

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

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

REPORT

**Borrisokane Community College
Borrisokane, County Tipperary
Roll number: 72370P**

Date of inspection: 13 January 2015



**AN ROINN OIDEACHAIS
AGUS SCILEANNA** | **DEPARTMENT OF
EDUCATION
AND SKILLS**
INSPECTORATE

Whole-School Evaluation

Management, Leadership and Learning

A whole-school evaluation of management, leadership and learning (WSE-MLL) was undertaken in January 2015 in Borrisokane 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

Borrisokane Community College was established in 1942 on the site of a nineteenth-century workhouse complex. The physical transformation of the school campus has been a key change in school life over the past four years. Since 2011, a 1980 flat-roofed extension was demolished and a number of buildings from the workhouse complex were refurbished and integrated with a new structure resulting in a state-of-the-art campus. Final works will commence in summer 2015 to refurbish a three-storey workhouse building to provide more classroom accommodation for the school.

The school is a stand-alone, co-educational facility serving a large rural catchment. It operates under Tipperary Education and Training Board (TETB). The school's enrolment has been growing steadily in recent years, reaching 557 in 2014/2015.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

Key Findings

- Parents surveyed feel welcome in the school and are very happy with how the school is run.
- Students surveyed are proud of their school and get on well with each other.
- School development is supported by a well-informed, effective board of management and a very active parents' association. Both bodies are consulted and communicated with as genuine partners. However, the student council is an underdeveloped partner in school life at present.
- Senior and middle management work very well together to provide cohesive leadership of the school.
- There is significant capacity and enthusiasm among the staff at all levels to use reflective practices and to engage in continuing professional development (CPD) to achieve ongoing school improvement.
- While a key strength of the school is its broad curriculum, the distribution across the weekly timetable of class periods to some subjects in certain year groups needs to be reviewed.
- A wide range of very good student supports is in place.
- Good to very good teaching was observed in all lessons, with very good teaching predominant. In a very small number of lessons, there was scope for improvement in the quality of student learning.

Recommendations for Further Development

- Senior management should prioritise in-house sharing of and planning for school-wide implementation of strategies that have been judged to significantly improve learner outcomes, when apportioning CPD and meeting time for the whole staff.
- Certain aspects of the school timetabling process and of the school timetable need to be improved. Student and teacher feedback should be used in this process, as appropriate.
- A significant empowerment of the student council, coupled with more regular learner surveys, is recommended.
- Topic-specific, digital learning resources should be researched by subject departments and uploaded for student use, to support differentiation for the more able students and revision support for all.
- Student learning should be further enhanced by the development of choice, criteria for assessment, and exemplar elements in teachers' setting of homework assignments.

1. QUALITY OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP

1.1 School ownership and management

The board of management has appropriate communication mechanisms with its trustee, Tipperary ETB. It is well-informed by very detailed principal reports and functions collaboratively. The board contributes to school policy development and review, disciplinary management when occasionally necessary, and is fully committed to the school's on-going development and success, guided by an ethos of inclusion, innovation, and firmly embedding the school in its community.

It is highly commended that the board has planned for a formal briefing to its successor when its term runs out in 2015. The board reports to staff and to the parents' association (PA) through oral reports by the principal. It is recommended that short, agreed written reports extracted from its minutes be provided to staff and the PA, as the basis for oral commentary by the principal. Also, to further enhance communication, the board should organise a meeting with key members of the student council, at least on an annual basis.

A vital support to the ongoing improvement of Borrisokane Community College has long been its PA. Meetings of the PA are attended by the principal and two volunteer teachers, thus providing high-quality, two-way communication between school staff and parents. It is integrally involved in the identification and achievement of school improvement priorities. In past years, the PA have fundraised to provide substantial facilities for the school including its sports hall, canteen, and school oratory. Most recently, it raised an extraordinary fund to equip and furnish the school's centre for young people with autism. The PA also organises talks about student support topics for parents and students, and is engaged in ongoing development of its approaches to keeping the general parent body informed of its work. The fact that many past members of the PA subsequently serve on the board is testament to the depth of commitment of the parent body to the success of the school.

