Whole-School Evaluation
Management, Leadership and Learning

REPORT

Our Lady’s Secondary School
Templemore, County Tipperary
Roll number: 65440T

Date of inspection: 13 May 2011
Whole-School Evaluation
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A whole-school evaluation of management, leadership and learning (WSE-MLL) was undertaken in May 2011 in Our Lady’s 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, 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

Our Lady’s Secondary School was established in 1985 through an amalgamation of the Christian Brothers’ School and the Convent of Mercy. In 2002, following the discontinuation of second-level programmes in the local vocational school, Our Lady’s became the sole provider of post-primary education in Templemore. The school’s current enrolment is 471 students. In recent years it has moved under the trusteeship of Catholic Education, an Irish Schools Trust (CEIST).

1. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

1.1 Key Findings

- The quality of teaching and learning ranged from good to very good.
- The board of management is appropriately constituted and demonstrates a clear vision for the school.
- There is a highly effective senior management team that models learning for the school community.
- The whole school community has a shared vision, centred on supporting students’ learning.
- The school has an inclusive atmosphere and seeks to support all of its students in reaching their potential.
- There is a very strong commitment to the school on the part of the teaching staff.
- The school consistently adjusts its curriculum to meet students’ needs.
- A very positive feature of the school is the manifest commitment to creating strong learning environments.
- The school has begun to engage with school self-evaluation and has already made significant progress in this area.
- There are very good links with the wider community.
- Students are very positive about their experiences in the school.

1.2 Recommendations for Further Development

- A Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) policy for senior cycle should be formulated.
• As identified in its own priorities for development, the school should formally include self-evaluation as an element in its school improvement processes and should expand the range of tools used for self-evaluation.
• Whole-school, peer-led professional development should be undertaken in the area of co-operative learning.
• The practice of integrating content, skills and learning goals in subject plans should be extended to all subject departments.
• Further capacity and structures should be pursued to add to the good work already underway in supporting students with additional educational needs.
• The admissions policy should be adjusted to fully reflect the inclusive ethos of the school.

2. QUALITY OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP

2.1 School ownership and management – the Board of Management

Composition, functioning and fulfilment of statutory obligations

The board of management is properly constituted, meets on a regular basis and takes a proactive role in the management of the school. The board is aware of its responsibilities and has a clear vision for the school.

An agreed written report is communicated to staff following each meeting of the board. In addition, the principal delivers a verbal report to the parents’ association. To build on this good practice, it is suggested that this arrangement be formalised in the future through an agreed written report, as is distributed to staff. Minutes of board meetings, financial statements and an annual report are submitted to CEIST. It is recommended that the board publish an annual report for parents outlining the activities of the school community and its progress regarding identified priorities.

The board is actively engaged in policy development and review. This involves the different partners. The board demonstrates a clear engagement with the quality and development of teaching and learning. This is especially evident in its considered responses to the implementation of recommendations from previous subject inspection reports.

Confirmation was provided that, in compliance with Post-primary Circulars M44/05 and 0062/2006, the board of management has formally adopted the Department’s Child Protection Guidelines for Post-primary Schools (Published September 2004). Confirmation was also provided that these child protection procedures have been brought to the attention of management, school staff and parents; that a copy of the procedures has been provided to all staff (including all new staff); and that management has ensured that all staff are familiar with the procedures to be followed. A designated liaison person (DLP) and a deputy DLP have been appointed in line with the requirements of the guidelines.

The school’s priorities for development

The board’s vision for the school is informed by the school’s mission statement. Arising from this, a number of development priorities have been identified. These include the completion of the school’s refurbishment programme, the development of the work of subject departments, self-evaluation, ICT, and work on students’ literacy and numeracy development. It is apparent that the worthy aim of catering for the needs of students constitutes the overriding concern of the board.
2.2 Effectiveness of leadership for learning

Leadership of staff

There is a highly effective senior management team. The roles of the principal and deputy principal are complementary in nature and leadership for learning constitutes a key element of their work. This is evident through the significant commitment made by members of senior management to their own professional development, to focused support for staff continuing professional development (CPD) and to continuing engagement with educational research.

