An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Whole-School Evaluation
Management, Leadership and Learning

REPORT

Saint Joseph's College
Borrisoleigh, County Tipperary
Roll number: 65241N

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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 May, 2016 in Saint Joseph's College, Borrisoleigh. This report presents the findings of the evaluation and makes recommendations for improvement. During the evaluation, the inspection team met with the school's board of management, in-school management, and groups of teachers, parents and students. Inspectors also reviewed a range of school documentation and responses to questionnaires and examined other data in relation to the operation of the school. As part of the evaluation, a range of lessons across a number of subject areas was inspected. The board of management of the school was given an opportunity to comment on the findings and recommendations of the report; the board chose to accept the report without response.

Introduction

Saint Joseph's College Borrisoleigh is a privately-owned, co-educational, Catholic voluntary secondary school, founded by the current owner in 1978 following the closure of the Convent of Mercy secondary school in the town. A system of unitary management operated until 2012. While the school's first board of management was set up in 2012, the patron/owner retained the majority of management functions. In December 2014, the patron/owner delegated all appropriate governance, managerial and administrative authority and functions, in line with the Education Act, to that board. At the end of that first board's term, a new board of management was appointed in October 2015.

The school has been through a difficult period, characterised by a number of changes in principalship since 2009, declining enrolment since 1999, and the related redeployment of staff in 2011. Enrolment at the time of the evaluation stood at 210 students. The current management structures are achieving positive outcomes by way of very supportive student, parental, and community involvement in the school and strategic planning to secure the future development of the school.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

Key Findings

- Over the past year, significant improvements have taken place in promoting a positive profile of school strengths, in harnessing communication channels with stakeholders to develop shared priorities for school improvement, and in the development of school facilities.
- The board of management functions effectively, is strategically focused on putting governance requirements in place, and is committed to working with parents and students in genuine partnership.
- Through survey returns completed as part of this evaluation, parents expressed overwhelmingly high levels of satisfaction with how the school is run and with how their children are progressing.
- A key strength of the school is its committed and hardworking staff, including the acting principal and deputy principal.
- The holistic development of students is supported by a very broad curriculum, very good informal and some formal student care structures and by co-curricular and extra-curricular activities voluntarily provided by teachers.

- There is scope to improve some of the school's formal student supports and to utilise the resources provided for students with special educational needs (SENs) more effectively.
- The quality of teaching and learning in the lessons observed ranged from good to very good.
- Almost all management-related recommendations from previous inspection reports have been implemented. Partial progress has been made in relation to the subject planning, teaching and learning recommendations made in previous reports.

Recommendations for Further Development

- The school should examine, in light of the resources available to it, the sustainability of the range of curricular options it is offering to students and make adjustments accordingly.
- The school should develop a formal care team and it should revise its whole-school guidance plan to ensure that the resources available to the school are used in the best possible way to provide appropriate guidance for students.
- Improvements are needed in the planning and organisation of allocated supports for students with special educational needs.
- Strategies for differentiation and assessment for learning need to be more widely and more consistently implemented to support learning across the range of abilities.
- Priority needs to be assigned to the ongoing, systematic review of school policies and to the development of a broader scheme of work model by subject departments.

1. QUALITY OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP

1.1 School ownership and management

The board functions effectively and collaboratively. It has worked diligently to establish corporate governance, personnel, and financial procedures and monitoring practices. It has also worked in partnership with the parents' association and student council to support fundraising and facilities development projects. The commitment and significant workload progressed by the board is highly commended.

An appropriate range of school development priorities has been identified in an action plan, prepared by the acting principal, synthesising key points made in formal discussions with the board and staff, and in informal discussions with some parents and students. As part of those priorities, provision should be made to inform board decisions around curriculum. It is recommended that the action plan for school development be formally presented to the various stakeholders. Reviewing that action plan should lead to the agreement of a sustainable, reasonably-paced action plan for improvement for a three to five year period.

The board has already reviewed and ratified changes to its admissions policy and has commenced work in relation to other policies. Ensuring that ratified policies are available to all stakeholders on the school's website is a priority for the board. To further support transparent reporting to all stakeholders, it is recommended that an agreed written report be finalised at the end of each board meeting, and provided to staff and the parents' association. The board should also produce an annual report on the operation and performance of the school and use this as a routine means of providing information to the patron, staff, and parents.

The parents' association (PA) has already made a huge contribution to school life, even though it was only established in 2015. Its first steps were to seek formal advice from the National Parents Council Post-primary (NPCpp) on confirming its role, functions, and best

practice operating procedures and this proactive approach is highly commended. Its contributions to date include support for open nights, for fundraisers, and for a staff-initiated, high-profile Cycle Against Suicide event. It would be useful if a dedicated section of the school website could be used to publicise the work being done by the PA and by the board of the school.

1.2 Effectiveness of leadership for learning

The acting principal and deputy principal are both highly-committed to the school. They have a partnership approach and work well together. The acting principal demonstrates a proactive approach to school development and the deputy principal plays an important operational role in the school while also teaching a substantial number of hours.

