

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

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

REPORT

**Saint Caimin's Community School
Shannon, County Clare
Roll number: 91447I**

Date of inspection: 25 April 2012



Whole-School Evaluation

Management, Leadership and Learning

A whole-school evaluation of management, leadership and learning (WSE-MLL) was undertaken in April 2012 in Saint Caimin's Community 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

St Caimin's Community School is a co-educational school with an enrolment of 700 students representing a diversity of cultural backgrounds. It first opened in 1985. A new school was later built, through a public private partnership arrangement, on the same site as the old school, opening in 2002. The trustees of this modern co-educational school are the Bishop of Killaloe, the Sisters of Mercy, and County Clare Vocational Educational Committee.

1. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

1.1 Key Findings

- The board of management functions very effectively.
- Very good leadership and management capabilities are demonstrated by the principal and deputy principal.
- Self-evaluation has been established as a whole-school process and very good progress has been made on school improvement planning in the space of a few months.
- The school is at an early stage of activating subject and programme planning as contributors to school improvement.
- Most departments have either fully implemented or made significant progress in relation to the recommendations made in previous evaluations.
- The school's wide curriculum and its facilities along with the extensive range of sports, extracurricular and co-curricular activities organised for students and aspects of its pastoral care structures are particular strengths.
- The quality of teaching and learning in almost all lessons observed ranged from good to excellent.
- Very serious attention is paid to ensuring a safe environment for students and staff through whole-staff risk assessments and through proactive work by school management.
- Parents indicate high levels of satisfaction with how the school is run and with how their children are progressing.
- Students indicate very high levels of satisfaction in relation to how the students of the school get on with each other.

1.2 Recommendations for Further Development

- To move the school improvement plan forward, the school should adopt a cycle of setting specific and measurable targets using relevant baseline data, implementing strategies to address the targets set, and monitoring the effectiveness of the strategies implemented in order to inform review and future planning.
- Subject and programme planning need to be fully utilised as drivers of school improvement.
- A plan documenting how guidance is delivered to students through a whole-school approach urgently needs to be prepared.
- The student council needs to be supported to play a more active, visible role in school life.
- Two learning-to-learn strategies need to be consistently implemented across the school. Subject-specific expectations and practices for the presentation and organisation of student work need to be communicated to students, in conjunction with periodic written feedback from teachers on that work. Also, the teaching of revision techniques along with varied in-class approaches to revision needs to be developed.

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, has received appropriate training, and functions very effectively. Educational expertise, strong community links, and long-serving commitment are key features of the board's membership.

The board has established high-quality communication mechanisms with staff, the parents' council, and its liaison trustee. It plans to disseminate annual reports on the work of the school in future years and to ask members of the board to address assemblies of students and parents on school occasions. These steps will further strengthen the quality of its communication with stakeholders.

The board's active involvement in policy formulation and review, through participation in teams representing all stakeholders, is very good practice.

Confirmation was provided that the board of management has formally adopted the *Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools* without modification and that the school is compliant with the requirements of the *Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools*.

The school's priorities for development

Four main priorities for school development were articulated by the board and senior management at the time of the evaluation. Those priorities encompassed preparing an evidence-based school improvement plan, formulating and ratifying specified policies, sustaining an appropriate level of guidance provision for the coming years, and exploring strategies to improve pedestrian access to and egress from the school.

The school has also identified other areas for development by seeking feedback from students and parents of certain year groups, from the student council, and from staff. Senior

management had planned consultation meetings with all stakeholders to formally synthesise its two sets of priorities to take place in May 2012, shortly after this evaluation was due to conclude. The fact that the school plans to formally agree and communicate its priorities for development for the coming academic year, having engaged in whole-school self-evaluation, is highly commended.

2.2 Effectiveness of leadership for learning

Leadership of staff

The principal and deputy of the school are highly-committed leaders. They work very effectively as a team and promote a culture of hard work and continuing professional learning. They consciously strive to manage staff in a manner that places a high value on supporting staff morale and motivation.

Instructional leadership has been shown by the principal in promoting the integration of ICT into teaching and learning and in preserving and adding to senior-cycle subject options for students. Instructional leadership has been shown by the deputy principal's work in formally mentoring teachers newly-appointed to the school.

Leadership of staff has been shown in the manner in which members of middle management have been guided to function in the school. Year heads' leadership of their year groups is supported by their weekly meetings with all assistant principals and senior management. Also, post holders' willingness to take on different posts to support the changing needs of the school, and the fact that the schedule of posts is revised through whole-staff review, evidences a collaborative school culture.

