

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

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

REPORT

Our Lady of Mercy College

Beaumont, Dublin 9

Roll number: 60870T

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**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 April, 2015 in Our Lady of Mercy College. 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 on the findings and recommendations of the report; the board chose to accept the report without response.

Introduction

Our Lady of Mercy College is a voluntary secondary school for girls. Originally established by the Sisters of Mercy, it is now under the trusteeship of CEIST – Catholic Education, an Irish Schools Trust. Enrolment has increased in recent years and there are now 435 students attending the school. The school provides the Junior Certificate, Leaving Certificate and Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) as well as an optional Transition Year (TY). Due to increased enrolment and the replacement of retired staff, many of the teachers are relatively new to the school. The student intake reflects a diverse range of abilities and backgrounds with many cultures and religions represented in the student body.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

Key Findings

- A high level of leadership is evident in the development by the board of management of a 'Strategy Document' that sets out the principles that will guide the future development of the school.
- The leadership, commitment and reflective approach of the senior management team has resulted in a well-organised school where teamwork and collaboration are valued.
- Senior management's strong commitment to improving the quality of student experience is particularly evident in the initiatives they are leading, with the support of staff, in the areas of professional development, peer observation and self-review.
- Teachers contribute significantly to the effective operation of the school through their leadership of many projects and initiatives.
- The quality of teaching was very good in the majority of lessons observed, with excellent practice observed in some lessons.
- Good progress is evident in the implementation of recommendations from previous inspection reports.
- The school has a very good capacity, under the guidance of the board and senior management team and with the collaboration of staff, to continue to effect school development and improvement.

Recommendations for Further Development

- Consideration should be given to including specific reference to the areas of student progression, and teaching and learning, in the school's Strategy Document and linking the overall principles in the Strategy with the annual planning targets and actions set by senior management.
- The peer observation and self-review initiatives should be further developed and expanded as a means of sharing good practice on all aspects of teaching and learning including differentiation.
- The policy and practices with respect to the assignment and recording of homework should be reviewed as part of an overall review of the homework policy.
- The very good practice of subject departments where analysis of examination results led to the setting of very specific measurable targets or actions should be adopted by all departments.

1. QUALITY OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP

1.1 School ownership and management

The board of management is appropriately constituted and is supported by the trustees to ensure the effective provision of education in the school. The board plays an active role in supporting the principal and deputy principal and in developing a wide range of policies, including mandatory policies such as admissions, behaviour, and special education. Effective procedures for policy development are in place. Strong links have been created with the student council and the parents' association, with both groups attending a board meeting annually. It is good practice that an agreed report is issued following each board meeting. The board also reports annually to CEIST, and regular newsletters and the school's website provide information to the wider community. As well as a finance sub-committee, the board has also established a board of studies, which reports to the board on curricular issues.

A high level of strategic leadership is evident in the development by the board of a 'Strategy Document' in 2012. The strategy sets out the principles that will guide the future development of the school such as the value placed on strengthening the links between the school and the local and wider community. The Strategy is kept under ongoing review and it is suggested that it would be useful to include specific reference to the areas of student progression and teaching and learning at the next formal review.

The leadership and commitment of the senior management team of principal and deputy principal have resulted in a well-organised school. A comprehensive school plan and effective systems to deal with various aspects of school life are in place. A culture of teamwork and collaboration has been created. While having some separate duties and roles, the principal and deputy principal work as a team. They work well together using a range of complementary strengths and skills, and both bring a very analytical and reflective approach to their consideration of issues. This approach is particularly evident in the introduction of a number of initiatives in recent years.

It is very good practice that the senior management team takes time out from the everyday work of the school to plan for the year ahead. Significant progress in implementing such planning is evident in initiatives such as changes to the curriculum, the introduction of school self-evaluation, development of new policies and the implementation of a new induction programme for staff. In future planning, it would be useful to have a clearer link between the annual targets and actions set by senior management and the principles set out in the school's Strategy Document.

Leadership roles are also distributed at middle management level. The schedule of posts of responsibility was reviewed in recent years and the current range of posts provides for relevant areas of school life. The duties assigned to each post are clearly set out in the schedule and their effective operation supports the management of the school.

An active student council contributes greatly to school life through the organisation of events and through its role in policy development. The parents' association is very supportive of the school. There is very good communication between the association and the senior management team. Parents' views on policies, as well as on-going issues, are sought and valued. The association helps to organise funds-raising events and assists at school events such as open nights. Surveys of students and parents show a high level of satisfaction with many aspects of school life. For example, students are proud to be in the school and feel safe and cared for. However, some views expressed by students and parents, in respect of behaviour for example, would merit further exploration.

