

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna
Department of Education and Skills

Whole-School Evaluation
Management, Leadership and Learning

REPORT

Loreto Secondary School
Wexford Town, County Wexford
Roll number: 63660A

Date of inspection: 17 May 2013



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

Whole-School Evaluation Management, Leadership and Learning

A whole-school evaluation of management, leadership and learning (WSE-MLL) was undertaken in May 2013 in Loreto Secondary 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, and groups of teachers, parents and students. Inspectors also reviewed a range of school documentation and responses to questionnaires and examined other data in relation to the operation of the school. As part of the evaluation, a range of lessons across a number of subject areas was inspected. The board of management 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

Loreto Secondary School was established in Wexford in 1866 to provide a Catholic education for girls. Part of the school is located in a listed house which dates back to 1792. A new school building on a green field site is currently being progressed. The school espouses the ethos of the founder Mary Ward: "Truth, freedom, justice, sincerity and joy so that the potential of each individual is recognised and respected, where excellence is pursued and where staff, parents and students co-operate for the common good". Currently there are 715 students, drawn from Wexford town and its hinterland, enrolled in the school.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

Key Findings

- The board is proactive in its duties, actively supports educational initiatives and is familiar with the day-to-day operation of the school.
- The appointment of an education officer to work in partnership with management, staff and the school planning group exemplifies the school's approach to meaningful development.
- The work of the principal and deputy principal is characterised by high levels of collaboration, respect and communication.
- There is an imbalance in some tasks assigned to assistant principals and special duties posts.
- First-year students sample all subjects in a forty-one period week and this has resulted in less than satisfactory time provision for many subjects.
- The quality of teaching and learning was good or very good in most lessons observed and, although exemplary practice was noted in a number of lessons, there was scope for development in a few instances.
- Students' performance is monitored at many levels and student outcomes in state examinations are consistently very good, with a high proportion of students taking examinations at higher level.
- The school has the capacity to deliver its improvement agenda.

Recommendations for Further Development

- Aspects of key policies should be reviewed to ensure that a written record of best practice is in place and the admissions policy should be reframed so that the admission process can be clearly understood by all.
- A review of posts should take place to further develop the school's management structure.

- A review by the school planning group of current timetabling especially for first years is advisable.
- To further enhance teaching and learning the very good teaching practices that were observed could be disseminated among all staff.
- An over-arching profiling system that encompasses the monitoring, mentoring and tracking of the academic progress of all students in a coherent manner should be progressed.
- A whole-school assessment policy should be progressed, and assessment for learning (AfL) strategies should be more fully integrated into students' learning experiences.

1. QUALITY OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP

1.1 School ownership and management

Loreto Secondary school is under the trusteeship of the Loreto Education Trust. The board of management is an appropriately constituted body that exhibits a deep sense of loyalty to the school. The committed and active board has a diversity of educational knowledge and expertise to competently oversee the management and development of the educational and infrastructural aspects of the school. Board meetings are held each month where the order of business follows an agreed format. The detailed report from the principal ensures that the board is well informed about all pertinent day-to-day issues in the school.

Formal communication between the board and other stakeholders is very good. After each board meeting a written agreed report is prepared and then shared with teaching staff and the parents' association. Annually, a comprehensive report outlining the main activities of the school is compiled and sent to each parent. Commendably, the aforementioned reports are made available to the general public through the school's website. To further enhance this partnership model, a formal meeting between the board, student council, parents' association and teaching staff could be considered on an annual basis.

The board ensures that policies are ratified and reviewed on a rotational basis and that the relevant stakeholders are involved in the process. Since June 2010, a revised admissions policy is in place. The document outlines the detailed procedures to be followed when enrolling a student in the school. The process outlined is complicated and highly administrative with a number of key timelines that must be adhered to. To clarify the admission procedure, the document should be reframed so that the admission process can be clearly understood by all. To reflect the school's inclusive nature, the board should also reconsider the appropriateness of requiring information regarding the special educational needs of prospective applicants as part of the 'declaration of interest' phase rather than after a place in the school has been offered and accepted. When reviewing the code of behaviour, a greater focus on positive expectations, behaviour and rewards could be enshrined in its content. As the whole-school guidance plan is currently being reviewed, the inclusion of the roles of the class teachers, the chaplain, any details relevant to the delivery of the Social Personal Health Education programme (SPHE) and all linkages to other relevant school policies and procedures should be noted.

