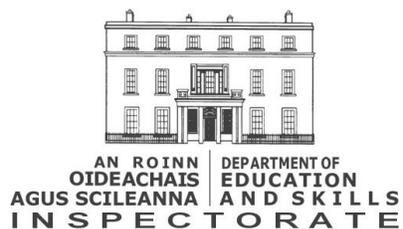


An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna
Department of Education and Skills

Whole-School Evaluation
Management, Leadership and Learning
REPORT

Holy Family Community School
Rathcoole, County Dublin
Roll number: 91301D

Date of inspection: 26 September 2013



Whole-School Evaluation Management, Leadership and Learning

A whole-school evaluation of management, leadership and learning (WSE-MLL) was undertaken in September 2013 in Holy Family Community School, Rathcoole. 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

Holy Family Community School, Rathcoole was established in 1981 and is a co-educational community school under the trusteeship of the Presentation Sisters, Des Places Educational Association, and Dublin and Dún Laoghaire Education and Training Board. There are 492 boys and 377 girls currently enrolled. There is great demand for places in the school as it receives applications well in excess of the number available. It is the only second-level school in Rathcoole. A new school is to be built on the existing site.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

Key Findings

- The board of management is experienced, collaborative, supportive and strongly committed to the school.
- The principal and deputy principal comprise a very efficient and democratic senior management team and are effective leaders of learning.
- The middle management team of post holders demonstrate very good leadership in providing high quality support to the operation of the school.
- Teachers have engaged very well with subject planning.
- The quality of pastoral care and support for students with special educational needs is very good.
- Very high quality teacher instruction was observed in a large majority of lessons; very few lessons required significant improvement; some excellent teaching practice was also noted.
- Very good attention was paid to the explanation of key words in most lessons when introducing new language and concepts.
- Very good progress has been made in the implementation of recommendations from previous inspections.
- The school has a very good focus on continuous development and improvement.

Recommendations for Further Development

- The board should formally document a strategic plan outlining the short, medium and long-term goals for the school's development.
- First-year students should be assigned to mixed-ability base class groups and should remain in these groups for their junior cycle years.

- The very good work of subject departments should extend discussion at subject department meetings to include teaching methodologies, lesson planning and classroom practice.
- The responses to the student and parent questionnaires that were part of this evaluation should be investigated further as part of the school improvement process.
- Significantly more opportunities should be provided for students to actively engage in lessons.
- Differentiated learning strategies should be used more widely than was observed.
- Best practice in relation to the correction of students' work and the provision of advice on how to improve should be more consistent across the school.

QUALITY OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP

1.1 School ownership and management

The board of management is very experienced and is committed to the on-going development of the school. The board is very supportive of the senior management team. The members are fully aware of their responsibilities and show very good understanding of the daily operation of the school. They are actively involved in policy making and review. The board plays a strong role in identifying areas for development and devising action plans to ensure that this development takes place. It is recommended that the board formally documents this very valuable work by developing a strategic plan outlining the short, medium and long-term goals for the school's development. The school has engaged very well with the school self-evaluation process and this strategic planning should incorporate and build on the very good progress made to date.

There is a strong culture of collaboration in the school and this is reflected in the board's communication with the wider school community. For example, members of the students' council are provided with opportunities to make presentations to the board. The views of parents and students are routinely sought in the development and review of relevant policies. It is common for policy change to be initiated by students or parents, for example, the review of the school uniform. Parents' contributions are highly valued. In addition to their work in policymaking, the members of the parents association participate in the careers night for students and assist with work experience placements.

The principal and deputy principal comprise the senior management team and their management of the school is very good. They are very efficient and lead the school community in a democratic manner. They seek and act on the views of teachers, students and parents and consult widely before making organisational changes. Appointed from the teaching staff, they are committed to the school and to meeting students' needs. They are approachable and share a common goal, which is to create a secure, happy school environment where students can achieve their potential. They work very well as a team and communicate regularly. They are very good distributional leaders. Their focus is student centred and they are open to innovation.

