An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

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

REPORT

**Saint Columba's College
Stranorlar, County Donegal
Roll number: 62861F**

Date of inspection: 17 May 2012

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DEPARTMENT OF
EDUCATION
AND SKILLS

INSPECTORATE

Whole-School Evaluation
Management, Leadership and Learning

A whole-school evaluation of management, leadership and learning (WSE-MLL) was undertaken in May, 2012 in St Columba's College, Stranorlar. 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 on the findings and recommendations of the report; the board chose to accept the report without response.

Introduction
St Columba's College operates under the trusteeship of CEIST (Catholic Education An Irish Schools Trust). It serves a large rural catchment area. The school offers a range of certificate and curricular programmes to meet the needs of its students, including the Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP), Transition Year (TY) and the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP). The school participates in the School Completion Programme (SCP). Enrolment, which at one time exceeded 1,000 students, remains very positive at 856 students.

1. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

1.1 Key Findings
- The school is well run.
- The quality of teaching and learning is good with many instances of exemplary practice.
- The high level of support for senior management indicates the close cohesion between senior management and members of the teaching staff.
- Care for students is very good.
- The school offers all certificate and curricular programmes, and a wide range of subjects is available to students.
- The impressive campus is well maintained.

1.2 Recommendations for Further Development
- The school must take immediate action to ensure that it is fully compliant with the requirements of all of the circulars in relation to Child Protection Procedures.
- The school should now develop and nurture a culture of middle management.
- Responsibility for school development planning should be included in the school's schedule of posts and be devolved to a post holder.
- In concluding the review of the schedule of posts, the school should ensure that there is equity of work load and that the schedule meets the most pressing needs of the school.
- Within the parameters of school self-evaluation, there is a need for a literacy and numeracy strategy to be developed and implemented.
- The student council should be empowered to engage in meaningful activities.

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 constituted appropriately, regular meetings are held and proper procedures are in place. There is scope for the board to develop links with the school community through, for example, annual meetings with the parents' council and the student council. Following board meetings, an agreed report is communicated to staff. This arrangement should now be extended to the parents' council.

The board was formed in October 2011 and includes four members who have served before. Some training has been provided by CEIST regarding child protection. No policies have been brought for ratification to this board since its term of office commenced. The board is advised to audit all current policies to ensure that they are properly ratified, signed, dated and include a timeframe for review. While applications for places are not currently oversubscribed, it is suggested that, in the next review of the Admissions Policy, the criteria for admission and the order in which they are to be applied, be included.

The board is very supportive of, and committed to, the school, For instance, individual members attend key school events, as required. In addition, the board has dealt appropriately with discipline issues as the need arises. The board has made some contributions to educational leadership within the school. For example, subject inspection reports have been discussed at board level. However, minutes of board meetings do not indicate the degree to which the reports' recommendations were considered. The board is encouraged to fully consider inspection reports and to ensure that steps are taken to respond to findings and recommendations. In addition, following any evaluation, relevant subject departments should submit an action plan and a timeframe for its implementation to the principal, who should provide regular updates to the board. This would ensure that the board is kept fully informed of progress in teaching and learning in the school.
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There is a very active parents' council in St Columba's College and much work has been achieved to date. However, many parents surveyed as part of the evaluation stated that they were unaware of the work of the parents' council. This is unfortunate, given the amount of time and commitment currently being given by the parents' council to the school. It is recommended that the council devise strategies to ensure that the remaining parents become more aware of its activites.

The board of management has not formally adopted the Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-primary Schools (September 2011). The school is not currently compliant with the requirements of Post-primary Circulars M44/05 and 0062/2006 as the school's child protection policy has not been brought to the attention of staff. School authorities provided evidence that arrangements are being put in place to ensure compliance with the requirements of the recently published Circular 0065/2011 *Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools* as a matter of priority.

The school's priorities for development
The school's priorities for development are coherent and focussed. The main areas identified for improvement will contribute positively to the effective operation of the school. These areas include the following: management of current resource provision; the implementation of a literacy and numeracy initiative; evaluation of the success of mixed-

ability classes; increase in the timetabled allocation to English and Mathematics; development of a more structured approach to the management of and planning for students with special educational needs (SEN); and the improvement of the plant. A strategy plan for 2008-2013 has been drafted. However, there is a need to review this plan and to identify the short, medium and long term targets, the personnel responsible for leading the various initiatives, and the success criteria that will be used to measure progress.