The principal and deputy principal have clearly defined roles. Their work as a united team is characterised by high levels of collaboration, respect and communication. The day-to-day management of the school is highly efficient and effective. Senior management is supported by post-holders who diligently discharge their allocated tasks and duties. However, there is an imbalance in tasks assigned to some posts in terms of time expended and level of responsibility. All posts should be reviewed by senior management and staff in consultation with the board to ensure that the current needs of the school continue to be addressed and any imbalances are eliminated. The school does not have a tradition of

having year heads or a middle management system. Links between management, student care teams and students is through the class teacher system. A more formalised approach to devolved responsibility should also be progressed particularly among established post holders so that a formal middle management team is fully established.

A comprehensive and coherent school plan is in place. It details the organisational and developmental aspects of the school and provides a very good reference document on how the school operates for the school community. The school is commended on the manner in which it has embraced the school self-evaluation process. A school improvement plan grounded in research on the attitudes of all stakeholders has been devised by a committee representative of these stakeholders. The eight key areas highlighted for development in the next three years are the teaching of study skills, literacy development, career guidance, homework distribution, grinds, student supports, correction of students' work and teacher well-being. The board's appointment of an education officer to work in partnership with management, staff and the school planning group to progress the areas for development exemplifies the school's approach to meaningful development of its identified priorities. To ensure the successful implementation of the plan, the key whole-school issues related to teaching and learning such as study skills, literacy development and correction of students' work should be prioritised and fully integrated into all teachers' daily practice through guided support from the school's planning team.

The work of the school is supported by an active and vibrant parents' association. There is good communication between senior management and the association. An effective partnership model has been developed through parental participation in many of the school's leadership teams. Each week a parent attends the meeting of the school planning team where their input is highly valued.

1.2 Effectiveness of leadership for learning

Senior management effectively provides good direction and a supportive teaching and learning environment by ensuring that the school is well organised. Good channels of communication exist in the school. A very good staff handbook promotes a consistent approach to student welfare and to the organisational aspects of the school. Teachers have the opportunity to develop leadership through the class teacher system and teacher participation in established and task-based leadership teams.

Leadership teams such as the student care and school planning group meet on a regular basis. Frequent staff meetings provide a forum to discuss many aspects of school organisation and development. A well-planned schedule of meetings for collaborative subject planning is provided. The principal meets annually with the liaison teacher of each subject and curricular programme to review planning and to discuss relevant issues. Senior management is very supportive of teacher attendance at continuing professional development (CPD) events.

A description of the Transition Year (TY) programme is contained in the school plan, while further details on subjects and modules are to be found in relevant subject plans. Some of the subject descriptors should be reviewed to ensure that they meet the overall aims of the programme and an overall plan for the delivery of the TY should be devised.

Subject plans are developed for each subject offered in the school. There is a good culture of collaborative subject planning to promote effective teaching and learning. The quality of this planning was generally good. All plans follow a similar template where methodologies, teaching resources, homework procedures and curriculum topics are listed separately. To further develop subject planning, it is recommended that each of these elements be aligned with the learning outcomes for each topic. From second year, students are allocated to class groups based on perceived ability in core subjects. In these subjects a more strategic co-ordinated approach to planning course content is advisable so as to ensure that movement between bands for students is a viable option.

The school offers a broad academic curriculum. New subjects for consideration are piloted through the TY programme. It is highly valued by students and parents that all seventeen subjects on the junior cycle curriculum are sampled in first year, thus enabling an informed choice of optional subjects in second year. However, accommodating all subjects in a forty-one period week has resulted in less than satisfactory time provision for many subjects. This has been referred to in some previous subject inspections. It is recommended, therefore, that the school planning group initiate a review of current timetable provision, especially for first years. It is noteworthy that the school planning group have already discussed the introduction of new subjects in the context of junior cycle reform.

