

**An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna**

**Department of Education and Skills**

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

**REPORT**

**Saint Mel's College  
Longford  
Roll number: 63750B**

**Date of inspection: 25 September 2014**



**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 September 2014 in St. Mel's College. 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***

St. Mel's College is a boy's voluntary secondary school in the town of Longford. It is under the trusteeship of the bishop of Ardagh and Clonmacnoise. In 2015 the school will celebrate 150 years in existence. It is situated on extensive grounds. It has very good links to the local community. The school offers the traditional curricular programmes as well as the Transition Year programme. At the time of the evaluation there were 444 students enrolled.

### **SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT**

#### ***Key Findings***

- The board is appropriately constituted and the trustee gives good support to the board towards the effective provision of education in the school.
- The new principal has a vision for change and quality improvement and a number of positive changes have taken place under his leadership over the last year.
- The commitment and dedication of the middle management team was evident.
- The volunteerism of staff is excellent.
- A number of key timetabling issues were identified over the course of the evaluation.
- The behaviour of students in the school is very good.
- The quality of teaching and learning was good or very good in the majority of lessons observed.
- The school has a good capacity for improvement.

#### ***Recommendations for Further Development***

- The new board should lay out a three year plan that identifies key priorities, the actions agreed to reach those priorities, as well as the person or persons who will lead those actions.
- The management issues identified in this report should be addressed.

- A review of the timetable should be undertaken and a consultative approach to timetabling should be consistently adopted.
- The correct and full use of allocated resource and learning support hours, for the purpose for which they are intended, should be addressed as a priority.
- There should be a good balance between teacher input and student activity in lessons and Assessment for Learning (AfL) principles should be embedded into classroom practice.

## **1. QUALITY OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP**

### ***1.1 School ownership and management***

The board of management is appropriately constituted. The trustee gives good support for the effective provision of education in the school. Board members interviewed have a diverse range of skills and backgrounds and display a good understanding of their roles and responsibilities. Their commitment to the school is evident. The board in place at the time of the evaluation was approaching the end of its term.

The board has adopted a range of policies, and there has been good consultation with the education partners in relation to recent policies. A whole-school guidance plan has been prepared but is still to be ratified by the board. This should be progressed as soon as possible by the incoming board. It is recommended that all policies be dated and contain a date for review. An audit document listing school policies, their date of ratification and date of proposed review should be prepared to facilitate policy development and review. The new board should ensure that appropriate consultation with partners takes place when policies are being prepared.

Board meetings take place regularly. A finance sub-committee manages the finances of the school. The board prepares agreed reports that are shared with parents and teachers. The board has articulated its priorities for the future which include increasing enrolment and infrastructural improvement. It is positive that the present board has adopted an action-planning format to steer and monitor progress at meetings. A similar process of action planning and review should be used for the board's long term priorities. The new board should lay out a long-term plan that identifies key priorities, the actions agreed to reach those priorities, as well as the person or persons who will lead those actions. There should be a regular review of progress.

As is appropriate, a number of the school priorities focus on the area of teaching and learning. The board's commitment to teaching and learning is exemplified by its support for teacher continuing professional development. Further actions that the new board should take to support student learning include an annual review of a statistical analysis of student outcomes in certificate examinations, and the monitoring of the implementation of recommendations made in subject inspection reports. As is specified in Circular 0065/2011 the principal's report to the board should include a reference to the number of child protection reports submitted.

A new senior management team is in place. The principal was appointed at the beginning of the last school year from within the staff. The deputy principal has been in the post since 2002. The relationship between the deputy principal and new principal is cordial, and they meet daily to discuss the day-to-day running of the school.

The principal brings a great energy and enthusiasm to his role. He demonstrates a strong commitment to the school and has a vision for change and quality improvement. Under his leadership over the last year a number of positive changes have taken place: a students' council has been established, the parents association has been revived, a new system for

monitoring attendance was introduced and improvements were made to the school facilities. Staff, parents and students interviewed expressed great confidence in the leadership skills of the principal. The principal has an open door policy and is supportive of staff and appreciative of the contributions they make to the smooth running of the school. One very encouraging sign of change is that the enrolment figures have risen this year after many years of falling student numbers.

Certain management and administrative duties have been assigned to the deputy principal. These duties relate to the coordination of subject options, the preparation of class lists, aspects of the organisation of supervision and substitution, and duties relating to the preparation of the timetable. A need for improvement in the delivery of these functions was identified during the evaluation and should be addressed by school management.

