An Roinn Oideachais
Department of Education

Whole School Evaluation: Management, Leadership and Learning

Report

REPORT

Ainm na scoile/School name	Stepaside Educate Together Secondary School
Seoladh na scoile/School address	Ballyogan Road Leopardstown
Uimhir rolla/Roll number	68241F
Dáta na cigireachta/ Date of evaluation	01/02/2024
Dáta eisiúna na tuairisce/Date of issue of report	20/03/2024

What is a whole-school evaluation – management, leadership and learning?

Whole-School Evaluation – Management, Leadership and Learning reports on the quality of teaching and learning and on the quality of management and leadership in a school. It affirms good practice and makes recommendations, where appropriate, to aid the further development of educational provision in the school.

How to read this report

During this inspection, the inspectors evaluated and reported under the following headings or areas of enquiry:

1. Quality of school leadership and management
2. Quality of teaching and learning
3. Quality of support for students' wellbeing

Inspectors describe the quality of each of these areas using the Inspectorate's quality continuum which is shown on the final page of this report. The quality continuum provides examples of the language used by inspectors when evaluating and describing the quality of the school's provision in each area.

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.

Actions of the school to safeguard children and prevent and tackle bullying

<table>
<tr><td colspan="2">During the inspection visit, the following checks in relation to the school's child protection and anti-bullying procedures were conducted:</td></tr>
<tr><td>Child Protection</td><td>Anti-bullying</td></tr>
<tr><td>1. The name of the DLP and the Child Safeguarding Statement are prominently displayed near the main entrance to the school.
2. The Child Safeguarding Statement has been ratified by the board and includes an annual review and a risk assessment.
3. All teachers visited reported that they have read the Child Safeguarding Statement and that they are aware of their responsibilities as mandated persons.
4. The Child Safeguarding Statement meets the requirements of the Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools (revised 2023).
5. The records of the last three board of management meetings record a child protection oversight report that meet the requirements of the Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary schools (revised 2023).
6. The board of management has ensured that arrangements are in place to provide information to all school personnel on the</td><td>1. The school has developed an anti-bullying policy that meets the requirements of the Anti-Bullying Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools (2013) or Bí Cineálta (2024) and this policy is reviewed annually.
2. The school's current anti-bullying policy is published on its website and/or is readily accessible to board of management members, teachers, parents and pupils.
3. The school has appropriate initiatives in place to promote a positive and inclusive school culture and environment in line with their current policy.
4. All teachers visited report that they have read the school's current policy on anti-bullying and that they are aware of their roles and responsibilities in preventing and tackling bullying.</td></tr>
</table>

Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools (revised 2023). 7. School planning documentation indicates that the school is making full provision for the relevant aspects of the curriculum (SPHE, Stay Safe, RSE). 8. Child protection records are maintained in a secure location.	

The school met the requirements in relation to each of the checks above.

Whole-school evaluation – management, leadership and learning

Date of inspection	01/02/2024
Inspection activities undertaken • Meeting with Board of Management • Meetings with principal and deputy principal • Meetings with key staff • Review of relevant documents • Student focus group	• Meeting with parent representatives to the board • Analysis of parent, student and teacher questionnaires • Observation of teaching and learning • Examination of students' work • Interaction with students • Feedback to senior management team, board of management and teachers

School context

Stepaside Educate Together Secondary School is a co-educational, equality based post-primary school which operates under the patronage of Educate Together. The school has a current enrolment of 579 students. It provides the Junior Cycle programme, Transition Year (TY) programme, the Leaving Certificate (Established), Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA), the Level Two Learning Programme (L2LP) and has a special class for students with autism.

