An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Whole-School Evaluation
Management, Leadership and Learning

REPORT

Lough Allen College
Drumkeeran, County Leitrim
Roll number: 71560P

Date of inspection: 17 October 2012

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 October, 2012 in Lough Allen 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 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

Lough Allen College caters for male and female students and operates under the auspices of County Leitrim Vocational Educational Committee (VEC). There is a current enrolment of 174 students, which includes 41 students enrolled on post-Leaving Certificate courses. The programmes offered in the school are the Junior Certificate, established Leaving Certificate, Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) and Transition Year (TY). The school is inclusive in its admission practices with enrolment being open to all sixth-class pupils in its catchment area.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

Key Findings

- The principal and acting deputy principal work collaboratively as a senior management team and leadership roles are also distributed among staff members.
- The school has established processes for school planning, review and evaluation that now need to be formalised.
- The school provides quite a broad and balanced curriculum and there is a well-organised support system for students.
- The quality of learning and teaching ranged from fair to excellent with most lessons rated as good or of very high quality.
- Students were appropriately challenged by the learning activities and their contributions in class were encouraged and handled respectfully by teachers.
- The school has shown an openness to innovation and an eagerness to be at the forefront of educational developments.

Recommendations for Further Development

- Formal processes for establishing priorities, reviewing policies and engaging in school self-evaluation should be put in place and should be inclusive of all stakeholders.
- The time allocation for all subjects needs to be brought in line with syllabus guidelines and best practice.
- The school needs to take all necessary steps to become fully compliant with the requirements of the *Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools.*
- Teachers should communicate high expectations of good student behaviour in all lessons and the need for respect and consideration between students should be re-emphasised.

1. QUALITY OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP

1.1 School ownership and management

The board of management is appropriately constituted and members interpret its role as being one of support for the principal in ensuring that students get a good education in a happy environment. Due to circumstances beyond its control, the board has met on only three occasions since its appointment in March 2010. This has impacted on its work, including the ratification of some important school policies. With no impediment now standing in its way, it is recommended that meetings be scheduled at more frequent intervals. This will assist the board in fulfilling its role in the management of the school.

The board has previously linked with both the parents' association (PA) and the student council (SC) to discuss their roles in the school. This good practice should be continued. Consideration should also be given to agreeing a brief report on board meetings for communication to teaching staff and the PA. This would highlight the centrality of the role played by the board in the life of the school and help to keep these important stakeholders informed of issues or developments.

The board is aware of evaluations that have taken place in the school and, on receipt of the ensuing reports, the principal informs it of plans for the implementation of recommendations. The board should continue to seek updates on progress until it is satisfied that recommendations are fully embedded. In addition, the board's discussion and ratification of school policies should be clearly recorded in minutes taken and referenced in the policies themselves.

The principal and acting deputy principal work collaboratively as a senior management team through daily formal and informal meetings. Leadership roles are also distributed among post-of-responsibility holders and other staff members. It is good practice that meeting time has been set aside each week for post holders to discuss issues and agree common approaches.

The school communicates in an appropriately wide variety of ways with parents. The parents' association is involved in many school activities and plays a key role in fundraising. While the PA was involved in discussions on introducing compulsory TY, it would be of benefit to have it more centrally involved in ongoing policy development and review. It should also be informed of evaluation reports and their follow-up.

1.2 Effectiveness of leadership for learning

The assistant principals, along with the principal and deputy, take responsibility for school planning. As policies are identified for updating, small groups of relevant personnel are formed, under the guidance of an assistant principal, to make amendments. This process could be more effective and inclusive with parent and student representation, as appropriate.

There is a lack of clarity around the school's current developmental targets. This is likely due to the fact that the process to identify and agree priorities is not formalised. Such a formal process should involve consultation with all stakeholders to determine issues to be addressed, followed by a ranking into order of priority. The list should be ratified by the board of management and circulated among staff members, the PA and the SC. Time-bound action plans should then be developed and implemented.

