

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

**Whole-School Evaluation
REPORT**

**Ardee Community School
Ardee, County Louth
Roll number: 91441T**

Date of inspection: 9 December 2011



**A N R O I N N | D E P A R T M E N T O F
O I D E A C H A I S | E D U C A T I O N
A G U S S C I L E A N N A | A N D S K I L L S**

WHOLE-SCHOOL EVALUATION

A whole-school evaluation of Ardee Community School was undertaken in December 2011. This report presents the findings of the evaluation and makes recommendations for improvement. During the evaluation, the quality of teaching and learning in four subjects was evaluated in detail, and separate reports are available on these subjects. (See section 7 for details). 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

Ardee Community School was established on a greenfield site in 1974 and was the first Community School outside the greater Dublin area. It is now the only post-primary school in Ardee. The school was established as an amalgamation of St. Anne's Mercy Secondary School, the De La Salle Brothers Boys' School and Ardee Vocational Educational School. The Mercy Sisters and Co. Louth VEC still hold trusteeship of the school, while the De La Salle Brothers handed over the trusteeship to the Archdiocese of Armagh. The school is currently in the original building and is awaiting the building of an extension to cater for increased enrolment.

The school offers the full range of curricular programmes provided by the Department of Education and Skills. This includes the Junior Certificate programme, the Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP), an optional Transitional Year (TY) programme, the Leaving Certificate programme, the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme and the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP). The school participates in DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools), the action plan of the Department of Education and Skills for educational inclusion. The school has access to a full time Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) co-ordinator and the Deeside School Completion Programme office is situated on site.

The school has had an increased enrolment over the last five years and student numbers are projected to rise further over the next number of years. The school currently enrolls 347 male and 321 female students.

The special education needs and resource department supports approximately thirteen and a half per cent of students in the school. The school's autism unit which opened in September 2006 caters for six students.

The school receives support from the National Behaviour Support Service (NBSS) in the form of a behaviour support classroom with specially trained staff. The school has been assigned a part-time Positive Behaviour Liaison (PBL) teacher for the 2011/2012 school year.

1. QUALITY OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT

1.1 Characteristic spirit of the school

In collaboration with members of the school community, a vision has been developed that is informed by the school's characteristic spirit and this is expressed in its mission statement. This document reads positively and places a very strong emphasis on inclusion.

The school fully embraces the aspirations of its characteristic spirit, vision and mission. A culture of openness and inclusivity was observed during the evaluation and is embedded in the policies and procedures that govern the day to day activities of the school. All parties met with during the evaluation regarded the school as a welcoming and supportive environment for students.

1.2 School ownership and management

The board of management is properly constituted and is in the final year of its three-year term. The board meets regularly and all board members have received training from their various representative bodies. The board is very proud of the school and committed to its development.

Communication between the board and the whole-school community is generally good. The principal gives a detailed report on the important issues and achievements to the board at each meeting. The trustees receive minutes of all board meetings and feedback is given to the teaching staff and parents. To ensure consistency, it is recommended that an agreed report be formulated for dissemination to the teaching staff and parents through their representatives on the board.

The board is very supportive of the school and is dedicated to addressing issues which impact on the operation of the school such as deployment, the school building, finances, health and safety, school planning and the development of the school's playing pitch. Various sub-committees are formed to address the work of the school and these regularly report back to the board. The board's work in developing the structural and environmental elements of the school is acknowledged. However, it is now recommended that the board assume a greater leadership role in developing teaching, learning and attainment within the context of the DEIS planning framework.

1.3 In-school management

The principal and deputy principal were appointed in 2006 and 2007 respectively. They form a cohesive, committed and hardworking senior management team. The board was very positive in its description of the work of senior management, as were all parties interviewed during the evaluation. The senior management team maintains a very visible presence in the school. An open-door policy has helped to develop a supportive relationship between senior management and students, parents and teachers. Evidence indicates that the senior management team enjoys a high level of respect from parents and the local community. It provides very effective and affirming support for the teaching team. It is clear that the senior management team is collaborative and is effectively managing change in the school.

The senior management team shares a vision for the development of the school and it is keenly aware of the school's strengths and weaknesses. In many areas of school life, it has plans to develop the work of the school. Its vision reflects the board's desire to improve facilities for an appropriate and well-resourced educational environment for students. Good progress has been made to date. Senior management acknowledges that it is now time for the school to extend this good work by focussing on teaching and learning.

Senior management's current workload does not allow sufficient time for the development and implementation of both short term and longer term strategies to actualise their vision. It is recommended that the team reassess its role and delegate duties as appropriate.

