

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

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

REPORT

**Saint Mary's Knockbeg College
Knockbeg, County Carlow
Roll number: 61130H**

Date of inspection: 12 October 2015



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INSPECTORATE**

Whole-School Evaluation Management, Leadership and Learning

A whole-school evaluation of management, leadership and learning (WSE-MLL) was undertaken in October 2015 in St. Mary's 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 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. Mary's College is an all-boys secondary school operating under the trusteeship of the Bishop of Kildare and Leighlin and has a long tradition of serving the needs of students from around the diocese. At the time of the evaluation the school had an enrolment of 411. The school offers a broad curriculum including the Junior Certificate, Transition Year (TY), the established Leaving Certificate and the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP). TY is optional for students. In addition, a unit catering for the needs of students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is an integral part of the school. The school has a long history of sporting and academic excellence and caters for the wider needs of its students by means of extensive co-curricular and extracurricular activities.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

Key Findings

- The existing school building is in a poor state of repair. Senior management, the board and teaching staff are hugely committed to improving the school's physical environment and an ambitious building and renovation project is due to begin shortly.
- The board of management is appropriately constituted, operates very effectively and in common with all the school's partners promotes the ethos of the school.
- The board is very well supported by the trustee and is committed to making the school more relevant to the local community.
- The senior management team is dedicated and hardworking, operates in a spirit of openness and enjoys the strong support of the school's board of management.
- Senior management demonstrates a willingness to delegate responsibility and the middle management team operates effectively, which supports a strong sense of community in the school.
- Teaching and learning varied in quality from excellent to fair, with most lessons being good or better with appropriate provision being made to support the more able students.
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Recommendations for Further Development

- The board of management should oversee the development of an overarching school plan and an audit of the school's policy provision should be conducted and policies that are either absent or no longer current should be addressed.

- Parents and students should be included in the policy formation and review process.
- The numeracy committee should extend its focus beyond improving the students' numeracy skill set to embrace classroom approaches including problem solving, problem posing and quality questioning by teachers and students.
- In setting targets for improvement, analysis of outcomes for students in the certificate examinations should be extended to include other data, including the house examinations and a short report of progress against the targets should be submitted to the board of management annually.
- Management needs to be taken on the status of CSPE and SPHE in junior cycle as the current provision is not in line with regulations laid down for their delivery.

1. QUALITY OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP

1.1 School ownership and management

The board of management is properly constituted. Its members are committed to providing a quality experience for the students during their time in the school and, in common with all the school's partners, is committed to maintaining and developing the school's ethos and traditions. In addition, the board has a vision for the future of the school, which involves making the school more relevant to the community living in its immediate hinterland, and encouraging its active involvement in the life of the school. The board members are well aware of their roles and responsibilities and have attended the requisite training.

The board communicates very effectively with the trustee and are very supportive of the school's senior management team. In recent times, much of the board's energies have been dedicated to leading an essential and ambitious building and refurbishment project. The proactive manner in which the board has engaged with this process is testament to their commitment to the school and their willingness to manage such a complex and demanding task.

There is scope for improvement in the role the board plays in leading school planning and the absence of a cohesive, written school plan needs to be addressed in the short to medium term. The planning process should begin with an audit of existing policies that will inform the schedule of policy development and review.

Despite their relatively recent appointment, the senior management, comprising the principal and deputy principal, has made a very positive impact on the school. The progressive manner in which they approach their work is reflected in their openness to the evaluation process and degree of partnership they bring to their work. Senior management, is well supported by all of the school's stakeholders. They are dedicated and hardworking and have a deep sense of the importance of their role in ensuring that the school's traditions are cultivated during their tenure. They operate an open door policy to parents, students and teachers alike. They are ever present on the school's corridors which ensures that the school is not only well ordered but that the students' experience of school is enjoyable and positive. The pervasive positive atmosphere is also reflected in the manner in which senior management affirms the efforts of teachers and students and the trust they place in the staff where, for example, even the newest members of staff are encouraged to adopt leadership roles.

