Whole-School Evaluation
Management, Leadership and Learning

REPORT

Saint Brigid’s Secondary School
New Street, Killarney, County Kerry
Roll number: 61340S

Date of inspection: 21 September 2011
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A whole-school evaluation of management, leadership and learning (WSE-MLL) was undertaken in September 2011 in St Brigid’s Secondary School, Killarney, County Kerry. 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

St Brigid’s Secondary School is a voluntary secondary girls’ school under the trusteeship of Catholic Education – an Irish Schools Trust (CEIST). The school was built in the early 1950s by the Presentation Congregation having been established as a post-primary school in another building in 1948. The school is situated in the Cathedral precinct of Killarney, close to the centre of the town, and has an enrolment 492 students. The enrolment has been stable at this level although the figures projected for the years to 2018 show a potential growth for St Brigid’s and for the two other post-primary schools in the vicinity. The programmes offered include the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA), Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) and Transition Year (TY), in addition to the Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate programmes.

1. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

1.1 Key Findings

• St Brigid’s is led and managed by a highly effective team that includes the board of management, the principal and the deputy principal.
• Relationships and communication among staff and students are positive.
• The commitment of staff and management to continuing professional development (CPD) is considerable.
• Effective structures have been established in support of students, of planning and of administrative systems.
• Overall, the quality of teaching and learning observed was very good.
• The responses of the board of management to the reports of previous evaluations have been proactive, and affirmative of staff.
• The school’s capacity for change, and for the management of change, is high.

1.2 Recommendations for Further Development

• To enhance current good practice observed in some planning documents, the roles and responsibilities of those charged with the implementation of plans should be clearly outlined and cross-referenced in all documents as appropriate.
• The school should build on the high quality of its planning, teaching and learning through exploiting structured sharing of professional practices and ongoing self-evaluation.

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 is properly constituted and meets regularly. The board has clear procedures and documentation in place, as is the case with most other staff teams whose documents were observed. The agenda of board meetings includes consideration of all aspects of the operation of the school. It is clear that the board is committed both to the development of the school’s physical and management structures, and to an ongoing programme of policy review.

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.

The school’s priorities for development
The board is committed to the retention of the subjects and programmes currently available to students and to that of the staff necessary to provide them. The board has shown foresight in having made good use of available funds to develop the school’s information and communication technology (ICT) system. This has included infrastructural development such as the installation of wireless technology across the school and of short-throw data projectors in most classrooms. This development enables the use of interactive technologies, such as interactive whiteboards and screens, as they become available.

A plan for the development of the school buildings has been considered by the board. The plan includes the replacement of number of prefabricated classrooms that are situated in the school grounds. As part of the plan, the board has prioritised the harmonisation of the school’s façade with buildings of architectural significance, which surround the school, and the development of water conservation measures that are both efficient and environmentally friendly.

2.2 Effectiveness of leadership for learning

Leadership of staff
The board of management and the senior management team lead and manage the school most effectively. While the deputy principal has been appointed recently, the senior management team of principal and deputy principal, including the previous incumbents, has had a long and positive association with, and impact on, the school.

Relationships and communication between senior management and staff are affirmative and proactive. An effective middle-management structure has been established that is clearly linked to the school’s administrative and academic functions. Structures are in place that facilitate planning and review. These include formal and informal channels of communication that are efficient and include provision for continuity through good record keeping and record management.
Change has been managed skilfully. Teamwork and collaboration among staff have been key elements in this process. The senior management team has led staff through the major planning phases. They have devised policy and procedural documents that are well presented in the school plan, and have established subject departments that are well structured and have an advanced focus on learning and teaching. The commitment of staff and management to CPD has been substantial and has contributed significantly to staff competence in the management of change.

Structures and procedures have been established that enable staff effectiveness in managing tasks of an administrative and procedural nature while maintaining an appropriate focus on professional practice. The structures include both the organisation and location of the administrative office, a very effective hub of communication between the school and the external world and a large factor in the internal administration of the school. Procedures include meetings of staff, and these are scheduled regularly. Most formal meetings, and many informal meetings, are well documented. The associated records, such as the minutes and agendas of meetings, were readily available in the course of this evaluation.

