Whole-School Evaluation
Management, Leadership and Learning

REPORT

Scoil Mhuire gan Smál
Blarney, County Cork
Roll number: 62090D

Date of inspection: 23 September 2011
Whole-School Evaluation
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A whole-school evaluation of management, leadership and learning (WSE-MLL) was undertaken in September, 2011 in Scoil Mhuiire gan Smáil. 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

Scoil Mhuiire gan Smáil is a voluntary secondary school which was established in 1969 under the trusteeship of the Sisters of Charity. In 1994 the trusteeship was transferred to the diocese of Cloyne. The school is a co-educational school with an inclusive atmosphere. In the very recent past the school has experienced rapid expansion in enrolment and currently serves 516 students.

1. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

1.1 Key Findings

- The quality of teaching and learning ranged from good to very good.
- The senior management team provides effective leadership for learning.
- The board of management is appropriately constituted and supports the continuing development of the school.
- There is a strong spirit of volunteerism and commitment, as well as a palpable sense of community among staff.
- A major expansion in student numbers has led to significant pressures with regard to room space and accommodation.
- A school development planning process is well-established.
- Student questionnaires indicate very positive feelings about the school among the student body.
- Clear and effective pastoral care structures to support students are in place.

1.2 Recommendations for Further Development

- The school should develop a three-year planning framework which incorporates clear timeframes and responsibilities for specific actions, together with effective self-evaluation structures.
- A developmental priority in the area of teaching and learning should be identified and supported as part of the planning framework.
- Learning environments in classrooms and in the school corridors should be developed on an incremental basis.
- A Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) policy should be developed, as outlined in circular 37/10 and circular 23/10.
• An electronic register of the use of resource hours should be created and a smaller core team should be developed.
• The role of the student council should be further developed and supported.

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 appropriately constituted and displays a strong connection with ongoing school activities. The board meets regularly, is aware of its responsibilities and is committed to meeting these.

An agreed written report is communicated to the teaching staff following each meeting of the board. In addition, the board communicates its activities to the parents’ association. It is suggested that the latter arrangement be formalised through the provision of an agreed report to the parents’ association as well as to the teaching staff. It is recommended that the board should move to publish an annual report for parents outlining the activities of the school community and its progress regarding identified priorities.

The board has supported the development of the school and is particularly engaged by the accommodation and enrolment issues which have arisen due to a very significant rise in student numbers. The board has taken an active role in policy development and review. In addition, the board expressed its interest in the quality of teaching and learning in the school. As a means of further supporting the board’s engagement with teaching and learning, it is recommended that two actions should be undertaken in the future. The board should engage in the analysis of students’ results in the certificate examinations, as is currently undertaken by other members of the school community. In addition, the board should formalise its responses to subject and other inspection reports which report on the quality of teaching and learning. These actions should serve to provide numerous opportunities for the affirmation of the considerable efforts of teachers while also providing valuable information regarding teaching and learning.

Confirmation was provided that, in compliance with Post-primary Circulars M44/05 and 0062/2006, the board of management has formally adopted the Department’s Child Protection Guidelines for Post-primary Schools (Published September 2004). Confirmation was also provided that these child protection procedures have been brought to the attention of management, school staff and parents; that a copy of the procedures has been provided to all staff (including all new staff); and that management has ensured that all staff are familiar with the procedures to be followed. A designated liaison person (DLP) and a deputy DLP have been appointed in line with the requirements of the guidelines.

The school’s priorities for development
The board has identified a number of priorities for development. These include obtaining additional building space in light of the school’s pressing accommodation needs as well as an improvement in facilities for Physical Education. As well as this, the board noted the need to support the ongoing professional development needs of teachers as well as continuing with the development and review of school policies.
2.2 Effectiveness of leadership for learning

Leadership of staff

There is an effective senior management team which provides very good leadership for learning. Senior management displays a commitment to their own continuing professional development (CPD) as well as to the CPD needs of teachers. A wide range of improvements has been supported by senior management, including the introduction of a mixed-ability class-grouping system in junior cycle as well as increased resources for special educational needs and information and communication technology (ICT).