Senior management communicates with staff effectively. In particular, the principal's monthly newsletters to staff strongly demonstrate commitment to nurturing community by valuing key moments and achievements in the lives of all staff, as well as sharing information on emerging priorities for school development.

While senior management has always encouraged and facilitated staff professional development, it has noticeably taken a more hands-on approach to instructional leadership this year in the area of school improvement. Having attended inservice on the area, the principal delivered a presentation on the need for a school improvement plan to the board of management, staff, and the parents' council of the school. Senior management then sought staff volunteers for a school improvement committee that had assembled an impressive amount of baseline data on school performance in different areas by the time of this evaluation. The fact that studies have also been undertaken by individual teachers to address areas for improvement and that the parents' council is also undertaking work to support specific school initiatives testifies to how a school improvement ethos has taken root in the school. Senior management is commended for building whole-school awareness of the need for school improvement planning through self-evaluation in the space of a few months.

There are two areas for development in the area of school improvement planning. First, the following cycle should be adopted to guide the work. As has already been done by the school in a number of areas, baseline data should be gathered. In particular, more evidence of students' literacy and numeracy skills needs to be gathered and analysed. Specific, measurable targets for improvement should be set, addressing trends emerging from the school's baseline data. Measures or strategies should then adopted by the school, that clearly address the school improvement targets set. Finally, monitoring arrangements

should be agreed in respect of the specific measures implemented, to inform review and future planning.

Second, while some very good practices were observed across some subject department plans in relation to subject self-evaluation and improvement, this is an area where there is significant scope for development. Based on the plans examined during the evaluation, it appears that in a number of instances, subject department planning is a static process, mostly focused on completing and updating content-driven schemes of work. Subject and programme planning now need to be refocused as a central element in the school improvement agenda.

Arrangements currently in place to support subject and programme planning need to be revised to create more opportunities for departments to meet to discuss methods, literacy and numeracy support strategies, self-review, and target setting to address subject-specific and whole-school areas for improvement. Keeping records of meetings and then including them in the relevant subject department plan will be vital. It is recommended that a whole-staff discussion be led on how different subject department planning practices might be transferred across subjects and on how evidence of improvement could be gathered. A member of senior management should take a leadership role to support this expanded remit for subject and programme planning. Such leadership might take the form of organising an annual meeting with each subject department co-ordinator(s) to discuss targets and progress. Evidence from such interviews could then feed into the school's overall improvement plan.

Leadership of students

An effective student-centred transition experience is organised for incoming first-years every year. This is evident from the well-planned contacts, information nights and packs, and planning between year heads and tutors that is engaged in. It is also supported by the finding that almost all parents surveyed agreed or strongly agreed that the school made their child welcome on entry.

A significant strength of the school is its broad curriculum. The subject sampling arrangements in place for students during the first half-term of first year are particularly valued by students, parents and staff.

Over the past two years, a drive to encourage good behaviour through a positive rewards system has been implemented with first and second year students. Staff interviewed reported that this new merit system has had a strong influence on the behaviour of individuals and on developing a co-operative team culture in classes. Awards nights are also organised for each year group for academic, sporting, attendance and other achievements. There would be merit in examining the benefits of positive rewards systems for year groups from third year onward, to build on the culture that has been firmly established in junior years. Also, the issue of more students remaining in the school building at lunchtime, needing spaces to sit down and socialise, should continue to be engaged with.

The guidance counsellor had a very flexible, well-planned individual programme of work in place at the time of the evaluation. However, the way the school delivers guidance to students needs to change, in response to the changes in guidance resource allocation outlined in Circular 9/2012. A whole-school review should be urgently conducted, led by the guidance counsellor and senior management, to identify where areas of personal, educational and vocational guidance are already being delivered or could potentially be delivered by subject teachers. Then a plan documenting how the school will deliver guidance to students through a whole-school approach urgently needs to be prepared. The

roles and responsibilities of different individuals, committees, and systems outlined in the school's existing pastoral care policy could be used as a starting template for the whole-school guidance plan. The school may wish to research the possibility of training student mentors to provide additional support to students in areas ranging beyond first year transition, as is currently the case. Finally, greater use could be made of the school's website and virtual learning environment (VLE) to support guidance provision into the future.

Effective supports in place for students include the early intervention system with absentees, a lunchtime club that promotes the social development of students and weekly, action-oriented pastoral care meetings. Also, many teachers contribute greatly to supporting students through their commitment to extracurricular activities and to extra tuition for students after school. Yet, there is still scope for development in some areas of pastoral care, as evidenced by students' responses to a small number of items on the questionnaires provided to them by the school in December 2011 and by the Inspectorate in April 2012. The school needs investigate these findings further, perhaps by rephrasing questions and re-administering surveys. If similar findings are again identified, then further action should be taken. Reviewing the role being played by class tutors across the school would be useful in this regard. Also, the social, personal and health education (SPHE) department could seek to create more themed awareness campaigns, competitions, and other interventions to address life issues that students have identified needs in relation to.