There was very good evidence that post-holders perform their duties diligently and effectively. It is commendable that post-holders present an annual end-of-year report at staff meetings. Consideration should be given, as resources allow, to give Year Heads some time on the timetable to meet with students as issues arise. A number of posts of responsibility have been lost to the school, and it is timely now to undertake an audit of school needs to identify school priorities. A reorganisation and redistribution of post duties should be undertaken to ensure that the range of posts available meet the needs of the school. It is recommended that each post-holder has an annual end-of-year meeting with the principal at which the successes and challenges of the year can be discussed as well as the resource needs for the next year.

The recently-revived parents association meets regularly, and makes a good contribution to the school. For example, the association has been involved in fund-raising activities during the last year. Parent questionnaire data indicate that the vast majority of parents surveyed are happy with the school and feel welcome in the school. However, the majority of parents surveyed were unaware of the work of the parents association. It is suggested that the parents association make use of the school's website or newsletters to communicate with the wider body of parents.

### ***1.2 Effectiveness of leadership for learning***

Effective leadership of learning was evident over the course of the evaluation. Staff members are facilitated in their attendance at in-service and a number of whole-school professional development events have been organised. Subject department meetings take place regularly and staff members are encouraged to lead projects and initiatives. Staff members are enthusiastic and dedicated to their students. The volunteerism of staff is excellent. Many staff members give up their time in a voluntary capacity to take part in school committees such as the anti-bullying committee and the timetabling committee, and to organise extracurricular activities, for example, to train teams and organise the school concert. The board of management made clear to the evaluation team their appreciation of the commitment and dedication of all of the staff in the school, teaching and non-teaching.

Subject department meetings take place regularly. A number of subject department plans were examined over the course of the evaluation. In some cases comprehensive subject department documentation was noted containing common schemes of work, minutes of meetings and indicators of reflective practice such as a reflection on examination results and teaching methodologies. However, this was not the case in the majority of subject department folders examined. While individual teacher planning was, in general, very good, collaborative subject department planning is an area for development in the school. It is recommended that subject department planning processes be advanced, and that subject departments develop common schemes of work leading to common assessment, and

with a learning outcomes focus allied to suggested methodologies and resources. It is also recommended that minutes of subject department meetings, an analysis of relevant certificate examination results, and a section on long-term planning for the subject be included in subject department documentation.

The school provides a broad curriculum with a good range of subjects, including the full range of science and business subjects. Agricultural Science has been recently introduced as a subject to Leaving Certificate. Music, Art and Applied Maths are available on the curriculum but are taught mainly outside school hours or at lunchtime. As the school enrolment grows, it may be possible to bring these subjects into the main timetable.

Transition year has been available for a number of years. Parents and students interviewed commented positively on the programme itself and the co-ordination of the programme is very good. It was noted that the co-ordinator's allocated time falls short of the co-ordination time for the programme as recommended in Circular PPT 17/02. This should be addressed as soon as possible.

A review of the timetable was conducted as part of the evaluation, and a number of issues was noted. For example, at senior cycle a number of subjects have very generous time allocation, but Guidance periods are not timetabled, and the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) is no longer available to students. In addition, at focus group meetings a number of staff members raised concerns about other aspects of school timetabling. For example, teachers are often timetabled outside their specialisms, and timetabling decisions are frequently made without consultation as exemplified by the decision this year to introduce an information and communications technology (ICT) class for third year students. A staff timetabling committee was set up in 2013 by the board of management to address concerns raised and some improvements were noted. It is positive that students now are offered an open choice of subjects at Leaving Certificate level and that the option bands are created based on student choices. However, it was evident that many issues remain.

The timetable is a most important resource, and is the primary means through which the curriculum is delivered to students. A comprehensive review of the timetable is recommended. It is strongly recommended that the LCVP be reintroduced as it would contribute to both vocational education and student achievement. The school should also reconsider the position of Guidance and ICT periods on the timetable as well as time allocation for subjects. It is recommended that senior management team and the timetabling committee work together to ensure a consistent, collaborative, consultative approach to timetabling and put systems in place to ensure that the best use is made of valuable teaching resources.

