

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

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

REPORT

**Saint Mary's College
Arklow, County Wicklow
Roll number: 61780A**

Date of inspection: 7 December 2011



Whole-School Evaluation

Management, Leadership and Learning

A whole-school evaluation of management, leadership and learning (WSE-MLL) was undertaken in December 2011 in St Mary's College, Arklow. 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.

Introduction

St Mary's College is a voluntary secondary school with 530 female students. It is under the trusteeship of Catholic Education, an Irish Schools' Trust (CEIST) and provides post-primary education for the students from the town of Arklow and its hinterland. There is also a cohort of students who, in search of a single-sex school, travel from other towns in both Wicklow and Wexford. Students come from a wide range of socio-economic backgrounds. The board of management of the school was given an opportunity to comment on the findings and recommendations of the report; the board chose to accept the report without response.

1. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

1.1 Key Findings

- The board of management is committed to ongoing school development and is proactive in fulfilling its leadership and management roles.
- Senior management's work in leading and managing the school community has resulted in significant improvements in recent years.
- Assistant principals and special duties teachers carry out their duties in a conscientious and effective manner.
- The care and discipline structures in place support a positive learning environment for all students.
- The quality of teaching and learning ranged from good to very good in the lessons observed.

1.2 Recommendations for Further Development

- A more formalised middle management structure should be created to empower assistant principals and to afford senior management more time for strategic planning.
 - A core learning support team should be created to deliver more formalised timetabled resource teaching and learning support.
 - Year head duties should include the mentoring and tracking of students' academic progress thereby enhancing the overall quality of educational attainment.
 - Senior management should prioritise a curriculum review in order to resolve some of the current deficits in curriculum provision.
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2. QUALITY OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP

2.1 School ownership and management – the Board of Management

One of the many legacies of the outgoing board of management has been the professional manner in which meetings are held and duties carried out, thereby contributing to the effective leadership and management of the school. The composition of the current board, balancing experience with the injection of new ideas, means that its members are well placed to ensure continued quality in management and leadership.

The board is properly constituted and relevant training has been offered to all new members. It meets regularly and is kept fully informed of all that is happening in the school. Other good practices include the regular reports from the finance committee, the comprehensive report given by the principal and the agreed statement drawn up at the end of each meeting for the staff and the parents' association.

The minutes of meetings indicate that the board of management is cognisant of all school activities and of the students' progress in terms of attendance and participation, behaviour and achievements including examination outcomes. The work of the finance committee ensures that monies are wisely spent and that due investment is maintained in both the general infrastructure and in initiatives supporting ongoing improvement in teaching and learning and in student welfare. The inclusion of school development planning as an item for discussion at each meeting is also good practice as it makes the board more aware of its responsibility for matters beyond the school's infrastructure and finances.

The outgoing board was also proactive in ensuring that all relevant policies have been developed, ratified and reviewed as appropriate. 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 parents' association expressed very good satisfaction with the levels of communication between the school and home. Members see their role as supporting school management in its efforts to optimise the quality of educational provision for all students. The association has organised initiatives such as the recently introduced book rental scheme in addition to fundraising. They have also had meaningful input into policy development.

The school's priorities for development

St Mary's College is constantly striving to ensure optimum educational provision in accordance with the school's ethos and vision while at the same time responding to the needs of an ever-evolving society. A number of areas have been identified for development. Some priorities relate to the school's infrastructure, while others focus on curricular improvements. Infrastructural developments include the ongoing maintenance of the school building and the upgrading of facilities such as information and communication technology (ICT). A curriculum review has been prioritised as the next stage in school development planning. Other priorities include ongoing professional development to support teachers in both subject planning and teaching methodologies. School management has also identified the need to progress the culture of self-evaluation as a means of ensuring ongoing school improvement and academic attainment for students of all abilities.

2.2 Effectiveness of leadership for learning

Leadership of staff

Senior management works as a united and effective team, maintaining a visible presence in the school. The principal is responsible for ensuring good staff management relationships and forward planning in terms of numbers and resources. The deputy principal carries out the day-to-day administrative tasks required for effective management. They both have a strong belief in the importance of modelling good practice in terms of communication and openness and there was evidence of this during the evaluation in their accessibility to staff and students alike. They have both been very active in recent years in leading all members of the school community, primarily through the school development planning process and teacher professional development.

The work of the school development planning team, comprising senior management and the school development planning co-ordinator, is noteworthy for the manner in which the process has been managed, the way in which working groups were formed and ideas shared. This has resulted in more effective work practices and enhanced teaching and learning. However, given the pace of school development planning in recent years, it may now be timely to evaluate all that has happened in the school and look at how the policies, programmes and initiatives in place respond to the school's tradition, ethos and vision.