1.2 Effectiveness of leadership for learning

The principal is a very successful leader of school improvement, planning, and student support. Largely due to his leadership, the transformation of the school campus has been secured. Also, in co-operation with staff, he has fostered a very effective culture of action planning in the school, where staff and the board review progress on priorities at the end of one school year, and set specific priorities for development at the beginning of the next school year.

The deputy principal took up her post in August 2014. She brings a range of specialised skills to her role. She is involved in day-to-day management of the school, as well as carrying a weekly eight-hour teaching load.

The principal and deputy principal work well together and have been in discussion as to how the particular responsibilities of their roles should develop to serve emerging needs of the school. Now there has been a settling-in period, it is vitally important that the senior management team establish clear, individual roles in respect of tasks such as timetabling, academic monitoring of students' progress, and planning for whole-school implementation of agreed learning and teaching strategies.

A strong middle-management capacity exists in the school, underpinned by clearly-defined duties and effective communication and review channels. Holders of posts of responsibility contribute significantly to the operation and planning of school life. It is important to acknowledge too that many staff perform tasks which support students or the life of the school in a voluntary capacity, thus acting as leaders in those areas of responsibility.

The committed and hardworking staff of the school are one of its key strengths. There has been a very high level of engagement by staff in innovative student support and educational initiatives, benefitting their pedagogical strategies and the learning of students. This culture of encouraging and facilitating staff development has also empowered some staff to lead initiatives within the school. In particular, the openness of staff to a peer observation project and the compilation of those observations to support school improvement is highly commended.

The school has an extremely busy and ambitious agenda of priorities for development in the area of learning. Given the diversity of initiatives that have been engaged in over the past few years, it will be important to take time to review the outcomes of those piloted strategies in relation to the core learning needs of students. Learner and teacher feedback should be regularly gathered and analysed to identify the strategies adding the most value to students' learning.

In recent years, much whole-staff time has been allocated to training supporting the integration of ePortal, iPad, and SharePoint systems into school life and on specific student-support topics. Now that those necessary inputs have been provided, it is recommended that there be a renewed focus within planning for whole-school CPD and meetings on in-house sharing of learning and teaching expertise, on subject department meetings, and on occasional meetings of groups of departments working to develop similar skills in related subjects. Further integration of information and communication technology (ICT) should take place through discussions and research within and between subject departments, rather than sole reliance on external inputs for the next few years.

The breadth of subjects and programmes provided by the school and the first-year and Transition Year (TY) subject-sampling arrangements are both highly valued by students and parents. A consequence of the priority placed on providing the current form of sampling arrangements is that the principal has to prepare the school timetable before the start of the academic year and again over Christmas, to accommodate first-year final

subject choices. This is an onerous task that the principal has discharged very diligently over many years.

During the evaluation, some timetabling deficiencies were noted such as the distribution of periods for English and Mathematics in first year, the lack of provision of a double science class for experimental work for some class groups in first and third year, and the distribution of geography periods for some class groups in first year and third year. Also, changes to the school timetable in January occasionally necessitate a change in teacher for a few subjects, which can impact on student learning.

The principal identified two factors particular to 2014/15 in relation to these deficiencies: a lack of technical support advice available during the Christmas period when the timetable was being prepared using a new software system and the number of class groups for English and Mathematics provided to accommodate first years that year. To remedy these issues, school management is carefully planning for future first-year intakes and will have resolved software issues. This will take care of some of the deficiencies identified.

A school self-evaluation (SSE) approach should also be adopted to address other timetabling issues. An online survey of staff and students could capture deficiencies that have been noted over the past number of years. The current subject-sampling format should also be included as part of that review. If a second member of staff were to be involved in the timetabling process, then that would ensure that timetabling expertise is sustainably embedded in the school. Over the coming years, the school should seek to address the Circular 25/2012 recommendation that junior cycle students would have daily contact with English and Mathematics.