A sense of team, at whole-school level, has been achieved and nurtured by senior management and this is supported by good quality communication structures. There is a striking sense of community among staff. This is being channelled in a manner which adds greatly to learning opportunities for all students.

School development planning is firmly established. A clear focus on teaching and learning has been incorporated in the planning process. At present, an e-learning initiative is underway. This has included both external and internal inputs and teachers have displayed a strong engagement with and commitment to the project. A proposed focus on supporting students’ literacy and numeracy skills in the near future is appropriate and a similar model of CPD to that utilised in developing the e-learning initiative should work well in this area.

Considerable work has been undertaken in the subject-planning process and some very good subject department plans have been developed. Very good practice was observed where these plans included planning for the integration of content and skills, as well as a time-linked approach to the achievement of learning goals. This good practice should serve as a model for all subject departments in the further development of subject plans which have placed less emphasis on these areas. This should be undertaken through considered discussion and collaboration both across and, particularly, within subject departments in order to achieve consistency of approach between teachers.

Leadership of students

There are very good education support structures in place. Students’ responses to the questionnaire distributed during the evaluation indicated very positive feelings about their experience in the school. There is a strong guidance and care system. Year heads and class tutors are vital elements in this system. The weekly meeting between senior management, year heads and the guidance counsellor is most worthwhile in this context, alongside formal and informal contacts between class tutors and year heads. A further feature of school life is the strong administrative and care support provided by the school office team.

An admissions policy and comprehensive documentation to support the enrolment process have been developed. The school has an inclusive atmosphere and it is recommended that the admissions policy be reviewed and adjusted in order to more fully reflect this important part of its ethos. There is good awareness of the transition from primary to post-primary education. As an extension of current, very good arrangements, it is suggested that the potential to expand links with the primary school curriculum in core subjects be investigated.

A comprehensive attendance and participation policy is in place. The school has been proactive regarding student attendance, adopting information and communication technology (ICT) to make their system of record-keeping and communication more efficient. In addition, meetings are organised with parents of students who may be at risk of
regular non-attendance and the inclusion of the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme in the curriculum also indicates considerable commitment in this area.

Clear policies dealing with the care of students have been developed in numerous areas. The code of behaviour incorporates a strong emphasis on the encouragement of positive behaviour. A further worthwhile element in the school’s organisation is the inclusion of regular social education lessons for which a programme has been organised.

Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) is provided for students in first year, second year and third year. It was reported that Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) in senior cycle is delivered as an element of the senior religion programme. It is recommended that the school should now develop an RSE policy and programme as per Departmental requirements and in particular, Circulars 0037/2010 and 0023/2010.

A detailed special educational needs policy has been developed and adopted by the board. There is currently one member of staff with a qualification in the area of special educational needs. The principal also has a qualification in this area. It is recommended that the school proceed with plans to support another member of staff to qualify in this area.

The school has developed records of the use of resource hours to support specific students. In addition, there is a high degree of awareness among staff of the learning needs of students with special educational needs. It is recommended that an appropriately secured electronic register of student resource hours be developed, as a further aid to communication and transparency and to limit unnecessary documentation. The development of individual education plans to link with mainstream teachers, within the necessary bounds of confidentiality, could also serve to further raise awareness of the particular strengths and needs of students with special educational needs.

Students with special educational needs are currently supported through individual and group withdrawal from mainstream classes. In the past, team teaching has been included in the school’s model of provision and it is recommended that the school look to incorporate this again, where practicable and appropriate.

The school has a number of students with English as an additional language (EAL). The special educational needs co-ordinator has undertaken CPD in this area. It is recommended that the school should focus on continuing to build capacity in the area of EAL. The identification of a teacher who could take responsibility for English language support, alongside some whole-staff CPD on the needs of EAL students could be worthwhile. At present, some of the English language support for EAL students is provided through learning support groups. Careful consideration should be given to the manner in which support is provided for EAL students, in the context of the particular challenges – affective, cognitive and linguistic – faced by each individual student.