The work of senior management is greatly supported by the middle-management team, which is comprised of teachers with huge experience and a deep sense of commitment to the school. A review of the schedule of posts was completed in the last two years. Given the changing context of the school and the expected increase in student numbers upon completion of the building project, continuing review of the post structure is recommended.

The year heads are a key component of the team and contribute greatly to the running of the school. They liaise very effectively with the care team and ensure that the school's code of behaviour is administered in a fair and compassionate manner. The code of behaviour is clear and features a well-structured ladder of referral but is in need of review to include reference to the school's ASD unit and a differentiated approach to dealing with students from this unit or with other additional needs.

In conjunction with the middle management, senior management need to prioritise areas for development. These should include a review of the current curricular provision and the rationale for the introduction of new subjects and the development of policies resulting from the outcomes of the audit mentioned earlier in this report

Procedures for supporting teachers new to the school are very good. During their meeting with the inspectors they expressed deep satisfaction with the support they receive from management and their teaching colleagues. Their sense of belonging to the school is palpable and the new members of staff are encouraged to try new things and contribute fully to the development of the school. Two examples of which are the Maths Club, designed to provide the more able students with an additional degree of challenge in Mathematics, and School Wise, which will enhance the functionality of the school virtual learning environment (VLE).

Procedures for identifying and supporting students with special education needs or in need of learning support are very good. These procedures involve very good communication with the teachers in the feeder primary schools to ensure that students' performance in the tests during transition reflect their abilities. Once the needs of the students are identified a resume is prepared for each one detailing the most appropriate interventions ultimately leading to the development and use of individualised education plans. Finally a range of interventions, including targeted withdrawal and in-class co-operative support, tailored to the needs of the students is put in place.

The provision for students attending the school's ASD unit is of the very highest quality and the students receive the support most appropriate to their needs in a warm and caring environment.

A very active parents' association is in place. During the meeting with the inspection team, the members of the association expressed a high degree of satisfaction with how the school is run and the strong sense of community and care that informs the life of the school. The engagement of senior management with the work of the association is very good. The principal attends all of the meetings of the association and, works closely with the association to improve the quality of provision for students. One example of this collaboration is the recent refurbishment of the school canteen following concerns raised by the association and the student council. The parents association is consulted during policy formation and review, but has not as yet fully engaged with the process. This should be addressed when the policy development process mentioned above begins. Representatives of the association should meet annually with the school's board of management to discuss the work of the group and any issues of mutual concern.

The meeting with students revealed the deep sense of pride they take in being part of St. Mary's College and the very good relationships that exist within the student body. The positive relationship between teachers and students was also evident as was the positive view the students took of the school's extracurricular provision and of the role of the Meitheal programme in helping students settle into first year. The school also recognises that students' experiences outside of the classroom are important in building character and preparing students for life outside school and an impressive range of extracurricular and co-curricular activities are available to them.

An active students' council is in place and has a very good track record in fund raising for charities and in contributing to the life of the school. Their contribution to renovating the school canteen being just one example. Notwithstanding the council's access to the school's intercom to make announcements relating to their activities, student questionnaires indicate that there is some work to be done in informing the student body on the impact of the council's work. To assist in this regard, it is recommended that the council meet with the school's board of management annually to discuss its work, continue to collaborate with the parents' association and be included in future policy development and review.

1.2 Effectiveness of leadership for learning

The work of the senior management features a commitment to consultation and focuses on motivating and supporting both staff and students. The principal and deputy principal have a genuine empathy for the needs of the students and understand that all of the students should be appropriately challenged. Senior management leads by example, by being positive and enthusiastic and ensuring that the school's ethos permeates all its day-to-day activities. This results in the creation of a welcoming and caring environment conducive to developing positive attitudes to teaching, learning and enhanced outcomes for students.

