An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Whole-School Evaluation
Management, Leadership and Learning

REPORT

Saint Fintan's High School
Sutton, Dublin 13
Roll number: 60370W

Date of inspection: 23 September 2015

Whole-School Evaluation
Management, Leadership and Learning

A whole-school evaluation of management, leadership and learning (WSE-MLL) was undertaken in September, 2015 in Saint Fintan's High School, Sutton. 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

Saint Fintan's High School, Sutton is a voluntary Catholic secondary school under the trusteeship of the Edmund Rice Schools Trust (ERST). The school is greatly oversubscribed and has a current enrolment of 684 boys. The school provides the Junior Certificate, the Leaving Certificate and a compulsory Transition Year (TY) programme for students.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

Key Findings

- The board of management is very supportive of the school.
- The principal and deputy principal manage the school very effectively and lead learning well.
- The effectiveness of some of the longstanding structures in the school, including curricular provision and optional subject selection, would benefit from review.
- The post holders and year heads bring very high levels of commitment and energy to their work.
- Teachers have engaged well with subject planning and some departments have introduced peer observation as a valuable means of sharing expertise.
- The curriculum offered comprises a relatively limited range of subjects and programmes.
- The school's care system supports students very well and very high-quality learning support is provided for students with special educational needs.
- A very wide variety of valuable co-curricular and extracurricular activities is provided.
- The quality of teaching observed was good or very good in most lessons, and in some lessons teaching was excellent.
- There is very good practice in relation to the monitoring of students' copybooks and the provision of advice and encouragement on written work.
- Through the implementation of the school self-evaluation (SSE) model the school has very good capacity for driving on-going improvement.

Recommendations for Further Development

- The board, in collaboration with the whole-school community, should develop a medium to long-term strategic plan outlining the required actions needed to progress each of the areas that it has prioritised for improvement.
- The board's strategic plan should include measures to facilitate the expansion of the curriculum so that it provides a range of subject options and choices to cater for the diverse needs, abilities and interests of a broad student cohort.
- Analysis of examination results should include a comparison of student outcomes against the standardised tests administered on entry to the school so as to provide a more realistic perspective on student performance.
- In order to facilitate all students in reaching their full potential they should be assigned to classes on a more mixed-ability basis, have a wider subject choice and be enabled to become more independent learners.
- A wider variety of learning activities and more comprehensive assessment strategies should be included in lessons.

1. QUALITY OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP

1.1 School ownership and management

The board of management is very supportive of the school. The ERST ethos and values underpin and guide its work. The board has a good understanding of its responsibilities, is properly constituted and fulfils its statutory obligations. The board communicates effectively with the wider school community through the various representatives on the board. Additionally, the board's work is very well informed by the detailed and comprehensive principal's report provided for each meeting. The school's self-evaluation reports should now be made available to all members of the school community.

The board has identified the provision of adequate infrastructure, facilities and resources to cater for the school's increased enrolment, improved information and communication technology (ICT), and the implementation of the new junior cycle as its priorities for development. Considerable work has been completed to date, particularly in relation to improving the school's ICT resources and teachers' expertise in using ICT. It is now recommended that the board, in collaboration with the whole school community, develop a medium to long-term strategic plan outlining the required actions needed to progress each prioritised area further. This plan should also include strategies to facilitate the expansion of the curriculum so that it meets the full diversity of students' needs in the school.

The board makes a very good contribution to policy and decision-making. It has adopted and ratified all of the mandatory school policies. In keeping with good practice, the views of parents and students are routinely sought in the development and review of relevant policies. However, this consultation usually occurs following the completion of an initial draft of each policy. It is recommended that the board provide opportunities for all stakeholders, including parents and students, to engage in the policy development process from the earliest stage.

The principal and deputy principal have a partnership approach to leadership and communicate very effectively as a team. Their individual roles and responsibilities are clearly defined and agreed. They share a commitment to staff development by giving teachers the opportunity and appropriate autonomy to lead projects, in line with their strengths and interests. The relationships between teachers, students and the members of the senior management team are very good and there is an open-door policy in relation to

communication with all members of the school community. The principal and deputy principal use a range of skills to motivate, manage and support teachers and students alike, and this contributes to the excellent working atmosphere that characterises the school.