There is good communication across the school community. Parents’ representatives highlighted the openness of the school in listening to their concerns. In addition, there is a striking sense of commitment among teachers which is channelled in a manner which strongly supports students’ learning. In concert with senior management, the teaching staff played a key role in the publicity and improvement initiatives which have resulted in greatly increased student enrolment. Teachers’ commitment to a wide range of extracurricular and co-curricular activities must also be noted and has resulted in a number of prominent national successes.

Due to increasing enrolment, the school has experienced significant changes in the makeup of its teaching staff. Good, informal induction procedures are in place. It is recommended that these should be formalised at both a whole-school and subject-specific level. This should be undertaken in order to consolidate and maintain good practice which currently exists.

The permanent section of the school plan is well-developed and the school-planning process is well-established. In the context of the very good progress which has been achieved in the last number of years, it is recommended that a three-year planning cycle and planning framework should now be adopted to support a developmental school improvement plan. This framework should incorporate clear timeframes, responsibilities and self-evaluation structures. In addition, it is recommended that the selection of a developmental area in teaching and learning should be prioritised as a key element in the plan, to be addressed over the medium term. In the context of the considerable investment undertaken in installing ICT over the last number of years, it is suggested that e-learning presents itself as a viable option in this regard. An e-learning committee could be created to support this work. To support all of these developments it is recommended that a school development planning co-ordinator be appointed.

Leadership of students

There are good education support structures in place. Students’ responses to the questionnaires distributed as part of the evaluation indicate very positive feelings about their experience in the school. An effective pastoral care system has been organised. This includes year head and class tutor structures. A weekly meeting between year heads and senior management is organised which includes the special educational needs co-ordinator and, on occasion, the guidance counsellor. It is recommended that, to further support the care team’s work, the guidance counsellor should be formally included in all such meetings in future.

An admissions policy and documentation to support students’ enrolment have been developed. The school has an inclusive atmosphere. Given the greatly increased demand for places, it is recommended that the admissions policy should be reviewed to ensure clear and objective criteria are in place to meet each stage of enrolment. Beyond this, the
voluntary nature of contributions made during the admissions process should be more clearly reflected in all documentation related to enrolment.

Effective procedures to support students’ attendance are in place. It is recommended that an attendance strategy should now be formulated to consolidate these procedures. Clear policies have been formulated dealing with the care of students in other areas of school life. These include a code of behaviour which incorporates elements of positive discipline. The school is interested in further developing this element of the code. It is therefore recommended that the code should be reviewed with reference to recent guidelines from the National Educational Welfare Board (NEWB).

Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) is provided for students in first year, second year and third year. In the absence of a written policy, it was reported that Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) in senior cycle is delivered as an element of the senior Religion programme. It is recommended that the school should now develop an RSE policy and programme as per Department of Education and Skills circular letter 37/10, incorporating points made in circular letter 23/10.

A special educational needs policy has been developed. School management has been very supportive of the special educational needs department. During the evaluation, students spoke positively about their experiences of educational support. The school has a number of qualified personnel in the area of special educational needs and one of these teachers has assumed the role of co-ordinator. At present the size of the special educational needs team is large. It is recommended that a smaller core team should be developed in the future in order to aid communication within and beyond the team, and to aid the building of capacity in the area of special educational needs. Currently, the system of support used by the school is based on individual and group withdrawal. It is suggested that the addition of team-teaching to this model would maximise the school’s ability to match support to individual students’ needs.

Records of the use of resource hours to support students have been developed. Beyond this, communication processes regarding students with special educational needs are very detailed. To further aid this good work, it is recommended that an electronic register of special educational needs hours should be created. This will support communication between the special educational needs team and mainstream teachers, while also ensuring transparency in the use of these hours. It is recommended that whole-staff in-service training in the area of special educational needs should be accessed.