There are currently seven assistant principals and nine special duties teachers assigned to the school. This middle management team makes a very strong contribution to the running

of the school. The majority of posts are used in the management of students through a year heads and assistant year head system. Currently, the year heads have a timetabled weekly meeting which is focussed on student management. There are no meetings for all assistant principals. There is scope to develop the whole-school decision making aspect of middle management. Specific assistant principal meetings would provide opportunities to effectively contribute to decision making on a whole-school level.

The schedule of posts has not been reviewed by the whole teaching staff for some time. The loss of a significant number of posts, the subsequent redistribution of duties and the changing circumstances of the school require that the duties attached to posts be reviewed on a whole-school basis. It is recommended that such a review take place as this has the potential to have a very positive effect on the management of the school.

Currently fifty-five teachers are responsible for teaching and learning in the school. They present as an open and dedicated staff. Communication between senior management and the teaching staff is good. A range of communication channels is used to ensure that all staff is well informed. Staff meetings are held appropriately and staff has an opportunity to input into the agenda.

A programme of continuing professional development (CPD) is provided for all teaching staff. Future CPD will focus on differentiation. This is very appropriate. It is recommended that future CPD be linked with the school's vision for teaching and learning.

The school's admissions and enrolment policy is appropriately inclusive and welcomes all students. It fully reflects the school's vision and mission statements. The admissions and enrolment policy should be updated to include the criteria for entry into the various programmes offered by the school.

A whole-school approach to promoting positive student behaviour was evident during the evaluation. The school has embedded a number of strategies to achieve this outcome. In addition to a very well resourced year-head system, strategies include a termly commendation system in junior cycle and a yearly awards night for all students. The commendation system is held in very high esteem by the whole school community. It is good to note that the school is looking at ways to extend it.

Each year group has a weekly assembly which focuses on addressing its particular needs. The deputy principal sets the agenda and the assembly is delivered by the year head, deputy year head and tutors. The first-year assembly is attended by first-year mentors. During the evaluation, an assembly was visited. It was well structured and was very engaging for students. Good practice was observed in that students were affirmed, supported and challenged appropriately. Strategies were in place to support good behaviour and attendance.

In collaboration with the National Behaviour Support Service (NBSS) the school provides a discrete class, Rang Cillian, to promote positive behaviour. In addition to this, the school has a part-time Positive Behaviour Liaison (PBL) teacher who further assists the school community. This provision helps students to fully access the curriculum. It is good to note that the strategies put in place by Rang Cillian and by the PBL teacher are adopted by all teachers to form whole-school strategies. Good tracking and evaluation processes are in place to monitor progress.

The school's code of behaviour is detailed with a very clear ladder of referral outlined. School management goes to great lengths to ensure that the code is understood by students. It is taught to students in first year and is regularly mentioned in student assemblies, and a summary version is available in the students' journal. The code of behaviour is reported to

be effective by all parties and was described as fair by students. The behaviour of students during the evaluation was noted by inspectors as exemplary.

The student management team includes class tutors, assistant year heads and year heads. There has been some development of the roles in this area. Class tutors retain a pastoral role whilst the assistant year heads monitor attendance and year heads address discipline issues. These roles are extended at times to include other duties. There is scope to develop these roles further to strengthen the bonds between class group and tutor and also to develop the role of assistant year heads and year heads. The introduction of short tutor periods may assist in this development.

The school's students' council is well established and properly constituted. Currently, three members of the students' council are reviewing its constitution in keeping with developments in the school. Good opportunities for leadership are offered to students. All year groups are represented and in addition, a head boy and a head girl, selected by teachers, are co-opted on to the council. The students' council is well organised and effective. Issues are raised and resolved with the principal as appropriate. The council has been very effective in fundraising both for charity and to add to students' facilities in the school. The council has been involved in some policy development but there is scope to develop this further.

The current procedures for recording attendance are time consuming and involve the class teacher, SCP staff, assistant year heads and year heads. However, this focus on attendance has achieved a significant reduction in student absenteeism in 2010/11. This is good work. The school has plans to introduce a digital system to streamline this process. The school should implement this plan as a matter of priority. When the digital system is put in place, it is recommended that the roles of tutor, assistant year head and year head and others involved in recording and monitoring attendance be reviewed to facilitate other work with students such as mentoring and supporting students' academic achievement.

Student retention is supported by the School Completion Programme (SCP). The Deeside SCP is based in the school and there are three members of staff available. They provide a raft of appropriate supports to those individuals and groups of students in need. It is good to note that the efficacy of the interventions put in place is constantly monitored and reviewed to ensure that students gain best advantage from the resources provided.