The middle management system provides high-quality support to the operation of the school. The posts of responsibility have recently been reviewed and meet the needs of the school very well. In keeping with good practice, an annual meeting between the senior management team and each post-holder is held to provide an opportunity to discuss and review the operation of the posts.

The position of year head has been removed from the post structure; year heads are appointed following an interview process, for a three-year term, on a voluntary basis. This innovative arrangement affords teachers an excellent opportunity for professional development and has contributed to the very high levels of commitment and energy that year heads bring to their work.

It was evident throughout the evaluation that the teachers share a strong commitment to the school and the maintenance of its ethos. They are actively involved in the life of the school through their work as tutors, class teachers, and their participation in the school's planning and SSE processes. Additionally, they have a cohesive approach to the implementation of the school's literacy and numeracy strategies, and contribute to the very extensive extra-curricular programme provided for students. There is a very high level of teacher volunteerism in the school. It was clear that members of the teaching staff work very well together to support the students and each other.

The committed and active parents' council is involved in various aspects of school life. Its contribution includes the organisation of events for parents, fundraising, and the provision of support at school information nights.

1.2 Effectiveness of leadership for learning

The principal and deputy principal are effective leaders of learning. There is very good access to ICT and teaching resources. Teachers' continuing professional development (CPD) is facilitated and encouraged and this includes financial support provided by the board to any teacher undertaking further study. Senior management is approachable, encourages innovation and welcomes ideas for improvement. Examples include the wide range of TY subjects, the introduction of Spanish at junior and senior cycle, and the school's recent mental health initiatives. However, the effectiveness of some of the longstanding systems in the school would benefit from review, possibly using the SSE model. The current methods for assigning students to class groups and levels in some subjects, the models of support for students with special educational needs, the range of subjects on offer, and the optional subject selection processes in the school should be reformed.

The principal and deputy principal complete an analysis of the students' achievement in the certificate examinations against national norms. It is recommended that this analysis include a comparison of student outcomes against the standardised tests administered on entry to the school. In addition, an individual student target setting and tracking system should be considered. These measures will provide a more realistic perspective on student performance, will assist the school in setting expectations for achievement, and should be used to inform future planning.

Students are assigned to mixed-ability class groups for all subjects in first year. Higher and ordinary level classes in Mathematics and Irish are formed from second year onwards; this is done on the basis of performance in school assessments and the certificate examinations. Students are then placed in higher and ordinary level classes in order of achievement,

resulting in a top higher-level class, second from the top and so on. In order to facilitate all students in reaching their full potential, it is recommended that they be assigned to classes on a more mixed-ability basis.

Teachers have engaged well with subject planning. The best subject plans included programmes of work that outlined content together with the resources, methodologies and specific assessment strategies, a subject improvement plan, and a results analysis for the subject. Very good plans also indicated how the special educational needs (SEN) and literacy and numeracy plans would be implemented in the subject. This good practice should be extended to all subject areas and, in particular, the improvement planning sections for each subject should reflect the overall strategic plan for the school and SSE. Some of the plans indicated that discussion occurs around teaching and learning at subject department meetings, this good practice should be extended to all subject departments.

The teachers of some subject departments have introduced peer observation as a means of sharing best practice and promoting improvement in teaching and learning. This type of collaboration is hugely beneficial in facilitating on-going professional development and its extension is encouraged strongly.

The curriculum offered comprises a relatively limited range of subjects and programmes. In the junior cycle, for example, Technology and Art are the only practical optional subjects available and the demand for these subjects far exceeds the school's provision. This shortfall means that almost half of each first-year group choose a practical subject but cannot study one. It is, therefore, recommended, that in planning for a second option band in the junior cycle, additional practical subjects and an extension of the senior-cycle programmes offered begins immediately.