It is to be commended that a whole-school literacy committee has been established and has drawn up a literacy policy and strategies for implementation at whole-school level. The

focus for the current year is on basic punctuation and an appropriate teaching aid has been prepared for teachers' use. In addition, the school has introduced the MS Readathon and the Drop Everything and Read strategies to improve the level of students' engagement with reading. The ongoing monitoring of the effectiveness of these strategies will be an important element of the school's self-evaluation processes.

School management and teachers are committed to providing a high quality education for all students. The PA was particularly appreciative of the high level of dedication shown by teachers and in-school management. This dedication can be seen in teachers voluntarily taking responsibility for a range of aspects of school life. The senior management team is supportive of teachers in this work.

Teaching staff are, in almost all instances, deployed in accordance with their qualifications and expertise. It is good practice that they are consulted on their teaching duties at the end of the school year prior to the framing of the timetable. Teachers are encouraged to engage in continuing professional development (CPD) and there is an established structure in the school for their ongoing participation in CPD activities.

Subject planning is facilitating collaborative work practices for the teachers. School management should avail of the opportunity offered by subject team meetings to extend its role in leading learning and teaching, by having input into the agenda.

Teachers have invested significant time and energy in developing subject plans, many of which were reviewed by the evaluation team. To build on this good work, and to place students at the centre of the subject planning process, planned programmes of work should be expressed in terms of learning outcomes. Subject plans reviewed included clear, graphical displays of attainment in Certificate examinations and comparison with national data. These would be enhanced through the inclusion of documented analysis or comment and resulting action plans, as appropriate. Very good subject plans included extensive cross-curricular resources, plans for students with special educational needs (SEN) and individual teacher review and evaluation of completed activities. The extensive collection of resources gathered and prepared by most teachers is highly commendable.

The school provides quite a broad and balanced curriculum and makes deliberate efforts to meet the needs of students. Class size is often small, an aspect of the school that is favoured by parents, students and teachers alike. However, there are subjects whose time allocation is not currently in line with syllabus guidelines and best practice. While the school is fully compliant in providing students with a minimum of twenty-eight hours' tuition time, it is likely that the school timetable will need to be extended beyond its forty-three lesson periods to allow some progress to be made on this issue.

Following consultation with teaching staff and the PA, a compulsory TY programme has been introduced this year. While it is too early at this time to evaluate its success, robust efforts are being made to ensure that it will be a worthwhile educational experience for students. The TY co-ordinator has participated in dedicated CPD and is ensuring that all teachers on the programme are supported in realising their aims. The TY core team, established in line with good practice, meets periodically to engage in programme planning and review. While it is commendable that such a large number of teachers have shown sufficient interest to join this team, consideration should be given to reducing the numbers, for practical purposes.

There is a well-organised support system for students with key personnel being the tutor, year head and guidance counsellor. Tutors and year heads meet with their respective groups at regular intervals to support and monitor the students' well-being and progress. The school has maintained guidance provision at a good level, despite recent cuts in allocation.

Guidance is available to individual students by appointment or referral and all students entering critical points in their school careers are allocated individual appointments with the qualified guidance counsellor. Guidance classes are also scheduled for TY and fifth-year class groups. The well-planned guidance programme forms part of the comprehensive whole-school guidance plan that has been drawn up.

Support for students with SEN is largely on a withdrawal basis, with a small amount of team teaching and in-class support. It is good practice that educational plans are drawn up for groups of students and are periodically reviewed. In addition, two of the qualified resource teachers meet with parents of students with dedicated teaching support allocations, and agree strategies to maximise their potential for progress.

The code of positive behaviour, introduced in recent years, is well established and understood by both parents and students. A breakfast club, internally funded, has also had a significant positive effect on students' behaviour. The PA is happy that students' attendance is very well monitored and all students agreed that attendance is regularly checked. In line with good practice, the school also rewards student attendance through its student awards system.

A democratically elected student council is the main forum for developing student leadership in the school. There is scope to improve its profile through the erection of a dedicated SC notice board, the introduction of badges for members and the allocation of a page on the school website. While the SC has had some involvement in policy development, it would be appropriate for the council also to be informed of evaluation reports.

The board of management has not as yet formally adopted the *Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools* and the school is not currently compliant with the requirements of the *Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools*. This should be addressed immediately.