The Parents' Association was established at the inception of the school and is affiliated to the national body. Regular meetings are held and are well attended. The principal also attends meetings to support their work. The Parents' Association is involved in fund raising and provides practical support at school events. This is good work. The Parents' Association has also been involved in some policy formation, but its role in this area needs to be strengthened.

The school provides an effective set of communication channels for parents. This includes text messages, newsletters, school magazine, the school journal, letters, phone calls, open days and information evenings.

Parent-teacher meetings are held for each year group as appropriate. It is good to note that the school has improved parental attendance and engagement at these meetings. Initiatives such as Maths for Fun help parents to become involved in their child's education. This is a positive feature of the work of the school.

The school has established a good network of community links in the area. This was considered an important priority by all of the parties encountered during the evaluation.

Very good links have been established with the relevant outside agencies to support students.

Senior management has prepared documents which report on and evaluate all aspects of school life and work. This shows evidence of good evaluative thinking. Some other good examples of self-evaluation were also identified. It is now recommended that the school develop the use of data to support their evaluation work. Furthermore, it is recommended that future whole-school review and self-evaluation be led by senior management's vision for the school. Such a process should include contributions from the whole teaching staff. Self-evaluation should begin to focus on specific outcomes for students such as identifying trends in students' chosen subject levels. This should then be used to inform subject department planning.

1.4 Management of resources

A small number of students are not receiving twenty-eight hours of tuition time. The school must comply with circular M29/95.

The staff handbook has recently been reviewed and an induction pack is provided for teachers who are new to the school. These documents are very useful and outline the structures in the school to support teaching staff. The school's plan to develop a digital induction handbook will enable efficient updating and distribution. Currently the principal provides an induction programme for teachers who are new to the school. Whilst overseeing this important duty, senior management should consider delegating this role to a post holder.

In many areas, deliberate efforts are made to deploy teachers in line with their subject specialisms. This is good work. To ensure that students are provided with the best opportunities possible, it is recommended that teachers' expertise is maximised in all subject areas.

The school's administration staff, caretaker and cleaner are very effective and make a very strong contribution to the running of the school. The challenges involved in maintaining an old building and the efforts to improve the current staffing arrangements are acknowledged.

The school building is in good repair and is operating at full capacity. The school is currently engaged in planning for a significant extension. Over recent years it has benefited from significant improvements through the summer works scheme. It is recommended that the Home Economics room and the Guidance suite are targeted for investment as soon as funding presents. A notable feature in the school is the decorative work developed and provided by the art department. The provision of these artefacts significantly enhances the school's visual environment. This is good work. Consideration should be given to installing signage to indicate the entrance and reception area of the school.

The school has a large gym which is well maintained. A priority identified by various parties was the development of an outside playing pitch. The school is progressing this issue.

Almost all subject areas are well resourced. Good procedures are in place for the procurement and maintenance of consumable materials and equipment.

The school has used the ICT grant to install digital equipment in every classroom. It has a large number of data projectors and interactive white boards. This is very good work. CPD for teachers to use ICT in their subject areas is ongoing.

Fire drills are carried out regularly. The school has developed a health and safety policy as well as a statement of safety and both are updated each year. Relevant information is displayed at various points in the school building and is available in the staff handbook. Annual risk assessments are carried out by a designated post holder with the assistance of subject teachers. This is good practice. Hazards identified should be addressed as a priority by the various subject departments in collaboration with management. Some health and safety issues need to be addressed such as marking safe operational areas in one of the practical rooms and repairing trip hazards in various areas of the school.

The school has a very well established Green Schools Committee. The school has achieved two green flags and, commendably, is working on the third.

2. QUALITY OF SCHOOL PLANNING

2.1 The school plan

The planning process has been collaborative to some degree but there is scope to develop this element of the process further. It is recommended that representatives from the whole school community be included in school development planning.

The school's current identified priorities reflect its mission statement. Planning for the expansion of the school to cater for the envisaged increased enrolment and the development of educational standards were identified as the main priorities. It is recommended that the DEIS plan be used to develop specific educational targets for the school plan.

The school has developed a number of policies and many more are in draft format. Good work has been carried out but in recent times this has been hampered by the loss of personnel. It is recommended that an audit of policies be carried out to establish those that are completed and require ratification. All policies should be collated in one location and assigned to the permanent and developmental divisions of the plan. A clear time framework should be established for development, evaluation and review of policy. The status of the policy including information such as the dates of ratification and review should be clearly marked on all policy documents.

The school has developed a three-year DEIS plan. Targets and strategies have been established for all eight of the required areas. To further develop this good work, it is recommended that the targets set be constructed so that they are measurable and time-bound. It is recommended that the data gathering process is reviewed to enable better target setting.