An appropriately broad and balanced curriculum is offered. An effective optional Transition Year (TY) programme is in place. Students were very positive about their experiences in TY. The Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) is also offered and is appropriately provided for. The scheduling of work experience early in the year for fifth-year LCVP students should be reconsidered in light of the timing of students’ career investigations. At present there are a significant number of cases where students have two or three lessons in a particular subject on one day of the week. It is recommended that, in the future, once current accommodation pressures have been alleviated, senior management should seek to limit this type of arrangement as far as is practicable, particularly in the case of modern languages. Given the recent increase in the school’s student population, the need for careful curriculum planning in the future, in areas such as Mathematics, is clear and senior management is cognisant of this priority.

Appropriate arrangements are in place to support students’ choices and transitions. In first year, students choose a number of subjects prior to entry. It is recommended that current arrangements for subject choice in first year should continue to be monitored with a view to ensuring that students’ decisions are informed by useful experiences of the subjects, as far
as is practicable. An open subject-choice system operates in first year and in fifth year. This is good practice. Appropriate guidance is offered to students and a whole-school guidance plan is being developed.

A student council is in place. Student elections to the council are organised and students have participated in policy decisions. Student questionnaires indicated that there was some scope for development in students’ participation in the affairs of the school. At present the number of student council meetings is relatively limited each year and it is recommended that these should be increased and occur with greater regularity. It is also recommended that training materials from the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST) should be accessed and used with the council.

2.3 Management of facilities

School facilities are well managed. The school building is well maintained. At present, there are significant space restrictions. Both senior management and the board have been, and continue to be, proactive in addressing this concern. A priority area identified by the school is advancing a more litter-free environment. It is recommended that this goal should be pursued through the student council engaging with the Green Schools’ initiative.

A health and safety statement has been prepared and a meeting of those with responsibilities in this area is convened at a number of times each year. It is recommended that a health and safety audit be undertaken, with input from staff members, particularly those with specialist rooms. Minutes of meetings of the health and safety committee should be formally recorded in future.

3. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

3.1 The quality of learning and teaching

The quality of learning and teaching ranged from good to very good. In a very small minority of lessons, increased emphasis should be placed on implementing a clear lesson structure, particularly in relation to intended learning outcomes. Teachers were universally well-prepared for lessons which had clear objectives. In a small number of cases, learning outcomes were explicitly stated by teachers at the beginning of lessons. In all other lessons, the learning intention of the lesson was clear and in many cases extended from previous learning experiences. It is recommended that the learning intention of all lessons should be delineated at the outset for students. This will provide students with a clear awareness of what it is expected they will learn and will make them more secure with regard to their responsibilities for their own learning.

A wide range of resources was used in lessons to support students’ learning. These included ICT, photocopied resources, visual resources, textbooks, worksheets, whiteboard and the blackboard. These were well-integrated into lessons. In a number of instances, ICT was used in lessons with a very high level of expertise.

In a number of instances, students were assigned tasks to complete through individual, pair or group work. This approach was undertaken in a number of different subjects and often facilitated students in working independently or semi-independently based on clear directions and appropriate levels of intervention by their teachers, alongside clear learning outcomes. This was most effective where specific roles were assigned to individual group members. This ensured that all students were engaged with responsibilities to complete during the assignment. In addition, such approaches can act as a support in the development
of students’ literacy skills. In this context it is recommended that the further development of teachers’ skills in co-operative learning should be addressed through CPD opportunities. Indeed, this may suggest a further teaching and learning focus which could be pursued in parallel with, or following, a focus on e-learning.

Lessons were universally conducted in a safe, caring and orderly environment. Classroom management was of a very high standard and teachers were regularly affirming towards students. Relationships between teachers and students were very positive. Teachers’ concern for individual students was often evident and clear classroom routines were in place. Students engaged readily in lessons and often participated enthusiastically.