1.3 *Management of facilities*

School accommodation is maintained to a high standard. School management is investing significant time and energy in ensuring that facilities, in particular two classrooms in an adjoining annexe, meet current safety standards. Recent improvements have included upgrading not only of the plant, but also of the information and communications technology (ICT) infrastructure and hardware. A special duties post has been assigned to ICT support and this assists teachers in integrating technology into learning and teaching.

Facilities for sport are less than optimal and significantly restricted in inclement weather. Access to playable pitches and to suitable indoor facilities is limited and school management and students have expressed frustration at the current situation.

2. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

2.1 The quality of learning and teaching

The quality of learning and teaching ranged from fair to excellent with most lessons rated as good or of very high quality. There was thorough preparation for all lessons, including the advance preparation of materials to support students' learning. All lessons were purposeful and had clear learning intentions. Following on from the recommendation regarding programme planning in section 1.2 above, all lessons should, in future, begin with the good practice of the learning intentions being presented in the form of learning outcomes for students.

Teacher exposition was the predominant teaching approach observed. However, there was particularly good practice in varying teaching strategies when active-learning opportunities such as a student presentation, student role play or the completion of other practical tasks were provided. Fewer than half of all lessons included an explicit focus on literacy. In those that did, it was usually in the form of attention to topic-specific terminology or spelling. In order for the whole-school focus on literacy to have maximum impact for students, agreed strategies should be implemented in all lessons.

Classroom management was good in most lessons. Where it was unsatisfactory, rules for classroom engagement had not been established or were not being enforced. It is important that students receive consistent messages regarding expectations of good behaviour in all lessons. Good routines were being established in the majority of practical lessons in line with health and safety protocols.

Students were appropriately challenged by the learning activities in the majority of lessons. Their contributions in class were encouraged and handled respectfully by teachers. There was mutual respect between teachers and students in most lessons. However, an expectation of respect and consideration between students needs to be clearly reiterated in certain instances.

Students' progress during lessons was checked predominantly through the use of questioning. There was some good use of higher-order questions, challenging students' understanding and extending their learning. Good practice in the assessment of students' written work was seen where it was closely monitored and received feedback from teachers.

Many classrooms had visual displays that enriched the learning environment, including displays of quality work completed by students. Most lessons were characterised by good student engagement as students worked purposefully on assigned tasks. In a few lessons, students were given the opportunity to reflect on their learning and this very good practice is commended.

While lesson objectives were mostly attained, they were explicitly checked by teachers in only a small number of instances. It is recommended that, prior to the ending of each lesson, teachers review the attainment of the stated objectives as a further means of checking progress. Performance by students in the Certificate examinations compares favourably with performance on a national level.

3. IMPLEMENTATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS FROM PREVIOUS EVALUATIONS

3.1 Management

All main recommendations made to school management in previous evaluations, other than those relating to time allocation to subjects, have been implemented.

Implementation in subject planning is more variable, with some issues such as the recommended focus of subject meetings still to be addressed. The rewriting of programmes of work in terms of learning outcomes for students is ongoing.

3.2 Learning and teaching

The main recommendations for learning and teaching are being implemented or plans are in place for their implementation.

A number of statements made in previous evaluation reports apply equally to all subjects. Therefore, a further step should be added to the school's process for addressing the outcomes of evaluations. Generic findings of good practice as well as recommendations for improvement should be extracted and presented to all staff for school-wide adoption.

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

Individuals within school management and teaching staff are engaging in school self-evaluation and change is ongoing as needs are identified. However, systematic review and evaluation is not embedded in the school culture.

The school applied for and was chosen as a 'network school' for the new junior cycle indicating an openness to innovation and an eagerness to be at the forefront of developments. If planning and review processes in the school are formalised, it will have very good capacity for 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 reconstituted Board of Lough Allen College has now been in a position since the date of the original inspection to meet formally and adopt the Department of Education Guidelines on child protection. This was not possible prior to this inspection for reasons beyond the control of the school. The school have however in practice been operating the guidelines as provided by the Department prior to this and will continue to do so in full.

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

1) Child Protection Guidelines adopted formally
2) Plans have been put in place for further staff refresher training on these guidelines
3) Greater allocation of timetabled hours to specified subject areas