A democratically-elected student council, representative of all year groups, is operating in the school. However, whole-school awareness of its functions and contributions to school life is poor. To help address this, space on the school website could be allocated for student council use. Efforts should also be made to make more effective use of the dedicated notice board. Items for posting could include the membership of the council, agreed minutes of student council meetings, and its yearly plans. Connecting the election process to the student council more explicitly with civic, social and political education (CSPE) instruction is also recommended, to increase students' understanding of the council's functions.

2.3 Management of facilities

The school campus offers very good supports for teaching and learning and is very well maintained. Displays on school corridors promote a positive, student-centred atmosphere. Similarly, learning is conducted in classrooms where subject-specific learning aids are on display, along with some student work samples.

Very serious attention is paid to ensuring a safe environment through proactive work by school management and through the engagement of all staff in risk assessments. This is very good practice. The attention being invested by the board and the parents' council in addressing the traffic congestion the school is generally experiencing at the end of the school day and on specific occasions is commended.

Very good attention to detail was evident in the school's risk assessment documentation. The actions taken on identified risks should be recorded in the health and safety documentation, to make clear what issues have been dealt with and what issues still need to be pursued. During the evaluation, advice was provided by the inspectorate to subject teachers and school management in relation to a few health and safety issues relating to the woodwork and engineering rooms.

ICT facilities in the school are being increasingly effectively used. To support school improvement planning and implementation, it is advised that systems of data capture and management be designed to enable the comparison of data relating to individual student performance. Also, electronic methods for administering surveys to students, staff and

parents should be investigated, to reduce the need for paper processing in the work of self-evaluation. These areas should feed into the school's general e-learning plan that is due to be composed in the coming months.

3. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

3.1 The quality of learning and teaching

Good or excellent teaching was observed in almost all lessons. Teachers and students were very respectful of each other and a very positive atmosphere prevailed in all lessons.

Lessons were prepared and planned diligently. Effective practices observed in many classes included teachers' establishing and reinforcing classroom routines, giving clear instructions and demonstrations, integrating the teaching of skills with theory and with real-life purposes, using varied multi-media resources to support student learning, and using the whiteboard to record key information in a clearly organised manner.

Good active learning methods, supporting students to learn at their own level, were observed in most lessons. These included questioning styles that distributed a blend of lower and higher-order questions across the student group, checking students' understanding of tasks before allowing them to begin, pair and group work activities, group competitions, project work, and short whole-class revision games. Teachers should share and model these active learning strategies for each other. Such sharing would also help address the weaknesses noted in a small number of lessons in relation to poor questioning practices, allowing teacher-talk to predominate in lessons, and setting an inadequate level of challenge for students.

Student learning was being supported in almost all cases by teachers moving among students during class tasks to monitor students' progress, to answer their questions, and to give oral feedback to the students. Other learning supports observed included linking new learning to students' locality and prior experiences, showing students examples of completed projects using digital photographs to aid them at the beginning of project preparation, setting the requirement that students gather their class, home, and test work in organised folders that teachers were monitoring, and providing good quality study notes and sample revision plans to students.

Two areas for development in relation to supporting students' learning-to-learn skills were identified during the evaluation. First, subject-specific practices and expectations for the presentation and organisation of student work need to be communicated to students, supported by periodic written feedback from teachers on that work. Second, in some classes observed, working on examination questions was the only approach being taken to prepare students for the certificate examinations. The explicit teaching of revision techniques along with varied in-class approaches to revision now need to be developed. For example, supplementing the use of examination questions with mindmapping, graphic organisers, the use of websites, the setting of problems for groups to solve where syllabus content has to be used to answer, and teaching students how to revise material rather than expecting students to revise chapters on their own should be considered. These would help to ensure that students have the critical thinking and higher-order skills as well as the content knowledge necessary to succeed in their examinations.

4. IMPLEMENTATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS FROM PREVIOUS EVALUATIONS

Most departments have either fully implemented or made significant progress in relation to the recommendations made. Senior management and subject department co-ordinators should take a more active leadership role in tracking and encouraging the implementation of recommendations from previous evaluations.

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

Self-evaluation has been formally established as a whole-school process in the school this academic year. It is now recommended that a consistent annual or biannual review cycle of parent, student, and staff responses be established, moving toward electronic collection and processing, to make information as useful as possible.