The middle management team, who are the post holders, has a strong leadership role in the school and makes a significant contribution to its decision-making processes. They have appropriate autonomy, meet regularly and capably carry out their duties. The post structure has developed in response to staff changes as they have occurred. In order to ensure that the post schedule continues to meet the school's needs, the senior management team in consultation with staff should conduct an audit of those needs. The results of the audit will provide the basis for making adjustments to

the duties attached to each post. A yearly meeting of all post-holders should be held as a forum for reviewing the operation of the posts, sharing expertise and engaging in strategic school planning.

It was evident throughout the evaluation that the teachers share a strong commitment to the school. They are actively involved in the school through their work as class teachers, tutors, year heads, through their participation in school and subject planning groups, and through their contribution to the extensive extracurricular programme that is provided for students. It was clear that the teaching staff act as part of a whole-school pastoral care team and work very well together to support the students and each other. There are very good supports in place for student teachers and for new teachers.

1.2 Effectiveness of leadership for learning

The principal and deputy principal are effective leaders of learning. Decisions regarding the organisation of the timetable and the deployment of teachers to programmes involve consultation with relevant staff members and are student centred. There is very good access to information and communications technology (ICT) and resources for teaching and learning. Teachers' continuing professional development (CPD) is facilitated and encouraged. The senior management team know the students very well and share an interest in their overall development and their academic progress. They have recently begun using an analysis of the school's performance in the certificate examinations to monitor student outcomes. This practice is a welcome development as it provides an additional valuable source of information for the senior management team to use for making decisions on the whole-school systems that best support teaching and learning. The senior management team could observe lessons as a further source of evidence.

The following is the current practice in assigning students to classes: Students sit assessments in addition to the standardised tests that were introduced for incoming students this year. They are then assigned to class groups on the basis of their test results, communication with the feeder primary schools and other relevant information, for example, psychological assessments. The top ninety students are assigned to an upper mixed-ability band and the other students are assigned to a lower band where the classes are organised in order of ability. In the mixed-ability band there are three base classes, each with a mixture of students comprising the full range of ability in the band. The classes in the other band are organised in order of ability so there is a top class, a second from the top class and so on. Where concurrent timetabling allows, classes in the upper band are also split and arranged in order of ability. An example is first-year Science where there are top, middle and lower class groupings. The number of students is kept small in the classes comprised of the weaker students in order to provide additional attention to meet their needs. Students remain in their ability groupings for all subjects except the optional subjects for the duration of the junior cycle. There is flexibility in the system and students can change class if, for example, they improve and would be better suited to a higher ability group.

It is recommended that first-year students be assigned to mixed-ability base class groups and that they remain in their base classes for their junior cycle years. It was evident throughout the evaluation that the level of teacher and student expectation is determined by the class's placing within the year group rather than on students' individual demonstrated achievement. Additionally, smaller groups containing weaker students of a similar level of ability were observed during the lessons evaluated to be hard to motivate and there were limited opportunities for students to learn from each other in a collaborative way. These lessons also tended to over rely on direct teacher instruction.

The school admission policy is inclusive and there are students in the school with significant special educational needs. It will be necessary, therefore, to include such students in mixed-ability classes in a way that allows their needs to be met within existing resources. This recommendation will represent a significant change in practice for the school. Preparation will need to be made well in advance of its implementation in terms of informing parents, incoming students and feeder primary schools and also in accessing CPD in the area of mixed-ability teaching and differentiation. The preparation should include a comparison between intake data and student performance in the certificate examinations, a review of the available research in this area and the experience of other schools. In addition, it should be implemented within the context of recent and upcoming curricular changes such as *Project Maths* and the Junior Cycle reform.