There is very good practice in relation to guidance in the school. Guidance lessons are provided for all senior-cycle year groups. Individual careers and personal counselling appointments are also arranged. First-year students study optional subjects for six weeks, before making their subject choice. The guidance counsellor supports students in making subject, level, and career choices very well.

The school's code of behaviour is being reviewed currently. There is a clear ladder of referral that facilitates the appropriate management of students. An assistant principal post has been allocated to managing detention and the 'blue card' system in the school. It is good that keeping students out of detention, identifying students who need the attention of the care team, and reinforcing positive behaviour are the core principles underpinning this work. There is a 'yellow card' system for recording and rewarding good behaviour. In addition, both members of the senior management team are active in supporting good student behaviour. Students were observed to be well behaved, confident and happy throughout the evaluation.

Students have a voice in the school through their class representative on the students' council. Additionally, they have contributed to the school's SSE process by completing surveys. However, the questionnaires administered as part of this evaluation indicate scope for a further strengthening of the student voice. Opportunities should therefore be provided for students' views to become a more central part of planning in the school.

The admissions policy and procedures are well structured and the criteria for admission to the school are outlined clearly and applied fairly. However, the limited curriculum on offer does not provide a range of subject options and choices to cater for the diverse needs, abilities and interests of a broad student cohort.

The school's care system supports students very well. Promoting positive mental health, through initiatives such as the positive mental health week, is prioritised. Social Personal and Health Education (SPHE) and Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) are provided within the curriculum.

High-quality learning support is provided for students with special educational needs. There is very good collaboration between mainstream teachers and the learning-support co-ordinator. The main modes of delivery are small-group withdrawal, one-to-one withdrawal and the provision of smaller class groups. Team teaching should be introduced as an alternative method of providing learning support for students.

A very wide variety of valuable co-curricular and extra-curricular activities in sports, academic areas, music and the arts is provided. Students themselves provide extra-curricular activities, such as chess and coding, for their peers. These activities are very worthwhile as they provide students with additional challenge, allow them to develop a range of skills and offer them a different perspective on learning.

Confirmation was provided that the board of management has formally adopted the *Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools* without modification and that the school is compliant with the requirements of the *Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools.*

1.3 *Management of facilities*

The school is at maximum capacity and there is severe pressure on the building to sustain an appropriate variety of learning experiences for students. It is recommended that, as part of the board of management's strategic plan for expansion of the curriculum, particular attention be given to the development of facilities and resources to support the learning of all students. Additionally, in the interest of facilitating a wider range of teaching methodologies, consideration should be given to making classrooms teacher-based.

An active green schools committee promotes respect for the environment and is working towards the achievement of its second green flag. The caretaking and cleaning staff work hard to maintain the school to a high standard.

2. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

2.1 The quality of learning and teaching

The quality of teaching observed was good or very good in most lessons, and in some lessons teaching was excellent. While there were many valuable practices evident in the good lessons observed, the inclusion of a wider variety of learning activities and more comprehensive assessment strategies would have made them very good.

All lessons were well prepared and involved the use of a good range of resources. ICT was used effectively for teacher presentations, scientific demonstrations, playing video clips and music, and also to provide visuals for Art. This level of preparation is particularly commendable given that classrooms are student-based. Some of the classrooms are small and were cluttered with students' books and bags. However, teachers overcame these limitations by asking students to remove books from their desks and to rearrange desks, and in doing so were able to include active methodologies in their lessons.

Activities such as well-organised group or pair work, active methodologies, discovery and investigation, and the use of mind maps and graphic organisers were observed. These

methodologies supported good learning very effectively because they facilitated a wide range of student activities such as listening, discussing, presenting, being creative, personal expression, active learning, problem solving and thinking.

In some lessons, although there was a high standard of teaching, there was scope for improvement in the quality of learning. Student learning in these lessons would have been improved by the inclusion of some or all of the following: increased levels of student engagement; a wider range of student activity; deeper treatment of the concepts taught; methodologies that encourage learner independence; and additional challenge or additional support for students where necessary.