1.2 Effectiveness of leadership for learning

Senior management's strong commitment to improving the quality of student experience is particularly evident in the initiatives they are leading, with the support of staff, in the areas of professional development. For example, a comprehensive induction support programme is in place for new staff and continuing professional development (CPD) of all staff is supported. Significantly, CPD is facilitated by providing opportunities for staff to learn from their colleagues. For example, the literacy and numeracy link teachers have made presentations at staff meetings. It is suggested that CPD in the area of Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) and Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) should be prioritised.

Professional dialogue on teaching and learning practice has been enhanced and supported through the introduction of peer observation and self-review initiatives. In these initiatives, teachers visit each other's classrooms to observe and learn from each other and they also seek the views of students on their learning experience. As a result of these initiatives, teachers are talking to each other about what is happening in their classrooms and learning from each other and from their students. This has led to a culture where professional dialogue is valued and practice is shared in a collegial and collaborative manner.

Teachers contribute significantly to the effective operation of the school through their leadership of many projects and initiatives. For example, all staff are involved in at least one working group or committee. Some formal groups such as the care team and the year heads are timetabled to meet on a weekly or monthly basis. Other groups work on specific areas such as policy development, 'digital roadmap' and organisation of events, and meet on a more informal basis. In addition to participating in such working groups, teachers also take on many specific roles such as class tutor, new staff liaison person, student council, prefects, and subject coordination. This work is evidence of a high level of commitment to the successful operation of the school. Collegial and collaborative work practices are systematically supported through staff, working group and subject department meetings. Staff spoke highly of the support and encouragement they receive from senior management and in turn senior management commended staff for their willingness to collaborate with them in school development.

The school provides a broad and balanced curriculum. All students take the LCVP programme and a large majority benefit from this in applying for third-level places. The numbers taking TY are increasing and students spoke highly of their experience in TY. The curriculum has been extended in recent years with the addition or re-introduction of subjects such as Physics and Economics. There are open curricular choices for students coming into first year and those entering senior cycle. This is good practice and allows students to take

up subjects in senior cycle that they have not studied in junior cycle. Some subject departments have concerns regarding the difficulties which such students will face compared to those who have studied the subject previously and are implementing measures, such as a summer reading list, to support them. It is recommended that consideration should be given to how the TY programme can further support students who choose to take up certain subjects for the first time in fifth year.

Learning-support structures are working well within the school. Organisation of such support begins before students enter the school. A range of strategies is used to provide extra support including an increasing use of in-class support rather than withdrawal from class. Very good practice is evident in the involvement of subject teachers, students and parents as well as the learning-support teachers in the drawing up of individual education plans. It is also good practice that all teachers can access the information and advice they need to support students with special educational needs.

The school's admission policy provides clear and comprehensive procedures for application and enrolment in the school. Good systems are in place to monitor attendance and punctuality. Senior management is aware of the overall trends and deal pro-actively with individual cases of poor attendance or punctuality.

Students are very aware of the code of behaviour and in particular the 'zero tolerance' attitude towards any form of bullying. A wide range of awards promotes positive behaviour and student responsibility.

Guidance structures are working well. A guidance plan is currently being developed and every effort is made to cater for the needs of students. In discussion with the inspection team, students and parents acknowledged the help they had received at information events dealing with areas such as senior-cycle options or college applications.

Teachers are very aware of students' pastoral needs and there is very strong emphasis in the school on providing for such needs. A variety of strategies is used to provide support both formally and informally. The year-head and class-tutor system is working very well. Daily contact between tutors and class groups allows for issues to be dealt with quickly. It is good practice that the care team meets weekly to coordinate provision. Individual cases are referred for more specialised support when required, and it is good practice that information is shared with staff on a 'need to know' basis. Students' survey results show that they feel that there is someone in the school that they can talk to about a problem. As one student expressed it, "teachers think of students as people".

Students' personal development including their leadership skills is promoted through the establishment of a student council, class and subject prefects. In addition, many informal opportunities are provided for students to participate in extra-curricular activities such as a cultural day. The school musical and a tour to Berlin were among the highlights of this school year. Entrepreneurship is fostered through the students' involvement in a 'market day' and is evident in their success in the Student Enterprise national awards.