Senior management facilitates a good range of practices to support the full inclusion of students with special educational needs. Allocated resource hours are used appropriately to ensure student-centred provision. Student learning is further enhanced by the good care provided through the guidance programme and student access to personal counselling. It is noteworthy that in the questionnaires administered as part of the evaluation, a very high percentage of students and parents responded very positively to questions relating to students feeling safe and cared for in the school. Each class group is allocated a “class teacher” who is the main link between home and school. The class teacher is part of the formal pastoral care system.

Students are encouraged and supported by subject teachers to achieve to their highest potential. Outcomes in State examinations are consistently very good with a high proportion of students taking examinations at higher level. However, there is no over-arching system in place to track and monitor all aspects of students’ academic progress. To further develop educational leadership in the school, an over-arching profiling system to monitor, mentor, track and support the academic progress of all students in a coherent manner should be progressed. The profiling system should consider cognitive ability scores in addition to attainment data when students are arranged into ability groups for core subjects in second year.

There are high expectations of student behaviour, application and participation in the school. Students can avail of a range of leadership opportunities such as participation in the student council, the class prefect system and *Meitheal*. The student voice is included in policy development and, commendably, a number of students are members of some of the school leadership teams such as the school planning group. Student learning is complemented by a range of co-curricular, extra-curricular and charity fundraising activities. The commitment of individual teachers and school management to these activities is acknowledged. Nevertheless, the findings of the student and parent questionnaires indicate that a significant number of students do not partake in activities outside of class time. It is advisable that the student council investigates the reasons for these responses. The findings may give an indication of preferred additional activities that students may wish to participate in.

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

1.3 Management of facilities

Despite the impediments of working in an old building which is on several levels, good use is made of existing facilities for educational activity. The school buildings and grounds are well maintained with improvements ongoing to make the building comfortable and energy efficient. The school has two green flags and is committed to delivering green-school

initiatives. An appropriate and up-to-date health and safety statement, based on a risk assessment, is in place.

There has been significant investment in information and communication technology (ICT) in recent years and all classrooms are now equipped with computers and data projectors and most classrooms have internet access. Indoor sports facilities are currently limited and class groups, with the exception of first years and TY, are only timetabled for a single class period of Physical Education (PE). The intended provision of a new school building will allow the school to offer all students the recommended instructional time for PE.

2. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

2.1 The quality of learning and teaching

Thirty-four lessons covering a range of year groups, subjects and programmes were observed. In almost all of the lessons, the quality of teaching and learning was judged to be either good or very good with some individual examples of excellent practice observed. Best practice in teaching featured the use of a range of approaches including guided discussion, co-operative learning, active learning, and the setting of tasks to provide opportunities for the development of higher-order thinking and problem-solving skills. Almost all teachers circulated among students to monitor student engagement and to offer individualised support. Commendably, most of the surveyed second and fifth-year students reported that their classes were interesting. The school planning team should liaise with subject departments to disseminate the very good practices that were observed in the majority of lessons. Through this process effective teaching practices could be further developed among all teachers so that students continue to develop their independent and critical thinking skills.

In lessons where there was scope for development the teaching approach was predominantly teacher-centred. While the majority of students engaged capably with all set tasks, learning could have been enhanced through better questioning, a range of planned student-centred activities and the fostering of independent learning skills.

Almost all lessons were purposeful and well planned with a clear structure. However, only a minority of teachers shared clear and relevant learning outcomes with the students, and many of these did not revisit the outcomes at the end of the lesson. It is recommended that learning outcomes be shared with students in terms of what students need and should know and, as the lesson concludes, the key points of learning should be recapped. Teaching resources, equipment and materials needed for instruction were well prepared in advance. ICT was frequently and effectively used by teachers.

Students were well behaved and co-operative and teachers were caring and supportive of students. Good teacher-student relations were evident. There was a positive working atmosphere in most classrooms and both teachers and students had high expectations for student achievement.

A focus on the acquisition of subject-based vocabulary was integrated into many lessons and helped many students to grasp difficult concepts. While the development of literacy and numeracy is referenced in most subject plans, there is scope for further development in planning for the explicit teaching of subject-specific literacy and numeracy.