An appropriately broad and balanced curriculum is offered to students. The school adjusts its curriculum to meet students’ needs. A wide and extensive commitment to the provision of extracurricular activities is a particular element of the school’s ethos. Beyond this, there is a clear commitment in the school’s curriculum to providing students with experiences of physical activity and Physical Education (PE). In the case of provision for students in junior cycle, some further links to the PE syllabus should be explored.

Appropriate arrangements are in place to support students’ choices, including meetings with the guidance counsellor and information sessions. In first year, students choose subjects prior to entry. It is recommended that current approaches to subject choice in first year be monitored, with a view to introducing further opportunities to experience subjects in advance of making choices. However, in making this recommendation, current staffing
limitations must be acknowledged. An open-choice system for the selection of optional subjects is utilised in fifth year. This is good practice. In the case of some students with special educational needs, a reduced curriculum is offered, with the informal agreement of students’ parents. Parental agreement for these arrangements should be formalised in future.

Appropriate guidance is provided for students. This is delineated in a whole-school guidance plan. A wide range of engagement with all year groups is undertaken by the guidance counsellor. This includes junior cycle groups, an area which has recently been advanced. This development should continue if at all practicable.

Students have participated in the development of a number of school policies. The student council has been involved in fundraising and promoting study skills and evening study. It is suggested that further CPD be accessed to aid the council’s continued development.

2.3 Management of facilities

Management of school facilities is very good. The school building is well maintained. School corridors are tidy and incorporate an impressive visual environment which celebrates students’ achievements.

The board of management, senior management and staff have displayed considerable energy and commitment in addressing improvements to the school building. The parents’ association has also been strongly supportive of this work. At the time of the evaluation, construction work was taking place to create a social and canteen area and a prayer room. This was funded by monies directly raised by the school community. The completion of the school’s building programme will significantly upgrade many aspects of the school building. Continuing upgrading of ICT facilities has also been pursued.

A whole-school health and safety statement has been prepared, whole-school risk assessments are conducted and a systematic approach is taken to rectifying teacher-identified hazards every summer period. A health and safety committee meets at regular intervals. This is positive and, to consolidate this good practice, these meetings should be formally recorded in the future.

The school began actively working towards a Green School flag this year. A number of significant and very worthwhile developments to support this initiative have been advanced.

3. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

3.1 The quality of learning and teaching

Overall, the quality of learning and teaching in the school ranged from good to very good. Lessons were prepared and planned diligently. Very good practice was observed frequently, where teachers explicitly shared the learning goal of the lesson with their students at the outset. This practice should be adopted across subject departments. As a further extension of good practice observed, reference to the learning goal at the end of lessons could also be worthwhile.

A wide range of resources was used to support learning and teaching in lessons. In particular, it was evident that the implementation of peer-led whole-school CPD on the use
of ICT was having a positive impact on teachers’ classroom practice and on students’ learning. All involved are deserving of great praise for their strong engagement with this area and it is important that this initiative should continue.

Classroom management was of a very high standard. Students were well-behaved and lessons were conducted in a safe and well-ordered environment. Pair and group activities were observed in a number of lessons during the evaluation and these strategies were particularly effective where specific time-frames and roles were assigned within groups. However, there remains some scope for development in this area. Building on the model of peer led, whole-school CPD that has now been effectively established, it is recommended that a similar approach be adopted to enhance teachers’ skills in the area of co-operative learning. This work could, in turn, support students’ speaking, listening, reading and writing skills.

A particular feature of teachers’ practice was a strong commitment to the creation of print-rich learning environments in base rooms. This is very good practice. These classrooms served as motivational tools, highlighting students’ achievements, while also providing impressive resources which could be used during lessons.

There was solid evidence of learning in classes observed. This was evident through students’ written work, their asking and answering of questions and good levels of engagement. Students’ work was often maintained carefully by the teacher or students themselves. This good practice should be undertaken in all subject departments, combining with the principles of assessment for learning.

