

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

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

REPORT

**Sacred Heart School
Westport, County Mayo
Roll number: 64710R**

Date of inspection: 25 September 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 September, 2013 in Sacred Heart 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 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

Sacred Heart School is a girls' voluntary secondary school under the trusteeship of Catholic Education, an Irish Schools Trust (CEIST). The school originally founded by the Mercy Congregation is committed to the values enshrined in its mission statement and has a long tradition of providing a holistic education in a caring and inclusive atmosphere. The school serves the town of Westport and a wide rural catchment area consisting of 21 feeder primary schools. Students come from a diverse range of socio-economic backgrounds.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

Key Findings

- The board of management actively supports the school and is committed to fulfilling its role.
- The senior management team provide very good leadership, show strong support for staff and students and are committed to leading learning.
- Teachers are diligent, progressive and committed to the school and its students.
- There is a good level of distributed leadership across the school community.
- School development planning is well advanced in a number of areas and the ongoing process of improvement is supported by a three- year strategic plan.
- Key strengths of the school are its broad and balanced curriculum and the extensive range of co-curricular and extracurricular activities.
- There is a high quality of care for students.
- The quality of teaching was good to very good in the majority of lessons observed.
- Significant progress has been achieved in the implementation of a whole-school approach to literacy.
- The capacity for school improvement led by senior management is very good.

Recommendations for Further Development

- The school's health and safety statement should be reviewed and updated.
- Increased use should be made of active learning methodologies and strategies for differentiation to support student learning across the range of abilities.
- Developmental priorities in key areas of teaching and learning should be monitored and reviewed in a more systematic manner.

1. QUALITY OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP

1.1 School ownership and management

The board of management is appropriately constituted, meets regularly and is well informed about the operation of the school. Strong community links, the long association of a number of members with the school and a significant level of business expertise are key features of the board's membership. In considering its nominees to the board the trustees should ensure that a good balance of expertise encompassing education and other areas is represented. Not all current members have received training on the functions of a board and this should be addressed. The board promotes links with all stakeholders and has a visible presence in the school. Following board meetings communication with each nominating body should in future be formalised through the provision of an agreed written report. To build partnership further with all stakeholders the board should consider meeting annually with the parents' association (PA) and the student council. An annual report on the operation and performance of the school should also be made available to the school community.

The board takes an active role in reviewing policies, supporting the financial management of the school, developing facilities and supporting continuous professional development (CPD). Since some policies have not been reviewed for a number of years a cycle of review and update should be devised by the board for all policies. As policies are updated they should be dated and include a timeframe for review. The board has a broad overview of the quality of teaching and learning in the school through general reports on certificate examination attainment and updates on subject evaluations provided by the principal. The board should deepen its engagement with the outcomes of these reports as it is now timely for the board to increase its focus on matters that relate to the quality of teaching and learning.

The board in consultation with staff has identified an extensive range of priorities for development. These include promoting the school ethos, maintaining and developing student support and management structures, promoting high standards in teaching and learning, improving the school's physical infrastructure, developing information and communication technology (ICT), supporting literacy and numeracy and further developing school self-evaluation. In line with best practice a three year strategic plan has been developed which sets targets and identifies actions to address the agreed priorities over defined timeframes.

There are 605 students enrolled in the school and increased growth is forecast. The board should initiate the process of gathering and assimilating data on projected enrolment over a five to ten year period. This will inform timely planning so that the school's capacity to meet the anticipated additional demand can be realised.

1.2 Effectiveness of leadership for learning

The principal and deputy principal work in close partnership and provide very effective leadership to the school community. They set high standards, work diligently and lead by example. The senior management team have a shared vision for the school based on creating a high quality learning community. Both have successfully adapted to their new roles and have managed the significant changes in staff and in resources that the school has recently experienced, very well.

A distributed model of leadership is in evidence and the middle management team provide essential support in the running of the school. The five assistant principal (AP) posts include year head responsibilities and weekly meetings are held between senior

management and APs. Post-holders feel empowered and are given autonomy to fulfil and develop their roles. Non-post holders have taken up key roles to ensure the continued co-ordination of activities and to lead new initiatives. The post of responsibility structure should be kept under ongoing review as in some instances there is scope for post duties to be more closely aligned to the changing needs and developmental priorities of the school.

A collegial and collaborative working environment is in evidence. Staff members are dedicated and the spirit of volunteerism in facilitating a wide range of co-curricular and extracurricular activities is valued by management and parents. Teachers display a strong commitment to their own professional development and a significant number have gained additional qualifications across a range of specialisms. Staff CPD is actively supported, in-school presentations are delivered by senior management and whole-staff in-service training has been provided on a range of topics. To further disseminate and share good practices it is recommended that a mechanism is put in place so that on return from CPD events feedback can be given to colleagues in a structured manner. There is an effective induction process to support new teachers and a comprehensive staff handbook has been developed.