Summary of main findings and recommendations:

Findings

- Leadership of learning and teaching was very good overall; school leaders demonstrated a strong commitment to excellence in learning and teaching which was informed by the school's guiding vision and high expectations for teachers and students
- Senior leaders managed the day-to-day operations of the school highly effectively; the principles and lived experience of reflective and restorative practice collectively informed the systems and practices that created a positive school culture.
- School development was expertly led by senior and middle leaders through continuous and impactful school self-evaluation (SSE) processes, with excellent management of action planning and oversight of change processes that informed all practice observed.
- Leadership capacity for students, parents, and teachers was very effectively developed through frequent equality of representation that was underpinned by core values of kindness, respect and empowerment for all.
- The curricular and non-curricular variety of whole-school practices and supports for Wellbeing were excellent overall; the inclusive and proactive positive school culture enhanced the learning environment and experience for all.
- The quality of teaching and learning was very good overall, with a number of areas of exemplary practice evident and opportunities for further development in some aspects of practice.
- Collective and collaborative practices in lesson planning and delivery very effectively supported student learning while optimising active learning methodologies and enhancing positive outcomes for students overall.

Recommendations

- In order to more fully represent the very good practices in place, avoid unnecessary duplications and ongoing developments in the school, senior leaders with the school community should engage in a regular review of policies.

- The senior leaders should create a consolidated special education needs (SEN) team and incorporate SEN provision that includes more in-class support responsive to the full range of SEN needs of students, including English as an additional language (EAL); the SEN team should extend SEN tracking of students' progress in consultation with parents.
- To extend and optimise learning; all teachers should ensure that lesson tasks and activities are appropriately planned and differentiated with further scaffolding to support all students to engage and sustain themselves with incremental challenge.
- To enhance assessment practices, all teachers should incorporate a balanced use of assessment for learning (AfL) strategies as outlined in the school's assessment policy and all subject departments should ensure that ongoing AfL informs adjustments to lesson pace and challenge level based on all students' progression in learning.

Detailed findings and recommendations

1. The quality of teaching and learning

During the evaluation, fourteen lessons were observed, including a mix of junior and senior cycle programmes, learning support, core subjects and optional subjects across first, second and fifth year. Other year groups such as third, fourth and sixth-year groups were unavailable for lesson observation due to scheduled mock examinations and work-experience.

Learner outcomes and experiences

Overall students' learning outcomes and experiences were very good. Students showed very high levels of interest and participation and were highly motivated to learn in almost all lessons observed. Student behaviour was excellent overall.

All lessons were characterised by a high quality rapport between teachers and students and between students. All teachers modelled kindness and respect and this had a valuable impact on student participation. In lessons, students made regular contributions to their learning and teachers created a supportive and affirming atmosphere that was conducive to wellbeing and enjoyment of learning.

In all lessons, students engaged readily and purposefully with meaningful active-learning tasks, exercises and activities. In the highly effective lessons, students ably and actively exhibited positive dispositions to problem solving, research and discussions and most students showed very good subject knowledge and skill development. However, in a significant minority of lessons, some students struggled to sustain their engagement as the challenge level of the task increased. In these instances, there was scope to include more planned and scaffolded differentiation into the tasks aligned to learner strengths and needs.

Students actively participated in valuable pair and group work activities that were provided in all lessons observed and this is highly commendable. In these lessons, students experienced engaging and interactive collaboration with their peers where most students had successful ownership of their learning and developed the skills of working with others. Students engaged in excellent collaboration in a small number of lessons where they experienced frequent opportunities for individual and collective reflection at key transitions in the lesson. In this excellent practice, these students engaged in self and peer-assessment activities and were able to track progress in their learning and identify areas for further development. It was very good that in most lessons, pair and group work fostered and developed the skills and attitudes necessary for life-long learning.

It was positive that in the vast majority of lessons, students openly contributed to class discussions and posed their own questions and solutions and there was a very good balance between teacher instruction and student activities. However, in about a quarter of lessons, there was scope to increase student voice by extending teacher wait time or allowing more time for student discussion. In these lessons, a greater balance between student work and teacher input

would have enabled students to further demonstrate their learning and provided teachers with additional opportunities to gauge their progress and understanding of lesson content

Teachers individual and collective practice

Teachers made very good use of whole-school collective approaches to lesson planning; individual practice was highly effective overall and ensured that students made progress in all lessons. They engaged in very regular sharing of expertise with an evident strongly positive impact on teachers' collective approaches. Teachers engaged in excellent collaborative subject planning with agreed cohesive schemes of work that facilitated learning and teaching overall.