In a number of subject-specific classrooms, teachers had grasped opportunities to create displays of students’ work and strong learning environments. This is good practice as it promotes students’ self-esteem by providing opportunities to affirm their work. In addition, print-rich environments provide important learning opportunities and allow for the promotion of subject-specific learning goals. The wider creation of such environments is currently somewhat constrained due to necessary limitations in the allocation of rooms, leading to a lack of teacher-based classrooms. In this context, it is recommended that the school should adopt an incremental approach to the wider creation of rich learning environments in classrooms to enhance students’ learning experiences. A further opportunity in this area may be offered through the expansion of current displays in the school’s corridors to incorporate a wider range of subject areas.

Homework was regularly assigned and monitored. Homework journals were used regularly and comprehensively. There were frequent examples of the use of formative comments to support the development of students’ learning in their homework copybooks. This practice should be extended across subject departments. In addition to questioning students, teachers were very attentive to students’ needs where tasks were assigned during lessons. This is good practice.

4. IMPLEMENTATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS FROM PREVIOUS EVALUATIONS

4.1 Management

The board and senior management have engaged with recommendations made in previous subject inspection reports. In most cases, previous recommendations have been advanced. The recommendations arising from an Irish report to assign an Irish room could not be implemented due to accommodation difficulties, but storage facilities have instead been provided for the Irish department to facilitate the sharing of resources.

4.2 Learning and Teaching

In all subject departments, work has been undertaken to advance recommendations in subject inspection reports. In Geography, Special Educational Needs and in Construction Studies, all recommendations have been addressed.

While some work has been done in advancing the Science recommendations, the inclusion of practical work in a scheme of continuous assessment should be implemented. Work undertaken in developing programmes of work is acknowledged and this should be further advanced. In the case of Irish, subject departmental meetings have included discussions of teachers’ practice. The assessment of the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing has been advanced and these developments should continue. Considerable work has
been undertaken in improving facilities for Home Economics. Programmes of work have been further developed and this work should continue.

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

5.1

The school displays a very good capacity for school improvement. As highlighted previously in this report, it is now opportune to develop a planning framework to support the school improvement process over the medium term.

The school’s self-evaluation process has been effective, but largely informal in the past. Monitoring and self-evaluation should now form central components in the aforementioned developmental planning framework. This will support teachers and senior management in identifying strengths and weaknesses, while also maintaining ongoing work that continues to develop the very good teaching and learning evident in the school.

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Appendix

School response to the report

Submitted by the Board of Management
Area 1  Observations on the content of the inspection report

The Board of Management and staff welcome the very positive report on the WSE-MLL inspection. The Board wishes to note the overall positive report on the organisation and running of the school.

The key elements of the school, noted by the report are as follows

- The strong connection of the Board with ongoing school activities and the strong communication links with staff, students and parents.
- Effective senior management, which provides good leadership for learning.
- There is a strong spirit of volunteerism and commitment, as well as a palpable sense of strong community among staff,
- The school priority for development in obtaining additional building space to include improved PE facilities is well identified.
- Good education support structures and effective pastoral care structures in place to support students.
- The positive experience of students in the school, which has an inclusive atmosphere.
- School facilities are well managed but the school has significant space restrictions.
- The quality of teaching and the wide range of resources availed of.

We would like to thank the inspection team for their professionalism, courtesy and thorough report on the running of the school.

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

- Learning environments in all classrooms have been improved.
- A three-year planning framework is being developed by the Board of Management.
- Teaching and Learning is being improved in light of the numeracy and literacy programme being set our by the department.
- A new RSE policy is at a draft stage, which must be seen by all parties before the Board can adopt it.
- The student council is meeting the board with the aim of accessing its work and to investigate new areas of development.
- An electronic register of resource hours has been developed.