The school has been quick to begin the work of formal school improvement planning, and this is very good. Good foundations for this work include initiatives undertaken within the school to address absenteeism and to develop staff awareness of learning-to-learn strategies for students. However, three elements still need to be put in place: subject and programme planning as drivers of school improvement, guided by instructional leadership from senior management; the development of a whole-school approach to guidance provision; and greater whole-staff utilisation of learning-to-learn techniques.

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 and Staff of St. Caimin's Community School welcome the positive nature of this report. It captures the essence and dynamics of the school. It acknowledges the operational capacity of the board of management, the organisational effectiveness of management, the expertise and commitment of the teaching staff, and the active involvement of the parents in the running of the school. It furthermore places the students' involvement in their own education and welfare at the centre of the school's core values.

Parents have expressed high levels of satisfaction with how the school is run, and with how their children are progressing. The report recognises that serious attention is paid to nurturing a safe environment for students and staff. This gives reality to the aspiration in the school's Mission Statement: "Each person within the school community can enjoy developing to the fullest, while feeling cared for and safe".

The report acknowledges that teaching and learning is of a high standard. This is very much the product of dedicated teachers who engage in continuous professional development and reflective practice. Furthermore, students drawing on the cultural capital of their parents, do much to support this normative culture of learning.

The report recognises that the school operates a well developed system of School Self-Evaluation (SSE); this acts as a driver of further and future school improvement. Baseline data is collected and analysed with a view to informing future practice. This is a dynamic and responsive process that will guide the future direction of the school.

The report also comments favourably on the excellent facilities available within the school, including good use of ICT facilities in teaching and learning.

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

'Guidance in schools refers to a range of learning experiences provided in a developmental sequence that assist students to develop self-management which will lead to effective choices and decisions about their lives' (Department of Education and Skills).

Heretofore, St. Caimin's, like post-primary schools in general, was provided with staffing resources to provide this guidance. This is no longer the case. It is against this backdrop that the school has prepared a Whole School Guidance Plan which is now available through the school's website. This plan optimises the provision of guidance through the identification and allocation of resources, roles and responsibilities.

Consistent with Circular 009/2012, the plan sets out a range of options for making best use of finite resources in the provision of guidance. The delivery of personal, educational, career and vocational guidance is achieved in class group settings by staff who are specially qualified in this area. Further, some of the curriculum elements of the planned guidance programme are delivered by other teachers such as the SPHE staff. Additionally, collaboration with relevant subject teachers' greatly helps students with the big issues of subject, career and third level. Also, the new careers' portal will provide direction and assistance to both students and parents.

The establishment of the student council in St. Caimin's long predates the enactment of the Education Act (1998) which gave formal effect to the *student voice*. Presently, the council

elections and the role of the council form part of the civic, social and political education programme. This brings a renewed sense of connectedness in the relationship between the council and its electorate. Communication, too, will be improved by utilising the school's website and, also, through class representative feedback coupled with a dedicated notice-board for the council.

As the report points out, the board during the last school year issued questionnaires to parents, students and staff. The resulting data was triangulated to facilitate self-evaluation and evidenced-based school improvement planning. Following consultations with the stakeholders a number of priorities were identified and these are presently being implemented. When this school year has ended the effectiveness of the new initiatives will be evaluated.

Informed by advice from the Inspectorate, as well as Circulars from the Department of Education and Skills, a new cycle of data collection and analysis will inform the future direction of the school. Planning is a dynamic process, influenced by feedback. As envisioned in the report the school will, *inter alia*, continue to focus on setting specific and measurable targets derived from baseline data. This, in turn, will shape future strategies that in due course will themselves be assessed.

Concomitant with these drivers of school improvement, a reimagining of subject and programme planning is now taking place. The report signals that teaching and learning in the lessons observed ranged from 'good to excellent'. Nonetheless, the report makes a number of practical and helpful proposals; these are now being considered by subject departments and programme coordinators. The application of these new modalities will further improve critical thinking and higher-order skills.

In the last school year the school piloted two learning-to-learn initiatives. First, the effectiveness of these are now being evaluated and this will inform how the school will develop this project. Further, a member of staff was appointed recently to a post of responsibility to support the ongoing development of this initiative. Finally, it is envisaged that the practices that will evolve in this area will be embedded in subject and programme plans.

The report went on to indicate that there are effective supports in place for students. Nonetheless, lest any pupil might be in doubt as regards who to contact if they have a worry or a concern, the principal advised each year group as regards the pastoral structures and the approachability of teachers, tutors, chaplain and year heads. Further, the school chaplain regularly draws the attention of students to the ready availability of these supports.