

**An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna**

**Department of Education and Skills**

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

**REPORT**

**Meán Scoil Mhuire  
Longford, County Longford  
Roll number: 63760E**

**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 Meán Scoil Mhuire. 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***

Meán Scoil Mhuire was founded by the Order of the Sisters of Mercy in 1874 on its present site in Longford Town. The school is the only all girls' secondary school in the county. Current enrolment numbers 565 students from a wide range of socio-economic backgrounds. The curricular programmes provided include the Junior Certificate, Transition Year (TY), the established Leaving Certificate and the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP). Catholic Education An Irish School's Trust (CEIST) is the school's trustee. The Board of Management was appointed in October 2012.

## **SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT**

### ***Key Findings***

- The board of management, principal and deputy principal effectively manage and support the school's development.
- The principal and deputy principal work well as a team and share the common aim of ensuring that the school operates effectively.
- School Development Planning (SDP) is an important aspect of the school's life.
- Partnership with parents is central to the school's ethos.
- A high standard of subject planning underpins teaching and learning in the school.
- There is a strong focus on the care of students.
- The quality of teaching and learning was either good or very good in most lessons evaluated.
- The school's curricular programmes provide students with a wide range of subjects.
- Very good progress has been achieved in implementing the recommendations that were made in previous subject inspection reports.
- The school demonstrates evident capacity to maintain improvement.

### ***Recommendations for Further Development***

- The agreed report that is issued following board of management meetings should be an abridged version of the actual minutes and the dates of ratification and review of school policies should always be indicated on them.
- The board's strategic plan outlining its intended objectives for the school's development should be documented and a copy included in the school development plan.
- Senior management should obtain a short annual report from each post holder and meet annually with the post holders.

- The pastoral care team should meet formally at regular intervals and an overarching pastoral care policy statement should be developed.
- The splitting of a class's weekly allocation of lessons for a subject between two teachers should be avoided and a double period of Physical Education should be provided for fifth and sixth-year students.
- Enhancement of the role of the learning support department in relation to the provision for students with special education needs is recommended.
- The scope to provide the parents' council with a page on the school's website should be explored.
- More widespread consistency should be achieved in relation to the best pedagogical practices observed.

## **1. QUALITY OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP**

### ***1.1 School ownership and management***

The board of management is appropriately constituted and effectively manages the school's development. Meetings are held at regular intervals and decisions are reached by consensus. All board members have completed training for their leadership roles and responsibilities.

The business of meetings is wide-ranging and includes a detailed principal's report that enables the board to remain well informed about school matters. The minutes of the meetings are the agreed report that is provided to the teaching staff and parents' council. It is recommended that the agreed report be an abridged version of the minutes to ensure the anonymity of students in relation to social welfare issues about which the board is informed. Best practice would be to record only the number of such cases in the minutes.

The board's priorities to progress the ongoing development of the school include the provision of a new Art room that is near completion and the gradual extension of the new e-learning initiative throughout the school whereby all students will eventually use iPads. This has already begun with the new first-year entrants. The board's strategic plan outlining its intended objectives for the school's development has not yet been documented, however. It is recommended that this be done and a copy included in the school development plan. With regard to school policies, it is recommended that the dates of their ratification and review be always indicated on them. Best practice would be to have school policies as a routine item on the agenda of board meetings. The school's admissions policy and the suspension and expulsion policy require more detail and should be reviewed.

The board is very supportive of the principal and deputy principal in managing the school and has ratified for example, the recent revision of the school's post-holder structure. The board also demonstrates its support for the maintenance of high quality teaching and learning by giving attention to curricular developments in the school such as the recently introduced nationwide school self-evaluation process and to students' attainment in the certificate examinations.

Good relationships with the school community are important to the board. Towards this end, the board should extend invitations to members of the teaching staff with particular responsibilities, the chairperson of the parents' council and representatives of the student council to inform the board about their work. The template used to record the minutes of

board meetings could be amended to include a designated section for noting the input received from the parents' council as a positive gesture in this regard.

The senior management team comprising the principal and deputy principal share the common aim of ensuring that the school operates effectively and is well run. They work very well together and have agreed areas of responsibility. Leadership roles have been delegated to the post holders, each of whom has a particular job description regarding the assigned post. As the middle management tier fulfils a very important managerial role in the school, it is recommended that the principal receive a short annual report from each post holder and meets annually with the post holders both individually and collectively. This will enable senior management to further underline the significant contribution that middle management makes to the successful operation of the school. The post holders' reports should also be made available to the board.

School Development Planning (SDP) is an important aspect of school life. It is a set item for discussion at board of management meetings, features frequently on the agenda of staff meetings and some post holders have SDP remits for staff development and the school's information and communication technology (ICT). The formulation of whole-school strategies by subject departments to improve students' standards of literacy and numeracy has also been recently completed.