It was evident during the evaluation that there were a large range and number of interventions taking place to support students. There was anecdotal evidence and some data available that suggested that these strategies are having a positive effect on students' progress. However, the impact of these strategies should be analysed using evidence-based methodologies. The school should develop the systems in place to collect and analyse data. In this way, the school can accurately evaluate the use of its resources and further progress interventions in the future.

In its review of target setting, the school is encouraged to include a broader range of tests and to consider the role of alternative measurements such as teacher-generated criterion-referenced tests or other reliable measures developed by the school to assess progress in literacy and numeracy.

Confirmation was provided that the board of management has formally adopted the *Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-primary Schools* (September 2011) without modification. The school is compliant with the requirements of Post-primary Circulars M44/05 and 0062/2006). However, it is recommended that the school provide input on *Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-primary Schools* (September 2011) to all staff including new staff each year. The ancillary staff should have input on *Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-primary Schools* (September 2011) as a matter of urgency. School authorities provided evidence that arrangements are being put in place to ensure compliance with the requirements of the recently published Circular 0065/2011 and *Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools* as a matter of priority. The school intends that the name of the Designated Liaison Person will be displayed in a prominent position near the main entrance to the school as a matter of urgency.

The school is in the process of developing a steering committee for planning. This is a very positive step towards sustainable progress in this area. Terms of reference should be developed to establish the direction and remit of this committee and consideration should be given to integrating the planning framework for DEIS and strategies for school self-evaluation into the planning process. There is scope for greater involvement of the school partners in school policy development. It is suggested that the achievements of school development planning to date should be shared with the whole school community to help support and recognise school development planning as the main driver of future development. The school website would be a useful channel in this regard.

3. QUALITY OF CURRICULUM PROVISION

3.1 Curriculum planning and organisation

Ardee Community School offers the full range of programmes and a very broad range of subjects to cater for the needs of the students enrolled in the school. This reflects the inclusive ethos of the school and its desire to provide for the diversity of its students. It is also noted that there is very good equality of access for all students to subjects and programmes.

Due to a loss of personnel, senior management has had to take responsibility for the LCA, LCVP and the TY programmes. This situation is not sustainable in the long term. It is recommended that these duties be delegated in the context of a post review.

Subject departments are established and time is provided by senior management for planning and collaboration. Curricular plans were made available during the evaluation for all subject areas. These were based on the template developed by the School Development Planning Initiative. There is scope to develop the quality of planning for teaching and learning in all subject areas. It is recommended that learning outcomes linked to methodologies, resources and assessment be developed for all subjects and programmes. Subject planning folders should include results analysis, common examination papers, a catalogue of shared resources and subject development plans for the longer term. It is further recommended that this planning be led by senior management and that attainment as well as a whole-school approach to literacy and numeracy be prioritised.

It is noted that the school is at the very early stages of analysis of students' results in the state examinations. For this process to be effective, a whole-school strategy should be put in place to analyse results. Such a strategy should examine, for example, results from pre-entry tests, the numbers taking higher level, trends, comparison with previous years and suggestions for improvement.

The curriculum is reviewed on an ongoing basis. This review has resulted in positive outcomes for students such as the reintroduction of the TY programme and the introduction of Italian *ab initio*. However, the curriculum for first-year students remains overloaded. First-year students take eleven compulsory subjects including History, Geography and Business Studies and four optional subjects for the whole year. Towards the end of first year, students re-choose their optional subjects. This means that they study three subjects for a whole year which they will not continue to Junior Certificate level. Evidence was provided to suggest that this is impacting negatively on students' learning experiences and that some students experience disengagement. In addition, as a result of such a broad curriculum, the time allocation provided for some subjects is not optimal. It is recommended that a review of the first-year curriculum be carried out. It is suggested that the school establish a board of studies, within its structures for school development planning, to look at students' learning experiences. A review of first year should be carried out initially; in time, all areas should be examined. It is important that students are provided with a meaningful educational experience in sampling the optional subjects. In best practice situations, this is achieved with careful planning by the subject departments concerned. All members of the department should contribute to the development of a sample programme which ensures that students gain an appropriate experience of the subject. These plans should be included in the subject department plan. In light of the impending developments at junior cycle, the document *Towards a Framework for Junior Cycle* should also be referenced in this review.

The school operates a well-organised JCSP programme. The JCSP becomes targeted in second year after students' subject choices are decided. It is recommended that a review of provision for JCSP be carried out along with the review of the first-year curriculum. In this way positive interventions can be implemented in first year so as to give students the required support as early as is possible.

First-year students are arranged into mixed-ability class groups which is good practice. Students are banded into ability groupings after the first-year summer tests for Irish, English and Maths. Irish, English and Maths are concurrently timetabled.