All teachers were very well prepared for lessons and selected and used planning and preparation that progressed students' learning very effectively overall. All lessons comprised: clear introductions with learning intentions clearly articulated, a developmental phase with a series of well-resourced exercises and tasks and a consolidation phase with exit strategies to close. These planned approaches facilitated active learning in all lessons with positive outcomes and experiences for almost all students. All teachers selected thoughtful, imaginative, purposeful and stimulating resources that acted as useful catalysts for learning. In the highly effective lessons, learning intentions framed and progressed learning best when teachers continuously assessed and consolidated the learning intentions as the lesson activities progressed

It was very good that in most lessons, teachers set high expectations for all students to support upper differentiation and include challenging tasks. Teachers provided high quality assessment of learning (AoL) and circulated to provide additional support to students where required. Students sustained their progress best when teachers intentionally planned the tasks to differentiate for the variety of strengths and needs: this included utilising a universal design for learning approach, creating mixed ability groupings and integrating incremental challenge into the activities as the lesson progressed. There was a need in a significant minority of lessons to extend the planned differentiation approaches for all learners to support them with incremental challenge.

In most lessons, teachers made frequent use of very effective AoL practices to assess knowledge through recall and open ended higher-order questioning. AfL was very good when teachers provided a variety of regular AfL strategies with frequent individual and collective affirming feedback to students. However, there was scope in a significant minority of lessons for a better balance of assessment strategies to inform lesson progression. Teachers should share the very good practice observed and extend the use of AfL accordingly to optimise progression in learning for all.

Overall, teachers had high quality knowledge of the diversity of EAL and additional needs of students provided through very explicit and actionable individual learner profiles. Students with SEN and EAL would have benefited from additional in-class support and specialised teaching strategies which were more sufficiently aligned to their needs.

All teachers and students made very effective use of the schools digital learning technology (DLT). The very good quality digital learning plan had a clear annual focus with specific and measurable targets for this work. Teachers had engaged in numerous relevant digital Continuous Professional Development (CPD) opportunities and collectively agreed the use digital technologies to improve students' experiences and outcomes. In most lessons students competently and actively used DLTs through meaningful learning experiences. In a few lessons, there was scope for students to use digital technology more creatively to enhance learning. Teachers should share strategies for more creative use of DLTs.

2. Quality of school leadership and management

Leading learning and teaching

The senior, middle and other leaders in the school have highly effectively led and managed curriculum-related planning which was reflective of the schools' priorities, needs and wider national initiatives. The board of management and school leaders demonstrated a commitment to excellence in learning and teaching and had communicated a clear targeted and action planned vision for the school that built and sustained a culture of continuous improvement, which created enriched educational experiences for all students.

Since the school's opening in 2016, senior leaders have very effectively implemented numerous positive changes and advancements that ensured a broad and balanced curriculum which took into account the ethos, values and over-arching vision for the school. This included a focus on DLT, ethical education and phenomenon-based learning. Phenomenon-based learning and ethical education promoted an inclusive school community, which valued diversity through empowering experiences that challenged discrimination.

A highly consultative and collaborative whole-school involvement in SSE processes ensured that teaching and learning practices were continuously evaluated, refined and aligned with the schools' improvement plan (SIP). The SIP actions were regularly reviewed and enacted across all learning settings to a very high standard. This whole-school approach fostered students' holistic development and retention in education by expanding the programmes and new subjects as the school grew.

Senior leaders had very good oversight of planning and the quality of subject planning was excellent. All teachers contributed to the creation and incorporation of consistent and cohesive whole-school learning and teaching approaches. This included a consistently used lesson plan template, a focus on extension of challenge, frequent sharing of teacher practice and peer observation, a culture of high expectations, the use of a subject department overview checklist, systematic teacher reflection and monitoring of lesson planning and review of outcomes from summative assessment data with a very positive impact on learning.

The inclusion of a compulsory TY programme ensured that all students experienced a sampling programme across all senior cycle subjects and aptitude, competency based assessments, aiding their subject and pathway selection. The findings arising from parent questionnaires and representatives who participated in the focus group meeting highlighted a desire for more information about senior cycle subjects.

