

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

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

REPORT

**Mercy College
Chapel Hill, Sligo
Roll number: 65181V**

Date of inspection: 8 May 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 May, 2014 in Mercy 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 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

Mercy College is a voluntary girls' secondary school operating under the trusteeship of Catholic Education an Irish Schools Trust (CEIST). The ethos of the founding Mercy Sisters permeates all aspects of school life and is reflected in the school's care for students and its prioritisation of a holistic education. The school is very inclusive and caters for students across the full ability spectrum from a diverse range of socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. The school is one of five providers of post-primary education in the town of Sligo. Enrolment had declined but is now starting to increase with a current total enrolment of 392 students. The potential for increased enrolment remains a school priority. The school provides a range of Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) courses.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

Key Findings

- The school is inclusive, student-centred and progressive.
- The board of management is effective and the expertise of board members is very beneficial to the school.
- The senior management team provides very good leadership.
- The parents' association is proactive and very supportive of the school.
- School development planning is well established and is underpinned by a culture of self-evaluation.
- Key strengths of the school are its broad curriculum and the extensive range of extra-curricular activities.
- Teachers are strongly committed to supporting students and are willing to embrace new initiatives to enhance teaching and learning.
- There is very good provision for students with additional educational needs.
- There is a high quality of care for students.
- Teaching and learning were good or very good in almost all lessons observed.
- There is scope to increase the use of differentiation and assessment for learning strategies to support the attainment of optimal learning outcomes for students.
- The school demonstrates very good capacity for change and improvement.

Recommendations for Further Development

- The outcomes of school self-evaluation and planning activities should be enhanced by target setting and action planning with monitoring and regular review and to support the school's improvement agenda.
- An e-learning plan should be developed to further advance the integration of technology to support teaching and learning.
- Strategies for differentiation should be further extended to maximise learning outcomes for students across the range of abilities.
- Students should be given a more proactive role in improving the quality of their work through the implementation of a whole-school approach to student self-assessment and peer assessment.

1. QUALITY OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP

1.1 School ownership and management

The board of management is appropriately constituted and fulfils its role effectively in the best interests of the school community. Meetings of the board are held regularly. However, the minutes of meetings should be recorded in greater detail to reflect in a more comprehensive manner the discussions held. Board members bring a range of experience and expertise to their role and have a very good knowledge of the school based on their long association with Mercy College. The board supports partnership through good communication with the trustees and nominating bodies. It is good practice that the board meets with the student council annually. The board should now consider providing an annual report to the school community on the performance and operation of the school.

The board is actively involved in the areas of school finance, student support, policy development and review, and progressing school facilities. A comprehensive range of policies have been developed in a consultative manner with stakeholders. There is a good focus on leadership of learning with certificate examination results and inspection reports discussed at board meetings. The school improvement plan (2009-2014) includes an extensive list of developmental priorities with a central focus on improving the student experience and learning. Very good progress has been made towards achieving many aspects of these priorities. Current priorities focus on areas such as literacy and numeracy, preparation for the new junior cycle framework, upgrading facilities and school accommodation, school self-evaluation as well as enhancing teaching and learning through the exploration of student-centred methodologies. To advance a more strategic approach to planning, developmental priorities should be linked to specific targets and action plans over the short, medium and long-term. The outcomes of the planning process should be regularly reviewed at board and staff meetings so that progress can be monitored in a more focused manner.

Partnership with parents is central to the school's ethos. Parents reported very positively on the open door policy of management and staff and the expedient manner in which concerns are addressed. The parents' association actively supports the school through fundraising activities and other initiatives. Strengthening the involvement of parents in the parents' association has been identified as one of the strands of the school improvement plan. In this context the parents' association should have a dedicated space on the school's website to communicate their work to the wider parent body, as it may persuade more parents of the value of such involvement.

1.2 Effectiveness of leadership for learning

The principal and deputy principal are hardworking and competent and provide very effective school leadership as a united team. They are committed to the provision of education in an environment that is affirming and supportive of students and teachers and that equips students well for life after school. There are good lines of communication and consultation with staff to ensure shared ownership of school development. Building leadership capacity among staff and developing collaborative work practices are central features of their management style.

There is good evidence of distributed leadership in the roles and autonomy assigned to the middle management team and in the significant leadership opportunities afforded to non-post holders. As new posts have recently been made available to the school, the post schedule is currently under review. This review, as well as future reviews, should continue to ensure that the post schedule is matched to the school's changing needs and developmental priorities. In line with best practice, procedures should be developed for structured reporting on the performance of duties to senior management and the board.