The senior cycle programmes are planned for and organised in accordance with regulations and programme guidelines. The school is commended for offering the widest possible range of curricular programmes at senior cycle and in so doing, is catering for the needs of the diversity of its students.

The school acknowledges that the current timetable does not follow best practice for all subjects. It would appear that the number of restrictions imposed on the timetable has resulted in a less than ideal arrangement of class periods per subject per week. A review of the construction of the timetable is necessary. This is a key recommendation for the school at this time and has the potential to greatly enhance students' learning experiences.

3.2 Arrangements for students' choice of subjects and programmes

On entering first year, students choose from four subject options. At the end of first year, students can choose four subjects from a wider range of optional subjects. In senior cycle, students are given an open menu from which to choose their optional subjects. Subject bands are then created from which students choose one subject from each line. This is designed to offer students the best chance to achieve their subject choices and is good practice. The arrangements made by the school to inform students and their parents of the implications of their subject choices are very good. The school's guidance department makes a very strong contribution to this process, by providing specific input at strategic points and by providing relevant and timely information for parents.

3.3 Co-curricular and extra-curricular provision

The school provides a very wide range of extracurricular and co-curricular activities for students. These include academic, sporting, environmental and cultural activities. Students have achieved success in local, regional and national competitions and events in a large number of disciplines and activities. A large proportion of teachers are involved in the provision of these activities in their personal time and their generosity is commended. It is good to note that targeted students are encouraged to participate as appropriate.

4. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN SUBJECTS

4.1 Planning and preparation

The school facilitates subject department planning meetings and most of the subject departments evaluated meet regularly, with the exception of SPHE. This is essentially due to the size of the teaching team and teachers' commitments to their other subject areas. The development of a core planning team should alleviate this problem.

In some of the lessons evaluated, preparation for learning was very good. The range of resources used in these lessons took the diversity of students' learning styles into consideration and were chosen to reinforce learning and to engage students.

Subject plans have been developed but are at various stages of development. All subjects should integrate an outcomes based approach into plans and link these to the assessment procedures and methodologies being used. Plans should also indicate how the differing learning needs of students are being catered for.

Where relevant, TY planning was praised by inspectors. In almost all subjects visited, programme plans were age-appropriate, but the first-year English programme is not sufficiently challenging and needs to be reviewed. As part of whole-school planning, all subject departments should indicate how they are fulfilling their obligations under DEIS with regard to planning for literacy and numeracy and should include this information in the plan. The school should ensure that these, and all DEIS targets, are measurable, realistic and time-bound.

Some subject department plans take into account students with special educational needs when referring to classroom planning. This is an area for development for all. In addition, each department should seek the advice and support of the special needs team and the qualified resource teachers to help them identify subject-generic and subject-specific strategies to promote inclusive classrooms. Subject departments should also review their planning in relation to mixed-ability teaching and make reference to the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment's *Guidelines for Teachers of Students with General Learning Disabilities* (2007) as a planning resource.

Classrooms are teacher based where possible and almost all classrooms are well managed. Best practice was observed where the space provided had been developed into a stimulating learning environment for students. This included good management of the space and the display of students' work.

4.2 Learning and teaching

Good quality teaching and learning was evident in most of the lessons observed with many instances of very good practice noted in individual subject inspection reports. Best practice saw learning outcomes shared with the students at the outset and revisited towards the end of lessons to assess students' progress and understanding. This practice should be extended across all subject areas.

The pace of lessons observed was generally good. It was noted however, that in some lessons there was significant scope to vary the pace and the pitch of lesson presentation so as to fully meet students' needs. This is an important consideration to ensure that the lesson content and the lesson activities are accessible to all students. The school's imminent whole-staff CPD on differentiation should assist teachers in formulating strategies to this end.

Questioning was used to stimulate learning and provide interaction with students. A good balance was maintained between global and individual questioning. The use of lower-order and higher-order questioning was also noted. Teachers targeted questions at named students to involve them in class discussion and keep them on task. Students were appropriately affirmed for their efforts. It is important that sufficient time be allowed for responses to higher-order questions as they demand a greater level of analysis on the part of the students.

To avoid the development of a culture of over-reliance on the teacher, efforts should be made to encourage students to raise their expectations and to take more responsibility for their own learning. In the most successful lessons, good use was made of a variety of student-centred activities. This created a balance between teacher and student input. Examples were seen of students engaging in their own learning through the challenge of individual, pair or small group discussions and tasks. Such strategies encouraged independent or semi-independent learning and were most effective where roles were assigned by the teacher and tasks were time bound. Handouts, ICT and the whiteboard were also used to scaffold students' learning. A wider use of these and additional strategies is encouraged across all departments to vary the students' learning experience.