The assessment and academic tracking leader had led the implementation of a highly effective systems for monitoring students' progress and summative attainment in an online tracking tool. Very good oversight was led by an assessment and academic tracking leader. An effective traffic light system was utilised to identify students who may require additional support. While the school made significant strides in promoting reflective practice among teachers, there was scope for further improvement in the monitoring of progress made by students with SEN by also tracking their progress with individualised priority needs.

Managing the organisation

Senior leaders and other school leaders modelled and cultivated a strong learning culture characterised by mutual trust, respect, and shared responsibility. The principles and lived experience of reflective and Restorative Practice collectively informed the implemented systems and practices that created a positive school culture that prioritised high expectations and learning overall. This positive school culture supported learning and teaching while promoting respectful interactions across all levels of the school community through highly efficient and frequent communication.

Senior leadership very effectively managed the school's day-to-day operations. Senior and middle leaders, including year heads, were well informed about the daily lived experiences of students, maintaining regular communication with the Student Support Team (SST) to address needs and offer interventions proactively. Visible efforts to connect with students were apparent, fostering a welcoming atmosphere in various school areas. The Guidance counsellor and family support officer, through the SST, provided additional assistance to at-risk students and families,

yielding positive outcomes. The SST conducted frequent meetings with external agencies as needed, with resulting actions sensitively communicated to relevant staff.

The board of management and the principal comprehensively understood and very effectively communicated the school's responsibilities regarding child protection, anti-bullying, and health and safety. Questionnaire data showed high levels of agreement that students are cared for, they like coming to school and feel that their opinions are valued by teachers. Students in the focus group mentioned that their relationships with the staff were the best thing about the school. Senior leaders developed clear policies to ensure safety and wellbeing, informed by effective consultation with stakeholders that guided ongoing policy developments.

Senior leaders, year heads, and other leaders in the school created and communicated key annual priorities for each year group. Parents reported that communication from the school was very regular, and they were very positive about ‘settling in’ meetings and other meetings in the school. They would welcome more communication that is specific to a particular year group rather than generic information for all years. Questionnaire data showed high levels of agreement that students are cared for, they like coming to school and feel that their opinions are valued by teachers. However, some students reported that lessons do not always begin on time and senior leaders should sustain their focus on this through the classroom charter.

The senior leaders ensured appropriate Junior Cycle and Senior Cycle subject specifications time allocations. SEN provision was currently distributed across a very large number of teachers with small amounts of team-teaching to provide in-class support. There was a need for more strategic deployment of specialist teachers with expertise in SEN to optimise support for students with SEN though a consolidated core SEN team.

Positively, as the school continued to grow, the regular review of school needs and priorities led to the creation of many purposeful posts of responsibility including a policy leader. The school leaders should now engage with further reviewing of some policies. The inclusion policy and AEN policies should be streamlined to reflect the collective practices in place. The SEN team should develop this policy to further capture and develop supports for EAL, and outline supports for the full range of SEN needs of students.

Leading school development

The overall quality of leading school development was excellent. Senior leaders and those leading SSE fully engaged with robust cycles of evidence gathering which informed action planning for improvement. This successfully created and sustained whole-school learning and teaching practices that evolved as the school developed with high expectations placing students at the centre.

The board and the principal were proactive in establishing and maintaining the guiding vision for the school. Senior leaders developed a highly efficient system of devolved and distributed leadership and very effectively led and managed action planning for improvement. They ensured that actionable improvement plans were systematically implemented and reviewed on a whole-school basis to a very high standard. Those leading SSE ensured that the school’s improvement planning was underpinned by a culture of high aspirations for both staff and students. The outcomes of reviews were presented to staff, discussed and collaboratively refined ensuring that targets for improvement were continually met and consistently implemented as the school evolved.

SSE was integrated into every aspect of school life to an exceptionally high standard. SSE very purposefully ensured that implemented actions resulted in measurable and identifiable improvements in learner outcomes. The SSE focuses were evident in all planning documentation, during the lessons visited and during feedback discussions with teachers. This exemplary practice embodied the highly effective and informed use of SSE to bring about contextualised improvements and the collective uptake of priorities by all teachers was an outstanding feature of excellent leadership. Recommendations from previous inspections were incorporated into the SSE process and actions arising were embedded in all practice observed.