Some collaborative work has been undertaken in the area of school development planning. For instance, in tandem with the acquisition of all necessary hardware, an e-learning planning committee was established and work is now well underway in implementing the school's e-learning plan. This level of collaboration is very good. Overall, responsibility for school development planning rests predominantly with the principal. The collaborative practices already established in the school should now be extended to all planning activities and include the parents' council and, where appropriate, the student council.

Almost two years have passed since a review of the schedule of posts was initiated and this work needs to be concluded. The current draft schedule does not fully meet the needs of the school. For instance, the allocation of a post to school development planning is a notable gap. A schedule appropriate to the level of the posts as required by the priorities and needs of the school should now be drawn up.

2.2 Effectiveness of leadership for learning

Leadership of staff
The senior management team comprises an acting principal and an acting deputy principal. The acting principal is in her fourth year in office while the acting deputy principal is in his first year. While both members have received training for their roles, it is recommended that they explore further the networking opportunities available within the National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals (NAPD).

There was evidence that confidence in the senior management team is very high and that the morale of staff is equally high. Both members of this senior management team work very well together and provide clear direction for staff. This is matched by good support in terms of access to, and facilitation of, continuing professional development (CPD), both at individual and whole-staff levels. Classroom management, differentiation and assessment for learning practices are recent examples of themes that were explored to support a positive learning environment.

The senior management team works collaboratively with staff. Examples are to be found in the candid exchanges documented in the minutes of staff meetings, the facilitation of subject department planning meetings, and the open-door policy of both the acting principal and the acting deputy principal. The senior management team carries a very full brief of duties. There is scope to develop and nurture middle management structures in the school so that greater support is provided to senior management. For example, the scheduling of regular meetings of all assistant principals (APs) and senior management would facilitate discussions of a whole-school nature which would, in turn, benefit the development of a collaborative culture in the school. This practice of regular meetings could be extended to year heads to ensure that there is a consistent approach being taken to the management and care of students. Senior management should also ensure that post holders set targets and provide a progress report at the end of each year to the principal. If necessary, further training should be provided to post holders to enable them to carry out their duties effectively.

The middle management team of five APs and fourteen special duties teachers (SDTs) carries a portfolio of responsibilities. However, the workload across the range of posts is

inequitable. All duties should be of a curricular, administrative or pastoral nature, or a combination of all three, and should reflect the grade of the post, taking into account the level of responsibilities involved and the context of the size and needs of the school.

Leadership of students
The code of behaviour is constructed so that positive behaviour is emphasised. This code is perceived by student representatives as fair. Student awards systems have been put in place to recognise achievement. The student questionnaire responses gathered in the course of the evaluation endorse this statement. However, the practice described to the evaluation team of students being sent out of class for misdemeanours conflicts with the published code of behaviour and should be reviewed.

Transition arrangements for students are good and there is close communication with the feeder primary schools. Activities are in place for student leadership development opportunities. A student Buddy system operates and a prefect system is in place. The student council is established but student questionnaire responses indicate that there is scope to develop its potential to give students a greater say in how the school is run.

The school curriculum has been expanded with the needs of students central to decisions made. A broad range of subjects is provided. In generating the school timetable, the practice of splitting lessons across break times should be avoided, if at all possible.

All certificate and curricular programmes, with the exception of the Leaving Certificate Applied programme (LCA), are provided in the school. Although LCA has been offered every year for over a decade, currently, there is insufficient uptake by students to make a class viable. Programmes are well planned and co-ordinated. Review mechanisms are well-established in the transition year (TY) programme. However, the current practice of having formal examinations only in the core subjects of English, Irish and Mathematics should be reviewed. A TY assessment policy should ensure that all subjects are adequately and appropriately assessed. In addition, the allocation of four weeks to work experience should be reconsidered.

A small care team is established and meets each week. There is scope to expand this team to include other staff. The role of the form tutor has diminished over time and should be revisited. It is very good to note that students interviewed during the course of the evaluation, in conjunction with those surveyed in questionnaires, responded very positively when asked if they were encouraged to work to the best of their ability.

Overall, guidance provision is good. However, there is a need for greater collaboration between the guidance and the Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) departments. Very strong links have been developed between the school and the Family Enrichment Centre which is funded by the Health Service Executive (HSE) and which provides valuable support to both students and parents.

The learning support department comprises fourteen teachers, some of whom have obtained further qualifications in this area. Currently, the acting principal retains responsibility for the co-ordination of this department. Given the level of expertise that already exists within the SEN department, the role of co-ordinator should now be devolved to a member of the team. Furthermore, the SEN policy, currently in draft format, should be finalised, to reflect all of the practices in place in the department, and should then be submitted to the board for ratification.