The senior management team has focused on promoting a positive profile of the school to reverse falling enrolment trends and on working with the board to introduce new communication structures for stakeholders and staff. Simultaneously, the acting principal and deputy principal have been strategically planning to maintain the broad curriculum and profile of student achievement that have been, to date, core features of the school. Further evidence of their leadership was gathered through survey returns completed as part of this evaluation, where parents expressed overwhelmingly high levels of satisfaction with how the school is run and with how their children are progressing.

Decision-making is shared in the school. Survey returns support the statement that "teachers feel that their views are valued in decision-making processes." A review of posts of responsibility has been completed, resulting in an alignment of posts with the current needs of the school. Also, a weekly meeting of assistant principals has been timetabled, for the purpose of student management discussions as well as supporting school improvement planning. It is highly commendable that such open and productive communication has been established in the school.

The school's curriculum has been regularly reviewed and adapted over the years, with the needs of students central to decision making and every effort possible made to preserve high levels of choice for students. In response to teacher redeployments, staff very generously upskilled and diversified to maintain curriculum breadth for students. It is a tribute to the school that student performance in certificate examinations has remained very high during the aforementioned difficult period.

Over the past eighteen months, great energy and volunteerism has been invested by teachers in enabling structural changes and key events to proceed. Maintaining this level of engagement into the future will be challenging. Giving due regard to the wellbeing of staff, the action plan for improvement which has been developed with stakeholders needs to be revisited to ensure that it is reasonably paced, with careful identification of key events and targets for each school year. A significant part of this work should involve examining the range of curricular options the school is offering to students in light of the resources available to it and of the sustainability of provision into the medium term.

The school plan comprises a range of policy documents, almost all of which were prepared in 2012. There is a body of work to be done to update them in a consultative way and to ensure ongoing compliance with Department and other requirements. It is vital that the school plan be available to all school staff, ideally in digital format so that it can easily be updated as policies are amended and ratified.

Commendable student-support aspects of school life include a very strong ethos of informal student care, a warm and welcoming school atmosphere, voluntary tutor monitoring and support of class groups, and the organisation of student-support related events. It is

commended that the code of behaviour was revised in 2015 and that formal continuing professional development for year heads has commenced. However, formal student-support procedures and policies need to be revised and updated to ensure that school has capacity to deal with more complex needs among students as they arise.

Three developments are now recommended. First, a care team approach should be adopted within the timetabled year head meetings, with the guidance counsellor and special educational needs (SEN) co-ordinator invited to attend those meetings from time to time, to support decision-making for particular students. Second, the guidance counsellor should participate in Social Personal and Health Education (SPHE) planning meetings, to support the guidance being provided through SPHE on key aspects of life to junior cycle students. Third, key student support policies need to be reviewed and amended, including the anti-bullying, critical incident, and whole-school guidance policies. In the recommended review of school policies, these student care policies need to be seen as urgent.

A very wide diversity of leadership roles is undertaken by students of the school, ranging across sporting, musical, scientific, student council, and social awareness activities. Strong evidence was gathered that students' suggestions for school improvement are listened to, respected, and supported by school management, the PA, and the board. This is a very positive feature of school life.

The parents and students interviewed praised teachers' volunteerism in providing a very wide array of extra-curricular and co-curricular activities such as preparation for subject-specific competitions, matches, concerts, and in organising co-curricular outings and tours.

The school facilitates students in their subject choices through exposure to all subjects in Transition Year and through open choice for Leaving Certificate subjects. In addition, a sampling programme for first-year optional subjects will be provided from September 2016 onward. This level of choice, while desirable for students, stretches available resources in ways that are impacting on provision in other areas, such as SEN and guidance.

The school has a qualified guidance counsellor on its staff but following the redeployment of staff in 2011 and the change in 2012 from the ex-quota allocation for guidance, her timetable largely consists of classroom teaching. While a review of guidance to ensure that time for counselling is allocated had already been identified in the school's action plan for 2016/17, it is recommended that a full review of whole-school guidance provision and supports takes place, reflecting the resources available.

Transition Year (TY) is a very successful programme. The individual students entering the programme are surveyed in advance on their unique interests and strengths and then extra-curricular and co-curricular activities for the year are matched to these. In supporting the future development of this programme some co-ordination time needs to be provided, given that two TY classes are due to run next year.

The school operates an open, inclusive admissions policy that was revised and ratified in 2015. School management reported that plans to deliver allocated supports to students with special educational needs (SEN) in a more co-ordinated manner had been put in place in the school timetable, but could not be delivered when low enrolment meant that teaching allocations to the school fell. Inspectors found that allocated SEN support hours were timetabled across approximately fifty percent of the teaching body and that some of the support groups numbered more than fifteen students, with the simultaneous grouping of students from junior and senior year in a few instances. To support improved delivery, it is recommended that the contributions of staff with specialist qualifications in the area of SEN be harnessed more strategically. More flexible curricular planning should be conducted for a minority of students. Finally, the school should create a student register to

record the use of allocated hours and to track how each student receives support as per Circular 70/2014.