Students generally exhibited levels of knowledge and skills consistent with their abilities in the various subject areas. Their responsiveness to teachers' questions, their contributions to lessons and their competence in undertaking set tasks demonstrated that learning was taking place.

There was some evidence of targeted strategies being used to develop literacy levels and to facilitate students in accessing the language of the curriculum. There is significant scope however for the wider deployment of these strategies. A whole-school approach to the development of both literacy and numeracy needs to be a focus of future subject department discussion and planning.

The classroom atmosphere and management were positive with a good student-teacher rapport evident. This reflects the school's care, commitment and concern for students' progress and achievement. Many of the classrooms visited provided a rich learning environment through the display of students' work, posters and other supporting materials. This work is commended.

4.3 Assessment

Currently the school does not have a whole-school assessment policy. However, some subject departments have developed assessment policies. One of the subject departments inspected has developed good policies and procedures to monitor, record and support students' progress. It is recommended that a whole-school assessment policy be developed with specific reference to the requirements of each subject area. The range and the modes of assessment to be used in the various subject areas should be discussed and agreed amongst all teachers. Some good assessment for learning (AfL) processes were observed during the evaluation and these should be extended to all subject departments. In one subject area, the teacher-generated examinations developed were pitched too low for some

students' abilities. It is recommended that differentiated approaches be implemented to enable all students to be challenged appropriately.

In one of the subject areas evaluated, individual teachers observed best practice with regard to recording attendance and examination results. It is recommended that clear procedures for recording and monitoring students' effort and achievement be developed for all subject areas. Records should then be used to inform planning for teaching and learning.

5. QUALITY OF SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS

5.1 Inclusion of students with additional educational needs

The school has a very positive attitude to inclusion and welcomes all students. This is reflected in the school's well established autism unit. It is unique to the county and has been very successful in providing an appropriate and inclusive education for the enrolled students. A policy on special educational needs is in place and is scheduled for review. In addition to reviewing current practices, this review should focus on evaluating the communication channels between the special education team, the special needs assistants (SNAs) and the mainstream teachers. In this way, teachers' awareness of students' learning styles and particular needs will be enhanced.

The school has very good systems in place to identify students with specific needs. The transfer of students from primary school is very well managed and appropriately used to gather relevant information. Students are also tested and referred by subject teachers or year heads.

The special education needs team comprises five teachers with specialist qualifications. Co-ordination of the team is assigned to a post-holder who is allocated time for this duty. The team do not have timetabled meetings but meet very regularly and where appropriate, these meetings are minuted. The co-ordinator has developed registers to organise and track the provision of supports. It is good to note that the co-ordinator is also a member of the care team which facilitates good sharing of information.

There are eighteen teachers involved in the delivery of learning support. It is recommended that this team be reduced so that a core team can be established to facilitate a more co-ordinated approach. It would also enable better continuity for students.

The school has been allocated six SNAs, all of whom are qualified for their positions. Two of these SNAs are assigned to support students in the autism unit. The remaining four provide care assistance to thirteen individual students in the mainstream school. The SNAs contribute significantly to the inclusion of students with special educational needs in the school.

The facilities to support students with special educational needs are good. The special education needs department has developed the spaces provided into positive and attractive learning environments for students. This is commended.

The autism unit is well established. A safe and happy environment facilitating a broad and balanced interest range and skills for life is a priority for the unit. The school makes great efforts to integrate these students with their peers in mainstream classes. The unit is well organised and provides a very welcoming learning environment. Many staff members have had input into the teaching and learning of students who are on the autism spectrum. The school's planned input on differentiation will support the teaching and learning of these students as well as the mainstream students in the school.

The school operates a number of models of provision for students with special educational needs and for those who require learning support. This includes small classes and individual and group supports. Students who are exempt from Irish receive individual tuition in literacy and numeracy during the Irish class time. Other students may be withdrawn or, with their parents' consent, opt out of a subject to receive support. It is good to note that the school endeavours to keep the numbers of students in this situation to a minimum. The school's policy to offer students an open menu of subjects and to maintain the full range of subjects if possible is commended. All students in first year benefit from initiatives derived from the JCSP. Consideration could be given to reminding teachers of this approach to ensure that they are fully aware of the resources and supports available.

5.2 Guidance and student support in the whole-school context

The school has an allocation of one and a half Whole-Time Teacher Equivalents (WTE) for Guidance. This is shared between two qualified guidance counsellors, one of whom has a full-time position in Guidance. Although relatively new to the school, they have settled well into their duties and form a committed and cohesive guidance team. They provide very good supports for students at the school.