Teaching staff are motivated, demonstrate a strong work ethic and are committed to students. This finding is reflected in responses to questionnaires and in discussions with parents and students. Teachers work in a number of ways on a voluntary basis to support student attainment including facilitating a diverse range of extra-curricular activities. There is good provision of teaching resources and teachers are deployed according to their qualifications. The school operates an induction programme for new teachers and a good quality staff handbook has also been developed. Continuing professional development (CPD) for staff is a school priority and is actively supported by management. In line with good practice the knowledge gained at CPD events is shared with colleagues as appropriate following attendance at training.

The principal provides clear educational leadership and is committed to leading a high-quality learning community. The school has embraced a number of initiatives to explore innovative models of learning including the Bridge 21 programme and is a participant in the junior cycle school's network. A school-based strategy to promote teacher's self-evaluation of classroom practice has also been put in place. The willingness of staff to engage with these developments and the peer mentoring provided to support technology mediated learning as part of the Bridge 21 project are highly commended.

The implementation of a whole-school strategy on literacy is well advanced and a literacy plan has been developed. To build on the very good work achieved, it is recommended that baseline data is gathered in relation to some of the agreed literacy strategies so that it can be used as a benchmark to set more specific targets and to measure improvements made. In line with good practice the impact and effectiveness of keyword strategies has been evaluated across all subject departments and a marked improvement in students' acquisition of subject-specific terminology has been noted. Progress has been made in identifying agreed cross-curricular approaches to numeracy development. The formation of a numeracy core team is recommended with representation from a range of subject areas. The very good practice adopted for literacy will be a significant asset in advancing numeracy initiatives.

The school provides a broad curriculum and a very wide range of subjects. Teachers are commended for their commitment to maintaining the school's curriculum provision. There was evidence of very good supports for students and their parents during transitions including information evenings and the comprehensive 'Belonging Plus' transfer and induction programme for first-year students. In line with good practice the option blocks in junior cycle and senior cycle are based on students' preferences. The Leaving Certificate

Applied (LCA) and Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) cater well for the needs of students. The Transition Year (TY) is a very popular optional programme and provides a rich learning experience for students through its subject taster menu and the diverse range of calendar events.

The process of timetable construction is consultative and the allocation and distribution of class periods is generally appropriate across the curriculum. Time allocation to Mathematics and English across the three years of the junior cycle should be addressed in line with Circular Letters 0058/2011 and 0025/2012 to support the implementation of the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy. The provision of two class periods of Physical Education in fifth year should also be prioritised as resources permit.

Provision for students with additional educational needs is very good and is co-ordinated and organised effectively by a specialised team of teachers. Examples of very good practice include the close liaison with the student's primary school, a variety of models of support flexibly tailored to meet students' needs and appropriate levels of communication with mainstream teachers and parents. The identification of students' needs and progress is informed by the use of diagnostic assessment instruments. Individual education plans are in place for students with low incidence needs and a resource toolkit has been designed by the co-ordinator on strategies for differentiation to support mainstream teachers. The school's Autism Centre caters for the particular needs of a small number of students and access to the mainstream curriculum is facilitated as much as possible for these students.

A whole-school approach to guidance is evident and supported through a well-developed programme of personal, educational and career guidance.

The code of behaviour is based on respect for all members of the school community and operates effectively in the management of students. The merit system and other affirming strategies including the award ceremonies are very effective in motivating students and in promoting good behaviour. During the evaluation students displayed excellent behaviour and were courteous and friendly. Responses to questionnaires administered as part of this evaluation indicated a high level of satisfaction with discipline in the school and the quality of care afforded to students.

Attendance strategies are effective. The increased focus on preventative measures has had a positive impact as is evidenced by the reported decrease in absenteeism in recent years.

The welfare of students is a key school priority and an extensive range of support structures are in place for student care including the care team, class tutors, year heads, the Shine a Light and Peace Police anti-bullying initiatives, the chaplaincy service and the Mental Health Awareness Week. The school is also proactive in attracting a range of resources to support the needs of its students. The School Completion Programme and the Sligo-Leitrim based Home Youth Liaison Service act as a key link between the family, school and professional services. The provision of a homework club and a range of student-centred programmes are of major benefit to a targeted group of students. The school's Learning Centre is a pivotal intervention with a focus on developing social, academic and organisational skills for students who are experiencing challenges to their learning. Regular meetings and good communication links between the various parties involved provide for a united and very effective whole-school approach to student care. A range of liturgical celebrations is also undertaken in line with the school ethos.

Student leadership is actively facilitated in the school through the prefect system, mentoring programme, head girl and deputy head girl, the student council and through the many projects and sports teams. The student council has effected positive developments in

the school however, its role in relation to policy development and review should be further extended.

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 school has good facilities and they are well managed and maintained. Environmental responsibility and awareness is promoted through the Green School committee and the school's system of recycling. The corridors and classroom environments are bright and colourful reflecting the students' creativity and the appropriate celebration of their work and many achievements are evident in the 'wall of fame' and across the school. The school has identified, in the interest of health and safety, the need for the refurbishment of two of its science laboratories. All available avenues should be pursued to achieve this. Concerns raised in relation to pedestrian access to the school should also be addressed by the board of management. The risk assessment audits carried out in specialist teaching areas should be extended to include all areas of the school.

