An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna
Department of Education and Skills

Whole-School Evaluation
Management, Leadership and Learning

REPORT

Scoil Uí Mhuirí
Dunleer, County Louth
Roll number: 71780G

Date of inspection: 9 March 2011
Whole-School Evaluation
Management, Leadership and Learning

A whole-school evaluation of management, leadership and learning (WSE-MLL) was undertaken in March 2011 in Scoil Uí Mhuírí. 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 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
Scoil Uí Mhuírí is a co-educational post-primary school in mid-Louth under the trusteeship of County Louth Vocational Education Committee (CLVEC). Established in 1954, it has undertaken a major programme of modernisation and expansion in the last five years. A new senior management team was appointed in 2005 and the refurbished and greatly extended new building was opened in 2006. The school now provides all Department of Education and Skills (DES) programmes and is within the Delivering Equality In Schools (DEIS) action plan for educational inclusion.

Enrolment has expanded considerably since 2005 and currently stands at 525, marking a sixty-eight per cent increase in five years. The gender profile among the students currently stands at approximately sixty per cent boys and forty per cent girls. Projected enrolment will bring considerable challenges due to the ongoing increasing demand for places.

1. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

1.1 Key Findings

- The board of management is effective and strongly supports the school’s priorities for development through its active involvement in and oversight of the whole-school planning process.
- The very effectively managed school development planning process is a major strength that has ensured a whole-school commitment to a focussed agenda of improvement.
- Very clear development priorities are identified in the school plan 2010-2013 and are developed into specific targets.
- The strong senior management team provides clear direction on the agenda for improvement which the school has initiated.
- Support for staff is of high quality and management has established high expectations of staff within a culture of accountability.
- The middle management team is well managed and well motivated and makes a significant contribution to the effective operation of the school through distributed leadership.
- The Enrolment and Admissions Policy (2009) does not provide sufficient detail to applicant parents.
- The school offers students a broad and expanding curriculum where the aptitudes of students are central to its design.
High quality school facilities are provided and contribute to the atmosphere and potential for learning.

The quality of teaching and learning observed ranged from good to very good and was in some instances excellent with students engaged in the learning process.

Improved academic attainment across all subject areas is a key priority both in planning and in delivery.

Good progress has been made in the implementation of recommendations of previous evaluations and these have been disseminated across all subject areas.

The process of self-evaluation is well established and the school has not only the commitment but also considerable capacity to achieve school improvement.

The school is making very good progress towards establishing itself as a centre of excellence for learning where the potential of each student can be fully realised.

1.2 Recommendations for Further Development

- The Enrolment and Admissions policy should be reviewed to set out an order of priority in the criteria for admission; a clear explanation of the grounds on which enrolment may be refused with particular reference to students with special educational needs; and notification of the right to appeal a refusal to enrol.

- The parents of students identified by the school as best placed in JCSP should be consulted in advance of any assignment to class groups. Their consent for the placement should be obtained first.

- To build on the good practice observed in this evaluation, more frequent use of differentiated teaching and learning strategies, specifically in terms of challenge in tasks set in mixed-ability settings, is recommended. Further opportunities for students to process or reflect on the topic should be provided.

2. QUALITY OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP

2.1 School ownership and management – the Board of Management.

The board of management is properly constituted, it meets regularly and proceedings are well recorded. As a sub-committee of the VEC, the board reports to the VEC and is supported in its management role. Members are aware of the functions of a board and the high quality principal’s report ensures the board remains well informed on school matters. The board has instituted a self-review process, guided by the DES published aid to self-evaluation Looking At Our Schools. Considerable effort has been undertaken by the board to broaden an awareness of its work among the school community through collaborative meetings with the parents association and the student council.

School development planning is very effectively managed and is a major strength of the school. The board plays an active role both in contributing to and in ratifying school policies and plans. This is evident in the case of the high quality key planning documents produced in the school: Whole School Plan 2010-2013 (draft); DEIS Three Year Plan 2010-2013; Whole School Plan 2009-2010 and Annual Report 2009-2010. The good work of the board should be marked by the clear recording of the date of ratification on all documents.

The school’s priorities for development are coherent, focussed, time bound in their targets and are collaborative both in their design and in their planned implementation. The main areas identified for improvement are central to the effective operation of the school. These broad areas comprise: the creation of a positive school climate based on mutual respect; the highest quality of teaching and learning, including e-learning; raising academic standards; curriculum expansion; support for disadvantaged and special educational needs students;
excellence in resources, including staff resources; positive relations with feeder primary schools; community relations; a future building programme for expansion and the greater involvement of parents in the life of the school. Together these priorities provide an ambitious agenda for whole-school improvement.

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.