Records of subject-department meetings, of the student-support team, and of those involved in middle management and in planning showed similar good practice and demonstrated clear links between those meetings and subject-department plans. In light of such good practice, future reviews of plans should include a cross-departmental focus with the aim of linking plans and policies to form an integrated whole. It is suggested that, for example, a whole-school policy on the use of teaching methods would be appropriate in the context of the school’s current focus under the Learning School project. This policy might be developed in conjunction with the outlining of the variety of teaching methods used and be linked to subject-department plans, obviating the need for separate descriptions in each plan. Similarity, current issues that may be of wider interest should be considered for future whole-school policy development. These include issues such as confidentiality, assessment and the management of referrals. To enhance current good practice observed in some planning documents, roles and responsibilities should be clearly outlined and cross-referenced in all documents as appropriate.

Leadership of students
Students confirm that St Brigid’s is a school in which they feel successful, comfortable, and supported academically and personally. Interactions are based on good relationships and good communication, both with teachers and with other students. Student attendance rates confirms this. It is of note that the proportion of students whose rate of attendance is of concern is significantly lower than would be encountered in similar schools. This confirms other evidence of student satisfaction, of effective student management and of the school’s success in achieving its mission. Such evidence includes the responses made by students and by parents in questionnaires administered as part of this evaluation.

Student transitions are well managed. A comprehensive process of transfer from primary to post-primary schooling has been devised. This includes information sessions for parents and incoming students, and clear documentation and communication with parents following entry. It is suggested that consideration be given to substituting the term cater for in place of accept on page 13 of the school’s Admissions and participation policy to reflect more accurately current practice. In the transition from junior cycle to senior cycle, provision is made for students’ participation in the process through dialogue regarding programme and subject choices. The subsequent design of the timetable is based on preferences expressed by students during this process. This is good practice.

The timetable provides an appropriate allocation of time for subjects and programmes. In addition to providing a wide range of subjects, the school has engaged in effective collaboration with Coláiste Bhréanainn, a local boys’ school, in facilitating access to
subjects, such as Home Economics, Agricultural Science and Music. Continuing provision of programmes such as TY, LCA and LCVP and continuing engagement with the Learning School project demonstrate staff commitment to providing for the learning needs of all students. Further evidence of commitment to students’ extracurricular and co-curricular education is found in the extensive sporting, cultural and leisure activities provided by staff on an ongoing basis.

The student voice is facilitated through the active student council, which meets fortnightly during the school year. The majority of students admit to having a say in school improvement. The records of the student council show that issues of concern to students are discussed, are communicated to senior management and are given due consideration.

Effective structures have been established in support of students. These include the additional educational needs department, the guidance department, the pastoral care structure and the structured support received from external agencies, such as the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS). The additional educational needs department has a clear focus on professional teaching practice, showing responses to students’ needs that are evidence based and individualised across the range of students’ abilities. Such good practice is reflective of the school’s general commitment to good teaching and is important as a model for that commitment.

Guidance, as described in documents of the Department of Education and Skills, is considered in St Brigid’s under the title pastoral care. It is clear from the school-wide provision observed that elements of personal, educational and vocational guidance are delivered, in particular, by the guidance department and by other staff, such as those of the Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE), Religious Education (RE), Physical Education (PE) and Home Economics departments, who contribute to the curricular component of Guidance through their work. It is noted that the support of teachers is acknowledged by the majority of students and is further confirmation of the centrality of the school’s mission. Documents provided to the school in the course of this evaluation should be consulted in clarification of, for example, the curricular framework for Guidance, the relationship between the school’s care systems and Guidance as described in the documents, and the roles and responsibilities of those engaged in the formal and informal support of students. This is best achieved in the context of whole school planning, whose aim should be the efficient integration of the available supports and the linking of those supports to subject-department plans and to support effective teaching and learning.

2.3 Management of facilities

It is clear that high standards of maintenance and careful planning have been key factors in the retention and successful integration of the older school buildings and those more recently built. Recent modifications to the building have included the creation of a well-equipped boardroom and entrance lobby that are tasteful and spacious. In conjunction with these developments, the security of the school has been enhanced by electronic means and by the installation of a window, which enables the effective monitoring and welcoming of those visiting the school.