Partnership with parents is central to the school's ethos. The parents' council consists of twelve members, two parent representatives for each year group. The principal attends their meetings and keeps the parents' council informed about school matters. The parents' council members are appropriately consulted in policy formation and new school initiatives. Good communication is also maintained with the wider parent body through, for example, parent-teacher meetings and information evenings. The parents' council actively supports the school through fundraising ventures.

### ***1.2 Effectiveness of leadership for learning***

The principal and deputy principal promote and expect a good work ethic among teachers and students. They have a visible presence around the school and maintain good communications with the teaching staff to whom they are readily accessible. Staff meetings are also organised into which teachers can have input.

Staff are well motivated. The effectiveness of the senior management's leadership in this regard is indicated, for example, by their promotion and realisation of the high standard of subject planning that underpins teaching and learning. This was evident in the subject department plans that were reviewed. It is recommended, however, that, where they have yet to be included, the plans incorporate a section on strategic planning outlining areas that have been identified for subject improvement, and a section detailing teachers' reflections on how their analysis of students' attainment in their subject area in the certificate examinations informs classroom pedagogy.

The teachers are deployed to teach their subject specialisms and there is good provision of teaching resources. Appropriate continuous profession development (CPD) is organised for the teachers and they are facilitated in attending in-service training for their subject specialism. There remains scope, however, to foster and facilitate the sharing of expertise by members of the teaching staff with their colleagues to a greater extent than has occurred to date.

There is a strong focus on the care of students. The students' year heads and form tutors have a particular responsibility to monitor and keep well informed about the personal and

academic development of the students in their charge throughout their secondary schooling. Guidance counselling is available to students through timetabled provision for all year groups apart from second year and by appointment or referral. There is also a range of whole-school policies in place to ensure their wellbeing. Furthermore, there are established procedures for effectively managing student transitions into the school and between junior and senior cycles.

The pastoral care team consists of the principal, deputy principal, year heads, guidance counsellor and the TY and LCVP co-ordinators. Notwithstanding the fact that the team members are vigilant in respect of the students' care and maintain good communications with each other, it is recommended that the team meets formally at regular intervals and records the minutes of their meetings. It is also recommended that an overarching pastoral care policy statement be developed to co-ordinate the work of the wide range of initiatives involved in the care of the school's students.

Students' attendance is effectively monitored and follow-up procedures are activated to address concerns about absenteeism. In the broader context concerning the required annual provision of 167 days instruction for all students, it is noted that the school operates a staggered system at the start and end of the academic year, whereby TY students, in particular, begin later and end earlier than the other year groups. This situation should be reviewed to ensure that TY students do not experience a shortfall in this regard.

There are good opportunities for students to assume positions of responsibility in the school community and to develop their leadership skills by becoming members of the student council, prefects and mentors. Students are also afforded the opportunity to represent their school while simultaneously developing their personal talents through their participation in a wide variety of extracurricular activities such as sports, debating, music and Gaisce, the President's Award programme.

The school's curricular programmes provide the students with a wide range of subjects and first-year students have a year-long taster programme to enable them to make informed choices when selecting their optional subjects for their Junior Certificate. Three core subjects namely, Mathematics, Irish and English are concurrently timetabled for all year groups apart from TY to enable the students to study the subject at the level that is most appropriate for them. A small number of examples of the splitting between two teachers of a class's allocation of weekly lessons for a subject occur on the timetable. Such occurrences should be avoided. The timetabling of a double period of Physical Education rather than a single period for fifth and sixth-year students is also recommended.

Senior cycle students can progress into TY, subject to their meeting set criteria and the availability of places, before undertaking either the established Leaving Certificate or the LCVP. In TY students are provided with a broad curricular programme that includes new subjects and the opportunity again to sample subjects before deciding on their Leaving Certificate optional subject choices. Both TY and LCVP include work placement experience and very good communication is maintained with local employers. The two programmes are well managed. They are also regularly reviewed and in the case of TY, the review is informed by the feedback that is obtained from students, parents, the TY teachers and local employers.

Learning support is provided by forming small class groups for first, second, third and fifth-year students with special education needs within the concurrent timetabled provision of the aforementioned core subjects. Learning support is also provided to individual students on a withdrawal basis by eight members of the teaching staff. Yet, there is still scope to enhance the role of the learning support department in this provision that should be explored. For example, formal meetings should be convened at regular intervals to enable the teachers

involved in the provision of learning support to meet collectively with the learning-support co-ordinator to report on progress being made, challenges encountered and to share expertise.