Planning to support teaching and learning is underway and there are some very good policies in place. Of particular note are the plans relating to guidance and special education needs while the recently developed homework policy is also very good. Subject department planning is well established and there are some very good plans have been developed. Where there is scope for improvement, the plans should include an explicit focus on effective teaching methods, assessment for learning (AfL), particularly the role of formative assessment in progressing improvement.

All subject departments analyse the level of uptake of higher and ordinary level by their students in the certificate examinations, as well as their performance therein, in order to set targets for improvement. The analysis indicates that student attainment is very good. To further enhance the process additional data, for example student performance in the house examinations and assessments at the point of entry to the school, should be included when setting targets. Each department should prepare a short annual report on progress against these targets for submission to the board of management.

The initial thrust of the school's self-evaluation process was in the area of literacy. Work has now begun on developing a whole-school plan for numeracy and a committee to progress the process is in place. The mathematical abilities of students entering the school are established using a number of testing instruments including an amended form of the competency test available from the Professional Development service for Teachers. The outcomes of these tests provide a baseline of attainment and are used to set targets for improvement. This process could be further enhanced if a correlation between the outcomes of the different tests were established and student performance measured in a structured way against them. In addition to focussing on improving the students' mastery of the mechanical elements of numeracy, the work of the committee should address the role of problem solving, problem posing and quality questioning in improving students' numeracy.

The school provides a broad and balanced curriculum and the review mentioned earlier will determine the most appropriate additions that can be made to the existing provision. The school has identified the need to introduce a technology subject in junior cycle and this has been addressed in the specification for the refurbishment project. The decision to introduce Accountancy and Technology in TY as a precursor to its possible introduction as an option for Leaving Certificate is eminently sensible.

Parents and students expressed themselves as content with the subjects and programmes available in the school. However, some concerns were raised in relation to work experience in TY. The parents were particularly adamant that the current model where student attend for work experience on one day each week is unsatisfactory from the point of view of the student and employers alike. Consideration should be given to the block release of students for work experience at agreed times during the year as this would allow them to experience the world of work in a variety of settings and from a range of perspectives.

Timetabling provision for the various subjects and programmes is good and management is addressing the legacy issue in senior cycle where a number of students, depending on their subject choice, are free at different times during the day. Action also needs to be taken on the status of CSPE and SPHE in junior cycle as the current provision is not in line with regulations laid down for their delivery.

The guidance and counselling service makes a very positive contribution to the operation of the school and collaborates very effectively with the various committees and agencies working within and outside of school. The guidance plan is of the very highest quality and the insightful and passionate manner with which the counsellor operates ensures that the students are provided with excellent support in this important area.

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 existing school building is in a very poor state of repair. The building project involving an extension and extensive renovation which was due to start prior to the evaluation was delayed owing to technical issues. It is essential that these issues are resolved and that the project is progressed to completion as soon as possible.

Very good work is underway in relation to developing the school's ICT infrastructure. The approach being adopted involves finding the infrastructural model that will most appropriately accommodate teaching and learning and fully exploit the functionality of the school's VLE.

2. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

2.1 The quality of learning and teaching

The quality of teaching varied from excellent to fair with the vast majority of lessons being good or better. Two lessons featured teaching of outstanding quality and all of the lessons featured very good classroom management, respectful interactions, and good lesson planning.

The very best lessons featured explicit use of the learning intention, very high expectations of student engagement and attainment and very good use of AfL. This manifested itself in high-quality teacher questioning, written comments and guidance for improvement in the students' copybooks, the integration of problem solving and very good questions being posed by the students themselves. The approach adopted in these lessons reflected the teachers' excellent pedagogical content knowledge and a focus on planning for learning rather than content delivery.