Teachers have engaged very well with subject planning. However, a section on strategic planning for each subject department should be included in the subject plans to reflect the overall strategic planning for the school and school self-evaluation. The very good work of the subject departments should now be developed to extend discussion at subject department meetings to teaching methodologies, lesson planning and classroom practice. To this end, it is recommended that teachers observe each other's lessons as a way of sharing best practice. CPD in 'Instructional Leadership' and 'Lesson Study' are also recommended.

The school's code of behaviour reflects the school's ethos and has recently been reviewed. The code is centred on respect for the rights of all members of the school and local community. There is a clear ladder of referral that facilitates the appropriate management of students. In addition, both members of the senior management team are active in supporting good student behaviour. Students were observed to be well behaved, confident and happy, throughout the evaluation. However, the students' and parents' responses in the questionnaire administered as part of the evaluation have highlighted student behaviour as an area of concern. The school should investigate this evidence further. A reward system, which involves sending positive postcards home, has recently been introduced. This is a very good development. Students have a voice in the school through the student council.

The student dialann (journal) is used for recording homework and for parental notes. The school communicates with parents through school reports, parent-teacher meetings, phone calls, letters, texts and sending positive postcards. An incident recording and reporting system, which is referred to as the 'triplicate sheet' system, is also used to inform parents of student misbehaviour. It is recommended that parents be requested to sign the dialann weekly and that teachers use the dialann as a means of communicating with parents.

The school's pastoral care system supports students very well. The school is committed to promoting positive mental health, supporting students through bereavement and providing support for students experiencing hardship. Initiatives such as the Rainbows programme and the organisation of 'Lean on Me', a positive mental health week, ensure that this commitment is lived out in the school. The school chaplain and the open door policy of the school's oratory are important aspects of this care provision.

High quality learning support is provided for students with special educational needs. The main modes of delivery are small-group withdrawal, team teaching and the provision of smaller class groups. One-to-one withdrawal is used in exceptional circumstances. There is very good collaboration between mainstream teachers and learning-support teachers. Transition Year (TY) students are paired with first year students for reading. This valuable initiative encourages positive relationships between year groups and very good learning opportunities for students.

Guidance is formally timetabled for senior cycle students. The guidance counsellors also provide individual counselling and a school funded counsellor/psychotherapist visits the school one day per week to offer further counselling to students. Social Personal and Health Education (SPHE) and Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) are also provided within the curriculum.

Valuable co-curricular and extracurricular academic, sporting and leisure activities are provided. TY students study Bridge, for example. These activities are very worthwhile as they provide students with additional challenges, allow them to develop a range of skills and offer them a different perspective on learning.

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 original school building has been extended and additional buildings were provided as student numbers increased. This has resulted in a school that is spread over a number of separate buildings. Notwithstanding the fact that students' behaviour was observed to be very good during the evaluation, it was evident that the layout of the school makes behaviour management significantly more difficult. Permission has been granted by the Department of Education and Skills (DES), for the construction of a new school and planning for this has already begun. At present some classrooms are student-based and most teachers have their own rooms. Where possible classrooms will be teacher-based in the new school. This will make it easier for teachers to individualise their learning environments by displaying students' work and subject resources and will be a welcome development.

The building has been well equipped with relevant health and safety equipment. Regular fire drills are organised. There is a health and safety policy in place.

QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

2.1 The quality of learning and teaching

Thirty-two lessons were evaluated. A very high standard of teaching and learning was observed in a large majority of the lessons. There was some scope for improvement in most lessons and significant scope for improvement in a very few lessons. In addition, examples of excellent practice were noted. Students in their meeting with the inspectors and in their responses to the questionnaires administered as part of the evaluation expressed much appreciation for the hard work and commitment of their teachers.

Lessons were well planned and included a range of suitable resources to support learning. Teacher instruction was very good. Explanations and instructions were clear. New material was related to prior learning and to real life. In almost all lessons the learning objectives were clear and were shared with students at the outset. In some lessons, teachers checked the achievement of the learning objectives as the lessons progressed or at the end. Lessons were well structured overall and lesson delivery was lively and interesting.