Subject department planning is well established and actively supported by management. Each subject department is provided with templates to guide effective planning for teaching and learning and to promote self-evaluation. The overall quality of subject planning is of a high standard and some very good practices were observed in relation to detailed schemes of work and to review and target setting for improvement. In some instances literacy strategies are tailored to individual subject plans. In a small number of cases schemes of work need further development to include increased levels of detail on expected learning outcomes, teaching methodologies and specific resources linked to the different topics. Student achievement in the certificate examinations is generally good to very good and there is a high uptake of subjects at higher level. The responsibility for analysing certificate results should be devolved to each subject department and the outcomes of these analyses should be used to identify an improvement agenda for teaching and learning. This agenda should be submitted by each department to senior management.

School development planning is well advanced. It is currently driven by senior management and supported by the input of task groups and individuals drawn from staff. The permanent section of the school plan is a comprehensive document. All the mandatory policies have been developed. The findings of questionnaires indicate that there is scope to develop a greater level of communication with parents in relation to school matters. The consultative practice noted in the review of the code of behaviour is a good model for how the planning process should be conducted in the future. Increased communication with parents as regards students' progress should also be further developed as part of the year heads' brief. Some very good work has been done in advancing aspects of the school's developmental priorities. Planning for teaching and learning including literacy, numeracy and assessment are central elements of the school's developmental agenda. Procedures should now be put in place to monitor in a more systematic manner the impact and effectiveness of agreed strategies for improvement in these key areas. This approach would enable the school to establish more clearly its progress and areas where further work is required. There has been significant planning for the implementation of a whole-school strategy on literacy and an improvement plan for literacy is in place. A link person has been identified to develop a numeracy strategy. The very good practices adopted for literacy will be a significant asset in advancing this initiative.

The admission policy is open and acknowledges inclusion in principle and practice. The school curriculum is broad and balanced and the full range of senior cycle programmes on offer reflects the commitment to meeting the needs of the varied student population. The Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme is very effective in the retention of

students. A popular optional TY programme is in place and students were very positive about their experiences in TY. During TY students sample all subjects offered at senior cycle, study other areas and participate in a very wide variety of calendar events. The TY programme should be kept under review so that an appropriate balance is maintained between the four programme layers. This balance should ensure that students have adequate exposure to subjects so that remediation needs as well as the building of subject skills are sufficiently developed in preparation for the Leaving Certificate programme.

The process of timetable construction is consultative and the allocation and distribution of class periods is generally appropriate across the curriculum. However, there is unequal class period provision of the core subjects across the three years of the junior cycle. This should be addressed in line with Circular 0025/2012 to support the implementation of the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy. In a few instances classes are shared between teachers. The school is aware that this is not ideal and of the need to have any one class assigned to one teacher in order to maximise continuity in students' learning.

Students' attendance and punctuality are closely monitored and parents are appropriately informed. Records indicate that students have good attendance and retention levels are excellent. The code of behaviour is based on respect, rights and responsibilities; it promotes positive behaviour and includes a clear ladder of referral. The majority of questionnaire responses indicate that discipline is very good in the school. A positive atmosphere, respectful relationships and exemplary student behaviour were observed during the evaluation.

The school provides very good opportunities for student leadership through the student council, the mentoring system and the prefect role. In order to enhance the profile of the student council, structures should be put in place whereby it can communicate more effectively with the entire student cohort.

There are very good supports for students at times of transition including a well organised and comprehensive induction programme for first year students, information evenings for parents and guidance support for students in making subject choices. The mentoring system was highly praised by first-year students and parents as a key support during this integration phase. An open subject choice operates in first year, second year and in fifth year. The school has maintained very good guidance provision in light of the removal of the ex quota allocation for guidance. A comprehensive guidance programme is in place. The guidance plan should now be further developed to reflect the whole-school approach to guidance.

A range of effective structures are in place to support a co-ordinated and integrated approach to student care. Class advisors and year heads meet each day with their respective groups. The chaplaincy service provides pastoral care and individual counselling and is highly valued by parents and students. Regular meetings of the care team, year head meetings and good communication links with staff facilitate a whole-school approach to student care. It is evident from questionnaire findings that a high proportion of students and parents agreed that the students felt safe and well looked after.

Supports for students with additional educational needs are underpinned by a flexible approach tailored to students needs across a range of skills and subjects. Examples of very good practice include the close liaison with primary schools, regular meetings of the special educational needs team, dissemination of relevant information to staff and a variety of models of provision. An assessment in numeracy is administered to first year students to identify additional learning needs. This good practice should be extended to include an assessment of literacy skills. There should also be structured retesting to determine the effectiveness of support interventions. The school should explore the feasibility of team

teaching in keeping with the ethos of inclusion and to maximise the use of the allocated resources.

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

The building and grounds are well maintained and there is an ongoing programme for repair and refurbishment. There is a good range of specialist rooms and sports facilities. Further attention should be paid to the upkeep of the external courts and access area.

The school's acquisition of four Green Flags is indicative of its commitment to its environmental responsibilities. Teacher-based classrooms have made a significant contribution to an enhanced learning environment.

The school's health and safety statement should be reviewed and updated in line with the *Guidelines on Managing Safety and Health in Post-Primary Schools* (2010). An annual review of the statement should be supported by risk assessment audits carried out by staff in their respective working areas.

