ICT advances at VEC level. The development of the e-learning platform Moodle as a resource for teachers and learners is in train. In addition, the benchmarking of improved examination outcomes against national attainment norms is led by senior management.

Senior management has successfully led the development of special educational needs provision and a staff member is pursuing formal qualification in this area. This enhanced expertise is promoted as a feature of an inclusive school that complements the aim of improved educational attainment and a raised academic profile, and not as a contradiction of that aim.

Personal initiative is encouraged and supported. Support for teachers’ work in relation to a link with a school in North America, and participation in the optional Junior Certificate French oral examination are good examples.

The establishment of subject departments and collaborative planning, delivery and assessment are strong examples of a culture of teamwork and accountability successfully introduced by senior management. Senior management has also successfully led staff members to see the benefits to learning that flow from the introduction of new pastoral care structures.

Subject department plans are mostly good quality but they do range from basic to excellent. These should be reviewed to include clear identification of learning outcomes, linked to resources, methodologies, and modes of assessment. Analyses of attainment should be included in all.

The admissions policy criteria to deal with over-demand on places and the ‘deferral of enrolment’ clause for certain applicants with special educational needs need review. The input of staff into hazard identification and risk assessment would improve ownership of the health and safety statement.

Leadership of students
There is very good leadership of students. This begins with the early transfer arrangements from feeder primary schools and transfer is again well managed from junior cycle to senior cycle. Senior management is prominent in these arrangements for which parent and board representatives indicated very high approval. The guidance counsellor and all relevant staff members contribute to the well-managed transfer to senior cycle.

The inclusive admissions policy is managed fairly, alongside the aim of providing for an increasing proportion of students of high academic potential. Individual plans are devised for students in receipt of learning support (LS) and resource hours, and the LS team leaders provide very good direction and advice to the wider team of subject teachers. The deputy principal’s co-ordination role for LS communicates a healthy message around senior management involvement and support for students with special educational needs.

Student care and discipline are both very good. The new pastoral care structures have been linked to increased expectations of students to take responsibility for their learning. Attention to checking students’ attendance, making notes in homework journals, instilling pride in their uniform, and encouraging a strong work ethic were demanding tasks that were seen to operate thoroughly and efficiently at morning assemblies. These developments were acknowledged by students themselves, albeit with some reluctance, but with clear approval.
Discipline is well managed and fair, a fact that finds strong approval in student and parent questionnaire responses. The student council has a voice and has made observations on assessment arrangements that have been adopted. The school’s code of behaviour has not been updated to reflect the school’s practice of promoting positive behaviour. This practice is consistent with the NEWB guidelines but as the code was devised before their launch in 2008 it should be reviewed to ensure full alignment.

The co-ordination and provision of programmes is good. Evidence of enhanced attainment in the Leaving Certificate by students who undertook TY has been established in the analysis of the school’s examination data. Almost all students choose LCVP. The school’s commitment to LCA is on a par with all other programmes. The expanded curriculum has enriched the students’ educational experience and broadened the appeal of the school to prospective parents. Music in particular has seen a very significant growth in popularity.

The following areas merit reflection and review. The assignment of some students to streamed classes at the start of second year and the potential of low expectations attaching to these class groupings are a concern. To address this there is a need to better prepare staff for a fuller move to mixed ability. Most students take twelve subjects in the Junior Certificate examination and the question of overload should be examined. Timetabled provision for core subjects in the junior cycle is low.

2.3 Management of facilities
Management of facilities is good: both student and parent questionnaire responses indicate very high approval of the quality of facilities. A stimulating learning environment has been created in the classrooms which are well resourced. Enhancement of ICT resources has been and remains a priority. The main foyer is bright, welcoming and well decorated, and the electronic screen provides reminders of both recent and upcoming events. Community involvement in the development of the sports hall and canteen are examples of a positive approach to the improvement of school facilities. New hard courts have enhanced the sports and recreational facilities. Environmental awareness is well promoted.

3. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

3.1 The quality of learning and teaching
Twenty-one lessons were observed, involving a high proportion of the teaching staff. The quality of teaching and learning showed significant strengths in the vast majority of lessons. High levels of student engagement and understanding were established in many lessons. Varied teaching methods and excellent classroom management were distinguishing features of such lessons. These very positive findings should encourage the ongoing pursuit of further improvement in this core work of the school. Separately, the questionnaire responses of students and parents indicate a high level of satisfaction with the quality of teaching.