The school operates an open, inclusive admissions policy. There is a well-developed student-management system in place, based on close contacts between class tutors, year heads, and senior management. The clearly-structured code of behaviour and related recording systems and also anti-bullying procedures that are explicitly shared with students, teachers, parents, and the board contribute to effective student support. An academic monitoring project currently being piloted will be a very important support to the school's leadership of learning into the future. The fact that a survey of attendance issues was planned as part of a parent-teacher meeting to take place soon after the whole-school evaluation signals commitment to engaging with this issue.

Very good supports are provided to students by the team of teachers with specialist qualifications and training in the area of special educational needs (SEN). Also, the staff attached to the centre for young people with autism organise appropriately individualised programmes for their students in a very supportive, learner-centred manner. A student register tracking the use of allocated resource hours and the provision that is made for all students receiving support is recommended as a very useful action planning tool for the SEN department. Circular 70/2014 offers advice in this regard, including a sample SEN register template.

Living the mission statement that “Is ar scáth a chéile a mhairimid” is regarded as a responsibility of all staff members. Core supports for students in all year groups are the weekly pastoral care team meetings, the voluntary chaplain, the morning notes system for gathering students' concerns, focus weeks on various topics, and the personal guidance provided by external counsellors. In particular, the school's provision of targeted supports for at risk students through the Friendship Café; Big Brother, Big Sister; the homework club staffed by volunteer teachers; and the youth group are highly commended. The school's advanced progress toward establishing itself as a health-promoting school and the very broad range of co-curricular and extra-curricular activities organised by teachers in their own time provide excellent supports to students' holistic development.

Parents and students are supported in making subject and programme choices by subject-teacher advice and by information nights and booklets provided by the guidance counsellor. Timetabled guidance classes and individual appointments are provided for senior students, along with the organisation of outside speakers to provide careers talks to those students. An open careers night involving past students, suggested by the PA, could be another useful guidance support. Gathering student and parent feedback on the guidance service will help develop it into the future.

Student leadership is promoted through initiatives such as Cairde, a Foróige student entrepreneurship programme, Green-Schools committee, and TY ambassadors on the school's open night. A student council is also democratically elected every year. It is consulted in the development of school policies, it organises fundraising events, and highlights supports requested by students. However, significant aspects of its functioning are in need of improvement. A student council constitution should be drafted and approved by the board. From year to year, a handover of official minutes should be organised, perhaps supported by one or two members of the outgoing council remaining on it in an advisory capacity. Enhanced communication mechanisms with the general student body, and with the board and PA should also be put in place. These measures could help to address the level of dissatisfaction expressed in student questionnaires in relation to "having a say in how things are done in 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*.

1.3 Management of facilities

The new school campus is a state-of-the art facility. Vibrant learning environments have been created in the largely teacher-based rooms and particularly in the centre for young persons with autism.

School accommodation is maintained to a very high standard. Environmental responsibility is promoted as a key school value through the impressive action planning and ongoing work of the Green-Schools committee.

An appropriate health and safety statement is brought to the attention of all staff annually. Risk assessments have been completed by all staff members, as per the advice of the HSA's 2010 *Guidelines on Managing Safety and Health in Post-Primary Schools*.

2. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

2.1 The quality of learning and teaching

Twenty-four lesson periods across a range of subjects were observed by inspectors. Classes were generally very well planned and managed, with positive interactions between students and teachers. Student feedback from a focus group and from questionnaires was that they strongly feel their teachers encourage them to do the best they can do.

Good to very good teaching was observed in all lessons with very good practice predominant. In almost all lessons, the quality of learning was good to very good. In a very small number of lessons, there was scope for improvement in the quality of student learning.

Assessment for learning (AfL) strategies were consistently practised by most teachers through the sharing of learning outcomes at the outset of lessons and through higher order questioning. In some instances, teachers returned to learning outcomes toward the end of lessons. These excellent practices promoted student self-reflection and helped teachers identify areas in need of further reinforcement in subsequent lessons. Other impressive AfL strategies in use included teachers' provision of exam tracker graphs and self-assessment templates to help students identify their own strengths and areas for development when reviewing corrections and comments on their performance in substantial tests.