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

Teachers are commended for the stimulating learning environments they have created in their classrooms and on school corridors, featuring displays of subject-specific materials and in some cases, samples of students' work.

Over the past year, there have been substantial improvements to the maintenance and development of school facilities. Student initiative led to the cleaning and painting of the school canteen, areas in the main school building, and the school gates and this has made a huge contribution to student pride in the school. Extensive information and communications technology (ICT) upgrades have taken place in all classrooms.

A health and safety policy is in place. It was reported that teaching and non-teaching staff undertook a risk assessment this year, co-ordinated by the health and safety post holder. It is advised that the HSA's 2010 *Guidelines on Managing Safety and Health in Post-Primary Schools* be consulted in further developing risk assessment practices and the general health and safety policy of the school.

2. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

2.1 The quality of learning and teaching

Seventeen lesson periods across a range of subjects and programmes were observed by inspectors. The quality of teaching and learning in the lessons observed ranged from good to very good. In all classes, very good rapport was noted between teachers and their students and very good standards of behaviour and of application to work were noted among the general student body.

Students' learning was supported by strong subject-specific teacher professional knowledge, by the use of objects/audio/visual/multimedia aids in some lessons, by classroom layouts which had been adapted to encourage students to work in groups, and by some integration of active learning opportunities to reinforce new concepts or procedures taught. A small number of teachers also provided materials on online platforms, to support students' self-assessment and revision.

Skilful questioning was the main teaching methodology utilised, ranging from activating prior knowledge, to checking students' learning and understanding, to connecting new learning with real-life contexts and in some cases, to posing problems requiring students to engage in critical thinking in pairs or groups. Ensuring this mix of individual and collaborative opportunities for answering questions is recommended.

A professional development input on assessment for learning (AfL) was organised for teachers this year and a number of staff are commendably experimenting with various AfL strategies. Good written teacher feedback is provided to students on end-of-chapter or topic tests. Furthermore, a few teachers are beginning to formally survey their students at the end

of the school year, asking for feedback on strengths and areas for development, and then amend their schemes based on that feedback.

To achieve more consistent usage of AfL approaches by staff, it is essential that the key principle behind the process guide teachers' work: that evidence of learning needs be gathered *during* the learning process, and then used to adapt teaching to meet students' needs. As well as checking students' understanding during lessons using oral and written questions, additional methods need to be used, possibly including show-me-boards, exit slips, and online learning checkers. Also, the development of students' subject-specific skills needs to be evaluated during the learning process, through tailored assessments such as projects, oral presentations, and research tasks. It is acknowledged that AfL is strong in some of the TY courses delivered by teachers. This concept now needs to be consistently transferred into the teaching of junior and senior cycle classes.

The second area for development is more consistent incorporation of differentiation into teachers' practice. While good visual support for learning was provided by some teachers, a more consistent use of graphic organisers is recommended. Careful attention to student placement and rotation in group work, and to the setting of differentiated in-class and/or homework tasks to meet the needs of particular students is recommended. Teachers need to share criteria for assessment for substantial tasks with students and to show them exemplars of standard where appropriate. Finally, more written formative feedback on substantial pieces of student homework should be provided by teachers to help students make adjustments in their learning during units of work.

3. IMPLEMENTATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS FROM PREVIOUS EVALUATIONS

3.1 Management

The management-related recommendations in the school's previous whole-school evaluation and subject inspection reports have either been fully addressed or good progress made on them. It is envisaged that increased time allocation recommendations for different subjects will be largely implemented over the coming years, as the requirements of the new Junior Cycle Framework are incorporated into the school timetable.

3.2 Learning and teaching

Partial progress has been made in relation to the three teaching and learning themes that recurred in previous subject inspections: the need for the consistent integration of AfL approaches, of differentiation, and of active learning approaches into teachers' classroom practices. Advice in section 2.1 will help progress implementation of these themes.

Subject department planning has been progressing over the years, as evidenced by meeting minutes and by the identification of subject-specific strategies for supporting students' literacy and numeracy skills in plans. However, the frequently recurring recommendation in previous subject inspection reports that a broader model of schemes of work be developed has not been progressed. Different topics/sections of schemes of work should be stated in terms of specific learning outcomes, with customised methodologies, resources, and assessment modes planned for those outcomes.

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

While there is scope for development with regard to the school's progress on the formal self-evaluation requirements, it is clear that the school has considerable capacity to progress its priorities. Some SSE elements are already embedded in the school. Staff members have taken on co-ordination roles in relation to SSE. Some literacy, numeracy, and AfL strategies are in use in lessons.

To further enrich SSE outcomes, two developments are advised. First, suggestions should be formally gathered from subject departments on additional strategies for supporting literacy, numeracy, and AfL that they currently use. Second, agreed school improvement plans should be provided to the school community and the board should familiarise itself with the legislative and regulatory checklist contained in the SSE guidelines.

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