The school has an allocation of 54.66 hours teaching time to provide students in need of learning, language or other supports with additional help aimed at helping them to access the curriculum. The timetabling of these hours is an area of concern. At the time of the evaluation, it was evident from a review of the timetable and from interviews undertaken that only 22.66 hours of this teaching time were being used for their intended purpose. The two main learning support teachers have been allocated a heavy timetable of mainstream teaching and have very limited contact hours available for the delivery and coordination of learning support and resource hours. The learning support team supported by the guidance counsellor work hard, within available resources, to coordinate supports for students and good record keeping and a commitment to student support was evident. However, the learning support team does not have the capacity, given the hours allocated to them, to deliver the full complement of allocated support to students. It is essential that the correct and full use of allocated resource and learning support hours, for the purpose for which they are intended, be addressed as a priority.

There has been a renewed effort in the last school year to tackle falling enrolment and first year admissions have increased. A good induction programme for first year students has been prepared. It is recommended that enrolment documentation distributed to parents be amended to remove references to a required admissions fee.

The behaviour of students in the school is very good. Questionnaire data and interviews undertaken during the evaluation indicate that the large majority of students are proud to be in the school and feel safe and well-cared for. Staff, parents and students interviewed have agreed that the discipline in the school is good and has improved. This is supported by other evidence collected during the evaluation. The principal and Year Heads give good support towards the management of student behaviour.

Attendance is well-monitored. An electronic system is now in place for the monitoring of student attendance and behaviour and it was reported that this system worked well. Evidence viewed by the evaluation team indicate that absenteeism rates have improved. A pastoral care team is in place to coordinate actions aimed at supporting students who may be experiencing difficulty and a caring and inclusive approach is taken to student care. However, there is at present no dedicated meeting time for the care team. This should be addressed on future timetables.

Guidance in the school is developing and parents and students interviewed were very happy with the support being provided by the guidance counsellor who is available to counsel students as well as providing educational and career guidance. A very good whole-school guidance plan has been prepared. Social Personal and Health Education (SPHE) training has been availed of by the SPHE coordinator but he is not at present teaching the subject. This is not in line with good practice. Management should ensure that regular team meetings of the SPHE team take place and that students are not withdrawn from SPHE to attend resource teaching. The school deals well with bullying incidents as indicated by interview data and questionnaire results. It is commendable that a whole-school approach to anti-bullying has been adopted.

The Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) programme is provided as an integral part of the SPHE programme at junior cycle and at senior cycle the RSE programme is delivered on a modular basis by one of the Religious Education (RE) teachers as part of the RE programme. These arrangements are in line with Circular Letter 0027/08. However, evidence from questionnaire data and interviews with students would suggest that a significant minority of students would welcome more input in this area. The RSE team should review the programme with this in mind.

Opportunities for student leadership are provided by the democratically-elected student council and the class prefect system. An awards day is arranged each year at which student achievement and effort is recognised.

A good range of sporting activities is available for students and the school is proud of its sporting achievements. Other activities available for students include the *Readathon* and the *Gaisce* awards. Parents interviewed would like to see a greater range of non-sporting activities available for students.

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*.

## ***1.2 Management of facilities***

Facilities are clean and tidy and well-maintained. A student canteen is available where hot lunches are served and a new library has been developed. There are also good sporting facilities in the school. The school has engaged with the Green Schools Programme. The health and safety statement has been recently reviewed.

## **2. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING**

### ***2.1 The quality of learning and teaching***

Twenty-one lessons were observed over the course of the evaluation in a variety of subjects and programmes. Overall, the quality of teaching and learning was good with the majority of lessons evaluated featuring good or very good practice. There were aspects of exemplary practice in a number of lessons. A significant minority of lessons had scope for development with respect to certain aspects of teaching and learning and one lesson evaluated had significant weaknesses.

Classroom management and students' behaviour were of a high standard and reflected the good teacher-student relationships that were a marked feature of lessons observed. A calm atmosphere, supportive of student learning, characterised all lessons. Almost all lessons had a planned development and incorporated resources to support student learning.

In the best lessons, particular attention had been given to how learning would be facilitated. Students were aware of what they were meant to achieve and lessons were well structured in support of the learning intention. The resources and methodologies employed, supported active student engagement and included independent and cooperative learning opportunities. In these lessons, integrated assessment for learning (AfL) strategies were in evidence. These included the sharing of learning outcomes, frequent monitoring of student learning throughout the lesson, questioning strategies to guide and gauge learning, and review and assessment of learning during lesson closure. Student learning was clearly evident in the more successful lessons.