Lessons included teacher exposition followed by students completing exercises, group or pair work, listening exercises, and reading. However, apart from practical lessons, the main methodologies were teacher directed. Overall, there was significant scope for the use of a variety of activities that encouraged a greater level of student participation. It is recommended that further opportunities be provided for students to actively engage in lessons, to take responsibility for their own learning, to engage personally with lesson material and to learn collaboratively. The criteria for evaluation of teaching and learning contained in the Department's School Self-Evaluation Guidelines should be used as a guide.

Teachers monitored progress through questioning and, where students were engaged in individual or group tasks, through observation. Some of the students' written work included comments advising them on how to improve the quality of their work. It is recommended that best practice in relation to the correction of students' work and the provision of advice on how to improve should be more consistently practised across the school. Students highlighted the value to them of such feedback in their discussions with the inspectors.

Very good attention was paid to the explanation of key words in most lessons when introducing new language and concepts. In most cases the key words and their meanings were written on the board. It is very appropriate that the school is targeting literacy and has developed a very good literacy policy as part of its school self-evaluation and improvement process.

The relationships between teachers and students were warm and caring. In all lessons students participated and engaged very well. Students' contributions indicated that very good learning was taking place.

IMPLEMENTATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS FROM PREVIOUS EVALUATIONS

3.1 Management

The whole-school recommendations made in previous evaluations have been implemented, an example being the modular treatment of TY Mathematics.

3.2 Learning and teaching

Previous subject inspections recommended an increase in the use of ICT in lessons. While this has been well implemented as evidenced by the good use of ICT that was observed in the majority of lessons evaluated, there remains scope for more varied use of ICT. Differentiated teaching strategies were recommended in previous evaluations and this remains an area for improvement particularly in light of the recommendation to introduce mixed-ability base groups in the junior cycle. The recommendations relating to subject department planning have been fully implemented.

There was very good use of the target language by teachers in the modern language and Irish lessons, observed and by students in some of these lessons. The recommendation in this area, therefore, has been partially implemented, as there remains scope to increase the students' use of the target language. The recommended move to mixed-ability base groups should be of particular benefit in modern languages and Irish classes as advantage can be taken of the range of proficiencies in the group to encourage peer learning.

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

The school self-evaluation process is well under way with literacy as its initial focus. The school has produced a draft school self-evaluation report and school improvement plan (SIP) both of which are of very high quality. A very good literacy policy has been drawn up and the school is now implementing the recommendations made in their SIP. The standardised testing that has been introduced for first-year students will be used as baseline data to measure improvements in literacy and numeracy. It is very good practice that decisions regarding literacy and numeracy will have a strong evidence base. There is a very strong sense of care and a commitment to meeting students' needs and this motivates and directs the work of teachers and the senior management team towards continued improvement.

Published February 2014

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 welcomes the very positive WSE - MLL inspection report. The Board is pleased with the strengths identified in the key findings.

The Board is examining the recommendations with a view to their implementation.

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 outlined to the inspectors its short, medium and long term goals for the school's development. The Board is currently formally documenting its strategic plan.
- The Board is considering the inspectors' recommendation that First Year students should be assigned to mixed-ability base class groups and remain in these groups for their Junior Cycle years. The Board is examining this practice in other schools. The Board is investigating the implications for the timetable in the context of the introduction of the new Junior Certificate Course and the changes required to the existing system of support for SEN students. The PDST has been contacted with regard to CPD for staff to support mixed-ability teaching.
- The Board has requested that staff take on board the recommendations re subject department meetings, teaching methodologies, lesson planning, classroom practice, student engagement, differentiated learning strategies and assessment. Staff members have been asked to identify the supports necessary to implement the recommendations. The Board will provide the identified supports within its means.
- The Board will further investigate the responses to the student and parent questionnaires and take cognisance of the findings as part of the school improvement process.