Rooms are well furnished and designated for specific uses by teachers and subject departments as appropriate. These include a sports hall that is conveniently situated in the school grounds. ICT suited to good teaching practice has been installed in the majority of rooms and is of a high specification. The interior, which is clean and well decorated, attests to the skills of those responsible for its upkeep and to the environmental responsibility of students.
3. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

3.1 The quality of learning and teaching

Overall, the quality of teaching and learning observed was very good. This is reflected not only in the positive academic outcomes for students, in the certificate examinations, for example, but also in general student behaviour and participation in a variety of educational activities within the school and in the community. In all of the classrooms visited, high levels of professional competence were observed. Teachers were well versed in their subjects and imparted their knowledge with skill and variety.

Lessons were well prepared, structured and executed. Where used, worksheets and other materials were clear and relevant to the lesson topic. Lessons progressed developmentally and at a pace that, while challenging, enabled student participation. In some lessons, it was observed that a clear statement of the objectives was made at the outset, sometimes in written form on the whiteboard. Similarly, a brief summary of the learning achieved was made prior to the conclusion of some lessons. This good practice enables self-evaluation, and is recommended for more widespread adoption across subject departments.

The classrooms were bright and visually pleasing. In addition to printed material, most were decorated with examples of student work. This is good practice. It is suggested that, to avoid the perpetuation of common spelling and grammatical errors observed in some students’ displays, the work be audited by staff and students as an evaluative exercise.

The benefit of readily accessible ICT was clear in the majority of lessons. Use was frequently made of data projectors permanently installed in most classrooms and, in some cases, the use made of broadband internet access was stimulating and effective.

In maintaining student engagement, good use was made of a variety of methods and actions. Although in the majority of classrooms visited, the traditional layout of students seated at desks arranged in rows and columns was observed, teachers moved well among students while speaking and while advising individuals. Humour was used effectively in most lessons and facilitated smooth transitions between periods of individual work, such as note-taking and attending to teacher instruction, and more active engagement with, for example, discussion and group work. In confirmation of this, although textbooks were at hand, the majority of learning was achieved with appropriately minimal reference to textbooks.

Good rapport had been established and relationships between students and teachers were positive and educationally productive. This enabled well-focused approaches to the use of questions. It was clear that the personal and academic capacities of students had been well assessed, enabling the targeted use of questions tailored to individual students.

The high quality of teaching and planning practices observed suggest that the school is at an advanced stage of preparedness for the consideration of teaching and learning as planning objectives. This is particularly opportune in the current context of a nationwide focus on school self-evaluation led by the Department. This should be explored through structured and formalised professional dialogue among staff using the guidelines currently in preparation for publication by the Department. Although students were observed to be compliant and obedient, it was clear that a capacity existed for the development of greater ownership by students of their own learning. Consideration should be given to the inclusion of the student voice in the dialogue already recommended.
The planning documents observed were well presented. A clear relationship was observed between the individual plans of teachers and subject-department plans. Where good practice was observed in subject-department documentation, it included clear references to learning objectives, especially in the context of the school’s mission. This good practice should be considered by all subject departments, particularly in the context of the suggested focus on self-evaluation.

4. IMPLEMENTATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS FROM PREVIOUS EVALUATIONS

4.1 Management

The responses of the board of management to the reports of previous evaluations have been proactive. It is clear from the records of the board that ongoing review and self-evaluation have been key elements in determining the high quality of current practices. In that context, the recommendations from previous evaluations have been considered and implemented. The installation of a flame-proof cupboard, recommended in the report of an inspection of Science, was, for example, effected without delay.

4.2 Learning and Teaching

The engagement by staff in the Learning School Project characterises the approach to improvements to learning and teaching suggested in previous evaluations. The board has been aware of those recommendations and has responded well through its encouragement and facilitation of CPD. The board has also responded constructively by affirming staff in light of the positive findings of inspection reports.

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

The school’s capacity for change, and for the management of change, is high. The school continues to engage in self-evaluation through its involvements in various schemes of educational improvement, as outlined above. The high quality of leadership, of management and of teaching practice is both the product and the vehicle for continuing improvement. Good relationships among staff, management, students and parents, and the positive attitudes of parents and students to the school contribute to this process of improvement. The school is well advanced in its capacity for, and engagement with self-evaluation and improvement.

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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 is very pleased with the Inspection Report.

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 Recommendations “to enhance current good practice” have been put in place.