2.2 Effectiveness of leadership for learning

Leadership of staff
The strong senior management team provides clear direction for staff on the clear agenda for improvement initiated by the school. A culture of accountability exists within which high expectations are communicated to staff regarding collaborative planning, the quality of teaching and departmental self-evaluation. This is matched by good support in terms of access to and facilitation of continuing professional development (CPD) both at individual and whole-staff level. Differentiation and assessment for learning practices are recent examples of this that were provided to support a positive learning environment.

The senior management team works collaboratively with staff. Examples are to be found in the weekly middle-management team meetings, the engagement of all staff in the planning process, the devolution of responsibility for key areas of school management to staff teams, open communication through weekly newsletters and the facilitation of subject planning meetings.

The reduced middle-management team of five assistant principals (APs) and ten special duties teachers (SDTs) carries a considerable portfolio of responsibilities. The team makes a significant contribution to the operation of the school through this distributed leadership model. The finding from the parents’ questionnaire that almost one hundred per cent of respondents agreed that the school is well run sits well with this endorsement.

The school planning process has been consultative of the whole school community and the framing of priorities for the period 2010-2013 has followed a thorough consultation process that is well documented and includes good level consultation with the active parents’ association and with the student council. The high number of targets identified in the forward planning documents includes a number of achievable goals that are designed to sustain energies for the achievement of more ambitious targets. All key areas within the priority action plans are reader friendly and have an improved learning environment as a common aim.

Leadership of students
The enrolment and admissions policy is a key document in the management of students. Although recently reviewed, it contains a number of areas that require further attention. The school catchment area, for example, is not specified in the policy. The criteria for admission are not ranked in order of priority. Phrasing regarding the enrolment of students with special educational needs should be amended to reflect the school’s inclusive ethos. Applicant parents should be advised of their right to appeal a refusal to enrol.
The code of behaviour is well constructed with the aim of positive behaviour grounded in respect and it is perceived by student representatives as fair. Student awards systems have been put in place to recognise student achievement and a clear ladder of referral has been identified in the student discipline structure. Good advice is provided to staff on student management in the teachers’ handbook. Critical data in the school’s returns to the National Education and Welfare Board relevant to this area have been targeted by the school for improvement and the student questionnaire responses to the quality of students’ behaviour merits reflection.

Transition arrangements for students are good and there is close communication with the feeder primary schools. The success of the school in making students feel welcome when first enrolled received the strongest endorsement among the parents surveyed.

The DEIS plan 2010-2013 is in place to promote educational inclusion. The seven DEIS targeted areas are well addressed. A full position has been created for Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) and the School Completion programme (SCP) has a clear focus for targeted students. A multi-cultural week has been organised.

Arrangements are in place for student leadership development opportunities. A student mentoring programme operates and extracurricular and co-curricular activities have been expanded. The student council has a good profile in the school and student questionnaire responses indicate that there is scope to develop its potential to give students a say in how to make the school a better place. In that regard, all student council members should be elected in accordance with DES guidelines provided by the student council support team.

The school curriculum has been expanded with the needs of students central to those decisions. A broad range of subjects is provided that now also includes Music, Geography, Spanish, Technology and Construction Studies. Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) has become the Leaving Certificate of choice for almost all students. In generating the school timetable, the practice of splitting lessons across break times should be avoided as far as possible.

The full range of programmes is provided. These are well planned and co-ordinated. Core teams have been appointed in each case and review mechanisms are well established. The parents of students identified by the school as best placed in the Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP) should be consulted in advance of any assignment and their consent for the placement first obtained.

Guidance provision is good and arrangements for options subjects are now supported by the sampling programme in first year. Student and parent questionnaire responses on the quality of the school’s advice provided on subject choice indicate the need for ongoing attention to this area.

2.3 Management of facilities

The school building has been refurbished, extended and is very well maintained. There are plans for a further expansion of permanent accommodation and a seven acre site adjoining the school has been acquired. There is a welcoming atmosphere and student achievements are prominently displayed. Environmental awareness is high and the Green Flag has been secured. Management is committed to providing the highest facilities.

There has been significant investment in information and communications technology (ICT) and resources in classrooms are good. There is close co-operation on ICT development with another school in the CLVEC scheme. E-learning is an identified priority
of the school plan. The views of parents and students accord on a very high satisfaction rating at the quality of facilities provided at the school.

3. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

3.1 The quality of learning and teaching
Twenty-one lessons were included in the evaluation. The quality of teaching and learning observed was predominantly in the category of good to very good and was in some instances excellent. Preparation and planning was good across all lessons observed and in the very best instances teaching methodologies showed a perfect pacing of delivery of content.

Significant strengths were noted across the wide range of subject areas involved. These included the use of learning outcomes to frame lessons and evaluate learning during lessons. There was attention to the development of vocabulary across all subjects. In the best instances, student awareness of and use of the subject-specific language register was impressive. Key words were displayed, were referred to in the course of the lesson, and developed. This was in keeping with the school’s draft literacy policy.