Students' sense of personal responsibility and their skill at 'learning to learn' is particularly fostered through mentoring and target-setting initiatives. All TY and fifth-year students work with a teacher in setting and reviewing their academic and personal goals at regular intervals throughout the school year. Parents are also involved and thus are well informed about how their children are progressing.

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 school has excellent, well-maintained facilities including a large gymnasium, a sports field, a concert hall and many specialist rooms. A well-stocked library adds to the educational opportunities for the students.

The many displays of students' work and notice boards for curricular and extra-curricular activities on the corridors of the school have created an attractive learning environment.

A commitment to environmental sustainability is evident in the work of the eco-committee which is working towards the award of a green flag for environmental awareness.

2. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

2.1 The quality of learning and teaching

The quality of teaching was very good in the majority of lessons observed. Excellent practice was observed in some lessons. In many instances, high-quality planning for lessons was evident where it was clear that teachers had thought out what they wanted students to achieve during the lesson and had designed a structured sequence of learning and assessment activities to support that aim. In some cases, planning focused more on the delivery of content and there was not a sufficient link between the intended learning outcomes and the learning or assessment activities in the lesson.

Subject planning is well established and some very good practice was evident in subject plans such as the sharing of resources, action planning and an ongoing review of schemes of work. The use of a common template for subject plans is useful as it facilitates the sharing of good practice across subject areas. The good practice, seen in some cases, of allowing some time at formal department meetings for discussion of classroom practice should be adopted by all subject departments.

Successful lessons were characterised by the use of a variety of activities to engage students. Such strategies included the use of starter activities, group and pair work, discussion time, literacy activities, and practical work. Good assessment techniques tested understanding at different levels as well as testing simple recall of information. An innovative assessment strategy being used involved the rewarding of classes for asking probing questions of the teacher. Resources such as worksheets, and information and communication technology (ICT) resources were well used in lessons and ICT is also being used to extend learning opportunities beyond the classroom.

All of the lessons observed were well managed and a caring and affirmative rapport was evident in the interactions between students and teachers. Good use was made of the classrooms to display students' work and literacy or numeracy resources such as word banks. Classroom routines were well established in most cases. Student journals, however, showed an inconsistent record of homework. The homework policy is due for review and it is recommended that the areas of recording and assignment of homework be looked at as part of that review.

Most of the classes visited were of mixed ability and differentiation was generally an aspect of teaching where there was some scope for development. In most lessons, the content and pace was the same for all. While weaker students were very well supported and teachers'

questioning helped to some extent to differentiate between students of different abilities, more use could have been made of extension activities or of higher-order questioning to challenge students. Some excellent initiatives which will allow teachers to learn from each other and share good practice are already underway in the school. It is recommended that peer observation and self-review initiatives be further developed and expanded as a means of sharing good practice on all aspects of teaching and learning including differentiation.

3. IMPLEMENTATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS FROM PREVIOUS EVALUATIONS

Serious consideration has been given to the recommendations from previous inspections. The practice has been for relevant departments to meet shortly after an inspection to discuss what actions would best progress the recommendations of the report. Senior management has attended such meetings in order to advise and support staff and has also ensured that all subject departments take account of the recommendations from other areas.

Good progress is evident in the implementation of recommendations that required action from school management. For example, following an inspection of special education, the number of teachers involved in providing learning support has been reduced and a policy for supporting exceptionally able students is under development. Good progress is also evident in the implementation of recommendations which required action on behalf of teachers or subject departments. As an indication of this, the English department is developing ways to track progress and improve learner outcomes. All subject plans now include a statistical analysis of examination results and, in some plans, there was an in-depth analysis of what needed to be done in order to improve specific aspects of student attainment. This very good practice, where analysis of examination results led to the setting of very specific measurable targets or actions, should be adopted by all departments.

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

The school community has a very strong commitment to self-evaluation and review. For example, the school plan has been developed and amended over many years. Policies are regularly reviewed and updated. Staff and board minutes of meetings show ongoing review and planning for improvement. Many changes and initiatives have been implemented, including the introduction of peer observation and self-review projects focusing on the quality of teaching and learning.

A more formal school self-evaluation (SSE) project has been undertaken in the past two years. The first stage focusing on literacy has been well progressed and the next stage which focuses on numeracy is nearly ready for dissemination. Good practice is evident in the way the school has gathered evidence, identified areas for improvement and agreed whole-school actions and targets. However, future SSE planning would benefit from a more cohesive link between the various steps of the process.

Overall, the school has a very good capacity, under the guidance of the board and senior management team and with the collaboration of staff, to continue to effect school development and improvement.