2.3 Management of facilities

The school building has been extended and is well-maintained. There is a welcoming atmosphere and student achievements are prominently displayed. Management is committed to providing the best facilities to enhance teaching and learning and has worked diligently to that end. There has been significant investment in information and communications technology (ICT) and resources in classrooms are good. E-learning is an identified priority in the school plan. The views of parents and students concur on a very high satisfaction rating on the quality of facilities provided in the school.

An office has been made available to all year heads to conduct their business. However, year heads routinely use the general office or the deputy principal's office, a practice which inhibits the effective operation of these offices.

3. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

3.1 The quality of learning and teaching

Thirty-one lessons were evaluated during the course of the inspection. The quality of teaching and learning observed was predominantly in the category of good or very good and, in some instances, excellent. Preparation and planning was good across all lessons observed and in the very best instances teaching methodologies showed very good pacing regarding the delivery of content.

Significant strengths were noted across the range of subject areas. These strengths included the use of learning outcomes to frame lessons and evaluate learning during lessons. Attention was given to the development of vocabulary across many lessons. In the best instances, student awareness and use of subject-specific language was impressive. In a small number of lessons, key words were displayed, were referred to in the course of the lesson, and developed. Some innovative and creative ideas were integrated into lessons and excellent practice was observed when cross-curricular links were made. Good use was made of teacher-devised resources which enhanced the learning experience.

The quality of teaching in almost all practical subjects was very good, with some excellent practices observed. The balance between theoretical and practical activities in the main was appropriate and overall, lessons provided a sharing of experiences for teachers and learners. All activities were relevant to lesson content and successfully linked to everyday concepts. Overall, whole-class input was balanced very well with the provision of individual support and students were challenged to think independently. ICT resources were most effective when they provided prompts for discussions or were used to display pertinent images relevant to the topic.

In English lessons, sound teaching practices were observed, including the use of dictionaries to develop students' language skills and the application of this learning to different concepts. In other language lessons, an appropriate emphasis was noted on the development of students' vocabulary. However, there were limited opportunities for students to develop this vocabulary in free conversation. It is recommended that activities such as group or pair work be developed to provide greater opportunities for students to use the target language. The integrated approach was adopted in some lessons. This strategy should now extend to all language lessons.

A good level of student engagement was evident in the learning process. In the strongest examples, students demonstrated a capacity to make informed contributions on the lesson topics. The development of independent learning and higher-order thinking was evident in

a number of lessons. A warm relationship between teachers and learners characterised the classroom atmosphere in almost all lessons.

Responses to student and parent questionnaires indicated a high level of satisfaction with the quality of teaching and with progress in learning. Areas for development in learning and teaching arise in the context of a minority of lessons observed where classroom practice is dominated by the teacher and few opportunities for interaction with students are created. Learning would be better promoted by providing students with opportunities to process or reflect on the lesson topic. Assessment for learning (AfL) practices can also be promoted through the closer monitoring of homework which, overall, was very good.

An analysis of certificate examination data shows positive trends which illustrate that a high proportion of students are taking higher-level papers and outcomes are very good. This and other statistical information should now be included in all subject department plans and used to inform planning and set appropriate targets.

4. IMPLEMENTATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS FROM PREVIOUS EVALUATIONS

4.1 Management

Almost all of the key recommendations concerning management have now been addressed. However, the provision of English in TY, which is timetabled across two days, still needs to be addressed.

4.2 Learning and Teaching

Many of the key recommendations regarding teaching and learning have been implemented by the subject departments and this is highly commended. However, there remain a number of areas for development which are applicable to all subjects. These include the following: there is a need to broaden the scope of subject plans, to include more than content; references to assessment should provide details of all modes of assessment being used by the subject department; in subjects where teachers provide many resources, students should be required to keep folders; and all subject departments need to ensure that AfL strategies are regularly deployed.

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

The school is at a very early stage in the formal self-evaluation process. This needs to be addressed. For instance, targets for improvement on a whole-school level should be identified, planned for and regularly monitored. The overall effectiveness of the school's strategies for the assessment and monitoring of student achievement should also be considered.

There was very strong evidence to suggest that there is capacity within the school to implement the recommendations of the WSE-MLL. The opportunity now presents itself for the school to revisit some of its priorities for development in light of this report.

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