There is very good provision of information and communication technology (ICT) throughout the school. In the context of the school's developmental priority to further develop its ICT facilities and to implement teaching and learning platforms that are technology based, it is recommended that a strategic e-learning plan for ICT integration is drawn up. This plan should take a three-pronged approach with a focus on curriculum integration, teachers' professional development and the further acquisition of suitable hardware.

2. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

2.1 The quality of learning and teaching

Subject planning is well established and supported by collaborative practices and regular formal meetings. From the sample of plans observed the quality of subject and programme planning is overall very good. In practically all cases schemes of work include detailed learning outcomes for each year group as well as strategies to support literacy and numeracy. This should be extended to all subject plans. In line with good practice subject departments have begun to analyse certificate examination results in comparison to national norms and to include a commentary in which teachers reflect on the results and draw conclusions. Going forward each subject department should compile a year-on-year analysis to establish trends in attainment and uptake at the different levels. The outcomes of these analyses should be used to identify targets for improvement as part of the departments' developmental agenda.

The quality of learning and teaching was good in most lessons and very good in over one third of the lessons observed. There was scope to improve the teaching and learning in a very small minority of lessons.

Individual planning and preparation for lessons was very good with appropriate resources prepared in advance. ICT was used in most lessons and ranged from the delivery of text-based presentations to the use of video content and visuals. The potential of ICT as a dynamic and interactive resource should be further explored.

Best practice was noted in lessons characterised by a purposeful pace, good structure, clear learning outcomes and where differentiation strategies ensured a good balance between teacher input and students' active participation in learning. In lessons where there was scope for improvement teacher input tended to dominate and students were largely passive. To improve the quality of students' learning it is recommended that teacher instruction is appropriately combined with active learning methodologies to support differentiation in all lessons.

In many lessons the intended learning outcomes were shared with students. The good practice of reviewing the learning outcomes at the end of the lesson to assess and consolidate learning should be extended to all lessons.

There was some good use of probing questioning techniques to test student knowledge and to develop higher-order thinking skills. Targeted questioning should be used more regularly in lessons.

In some lessons there was effective use of differentiation, for example through questioning, one-to-one assistance and collaborative learning tasks. However, further planning for the application of differentiation to learning outcomes, homework assignments and in-class tasks is recommended to cater for the range of abilities evident. Best practice was observed in group work when the activity was time bound, group members were nominated to key roles and there was an effective reporting-back phase, followed by effective processing of the feedback to ensure that learning occurred. Some further refinement of the skills associated with group work is recommended.

Students' folders and copybooks were generally well maintained and indicated good progression of work. Consideration should be given to rewarding students for positive efforts in this regard.

There was a good focus on literacy and subject terminology was well explained and reinforced well in lessons. The potential to further develop students' literacy and numeracy skills should be explored in all subject areas.

Homework is regularly assigned in lessons. In most cases there was good provision of formative feedback on students' work. This good practice should be formalised and developed by each teacher. Strategies to promote follow-up on corrections as well as self-assessment and peer-assessment among students should be developed and implemented so that students further develop their writing skills.

Classroom management was very good in all lessons and seating arrangements supported collaborative learning. There were very good student-teacher relationships underpinned by mutual respect and an affirming learning atmosphere. The learning environment was exemplary as it was enhanced with relevant displays of subject materials, many of which had been produced by students.

3. IMPLEMENTATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS FROM PREVIOUS EVALUATIONS

3.1 Management

All main recommendations made to school management in previous evaluation reports have been implemented with the exception of a timetabling recommendation in relation to Art. In this context, the school should keep the current arrangements for the optional subjects in first year under review.

3.2 Learning and teaching

There was evidence that the recommendations made regarding planning from previous inspection reports have been implemented in practically all cases. The main recommendations regarding teaching and learning are being actively implemented however, there is scope for greater use of strategies for differentiation to support students' learning needs.

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

Senior management and staff demonstrate an openness to change and new developments to advance ongoing school improvement. Developmental priorities have been identified in the school plan. Best practice is evident in many aspects of the school's work on literacy. The central focus on striving to enhance teaching and learning is evident in the questionnaires administered to parents, teachers and students on various aspects of teaching and learning as well as the staff's willingness to trial new methodologies. Principles of self-evaluation are also evident in ongoing policy review, programme evaluations, the analysis of certificate results and in the ongoing development of subject planning based on inspection reports. Going forward a system should be put in place to identify the key findings and areas for development resulting from self-evaluation audits as well as a regular monitoring and review process to assess the progress made. Such an approach should further enhance the school's significant professional capacity for school improvement.