The whole-school literacy policy was implemented through the highlighting of key words. Students also read aloud and opportunities for discussion were provided. Examples of the very good numeracy practice observed included problem-solving activities, discovery approaches, measuring exercises and the use of higher-order questioning. These numeracy strategies are very valuable, not only in encouraging mathematical thinking, but also in promoting deep learning, and their extension is recommended.

It is good that most teachers shared the learning intentions with the students at the outset of lessons. This practice was most beneficial where the learning activities allowed for teachers to monitor the progress of each student and to identify gaps in understanding. Where one-to-one teacher questioning was the principal method used to establish the level of students' understanding, not all students' learning was assessed. Further use of activities that facilitate a more comprehensive assessment of students' learning should be included in all lessons.

There is very good practice in relation to the monitoring of students' copybooks and the provision of advice and encouragement on written work. In addition, student self-assessment and peer assessment were valuable features of some lessons, particularly where students themselves had identified areas for improvement in their own work. Effective use of 'show-me-boards' and 'lollypop sticks' to assess learning was also observed.

In was evident throughout the evaluation that the relationships between students and their teachers are very good. Teachers provide affirmation regularly for students' efforts.

3. IMPLEMENTATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS FROM PREVIOUS EVALUATIONS

3.1 Management

Good progress has been made on implementing the recommendations made in the whole-school sections of previous inspection reports. Mathematics lessons are now concurrently timetabled for all year groups except first year, there is now very good provision for RSE in the senior cycle, and a common programme for all TY English classes has now been adopted. Additionally, the peer observation that was recommended in the Irish evaluation has been introduced and is developing very well in the school. There remains scope, however, for the implementation of some of the recommendations made in previous evaluations, for example the introduction of team teaching for delivering learning support.

3.2 Learning and teaching

Recommendations were made in most of the previous evaluations for learners to experience a more active and engaged learning experience through the use of a wider range of methodologies. Twenty-three lessons were evaluated as part of this evaluation and some very

good practice was observed in the implementation of these recommendations. However, there is still scope for improvement in this area.

Most of the subject-planning recommendations have been implemented. For example, a subject department plan for SPHE and RSE has been developed on foot of the SPHE evaluation. The mathematics evaluation recommended that the programme of work for TY Mathematics should include material that is not on the certificate examination syllabuses; this remains to be done. There is very good practice in general in relation to the variety of subjects and material taught in TY and the implementation of this recommendation will fit very well with the current TY provision.

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

The school has engaged very well with the SSE process and a SSE co-ordinator has been appointed. In line with very good practice, the board of management has evaluated its own performance through engaging with the ERST self-evaluation process for boards of management. The school is now beginning its third round of SSE planning. The SSE reports and school improvement plans for the past two years focused on literacy and numeracy. It is very positive that the strategies promoted as part of the school improvement process were evident in most of the classrooms visited. Through the implementation of the SSE model the school has very good capacity for driving on-going improvement.

Published January 2016

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 of St Fintan's High School welcomes the report from the Inspectorate. The Board notes the very positive comments in relation to the quality of teaching and learning, the very high quality learning support for students with special educational needs, the very high levels of commitment and energy of the year heads and post holders, the very good practice in relation to guidance and the very high level of teacher volunteerism in the school.

The Board is pleased to note also that students were observed to be well behaved, confident and happy throughout the evaluation.

The Board welcomes all recommendations and is committed to implementing them 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

- The Board acknowledges and welcomes the recommendations around curricular provision, and it is expected that the recent inclusion of St Fintan's High School on the DES building projects programme for 2019-2021 will accelerate progress in this regard. In the short term the Board hopes to introduce Technology as a Leaving Certificate subject and it looks forward to offering a wider subject choice to students as soon as resources permit.
- A post of Academic Monitor will be considered as part of the schedule of posts for the next academic year.
- A different method of assigning students to classes in Mathematics and Irish in particular will be considered for the next academic year.
- Teachers will continue to explore a wide range of teaching and learning methodologies to enhance the learning experience of students and encourage learner independence.