Year heads are drawn from both the assistant principals and the special duties posts of responsibility. They carry out a range of duties which support the principal and deputy principal in the management of students. Post-holders with administrative functions or co-ordination duties contribute to the efficient day-to-day running of the school. While it is evident that post holders are carrying out their duties in a professional manner, the establishment of a more formalised middle management team is recommended to further progress the school as an organisation. Increased formal consultation between senior and middle management and the devolving of responsibilities should result in a greater openness to change and a better sense of shared ownership. It will also provide senior management with more opportunity to plan for the emerging needs of school.

Leadership of students

The school has an open admissions policy and transparent procedures and it has a current intake of 530 students. Senior management hopes to increase this number to 550 in the next few years. A recent audit of attendance and participation revealed some cause for concern in relation to student absences of over twenty days. While strategies such as better roll call systems and the establishment of a post of responsibility for attendance have succeeded in improving attendance, there is still much work to be done to reduce absences to more acceptable levels.

Recent changes to the code of behaviour are welcomed as there is now a much greater focus on positive discipline. The school has introduced a star system for junior cycle students with end-of-year rewards for good behaviour. Senior cycle students receive similar rewards. Notices and posters relating to positive behaviour adorn the walls of the school, reminding students of their responsibilities. This is good practice. A ladder of referral is in place to support the effective implementation of the code of behaviour.

All teachers are encouraged to take on the role of tutor, thereby supporting students' social and emotional development. Senior management meets weekly with the guidance counsellor to ensure that all students in need have been referred to the relevant personnel, either within the school system or to the external agencies working with the school. To

maximise the delivery of guidance particularly at junior cycle, greater collaboration is recommended between the members of the guidance service and the tutors who also have responsibility for the delivery of Social Personal and Health Education (SPHE) and Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE). This is of particular importance given the findings from the student questionnaires that a significant number of students either didn't know or didn't feel there was an adult they could talk to if they had a problem. To overcome this difficulty, it is recommended that the guidance service make formal contact with all class groups at the beginning of each academic year to inform or remind students of the services offered and how they can access them.

Students with additional learning needs are supported in a number of ways. Literacy support is provided through the use of additional reading programmes for students who have an exemption from Irish. Mathematics support is provided through the creation of a foundation level grouping. Teachers of subjects other than English and mathematics are also deployed for resource teaching and usually provide their designated students with additional help in their own subject area. This provision however, may not necessarily respond to a student's specific learning requirement. To optimise the provision of support for students with additional learning needs, the creation of a smaller core team, willing to undertake professional development and to work in this discipline, is recommended. The delivery of resource teaching should feature on the school timetable. The use of team teaching should also be considered as a means of maximising resources.

Given the good supports in place to support students' care needs, it is recommended that the year head duties should be revised to include the mentoring and tracking of students' academic progress from entry into the school. Such duties could incorporate some of the specific motivational study supports being currently offered to one year group. This would further enhance the quality of educational provision for all students, lead to improved academic outcomes and afford all students meaningful engagement with teaching and learning.

Students in St Mary's are afforded a range of leadership opportunities. A successful peer mentoring programme is in place to support first-year students. There is also a properly constituted student council, with representation from each year group. They meet on a regular basis and the issues raised are in turn communicated to senior management. Members of the student council have also contributed to recent policy development relating to the code of behaviour and the anti-bullying policy. According to the findings of the student questionnaires, a significant number of students felt that they did not have a say in relation to school improvement. To overcome this, all members of the school community should be informed on a regular basis that the student council serves as the forum for student contributions to school improvement.

Curriculum review was one of the areas identified by senior management for development. This is timely as the main recommendations arising from this evaluation relate to curriculum provision. The school currently works a forty-two period week, with all lessons of forty minutes duration. While this arrangement works well in terms of maximising teaching resources, some of the current curriculum deficits relate to insufficient time allocation for certain subjects. For example, Physical Education (PE) is currently accorded only one period a week for all students. In addition, the English inspection report carried out in 2009 indicated the desirability of an additional class period for English. Furthermore, given the sequential nature of Mathematics, best practice necessitates the timetabling of Mathematics on a daily basis from at least second year on. When drawing up the timetable, a sufficient time allocation for the core subjects should be prioritised. Additional subjects such as computer studies, which are desirable, but not mandatory, should be considered as an alternative to the study periods allocated in third year and senior cycle as such periods compromise the mandatory twenty-eight hours instruction time for all students.

An examination of the school timetable revealed a large number of option blocks in each year group offering the same subjects. While this indicates that students are afforded great breadth of choice from within the subjects offered, the number of students choosing specific subjects and the staffing requirements for the different option bands can limit opportunities for optimum timetabling. For example, subjects such as languages which are best timetabled in single periods spread across the week are currently blocked against practical subjects, which require double periods. Furthermore, while syllabus requirements for most subjects at junior cycle facilitate mixed-level groupings, optimum practice in most subjects at senior cycle would be the setting into higher and ordinary-level groupings. In order to maximise student opportunities in a resource efficient manner, it is recommended that a board of studies be created for the purpose of reviewing current curriculum provision, and considering possibilities such as a broader taster programme in first year to ensure that students are making more informed choices.