Where there was scope for improvement, the lesson intention was unclear and there was a need to rebalance teacher input and student activity with greater emphasis being placed on group and pair work. There was scope too for more in-depth teacher questioning, greater differentiation of the lesson content and the use of a plenary at the conclusion of the lessons to determine the extent to which the learning intention was achieved. It is recommended that the good practices in relation to teaching and learning that were observed in the very best lessons should be disseminated and shared within all subject departments.

The recommendations concerning teaching and learning have significant implications for collaborative subject department planning. Firstly, the school's adoption of literacy and numeracy as the first two strands of its self-evaluation process should be reflected across all subject department plans. This should involve exploring how each subject can contribute to developing the students' literacy and numeracy skills. Secondly, the good practice in some plans where effective active teaching methods are specified should be adopted as standard across the school.

Classroom management, student participation and engagement were very good in all lessons and all interactions were respectful and warm.

The quality of student learning was good or better in the majority of lessons, this was reflected in the quality of their response to teacher questioning and the in-depth nature of the questions the students themselves asked.

3. IMPLEMENTATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS FROM PREVIOUS EVALUATIONS

3.1 Management

Management has been proactive in implementing the recommendations from previous inspections. Senior management and the board conduct review of these recommendations systematically. The outcomes of the review process are used in framing on-going planning. This has resulted in all of the recommendations relating to management having been enacted over the years.

3.2 Learning and teaching

Very good progress has been made in implementing the recommendations relating to teaching and learning but work remains to be done in the widespread integration of AfL and student-centred activity-based learning.

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

School self-evaluation (SSE) is recognised by senior management and the board of management as key in progressing school improvement and even in the short time senior the team has been in place very good progress is evident. A very good literacy plan is in place and work has begun on numeracy as the second area of the school's self-evaluation process. Work in the area of numeracy should culminate in the near future with the production of a school improvement plan.

The management structures in the school and the commitment of senior management and the board to the school self-evaluation process, offer significant evidence of the school's capacity

to set targets for improvement, develop and implement initiatives to achieve them and engage in a process of review to determine the success or otherwise of the various interventions.

Appendix

SCHOOL RESPONSE TO THE REPORT

Submitted by the Board of Management

Area 1 Observations on the content of the inspection report

The Board wishes to thank the inspectors for conducting the WSE-MLL in our school. The Board is happy that all stakeholders in the school were afforded the opportunity to engage with the inspection process and comment on their experience in the school. Given the uncompromising priority afforded to promoting quality teaching and learning in St. Mary's Knockbeg College, the following points made by the Inspectorate are particularly noteworthy:

- The endorsement of the “high quality” practice that is evident in all areas of school work and life.
- “In the best lessons observed, students were asked both lower and higher order questions, were encouraged to extend their answers and sufficient wait time was given”;
- that parents are very positive in their support of the school with 96% of parents declaring that “their child was doing well in school”.
- that students are very positive in their view of life as a Knockbeg student with 93% declaring that they are proud of their school.
- “Students with SEN are provided with very good support in a secure environment.” within the school.
- That “An excellent programme of extra-curricular and co-curricular activities exists to cater for the interests of all students”.
- There is a unique atmosphere and sense of community in Knockbeg with all stakeholders working in unison to ensure continued excellence.

Area 2 Follow-up actions planned or undertaken since the completion of the inspection activity to implement the findings and recommendations of the inspection.

- In continuing to provide the highest quality education for our pupils, the Board notes the Inspector's “Recommendations for Further Development” and they are being given due and in-depth consideration by all relevant stakeholders.
- The Board will continue to seek ways of improving the school's ICT infrastructure.
- The Board will continue to support the school in the delivery of a quality student centred education.
- The statement that “The able leadership of the senior management team and the commitment to school improvement of many teachers and board of management members indicate that the school has considerable capacity to progress its priorities” affords us great satisfaction as we strive to ensure that St. Mary's Knockbeg College continues to provide an education of excellence for all of its pupils, building on the “Key Findings” of this Report.