An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

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

REPORT

**Coláiste Mhuire
Askeaton, County Limerick
Roll number: 71700F**

Date of inspection: 28 September 2012

Whole-School Evaluation
Management, Leadership and Learning

A whole-school evaluation of management, leadership and learning (WSE-MLL) was undertaken in September 2012 in Coláiste Mhuire, Askeaton. 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 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

Coláiste Mhuire, Askeaton is a co-educational school under the auspices of the County Limerick Vocational Education Committee (VEC). There is a long tradition of second-level education in Askeaton dating back to the original secondary school, which was founded in 1940. The school serves an elongated east-west catchment area, and demand for places is strong. The school has a current enrolment of 478 students.

1. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

1.1 Key Findings

- Very good quality leadership of learning was evident in the work of the board of management and of senior management.
- Senior management promotes a culture of self-evaluation and review within the school community.
- The quality of care provided for students is very good.
- The quality of teaching and learning was good with some examples of very good practice in the lessons observed.
- Parents and students, in their responses to questionnaires, were very positive with regard to the quality of the education provided in Coláiste Mhuire.
- Very good progress has been made in implementing the recommendations from previous subject inspection reports.

1.2 Recommendations for Further Development

- The board of management should advance the preparation of the three-year school development plan to include a number of achievable targets.
- The formulation of a Teaching and Learning policy is recommended in order to bring together and formalise the initiatives on learning already ongoing in the school.
- There should be increased use of Assessment for Learning (AfL) including the development of questioning techniques and peer learning, as a means of further improving teaching and learning.
- The possibilities that the school website offers for communication with the school community should be further explored.

2. QUALITY OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP

2.1 School ownership and management – the Board of Management

Composition, functioning and fulfilment of statutory obligations

The board of management is appropriately constituted and meets regularly during the school year. One of its strengths is the long association that some of its members have with the school and their background in education. This ensures a knowledge and appreciation of the school's ethos and history, and a strong sense of continuity. It is evident that all members contribute actively to the work of the board. Additional valuable support at systems level, in particular with regard to finance and human resources, is provided by the County Limerick VEC.

The board is aware of its responsibilities and statutory duties in the development, ratification and review of policies. It has undertaken robust policy formulation in partnership and consultation with staff, parents and students. Recent work has focused on systems evaluation, as well as reviews of special educational needs and of the posts of responsibility structure. Good systems for communication with staff and parents are in place including an agreed report after meetings. The school report is published on the website each year.

The board is committed to facilitating high quality student learning. By means of the principal's report, it receives information on projects that are ongoing within the school and engages in discussion of these projects and their outcomes, at its meetings. The board is supportive of teacher professional development including in-school professional development opportunities, and facilitates attendance by teachers at seminars as well as their involvement in school improvement projects and initiatives.

In line with the school's mission statement, the board is cognisant of its ethos of care for students. It displays a commitment to providing a holistic education for students that encompasses qualities such as creativity, innovation and resilience as well as a high standard of academic achievement. It likewise has a commitment to reflective practice and to evaluating its own role as a board as it strives to make the school a place of excellence. This is very positive practice.

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 school's priorities for development

The board of management is proactive in looking to the future and has already taken steps to address new educational priorities such as school self-evaluation and Literacy and Numeracy. Other priorities include a review of the Anti-Bullying policy and an exploration of the opportunities afforded by the reforms to the junior cycle.

Very good work has been done on advancing these priorities and progress is evident in a number of areas. A team to oversee the development of school self-evaluation is in place. In addition, the school has been accepted onto national pilot schemes for both Literacy and Numeracy, while current whole-school planning involving all teachers, is focused on the integration of strategies to promote Literacy and Numeracy within each subject's curriculum. This represents very good practice. In order to monitor progress on these

priorities, it is recommended that the board should advance the formal preparation of a three-year school development plan to include a number of achievable and time-bound targets as appropriate.

2.2 Effectiveness of leadership for learning

Leadership of staff

The senior management team of principal and deputy principal provides very effective leadership of learning. The principal promotes an open-door policy and a culture of trust as well as the importance of leading by example. While the principal and deputy principal have clearly defined roles, they are in regular communication and liaison with regard to day-to-day issues. They demonstrate a willingness to take on new initiatives and to oversee the management of change within the school, and actively promote collaboration and the sharing of good practice among staff. The clear commitment of the principal to reflective practice and to continuing professional development (CPD) through participation in instructional leadership courses is commended.