The guidance department has developed a guidance plan which is nearing completion. This document should be completed and ratified by the board as soon as is possible. The plan outlines the roles and responsibilities of all involved in delivering the guidance programme in the school. The role of the guidance counsellor includes timetabled class contact time, individual and group counselling and involvement with the educational support team. As there is a need to increase the level of personal counselling for students, the guidance team is putting plans in place to access further counselling support for students to maintain provision.

The guidance team works out of two designated adjoining offices. As a matter of urgency, to preserve student confidentiality, the sound proofing of these offices is recommended. To further improve the facilities for students, it is recommended that the guidance suite be provided with designated ICT as funding presents. This would facilitate small groups of students to access the relevant guidance-specific information.

All of the TY students, LCA students and all sixth-year students have timetabled Guidance. During these periods, students are advised on various career and college options and examination and interview techniques and are given a number of aptitude and personality tests. The Guidance team also block books the computer suite so that students can access the relevant on-line career information. Guidance provision for LCVP students is the same as for all other senior cycle students. Consideration should be given to providing LCVP students with specific class contact time with the guidance department as part of the LCVP curriculum. Junior cycle students are exposed to guidance in a cross-curricular manner through timetabled Social, Personal and Health Education, Religious Education and Civic, Social and Political Education and through the regular interventions of the guidance counsellors. The programme provided for junior cycle students is very appropriate and designed to help students make positive decisions about their lives and education. In collaboration with the other departments and agencies in the school, a number of special programmes are provided such as Love for Life and Rainbows.

The school has a very well-established and very effective care team. The team is large to facilitate input from the relevant personnel and meets each week. Meetings are minuted, good records are maintained and students' progress is systematically monitored. Communication between the various agencies and staff members is very good. This ensures that all of the supports for students available are fully integrated into the school and

targeted appropriately. Communications between parents and outside agencies are timely and effective. The care team has been involved in the implementation of a number of whole-school initiatives such as Anti-bullying Week and Friends for Life. The work of the care team is core to the effective operation of the school.

The school has access to a full-time chaplain. The chaplain's role includes teaching religious education, organising prayer services and Masses, school retreats, meeting students on an individual basis, and working closely with the pastoral care team in the school.

The school has access to a number of student support initiatives through DEIS. The local SCP co-ordinator is based in the school as is the school's HSCL co-ordinator. This facilitates good working relationships between school staff and the support co-ordinators. It also facilitates very good links with other schools and agencies in the locality. Evidence provided during the evaluation showed that good collaboration between these agencies and the school is prioritised in order to best support students. Both agencies operate a self-review system in order to ensure that the interventions taking place are effective. This is good practice.

The SCP co-ordinator and the HSCL co-ordinator organise and manage a large raft of targeted interventions for students potentially at risk. These are carefully targeted, well organised and are very well embedded and integrated as effective supports at the school. Good links are made with the special education team, year heads and the care team to ensure effective support for students.

The transfer programme for first years deserves special mention as a very positive way of introducing students to the school. This programme includes visits to the primary schools, home visits where necessary, an orientation day, a three-day induction programme, information events for parents and students and a specially developed work book to help students process the experience and to introduce students to the various support personnel. The school has developed a mentoring system for first-year students by sixth-year students. This is reported to be working very well and has contributed to the successful integration of first-year students into the school. This approach is indicative of the dedication and commitment to the care and welfare of students in operation at the school. Other supports include a lunch club for first years, supervised study, a homework club, and various personal development and social skills programmes.

During the evaluation, it was clear that student wellbeing is a priority for the whole school community and that the pastoral roles of the year heads, assistant year heads, class tutor, guidance counsellors, HSCL co-ordinator, chaplain, learning-support and resource team, Rang Cillian Behaviour Support Team, SCP team and the Autism team contribute to the effective support of students. In summary, care for students is a core strength of the school.

6. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The school's mission is commendably inclusive and this approach is reflected in all aspects of education provision.
- Senior management forms a committed and hardworking team that is positively managing change in the school.
- The school staff presents as open and dedicated.

- A whole-school approach to students' behaviour was evident and students' behaviour during the evaluation was exemplary.
- The school has achieved significant improvements in areas such as attendance, to support students' progress.
- The school is committed to school improvement and has begun to develop a culture of self-review.
- Significant progress has been made in school planning.
- The school offers the full range of programmes and a broad range of subjects.
- There is very good equality of access for all students to subjects and programmes.
- Subject departments are well supported.
- The curriculum is reviewed on an ongoing basis and has achieved positive outcomes for students.
- The school provides a very wide range of extracurricular and co-curricular activities for students. Students have achieved success in local, regional and national competitions and events in a large number of disciplines and activities.
- Good quality teaching and learning was evident in most of the lessons observed.
- The Autism unit is very well established and integrated into the school.
- The structures in place to identify students with additional educational needs are very good.
- The guidance plan is near completion and evidences very positive provision for students.
- The care team is very well established and care for students is a core strength of the school.