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**

Meán Scoil Mhuire is a well maintained school with a warm, supportive atmosphere. Classrooms are well equipped and established routines ensure the orderly movement of students. Environmental awareness is enhanced by the work of the green school's committee that is aiming to achieve the school's first green flag and the sets of attractive litter and recycling bins situated throughout the school. The development of the school's infrastructure is restricted, however, by the lack of available space on campus. The school has an attractive website. The scope to provide the parents' council with a page on the website should be explored.

## **1. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING**

### **2.1 The quality of learning and teaching**

The quality of teaching and learning was either good or very good in most lessons evaluated. The best lessons were characterised by very good pace and structure, the effective use of diverse methodologies that supported the varying learning styles of the students and an appropriate balance between teacher and student input. There was scope for varying degrees of improvement with regard to the aforementioned in the other lessons. In a small minority of lessons, there was scope for a more pronounced improvement.

All lessons had a planned development and incorporated appropriate resources to enhance student learning. Classroom management and students' behaviour were of a high standard and reflected the good teacher-student relationships that were a marked feature of the lessons.

In almost all lessons students were informed of the purpose of the lesson and the intended learning objectives at the outset or at a predetermined point early in the lesson. The concluding recap on the material studied was very good in a number of lessons. It should, however, have been used to assess students' learning more in some lessons and it was also sometimes overlooked.

There was very good contextualisation of the subject matter in many lessons through teachers' use of strategies such as interacting with students to engage their interest in the subject of their study, recapping on prior learning, the setting of a short written task and the correction of homework.

Teacher questioning was used extensively to gauge and guide learning. The combined good use of targeted and global questions that included probing higher-order questions was a marked aspect of the best lessons, where it supported greater understanding of the subject being studied by the students. This good practice should be extended to all lessons.

There was very good use of resources such as the board, handouts and textbooks to enhance and consolidate learning in many lessons. An audio tape was also used effectively in one

lesson to enhance the students' study of a Shakespearian play. ICT was used to best effect when it served a specific learning aim and fostered increased student engagement. It is recommended that this good practice be shared across subject departments as appropriate.

Differentiated learning was facilitated well in most lessons through the active learning methodologies employed. These included discussion, reading, co-operative learning, written assignments, and physical education activities. There was good emphasis too, on familiarising students with key words and new vocabulary in many lessons.

During the course of their lesson students remained attentive to their teachers and participated willingly in the study of their lesson material. Very good examples of learning were observed where students showed themselves to be knowledgeable about their subject, engaged well in the analysis of a problem or task, discussed their findings and explained their viewpoints. The standard of students' work was also good in the sample of their copybooks that were reviewed during the evaluation. The good practice that was noted of teachers providing written developmental feedback to students on their homework assignments is very positively acknowledged and should be increasingly implemented as a whole-school assessment for learning (AFL) strategy.

## **2. IMPLEMENTATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS FROM PREVIOUS EVALUATIONS**

### ***3.1 Management***

The recommendation that only one teacher be responsible for teaching a subject to a class was made in the Irish and English subject inspection reports. This recommendation has not been fully addressed and should be implemented.

### ***3.2 Learning and teaching***

Among the recommendations relating to teaching and learning in previous inspection reports were: rotation of the position of subject co-ordinator among subject department members; development of subject department plans to include analysis of students' attainment in the certificate examinations; the documentation of a reading policy by the English department; increased usage of ICT during lessons, and the adoption across the mathematics department of the practice of students amending their own work. Very good progress has been achieved in implementing these recommendations. The detailing of the implementation of the recommendations that was included in most subject department plans is commended. The format of some departmental annual coursework schemes could be further developed to include identification of the teaching and learning methodologies and resources to be used in respect of the listed coursework topics.

## **3. THE SCHOOL'S SELF-EVALUATION PROCESS AND CAPACITY FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT**

The board of management, principal and deputy principal are committed to effectively progressing the development of Meán Scoil Mhuire. The importance that they attach to school self-evaluation is clearly evident in their identified need of a new Art room, the review of the posts of responsibility that has been completed in order to meet the school's organisational needs and the overall high standard of subject department planning that underpins teaching and learning in the school. There has also been good progress made in relation to the development of whole-school literacy and numeracy strategies. Furthermore, there is consultation with the wider school community in relation to school policies, new school initiatives and the curricular review of the school's TY and LCVP. Indeed, the obtaining of the opinions of students, parents, teachers and employers to inform the

development of the school's TY curricular programme is an exemplar that can and should be replicated. The school, therefore, demonstrates obvious ability to maintain ongoing school improvement. The documentation of the board of management's strategic plan for guiding and realising the school's development will further inform planning for school improvement into the future.

# **Appendix**

**School response to the report**

**Submitted by the Board of Management**

**Area 1 Observations on the content of the inspection report**

A full and fair 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**

Tidying up the admissions policy & procedures by staff & board.

Anti-Bullying policy & procedures being worked on by staff & board.