There is strong support shown for staff, and recognition of the importance of empowering individuals and teams. Leadership is distributed at middle-management level through key teams such as the year head team and the student support team. Opportunities have been provided for teachers to take on leadership roles in projects, as programme and subject-department coordinators, and as tutors and mentors. It is very positive to see the prominence given to staff involvement in initiatives such as the Learning School Project, the Action Learning Network, information and communication technology (ICT), and Literacy and Numeracy projects. The teachers' willingness to engage with these projects means that students are the ultimate beneficiaries through enhanced learning opportunities in the classroom. While such projects may only involve a small number of staff initially, the findings have been shared with staff at staff meetings and subject department meetings. Moving projects in this way from small-scale to whole staff level represents very good practice. Given the number of projects that are currently underway, it is recommended that an over-arching Teaching and Learning policy be formulated so as to collate in one document the many initiatives on teaching and learning in the school. This document would then form a key element of the previously mentioned school development plan. In this way, professional dialogue will lead to new ideas and methodologies becoming more firmly embedded within the school's culture of teaching and learning, and the position of the student as the focus of these endeavours will be further strengthened.

There is good communication across the school community. Not withstanding the continued use of conventional modes of communication, ICT has been harnessed as an additional communications tool to very good effect. The school website has been expanded and the possibilities it offers for communication with stakeholders should be further explored.

Good use is being made of the recently revised posts of responsibility structure to support senior management in the day-to-day running of the school. The timetabling of weekly meetings of year heads with senior management, and of meetings of the student support team is of particular benefit in ensuring good communication and in providing a regular forum for the discussion of issues and ideas.

The staff has contributed greatly to the development of the school through their involvement in initiatives and in leading programmes. The goodwill and voluntary

commitment of teachers and school staff in providing a wide range of extracurricular activities for students is acknowledged and commended.

The school's planning process is well-established. A range of subject plans and programmes were reviewed as part of the evaluation and were found to be of good quality. There was evidence of good reflective practice in some plans, in particular where analysis and evaluation had been used to inform planning. It was also positive to note a move towards a focus on students' learning especially where programmes of work were presented in terms of learning outcomes.

An active parents' association is in place, which is very supportive of the school. The responses of parents to the questionnaire completed as part of the evaluation were very positive and parents stated that they were very happy with the school.

Leadership of students

The quality of leadership of students is very good. The school has an open and inclusive admissions policy, and parental satisfaction with enrolment procedures is high. There is a very good transition programme in place to welcome first-year students into the school with older student mentors assigned to each class, and assistance from the guidance counsellor to ensure that the transition from primary school is effected smoothly.

The care of students and the support structures in place within the school are of a very high quality and are very well organised to meet the needs of students. A significant number of staff members are involved in the care of students and their work is acknowledged and commended. The students benefit from the work of the learning support team, guidance counsellor, chaplain and the special needs assistants as well as from whole-school events such as the student wellbeing week. Supports are appropriately targeted to individuals and groups. Good quality personal, educational and vocational guidance is provided to students. Of particular note is the simple system used to ensure a high level of staff awareness of students who may be experiencing difficulty while always respecting the sensitive and confidential nature of such information. The learning support coordinator has also prepared a comprehensive and practical guide for staff on all aspects of additional learning needs.

The year-head structure represents one of the formal supports for students in the school. The role of the year head is primarily pastoral and includes the management of student behaviour, attendance and academic progress. Good practice is evident in the way that data relating to student attendance is now being used to track trends and to set targets in a number of areas.

The school offers a broad and balanced curriculum with a strong tradition in the sciences. Students in first year have an opportunity to sample subjects before making their choices. A similar system is in place at the start of Transition Year when students are offered an introduction to the full range of senior cycle subjects. This good practice allows students to make an informed choice from the options available.

Opportunities for students' involvement in the life of the school and for leadership roles are provided through participation in the student council and the *Anois* leadership programme for students. The student council meets regularly and students are consulted as appropriate in the formulation of policies. It is clear that they are able to discuss issues of concern with management and that their views are given due consideration.

A wide range of extracurricular sporting activities is provided for students including hurling, Gaelic football, basketball and soccer. Other activities include a student talent show and a school musical, participation in science competitions, Gaisce, as well as quizzes and debating. As the school does not currently organise a formal awards evening, it is suggested that students' contributions to all aspects of school life should be recognised and celebrated. This could be achieved through the school journal or website, or through the development of the current system of certificates of merit for good behaviour.

2.3 Management of facilities

The school building is bright and spacious and is maintained to a very high standard. It is well equipped with a range of classrooms and specialist rooms. Care has been taken to maximise the potential of the space available for teaching and learning purposes and to provide an attractive environment. The entrance area in particular is used to good effect with displays of photographs and posters, as well as an electronic notice board and copies of national newspapers. The recent acquisition of new benches and tables has ensured that the foyer has become a congenial meeting point for students at lunchtime.

The school has a keen awareness of environmental issues and is working towards the Green School award. Students contribute to ensuring that the school is kept free of litter through a daily duty roster to combat littering. A comprehensive Health and Safety document has been prepared. The valuable contribution to school life that is made by the administrative and ancillary staff and the school caretaker is recognised and commended.

3. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

3.1 The quality of learning and teaching

The overall quality of teaching and learning was of a good standard in the lessons observed with a number of examples of very good practice. In their questionnaire responses, students and parents were positive about the quality of teaching and learning in the school. Students stated that they were getting on well with their work while parents commented very favourably about their child's progress.

There was evidence of very good individual lesson preparation by teachers. Resources and stimulus material were prepared in advance including handouts, worksheets, PowerPoint presentations and visual supports for learning. These were used effectively during the lessons. Classroom management was very good with established routines in place such as the correction of homework and use of the journal to help ensure a structured learning environment. Lesson pace and the choice of content was also good.

While the intended learning outcomes were generally shared with students at the start of lessons, there is scope for further development of their use. Revisiting the outcomes at different stages of the lessons would help to consolidate learning and would allow the teacher to monitor whether the outcomes had been successfully achieved. Clarifying, sharing and understanding learning intentions are one of the key pillars of Assessment for Learning. By asking students to review their own progress and that of other students, they are enabled to develop the capacity to become independent learners.

Questioning was effectively used to check students' understanding in many lessons. As the questioning was often teacher-directed, it is suggested that more varied questioning techniques should be implemented. At times, there was scope to deepen the level of

students' engagement and learning through more higher-order questioning that would extend the students' understanding, facilitate differentiation and challenge the more able students. Greater use of AfL including questioning techniques, peer learning and peer assessment is therefore recommended.

Where very good practice was observed, in addition to effective lesson management, opportunities for collaborative learning were promoted and student interaction and discussion was facilitated. In these instances, students displayed a high level of critical thinking and were articulate in their responses. In other instances of very good practice, there was a high level of student participation and learning, most noticeably where students were working together in groups. It was evident that the outcomes from the recent Learning School project on group work had resulted in the implementation of successful group-work strategies with students confident in assuming different roles and responsibilities within the groups.

In many lessons, ICT was used by the teacher to support learning. It was also positive to see the ease and alacrity with which students worked independently on computers in a small number of lessons. Such methodologies help to support autonomous learning and encourage students to take responsibility for their learning, and so the continued integration of new technologies into classroom practice, where appropriate, is recommended.

There was a positive rapport evident between teachers and students with frequent use of praise to affirm and encourage students' efforts. The students in turn were co-operative and interested. In many classrooms, there was good use of posters, charts and displays of key words to create a stimulating and pleasant learning environment.

Student achievement in the certificate examinations is very good, and an analysis of levels of achievement is carried out. The data obtained from the analysis should be used to examine trends in the uptake of levels and students' outcomes, so as to further inform and enhance the learning experience for students.

4. IMPLEMENTATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS FROM PREVIOUS EVALUATIONS

4.1 Management

Previously published subject inspections in Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE), Guidance, Chemistry, Construction Studies and Materials Technology (Wood), and French were reviewed by the evaluation team. Recommendations relating to timetabling, or to the deployment of staff have been implemented where possible, while planning for provision for Guidance in consultation with senior management has taken place. A programme review for SPHE was carried out by a working group of parents and students as recommended.

4.2 Learning and Teaching

Joint planning meetings have taken place for the technology subjects and a common approach adopted with regard to the assessment of practical work. In French, a mini-oral has been introduced and correct pronunciation is emphasised, while recommendations on feedback and the development of a skills list have been implemented in Chemistry. Suggestions on methodologies and the sharing of good practice have been incorporated across the range of subjects.

It is very positive that there is a clear commitment by the board of management, senior management and staff to addressing the recommendations from subject inspection reports.

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

The school displays a very good capacity for school improvement. As highlighted previously, the promotion of self-evaluation and of reflective practice is already well established at whole-school level, within subject departments and among staff and students. Programmes, policies and procedures are regularly reviewed and the school's annual report is published on the website. The opinions of students and parents on issues such as the Code of Behaviour are also sought through consultation and through the use of surveys.

The commitment, drive, energy and experience of the board of management, senior management and staff is evidence that the school is well placed to progress the self-evaluation process, and that the school has the capacity to engage successfully with school improvement.

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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 is gratified by the overwhelmingly positive nature of the WSE-MLL Inspection report and welcomes the report as an independent affirmation of the very high standards in Coláiste Mhuire.

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 school is committed to a culture of continuous improvement and will be engaging enthusiastically with the formalising of its there-year plan, the placing of its many learning initiatives within the Teaching and Learning framework as well as enhancing its use of Assessment for Learning and optimising the use of its website for communication with parents.

The Board of Management wishes to acknowledge the professionalism and openness extended to the whole school community by the members of the inspectorate team.