The school is well resourced with ICT facilities and high-speed broadband. The need to maintain and upgrade the ICT infrastructure is a priority for management as well as the extended use of a virtual learning environment. The school had developed an outline five-year e-learning plan. A cycle of planning based on realistic target setting over the medium and long-term should be put in place so that future investment in ICT is appropriately targeted to maximise the potential benefit for students' learning across the curriculum.

2. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

2.1 The quality of learning and teaching

There was a good level of short-term planning for the lessons observed. Lessons were well structured and in all cases the planned learning outcomes were shared with students and reinforced throughout the lesson. A variety of good quality resources were prepared in advance and were integrated seamlessly to develop instruction and support learning.

There was very good rapport between teachers and students underpinned by mutual respect. The learning environment was positive and affirming and students were comfortable asking and answering questions. Classroom routines are well established allowing lessons to begin promptly and facilitating smooth transitions between lesson activities. Students generally displayed good levels of knowledge and understanding commensurate with their ability. In some classrooms, the learning environment is very well enhanced with displays of subject materials and students' own work.

The quality of learning and teaching was good to very good in the majority of lessons observed. Good lessons were characterised by a clear structure, purposeful pace, linking new learning with students' prior knowledge and by a variety of methodologies to promote student active engagement across the ability continuum. In a small minority of lessons, there was significant scope to improve the learner experience by adopting a greater balance between teacher input and students' active engagement with the content of the lesson. It is recommended that more individual and collaborative exercises should be incorporated into lessons to engage learners effectively.

Questioning was used as a key methodology. In some cases, chorus answering dominated and whole-class questions were posed with students choosing to answer. Best practice in questioning was observed where there was a good level of higher-order questioning, where targeted questions were well distributed across the ability range and where a sufficient amount of wait time was afforded to students to formulate their answers. This facilitated effective differentiation in many cases. In the context of mixed-ability classes, strategies to further support differentiation of the lesson content should be developed and implemented in lessons. In particular, when devising lesson tasks, consideration should be given to creating tasks that support learning across the full range of student abilities. The provision of whole-staff CPD in differentiation and active learning methods is recommended to support continued improvement in teaching and learning.

Where ICT was used by teachers, it was mainly used to present static content such as digital textbooks or text-based presentations. The increased use of dynamic and interactive software including graphics, animations and simulations would further support student's learning across the full range of subject areas.

An appropriate level of homework is regularly assigned in most cases. This practice is recommended in all lessons. Good practice was observed where teachers monitored and corrected copybooks, and comments outlining strategies for improvement were provided. This good practice should be extended to all classes. In addition, strategies to promote self-assessment and peer-assessment among students should be developed and implemented by teachers so that students are given greater autonomy in improving the quality of their work.

3. IMPLEMENTATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS FROM PREVIOUS EVALUATIONS

3.1 Management

The recommendations made to school management in previous evaluations have been implemented.

3.2 Learning and teaching

In practically all cases subject planning recommendations have been very well advanced. Work is ongoing in assessment practices and procedures across departments with some good progress made. While there was good use of active learning methodologies in many lessons there is still scope for improvement in a few instances. The recommendations of previous reports in relation to the use of ICT and differentiation need to be further developed and extended across subject areas to maximise student learning.

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

The school demonstrates very good capacity for self-evaluation and improvement. There has been considerable engagement with self-evaluation in a number of areas including end-of-year programme evaluations, analysis of certificate results, audits of training needs, policy review and in some cases subject department review. Best practice is evident in the schools' work on literacy as a focus for self-evaluation. At the end of the current academic year each subject department should undertake an evaluation of the effectiveness of the literacy strategies in their respective disciplines to support and inform ongoing monitoring and review of the school's literacy improvement plan.

Senior management provides effective leadership of school development planning based on a process of target setting and action planning. There is also a clear willingness among all school partners to engage with the process. Systems should now be put in place both at whole-school level and subject department level for ongoing monitoring and review of identified development targets. This should further advance the good work that is already underway.

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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 of the Sacred Heart School welcomes the very positive WSE-Management, Leadership and Learning report. The Management and Staff of the school engaged very positively with the process of whole school evaluation and found it to be both a rewarding and reaffirming experience.

The Board is particularly pleased to welcome the many positive comments which the inspectors made on the quality of teaching and learning, the quality of leadership and the mutual respect which exists between teachers and students. It is most welcome that the inspectors identified the comprehensive network of support systems/teams during the evaluation as well as the broad range of co- and extra-curricular activities organised and supported so generously by the teaching staff. 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.

The Board considers this to be an excellent report that affirms so much good practice in the School and recognises the professionalism and commitment of management and teachers. We note that it recognises the student centred approach of the school and the important role that pastoral care has in informing our procedures and practices. It makes very useful recommendations and suggestions that closely mirror the school's own improvement plan and provides a guide for further improvement and development.

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 Board of Management acknowledges the recommendations in the report and is committed to the implementation of the recommendations.

Some of these are already in progress, and all recommendations will form an integral part of the school's ongoing collaborative planning and developmental priorities for this academic year and into the future.

We would like to take this opportunity to thank the principal, staff, parents and students for their dedication to, and support of, our school. This was clearly evident throughout the WSE process.