The quality of teaching and learning in some lessons could have been improved by more consistent implementation of the features listed above. In many lessons, the teachers' input dominated which limited the opportunity for active engagement by students. It is recommended that a judicious balance between student activity and teacher-led instruction be achieved and that opportunities for active student engagement be optimised to promote deeper student learning. Imaginative methodologies should be identified in line with best practice in each subject area as part of subject department planning, so as to increase the opportunity for students to engage in active learning that stimulates their interests, and which promotes students' engagement in their own learning. It is recommended that preparation for all lessons emphasise the effective use of AfL and active learning strategies.

Some lessons explicitly developed key words associated with the lesson content and these lessons typically took place in a print-rich learning environment. Students should be encouraged to pronounce and use new vocabulary on a regular basis. In language lessons, the teachers' use of the target language was good, but overall, the students' use of the target language needed to be developed further.

There was good use of questioning strategies in many lessons to guide and gauge learning, with directed and higher-order questioning used effectively to promote thinking and understanding on the part of the students. This good practice should be extended to all lessons and be employed to support review and assessment of learning at the end of lessons.

Homework is assigned regularly and many lessons featured monitoring, review and correction of homework. Review of students written work showed some examples of formative feedback which is positively acknowledged. Considering the critical importance of constructive written feedback to student learning, it is recommended that this AfL practice be more consistently implemented.

### **3. IMPLEMENTATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS FROM PREVIOUS EVALUATIONS**

#### ***3.1 Management***

Some of the recommendations in previous evaluations have been implemented. It was reported by management that all subject department now have appointed co-ordinators. An extra period for History has been provided. However, areas for development remain in relation to recommendations pertaining to subject department planning and planning for improvement has not been fully embedded into subject department practice. It is recommended that in-school management and subject departments provide the board of management with an implementation plan following inspection reports and periodically update the board on their progress.

#### ***3.2 Learning and teaching***

A range of areas relating to recommendations from subject department reports was examined and some good progress was evident. The use of ICT is progressing and good use of ICT was seen in many lessons. However, the recommendation in reports in relation to the use of intended learning outcomes to structure lessons was not addressed in the majority of lessons observed. While active learning methodologies were well used in many lessons, this was an area for development in some classrooms visited.

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

The school has taken positive action in relation to school self-evaluation (SSE). Students have been surveyed in relation to guidance provision. Committees have been formed to address the key priorities of literacy and numeracy. Staff and students have been surveyed, and actions agreed at a whole school level to support the development of student literacy and a School Self-Evaluation report has been produced. In any future review the school should ensure that targets set are specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time-bound (SMART).

The school has a good capacity for improvement. Staff members are dedicated and hardworking and there is the capacity within management to move the school forward. Indeed, a number of key improvements have already taken place. Management and staff should continue to work together in partnership with parents and students to ensure that a high-quality education is available for all students in St. Mel's college.

# Appendix

## School response to the report

### Submitted by the Board of Management

#### **Area 1: Observations on the content of the inspection report.**

- The Board welcomes the very positive WSE-MLL Report.
- The Board would like to emphasise the very positive contribution that our patron, the Bishop of Ardagh and Clonmacnoise makes to the school and recognise the excellent relationship that exists between the patron and the BOM.
- The Board feels that the schools provision of all types of extracurricular activities needs to be emphasised and the role that the teaching staff play in this has been rightly highlighted in the report.
- The Board are aware of their obligations and are very experienced with a broad range of skills available for the benefit 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**

- The timetable has been reviewed to reflect a much more positive use of learning support hours.
- A review of the posts of responsibility has started and a committee has been put in place to coordinate this review.
- The Parents Association will publish its first newsletter for Christmas 2014.
- The area of subject department planning highlighted by the report has been addressed and each subject department is now in the process of implementing the recommendations.
- The SPHE coordinator is now timetabled for SPHE class and an in-service for all staff has been organized for March 2015.
- The possibility of re-introducing LCVP is being investigated at present by the timetable committee.
- An in-service for all staff on AfL/AoL is set for March 12, 2015.
- A review of all school policies is part of the new board of management's three year plan.
- The school enrolment form has been adjusted as recommended in the report.