Homework was regularly assigned and monitored in all lessons observed. Monitoring included the provision of some formative comment in some cases. This worthwhile approach should continue to be built upon. Currently, as part of the practice of subject departments, a very good analysis of students’ results in the Leaving Certificate examination is undertaken. It is recommended that this analysis now be extended to encompass students’ results in the Junior Certificate.

4. IMPLEMENTATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS FROM PREVIOUS EVALUATIONS

4.1 Management

It is clear that the board of management and senior management have engaged actively with recommendations made in previous subject inspection reports. In all subject areas, recommendations have been carefully considered or implemented. Where the science inspection sought an increase in the timetabled allocation to first-year classes, the school has considered this in the context of a whole-school curriculum review. A number of subject departments have engaged in new strategies to promote their subjects to students, as advised in a number of reports.

4.2 Learning and Teaching

Previous subject inspection reports highlighted the need for greater use of ICT as an element in teachers’ practice. There was significant evidence throughout the evaluation that this area has been, and continues to be, addressed. Other themes which emerged from these reports included the use of assessment-for-learning strategies, active-learning methodologies and the integration of skills in lessons. There was significant evidence of teachers engaging with each of these areas but scope still exists for further development. It
is in this context that a whole-school focus on co-operative learning strategies is recommended.

In English, good work has been undertaken in meeting the recommendation to further develop the subject plan. This work should continue, incorporating time for discussion and consideration of key learning goals in each year group. In both Irish and Science, recommendations regarding subject planning have been engaged with and should continue to be advanced. In the case of Irish and German, the wider introduction of oral assessment modes in formal examinations has been advanced. Overall, very good progress has been made in implementing previously made recommendations.

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

5.1

School improvement is facilitated at present by self-evaluation processes centred on the identification of planning priorities by senior management and through staff discussion and consultation with other partners including the board, parents and the student body. This is positive. Overall, the school displays very good capacity for school improvement.

It is now an opportune time for the school to explore the further development of its self-evaluation processes. Much work has been undertaken in this area already. A wider variety of approaches should be used to collect baseline data which, in turn, will inform the setting of school-specific time-bound targets.

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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 Our Lady’s Secondary School welcomes the very positive WSE – MLL report and wishes to acknowledge the courteous and supportive manner in which the evaluation was carried out.

The Board of Management would also like to acknowledge the dedication and professionalism of the teaching staff, secretarial, caretaking, and cleaning staff, and the cooperation and support of students and parents, all of whose commitment to excellence results in the high standards outlined in the report.

The school community at Our Lady’s feels affirmed by the very thorough but very positive evaluation of all aspects of life in the school. In particular, the school is pleased with the Inspectorate’s judgement that

- **In the area of teaching and learning**
  - There is a striking sense of community among staff and that this is being channelled in a manner which adds greatly to learning opportunities for all students.
  - Classroom management is of a very high standard. Students are well behaved and lessons are conducted in a safe and well ordered environment.
  - A particular feature of teachers’ practice is a strong commitment to the creation of print rich learning environments in base rooms.

- **In the area of Management**
  - There is a highly effective senior management team that models learning for the school community
  - A clear focus on teaching and learning has been incorporated into the planning process
  - The board demonstrates a clear engagement with the quality and development of teaching and learning
  - The board of management and senior management have displayed considerable energy and commitment in addressing improvements to the school building.
  - The management of facilities is very good. The school building is well maintained. School corridors are tidy and incorporate an impressive visual environment that celebrates student achievements.

The school community is also delighted with the recognition of its progress in such areas as the integration of ICT, the implementation of the recommendations from previous evaluations, self-evaluation, leadership of students and school improvement.
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 welcomes the recommendations of the evaluation and has set about implementing them in a structured and timely manner -

- The school has engaged formally with the process of self-evaluation. The self-evaluation committee is currently working with the inspectorate on a pilot project in relation to the school self-evaluation Draft Guidelines. A number of other self-evaluation initiatives are also underway including the extension of analysis of LC results to JC results in the current year.
- The practice of integrating content, skills and learning goals is being extended to all subject areas.
- The school’s admissions policy has been adjusted to reflect the inclusive nature of the school.

The remaining recommendations will be addressed in the future as time and resources allow for this.