A very comprehensive induction programme was developed for new teachers. Middle leaders and a variety of teachers shared their expertise regularly with particular focus on supporting new teachers in the school through mentoring and practical support and this fostered expertise through collaborative learning initiatives like teach meets. Teachers new to the school reported very good experiences of collaborative support and guidance that ensured they were able to very effectively align their practice with the schools' guiding vision and key priorities.

The school effectively established productive relationships with external education providers, engaged in peer observations with networks of schools, explored and learned from other jurisdictions through school visits, and participation in programmes in a wide variety of learning opportunities such as Erasmus and Bridge 21.

The principal's commitment to seeking and incorporating feedback promoted a sense of security among teachers to be creative and innovative, resulting in reported high levels of support and teacher invigoration.

The culture of continual review created a safe space to trial and innovate pedagogical approaches and all outcomes were embraced as key learning for the school as it grew. Senior leaders and middle leaders demonstrated a clear understanding of change processes and managed change very collaboratively, flexibly, and sensitively.

Developing leadership capacity

The principal initiated the establishment of systems and structures, notably creating a robust middle leadership team that effectively empowered teachers and oversaw efficient mentoring and induction programmes. Student leadership opportunities flourished, with very good engagement in decision-making bodies like the Student Council and opportunities to present to the board of management.

The strong middle leadership team and many other teachers had frequent valuable opportunities to contribute to staff meetings and ensured very frequent communication with the senior leaders, thereby fostering a collaborative and supportive environment. Furthermore, senior and other leaders actively participated in professional associations, enriching their practices and staying updated with the latest educational national priorities and wider educational developments and pedagogies. All middle leaders engaged in annual role review meetings with senior leaders regularly which were reported as highly supportive and constructive.

The school's core values, emphasising kindness, respect, reflection, and restorative practices, facilitated and empowered staff, students and parents with a positive impact skills for students and mediating challenging conversations when need arose.

The devolved and distributive leadership model enabled teachers and students to volunteer for many leadership roles in the school. Students were provided with valuable opportunities to present to parents of incoming students during a variety of open evening and school induction events. The student council, school prefects and school captains received leadership training and were ably facilitated in their work through two teachers who guided their work. Students were provided with meaningful platforms to voice their opinions and contribute to decision-making processes with evident positive outcomes.

The principal demonstrated strategic delegation of responsibilities through the post structure, ensuring that effective systems were in place to address the school's priority needs. Moreover, school leaders actively engaged with professional associations, drawing upon insights and best practices gleaned from these interactions to enrich their leadership practices and drive positive change within the school community.

3. Quality of support for students' wellbeing

The quality of support for students' wellbeing was excellent. All interactions and questionnaire data from teachers, students and parents indicated a very strong sense of community and belonging. A strong relationship-based approach supported an inclusive atmosphere with a very

positive impact on Wellbeing for all. The school is recognised as a School of Sanctuary by Schools of Sanctuary Ireland and demonstrated a very positive ethos of welcoming a very diverse multicultural student population.

Wellbeing curricular and non-curricular provision was very effectively organised and included various activities. A dedicated team diligently managed the implementation of the school's wellbeing programme, ethical education programme, as well as the phenomenon-based learning themed learning weeks. A comprehensive and holistic approach to ethical education within the school community celebrated neurodiversity and multicultural values. Themed weeks focused on various wellbeing inputs and built links between subject topics and real world events. The data arising from student questionnaires indicated that they strongly agreed that their learning was relevant to their lives outside of school.

Student questionnaire data indicated that they were positive about school and respected by school adults. The SST presented as a proactive team that coordinated very good tiered support for ‘at risk’ students including access to additional supportive NEPS programmes.

The school had an exemplary variety of whole school and tiered preventative practices in place to reduce and manage instances of bullying. The learning environment overall was observed as one of safety and belonging. Lesson observations, student questionnaire data and the student focus group demonstrated and described the positive value of their excellent relationships with their teachers and each other. Students in the focus group referenced the recently revamped House Points system as supporting a sense of belonging but identified a need for more positive affirmation when they are good through this system.