Overall, teachers’ knowledge of their subject areas was confident and assured. In the best examples, the teachers’ proficiency and enthusiasm for their subjects resulted in strong student participation. Planning of work was good, took account of the capacity of students, and was consistent with planning documentation of the subject departments. Planning for resources was good and these were used effectively in lessons to promote learning.

Clear learning outcomes were introduced at the outset and reviewed at the end of many lessons. In others, learning outcomes were implied. Learning is enhanced where explicit learning outcomes are targeted for achievement in the course of the lesson. Teaching
methods in most cases showed sufficient variety to ensure student engagement. In a minority of lessons, an excess of teacher talk showed insufficient attention to the need to actively involve students in lessons. While co-operative learning opportunities were provided in many lessons, none was provided in a small number of lessons. The quality of learning was enhanced when teaching methods provided students with opportunities for active learning.

Variation was noted in classroom practice regarding the highlighting, use and reinforcement of subject-specific key words. In the best examples students were familiar with, and confident in, the use of the language register appropriate to the subject. There were some very good examples of literacy development where students were encouraged to make word connections and explore their use beyond their confined subject-specific meaning.

Classroom management was in most cases very good and a positive learning atmosphere predominated. There was strong encouragement for students to achieve understanding, to think independently, and to establish this through student contributions. The level of engagement by students was in most cases very good.

There was widespread use of assessment-for-learning practices, both in lessons and in students’ written work. Student questionnaire responses were very positive about the advice they received from teachers on how they could improve the quality of their work. In lessons visited there were some examples of excellent advice to students on decoding the language of examination questions and on how to better order their answers so as to maximise marks.

Integrated literacy and co-operative learning, both pillars of the VEC educational plan, should be developed as routine practices across all departments. A focus on numeracy development should be added in line with *The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy 2011-2020.*

4. IMPLEMENTATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS FROM PREVIOUS EVALUATIONS

4.1 Management
Management has addressed all recommendations made in previous subject inspection reports and most have been implemented. Minutes show that the board has been briefed on the recommendations, the stage of their implementation and resource issues to be overcome to give them full effect. The timetable recommendation regarding twenty-eight hours’ instruction per week for students has been fully implemented. The updating of the health and safety statement is in progress. The home economics recommendation, that timetabling of practical work over break time and lunchtime be discontinued in all future timetabling, is being addressed.

4.2 Learning and Teaching
Arrangements in place to address recommendations from subject inspection reports are thorough. Senior management has met in the first instance with the relevant subject department to discuss and assess the recommendations. Those with a whole-school focus have been relayed to staff with a view to wider implementation. Management analyses the minutes of subject department meetings as a follow-up action. In the course of the evaluation there was evidence, in almost all lessons, that recommendations with a teaching and learning focus were being implemented.
5. THE SCHOOL’S SELF-EVALUATION PROCESS AND CAPACITY FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

5.1
Senior management is strongly committed to school self-evaluation and improvement. The process has been informal in nature but has been developed at staff level through subject department collaboration and the promotion of target setting that is based on examination attainment data. At a whole-school level the involvement in consultations on the VEC five-year educational plan has given impetus to the school’s now well developed self-evaluation processes.

The capacity for school improvement has been demonstrated by significant achievements to date in developing the academic profile of the school and in raising the educational expectations of parents and students. A collaborative approach to school improvement is evident. The school atmosphere is positive on all fronts: staff morale is high, community links are good, parents are confident, and the students show a pride in their school.

A formal self-evaluation process among the staff should be considered. The process could also include contributions by the board of management and parents’ representatives. Such a move would assist in keeping a focus on the direction of future school improvement, the ultimate aim of which is the entirely appropriate one of making Coola Post-Primary school the school of first choice for all parents in the community.

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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 Board of Management of Coola Post Primary welcome the very positive Whole School Evaluation/Management, Leadership and Learning report. The Board acknowledges the professionalism, courtesy and support of the Inspection team in carrying out the evaluation.

The Board of Management would also like to acknowledge the dedication and commitment of the teaching staff; the loyal and supportive response of students, parents and the Parents Association; and the work done by the ancillary staff to maintain and promote the highest standards as evidenced in the Evaluation report.

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

The Board of Management acknowledges the recommendations for further development as identified by the Inspection team. The Board will consider these recommendations carefully by collaborating with all of the school partners in planning for their successful implementation.