As part of ongoing teacher professional development, whole-school in-service has been provided on subjects such as assessment for learning (AfL) and differentiation to support the current situation of mixed-level groupings in most subjects. The provision of such in-service is good practice, particularly given the challenges of teaching mixed-level groupings at senior cycle. To benefit from such initiatives it is recommended that, following these interventions, the teachers in a particular year group or subject area pilot the strategies promoted and evaluate them with a view to integrating them successfully into their work in the classroom.

2.3 Management of facilities

The school is housed in a listed building which dates back to 1881. It is well maintained, with ongoing improvements and restoration work carried out in order to make the building more comfortable and energy efficient. There has been significant investment in information and communication technology in recent years and all classrooms are now equipped with computers and data projectors. This has resulted in the successful integration of ICT into general teaching and learning. St Mary's was one of the first schools in the country to be awarded a green flag and continued effort in this regard has resulted in the awarding of seven green flags for the school. Classrooms are teacher based and good efforts have been made in all instances to create attractive learning environments through the display of subject relevant posters, and student projects.

3. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

3.1 The quality of learning and teaching

The overall quality of learning and teaching in the twenty-four lessons observed ranged from good to very good. Responses to the questionnaires issued to parents and students also reported a high level of satisfaction with the quality of teaching and learning.

Most teachers began by communicating the intended learning outcomes to students. In some instances, the outcomes were also reviewed at the end of the lesson. These good practices should be extended. Effective planning and preparation was evident in all of the lessons evaluated.

The methodologies observed in most lessons ensured that students were fully engaged and active in their learning. Active and creative methodologies such as role-play, pair or group work were observed in the majority of lessons and they were most effective in instances where good student discussions and evaluations ensued.

Effective questioning strategies were used in most lessons. Best practice was observed where a good balance was maintained between global questioning and questions directed to named students and where they were afforded opportunities for active participation in lessons and for the development of higher-order thinking skills. ICT was effectively integrated into many lessons. This good practice should be extended and, in some instances, expanded to include additional resources which will further enhance student interaction and interest.

The target language was consistently used by the teachers in most of the language lessons observed. Students in some lessons also made good efforts to interact in the target language. These good practices should be extended throughout. Very good attention was given in lessons to the use of subject-specific terminology and to the explanation of key words.

A positive learning environment prevailed throughout and students were well supported in their learning. Most classrooms were good visual learning environments with subject related posters and displays of students work.

Homework was regularly assigned and noted by students in their journals. There was some evidence of formal checking of students' homework by teachers. In some lessons teachers included comments as to how students might improve their performance. This good practice should be expanded. Student outcomes in the certificate examinations indicate a need to review the uptake of higher level in some subjects in both Junior and Leaving Certificate.

4. IMPLEMENTATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS FROM PREVIOUS EVALUATIONS

4.1 Management

Five subject inspections have taken place since 2006. Recommendations common to many of the subjects evaluated related to issues of time and timetabling, improvements in subject planning and the increased use of ICT to support teaching and learning.

School management has facilitated progress in some areas. ICT has been significantly upgraded and more opportunities have been afforded to teachers to engage in collaborative subject planning. However, recommendations concerning the allocation of more time to certain subjects and the timetabling of others have not as yet been implemented. The recommended curriculum review should take into account the need to progress these recommendations as a matter of priority.

4.2 Learning and Teaching

Subject co-ordinators reported greater discussion and collaboration in relation to teaching and learning practices as an outcome of the recommendations made in subject reports. This was reflected in the developments noted in subject planning where greater emphasis has been placed on the establishment of learning outcomes. Work in this area should now progress to reviewing the methodologies used and their impact on student attainment. Improved practices in teaching and learning included the sharing of learning outcomes, the integration of ICT into lessons and improved use of the target language by the teachers and in some instances by students in the language lessons observed. This latter practice should be further extended.

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

The school development planning process as initiated and carried out by all members of the school community reflects the capacity of St Mary's College for ongoing improvement. As part of the school's self-evaluation process, a number of areas have been identified for development or review, including curriculum provision, ongoing teacher professional development and the further upgrading of ICT resources to enhance teaching and learning. The school has now completed one hundred and thirty years of educational provision in the town of Arklow. Given the pace of school development planning in recent years, it is now perhaps opportune to stop and celebrate what has been achieved and, in light of these achievements to re-imagine the vision for St Mary's College for the years to come and the changes this future may bring.

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