Good assessment practices were in place including targeted and global questioning, checking of relevant class work and regular testing. Homework was regularly assigned, collected and corrected. There were, however, few examples of the use of peer-assessment. Also, students could have been more involved in assessing their own learning. In many

lessons, teachers frequently gave students constructive oral feedback, but there were few examples of written formative feedback on students' homework or class work. In addition to these observations, a significant minority of second and fifth-year students reported in questionnaires that teachers did not tell them how they can improve. It is recommended therefore that assessment for learning (AfL) strategies such as written comments that focus on how the students can improve their work be more fully integrated into the students' learning experiences as a means of further enhancing teaching and learning. It is also recommended that a whole-school assessment policy be progressed so as to identify and promote summative and formative feedback processes, and mechanisms to support student learning and attainment.

3. IMPLEMENTATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS FROM PREVIOUS EVALUATIONS

3.1 Management

Progress has been made in relation to many recommendations made in the six previous subject inspection reports, such as the provision of common tests for English in first year and changes in the content of student report cards to reflect progress in PE and SPHE. Recommendations made in the Science and Physics inspection report relating to time in the laboratory for TY students and review of the health and safety statement has been addressed. Outstanding timetabling recommendations in PE should be implemented when the new school building is completed and the issue of time provision for Science in first year could be examined by the previously recommended school planning group.

In all previous subject inspections, recommendations indicated that subject department planning should be more strategic in terms of documenting agreed teaching practices and learning outcomes for the delivery of each topic in the classroom. While subject plans had been progressed on foot of previous recommendations, there is still scope for the development of comprehensive and guiding plans as outlined previously in this report.

3.2 Learning and teaching

It was evident that previous subject inspection recommendations, such as increased use of ICT, the development of student-led and co-operative learning methods, the introduction of a more integrated approach to the teaching of language, and the development of some assessment practices, are being progressed. However, as noted earlier, there is still scope to develop AfL practices such as outlining and recapping on lesson outcomes with students in lessons and the use of formative feedback on students' work.

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

The school is well advanced in its capacity for and engagement with self-evaluation and improvement. The school has engaged with all the stakeholders in a robust self-evaluation process. A variety of self-assessment tools such as questionnaires, focus group discussions and self-reflection aids were used to gather feedback across a number of areas of school life. The process of compiling the school improvement plan was very good and work has commenced on the delivery of its targets. Other praiseworthy self-evaluation practices include the formal annual review of teaching practices and the formal review by each subject department of the numeracy and literacy initiatives used within each subject.

It is evident that the knowledge, vision and professional capacity are available within the school to lead a systematic whole-school approach to progressing the school's own improvement plan and the recommendations made in this report.

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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 considers this to be an excellent report that affirms so much good practice in the school and makes very useful recommendations and suggestions that closely mirror the school's own improvement plan.

It means a great deal to the board that the report notes the very high estimation of parents and students of the care and support that is provided for students. This is very affirming of the support structures in the school as well as the broad range of co- and extra-curricular activities organised and supported so generously by the teaching staff.

However, in relation to the recommendation regarding current timetabling for first years, the board feels that timetabling and planning decisions taken by the school in the months prior to the inspection were not given due recognition. The time provision for all subjects had already been addressed by the school in 2012/2013 when planning for the new Junior Certificate programme. This will mean that the school will be in full compliance with the requirement to provide the stated minimum number of hours (240 or 200 or 100) in all subjects over the course of the three year programme. Furthermore, the practice of offering all subjects to all students in first year has been repeatedly supported by stakeholders in the past. As "student outcomes in state examinations are consistently very good" the board sees no reason to depart from this well-established practice.

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

- As part of the annual review of posts of responsibility, assistant principals have been formed into a management review group that will meet throughout the year to formally assess managerial roles.
- The admission policy will be reviewed to comply with proposed new legislative requirements.
- The school planning group will continue its work on reviewing school policies.
- The school has been proactive over the past year in seeking to introduce an overarching profiling system to track students' performance. It is intended that such a system will be in place before summer 2014.
- The school planning group will continue to lead the teaching staff towards a greater utilisation of assessment for learning techniques and the implementation of a whole-school assessment policy by summer 2014.
- All subject plans will continue to be further developed each year.
- The students' council has been asked to survey the views of students on participation in activities outside of class time. The response to this survey will determine the scale and nature of any future action.
- All matters referred to in this WSE-MLL report will be addressed within the terms of the school improvement plan, 2013-2016.