There was an excellent variety of well-attended extra and co-curricular activities facilitated by teachers with a strong sense of vocation.

Students and staff modelled acceptance and tolerance throughout the evaluation showing an openness to working with others and collective belonging. Students had many opportunities to participate in a very broad range of programmes that build a preventative and supportive culture of acceptance and tolerance. All staff received training in anti-bullying to develop their awareness of bullying prevention and intervention strategies.

A very good Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) including Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) programme plan, led by a newly developed core team of trained teachers, was in place. Positive student attitudes and tolerant values were evident in wellbeing lessons and in the LCA programme. A full programme of curricular Guidance was being provided for all year groups. The guidance plan was very clear and outlined key learning aims, objectives and actions for each year group. A very good range of preventative wellbeing supports was also evident in the guidance plan.

Overall, an excellent commitment to wellbeing was seen throughout all lessons, interactions and meetings with all stakeholders.

Appendix

SCHOOL RESPONSE TO THE REPORT

Submitted by the Board of Management

Part A Observations on the content of the inspection report

The board of Stepaside Educate Together Secondary School is delighted to accept the report as the final inspection report available for final issue. The board is extremely proud that the hard work and dedication of all members of our school community – staff, students, parents, trustees and board of management - has been affirmed and recognised so positively in this report.

The board is very proud that Stepaside ETSS is one of the first schools in the country to be awarded the highest evaluation of excellent in several categories under the inspectorate's new Quality Continuum.

The board particularly welcomes the findings that our school is excellent in leading school development through the school's exemplary self-evaluation practices that "embodied the highly effective and informed use of SSE to bring about contextualised improvements and the collective uptake of priorities by all teachers was an outstanding feature of excellent leadership."

The board is also delighted that the quality of support for students' wellbeing in our school has been described as exemplary and awarded the status of excellent. "Overall, an excellent commitment to wellbeing was seen throughout all lessons, interactions and meetings with all stakeholders."

The board further congratulates the senior leaders and teachers for the implementation of a collaborative system of subject planning that was also deemed excellent.

The board is extremely proud that "student behaviour was excellent overall" and that students "described the positive value of their excellent relationships with their teachers and each other" that were "underpinned by core values of kindness, respect and empowerment for all".

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

The board is fully committed to implementing the recommendations in the report to improve the quality of learning and teaching from "very good overall with a number of areas of exemplary practice" to excellent in the future.

The Inspectorate's Quality Continuum

Inspectors describe the quality of provision in the school using the Inspectorate's quality continuum which is shown below. The quality continuum provides examples of the language used by inspectors when evaluating and describing the quality of the school's provision of each area.

Level	Description	Examples of descriptive terms
Excellent	**Provision that is excellent** is exemplary in meeting the needs of learners. This provision provides an example for other schools and settings of exceptionally high standards of provision.	Excellent; exemplary; outstanding; exceptionally high standard; with very significant strengths
Very good	**Provision that is very good** is very effective in meeting the needs of learners and is of a very high standard. There is potential to build on existing strengths to achieve an excellent standard.	Very good; of a very high quality; very effective practice; highly commendable; very successful
Good	**Provision that is good** is effective in meeting the needs of learners. There is need to build on existing strengths in order to address the aspects to be developed and achieve a very good standard.	Good; of good quality; effective practice; competent; useful; commendable; good standard; strengths outweigh the shortcomings; appropriate provision although some possibilities for improvement exist
Requires improvement to achieve a good standard	**Provision that requires improvement to achieve a good standard** is not sufficiently effective in meeting the needs of learners. There is need to address certain deficiencies without delay in order to ensure that provision is good or better.	Fair; less than effective; less than sufficient; evident weaknesses that are impacting on learning; experiencing difficulty; shortcomings outweigh strengths; must improve in specified areas; action required to improve
Requires significant improvement to achieve a good standard	**Provision that requires significant improvement to achieve a good standard** is not meeting the needs of learners. There is immediate need for significant action to address the areas of concern.	Weak; poor; ineffective; insufficient; unacceptable; experiencing significant difficulties; serious deficiencies in the areas evaluated; requiring significant change, development and improvement to be effective