Some good use of multimedia clips was noted in classes as well as evidence of a few teachers using the school's SharePoint to upload study notes and homework assignments for students. Now that hardware and software supports are in place, the optimisation of technology as a support for learning needs to be developed over the coming years. In particular, subject departments are encouraged to research specific apps and websites to support the learning of particular topics, to save them in their subject department plans and to upload them to SharePoint, as teaching resources and also as extension activities for more able students. In particular, uploading multimedia clips and/or short videos demonstrating skills or procedures would be useful revision aids to students.

The widespread use of co-operative learning strategies supported students' engagement in learning and the development of their oral skills in language classes and learning of new knowledge. Evidence of the use of sophisticated co-operative learning in some classes such as jigsaw and placemat exercises was noted and this is highly commended.

Some good use of learning to learn tools like graphic organisers and mnemonics was noted in lessons. This is an area where teachers should share practice to embed this as whole-school practice. Furthermore, a whole-staff discussion is advised on what constitutes appropriate and excessive note-making for students. This is due to the fact that in the small number of lessons where there was scope for improvement in the quality of student learning, teachers over-relied on discussing text-only PowerPoint presentations and then required note-taking that absorbed significant amounts of teaching time.

Homework was being set and monitored in the sample of copybooks examined, with evidence of high-quality written feedback being provided on substantial assignments in many instances. The learning that can be achieved through homework tasks should be enhanced by always sharing criteria for assessment for those homework tasks with students, by varying the range of tasks assigned, and by showing concrete or digital exemplars of partly-completed assignments to help students approach the learning task.

3. IMPLEMENTATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS FROM PREVIOUS EVALUATIONS

3.1 Management

All teaching and learning and management recommendations from previous evaluations have been very diligently implemented.

3.2 Learning and teaching

Short reports were compiled by all subject departments previously evaluated, setting out their progress on inspection recommendations made. It is recommended that this be established as a whole-school practice, and that such reports be provided to the board, as evidence of ongoing school improvement.

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

The school has fully embraced the SSE process. Senior management and staff are energetic, motivated, and ambitious for the further success of the school. It is now timely to take stock of the very considerable amount of engagement with professional development and piloting of initiatives that has taken place among staff in recent years. As the school plots its course into the future, key indicators of student progress such as attendance, retention, progression, literacy, numeracy, examination attainment, and partnership should be born in mind. Given its track record in setting and achieving school improvement goals, Borrisokane Community College has very good capacity to drive school improvement through self-evaluation. The key to future improvement for this school is to ensure full focus on student learning.

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 Borrisokane Community College, on behalf of the staff, parents and the entire school community wish to acknowledge receipt of the WSE-MLL report.

Among the many positive findings made by the inspectors in their report we are particularly encouraged by the following:

- Parents surveyed feel welcome in the school and are very happy with how the school is run.
- Students surveyed are proud of their school and get on well with each other.
- School development is supported by a well-informed, effective board of management and a very active parents' association
- Recognition of the tremendous support given to the school by the Parents Association
- Good to very good teaching was observed in all lessons with very good teaching predominant. Excellent practices of Assessment for Learning strategies were observed.
- Senior and middle management work very well together to provide cohesive leadership of the school.
- Acknowledgement of the support given to students by many of the staff in a voluntary capacity with a wide range of extra-curricular and student support systems in place to provide for the holistic development of students.
- One of the key strengths of the school is the committed and hardworking staff.
- Students strongly feel that their teachers encourage them to do the best they can do.

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 acknowledges the recommendations made by the inspectors and some work has already commenced:

- The Board of Management has taken on board and implemented the suggestion of providing a short agreed written report to the school staff and parents association following its meetings.
- Steps are in place to ensure that issues highlighted with the distribution of periods on the timetable for some subjects across the week will be addressed for the new school year.
- Following the inspection a Students Council Constitution was developed and approved by the board of management. The students' council had regular meetings during the year and communicated with the Parents Association on areas of mutual interest. With the exception of first year representatives the membership of the students' council for the school year 2015/2016 was put in place in May 2015. A training course is organised for the new council.
- As recommended a meeting of the Students council with the Board of Management will take place each year commencing in the school year 2015/2016.
- The current school self-evaluation process which is focusing on Teaching and Learning will take on board the recommendations in the MLL Report to further enhance teaching and learning.