Teacher-based classrooms are the norm and a good supportive learning atmosphere has been provided in many cases. There was good use of ICT and the level of ICT resources in classrooms was good. Data projectors and broadband connection are provided in all classrooms.

A good level of student engagement was evident in the learning process. In the strongest examples, students demonstrated a capacity to make informed contributions on the lesson topics. The development of independent learning and higher-order thinking was evident in a number of lessons. A warm relationship between teachers and learners characterised the classroom atmosphere in almost all lessons.

Responses to student and parent questionnaires indicated a high level of satisfaction with the quality of teaching and with progress in learning. Areas for development in learning and teaching arise in the context of a minority of lessons observed and are identified in the interests of building on the good practice described above. These areas include the need to provide greater differentiation in the tasks set in mixed-ability settings. Classroom practice should not allow teacher instruction or explanation to dominate the lesson. Learning would be better promoted by providing students with opportunities to process or reflect on the lesson topic. Assessment for learning practices can also be promoted through the closer monitoring of homework. The quality of classroom management observed indicated the need to negotiate good relationships with learners and requires that progress through lessons is well managed.

These areas for development have relevance across all disciplines. The team teaching structure that has been established provides an appropriate initial forum for the sharing of good practice through observation and for its wider dissemination.

An analysis of certificate examination data shows that trends are emerging of increasing proportions of students attempting higher-level papers. The school’s assessment tests indicate an improving academic potential among enrolling students. The aim of improved academic performance is supported by the principal’s consideration of each subject department’s review of attainment in the certificate examinations and its plans to use the data to drive future improvement.
4. IMPLEMENTATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS FROM PREVIOUS EVALUATIONS

4.1 Management

Good progress has been made in the implementation of recommendations from the ten previous subject inspection reports (SIR). The board now makes a formal response to published reports that includes clear follow-up actions to implement SIR recommendations. Most recommendations for management relating to whole-school support and subject provision have been addressed. Examples that reflect this include the involvement of a greater number of teachers in teaching higher-level courses and students’ participation at higher level is promoted in all subjects. In relation to the learning of Irish and modern languages, arrangements have been made to enter students for the optional oral examination in the Junior Certificate examination. Some timetabling issues remain, including the splitting of double class periods across breaks and concurrent timetabling of Irish.

4.2 Learning and Teaching

Very good progress has been made in the implementation of recommendations on learning and teaching and these have been disseminated across all subject areas. Subject department teams and subject department planning are now well established. Lessons observed in the course of the evaluation showed significant use of learning outcomes. Subject department planning shows the incorporation of JCSP learning statements. The use of key words is well developed and there is a wide engagement across subject departments with the Learning Support department. Differentiation and assessment for learning practices have been developed. The integration of ICT as a learning tool has been advanced and e-learning is identified as a priority area for developing learning in the three year whole-school plan.

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

5.1 The school’s self-evaluation process is very good and has been led by the board of management which has engaged in self-evaluation of how it fulfils its own role and functions. Reflection on raising educational achievement engages the whole staff. The Annual Report 2009-2010 provided by the board is a new departure in providing a report on the operation of the school. A separate review, compiled in December 2010, documents the progress made in implementing the priorities identified in the 2009-2010 school plan.

All of this is evidence of the sound planning processes that engage all of the partners. In this, the school demonstrates not only the commitment but also considerable capacity to effecting school improvement. The evidence provided in the course of this evaluation of management, leadership and learning, indicates that strong claims are being established for the school as a centre of excellence for learning where the potential of each student can be fully realised.

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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, staff, students and parents of Scoil Uí Mhuirí welcome the very positive and affirming report from the WSE_MLL team. As a board we would like to commend the hard work and efforts of all those who play their part in the school community of Scoil Uí Mhuirí. The WSE_MLL report was found to be comprehensive, factual and endorsed the progress Scoil Uí Mhuirí is making towards establishing itself as a centre of excellence for learning where the potential of each student can be fully realised.

Regarding the ‘Recommendations for Further Development’ the Board are of the opinion that the parents of students identified by the school as best placed in the Junior Certificate Schools Programme (JCSP) should be consulted in advance and the benefits of the placement explained to them. This will enable these parents to make a more informed decision regarding the placement of their son/daughter in the JCSP group.

The Board would like to thank the inspectors for the professional manner in which they carried out this inspection.

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 are engaging in a comprehensive review of the Enrolment and Admissions Policy (2009).

Staff at Scoil Uí Mhuirí are engaging in a series of Continuous Professional Development (CPD) sessions on ‘Differentiated Teaching and Learning’.

Parents of those students identified by the school as best placed in JCSP have been consulted prior to the commencement of the academic year 2011/2012 and the benefits of the placement explained to them. A series of follow up meetings with some parents has taken place.