As a means of building on these strengths and to address areas for development, the following key recommendations are made:

- The board should assume a greater leadership role in developing teaching, learning and attainment within the context of the DEIS planning framework.
- A review of the work load of senior management should be undertaken and duties should be delegated as appropriate.
- The duties attached to the schedule of posts should be reviewed on a whole-school basis and measures taken to support the involvement of middle management in whole school decision making.
- The school's plan to introduce digital systems to streamline various school operations such as recording attendance should be implemented as a matter of priority.
- The school should comply with circular M29/95 and a review of the restrictions on the timetable should be carried out.
- The school's planning process should be reviewed and include the whole school community, as appropriate, in the policy development process.
- Planning should ensure co-ordination of provision within and across subject departments and seek to develop specific educational targets for the school. The data gathering process should be reviewed to enable better analysis and target setting. Led by senior management, subject department plans should be developed further.
- The school should provide input on *Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-primary Schools* (September 2011) to all staff including new staff each year. The ancillary staff should have input on *Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-primary Schools* (September 2011) as a matter of urgency.
- A review of the first-year curriculum should be carried out and inform the review of the timetable.

- A whole-school approach to the development of literacy and numeracy should be implemented in all subject areas.

Post-evaluation meetings were held with the staff and board of management when the draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation were presented and discussed.

7. RELATED SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORTS

The following related Subject Inspection reports are available:

- Subject Inspection of English – 7 December 2011
- Subject Inspection of Home Economics – 06 December 11
- Subject Inspection of Social Personal and Health Education – 9 December 2011
- Subject Inspection of Special Educational Needs – 02 February 2011

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 Ardee Community School welcomes the affirming, positive and constructive report following the Whole School Evaluation undertaken by the Inspectorate in December, 2011.

The Board acknowledges its commitment to the school. It is particularly pleased that the work being done by the whole school community was appraised and affirmed.

It was particularly pleased with the following findings of the evaluation team:

- The Board is very supportive of the school and is dedicated to addressing issues which impact on the operation of the school.
- The teachers present as an open and dedicated staff.
- The school's admissions and enrolment policy is appropriately inclusive and welcomes all students.
- A whole school approach to promoting positive behaviour was evident. Students were affirmed, supported and challenged appropriately. The behaviour of students during the evaluation was noted by the inspectors as exemplary. The use of the positive commendation and rewards system was particularly noted.
- The school provides an effective set of communication channel for parents.
- The school has established a good network of community links in the area.
- The school's administration staff, caretaker and cleaner are very effective and make a very strong contribution to the running of the school.
- The school offers a full range of programmes and a very broad range of subjects for the needs of students enrolled in the school, with very good equality of access for all students to subjects and programmes.
- The school provides a very wide range of extracurricular and co-curricular activities for students. These include academic, sporting, environmental and cultural activities. It is noted that a very large proportion of teachers are involved in the provision of these activities in their personal time and their generosity is commended.
- Good quality teaching and learning was observed in lessons inspected and the need to focus on teaching and learning as a key vision for the school was noted.
- The atmosphere and management in classroom was noted as positive, with good student teacher rapport evident.
- The fact that classrooms visited provided a rich learning environment through the display of students' work, posters and other supporting materials was commended.

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

- Prior to the Whole School Inspection, teaching and learning were identified by the Board and Management as key focuses into the future. This continues to be the case. A report on school planning, including DEIS planning is made to the Board at each meeting.
- A full review of the schedule of posts will take place. Some preliminary work has been done on this.
- An electronic system for recording attendance is due to come on stream from Halloween.
- The non compliance with Circular M29/95 was a temporary measure involving ten students. It was to facilitate the retention and the offering of minority subjects with small numbers due to the introduction of Transition Year.

- Some progress has been made in the increased involvement of all partners in policy development.
- Considerable work has been done within and across subject departments coordinated by the DEIS planning team in seeking to develop specific educational targets. The necessary data gathering process is also well underway.
- All staff and parents were instructed on the Child Protection procedures. The staff were instructed at the first staff meeting of the new year. Ancillary staff have also been instructed.
- A review of the first year curriculum is underway. We envisage this to be a two year process, ready for implementation in time for the new Junior Cycle in September, 2014.
- The whole school approach to literacy and numeracy has been implemented, and there are strategies for both in place across all subject areas.