An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Whole-School Evaluation
Management, Leadership and Learning

REPORT

Loreto Secondary School
Letterkenny, County Donegal
Roll number: 62840U

Date of inspection: 25 September 2014

Whole-School Evaluation
Management, Leadership and Learning

A whole-school evaluation of management, leadership and learning (WSE-MLL) was undertaken in September, 2014 in Loreto Secondary School. 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

Loreto Secondary School is a large voluntary secondary school for girls which operates under the Loreto Education Trust. The school has grown since its establishment in 1854 and at present 987 students from a variety of backgrounds are enrolled. The school provides the Junior Certificate, Leaving Certificate, an optional Transition Year (TY), Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP), and Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programmes.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

Key Findings

- The school's tradition and ethos of caring for students' academic, social and personal development is very well supported by the trustees, board, senior management and staff.
- The board of management is very supportive and committed to ensuring the continued success of the school.
- An excellent senior management team provides good leadership to the school community and oversees a very well organised and managed school.
- The staff's high level of commitment and collegiality is particularly evident in their willingness to lead out on new initiatives and in their support for extra-curricular activities.
- The school has very good facilities and provides a broad curriculum to support the needs of its students.
- The quality of teaching and learning was good, with very good practice observed in a significant number of lessons.
- The school has a very good capacity for managing and leading school improvement.

Recommendations for Further Development

- In light of emerging challenges in the area of curriculum reform and changing student needs, it is recommended that the board identify some long-term strategic priorities, and plan for how these can be achieved.
- In order to build on the good work already completed, it is recommended that management and staff continue to develop strategies for capturing, developing and sharing good classroom practice.

1. QUALITY OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP

1.1 School ownership and management

The board is very committed to ensuring the continued success of the school and is very well supported by the trustees in ensuring its effective operation. The members of the board bring a wide range of complementary expertise and experience to bear on their consideration of issues. The board is very well informed of school activities and issues. It has a good working relationship with the principal and provides great support to the school and senior management on an ongoing basis. A wide range of mandatory policies has been developed by the board including admissions, behaviour and child protection policies. Some policies are under review at present and it is good practice that there is a clear timescale for the review of all policies.

Good systems are in place to assist the board in identifying ongoing needs of the school and appropriate follow-through actions have been implemented. For example, an electronic system for monitoring attendance has been installed and wireless internet access has been made available throughout the school. In order to build on current success and to plan ahead for emerging challenges in the area of curriculum reform and changing student needs, it is recommended that the board also identify some long-term strategic priorities and plan for how these can be achieved.

The senior management team of principal and deputy principal has adopted agreed individual roles and responsibilities, and has a clear and strong commitment to the continued success of the school. They work closely together to ensure the smooth operation of the school on a day-to-day basis while also successfully managing the development of the school on a more long-term basis. Individually, and as a team, they effectively use a range of skills to motivate, manage and lead the school community. The implementation of good systems and procedures to manage various areas of school life has resulted in a very well organised and well run school.

Leadership roles are distributed at middle management level and clearly defined duties have been assigned to holders of posts of responsibility. The schedule of posts has been subject to ongoing review and this good practice will ensure that the schedule continues to meet the needs of the school into the future. The commendable commitment of staff to the development of the school is evident in their involvement in leading a range of initiatives and projects. The effective operation of the school is well supported by ancillary staff

A well organised student council provides a representative body for students. As well as organising specific events, the council contributes to the life of the school through its involvement in issues such as an anti-bullying campaign and the school's chosen 'theme' of the year. Further leadership roles for students are provided through the prefect and monitor systems. However, many students surveyed felt that they did not have a say in how things are done in the school. It would be worthwhile asking the student council to explore this issue further.

The parents' association is actively involved in the life of the school. As well as fund raising, they are also consulted on many issues relating to the school such as policy development. The views of parents in this regard are valued by the school, and a survey of parents showed great satisfaction with the school. The access to, and availability of, senior management and other staff to discuss individual issues was noted by parents. Some parents had concerns with respect to the level of advice available regarding subject choices. The parents' association could be asked to suggest improvements in this area.

1.2 Effectiveness of leadership for learning

The school provides a broad and balanced curriculum which meets the needs of the student cohort. The timetable balances varying needs and is generally in line with curricular guidelines. As well as the more traditional Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate programmes, the school provides very well organised TY, LCVP, and LCA programmes. A wide range of sporting and cultural extra-curricular activities complements the more formal curriculum. During the evaluation, teachers and students were busily preparing for a joint musical production with a neighbouring school. The school has a proud record of sporting achievements. The commitment of staff to the provision of such extra-curricular activities is noteworthy.

The senior management team supports and promotes excellence and quality improvement across the school. The views of staff are sought and valued by the senior management team and many staff noted the willingness of senior management to support them in initiating new developments or projects. An excellent example of staff involvement in such initiatives is the current *Forbairt* project which is focussed on the impact of teacher feedback on student engagement and learning. This project has now expanded beyond the original core team to include all teachers of first year. A high level of collaboration and collegiality is evident in the way staff work together both formally and informally. Access to relevant professional development is facilitated by management.

Attendance and retention of students are monitored in an organised and systematic manner. The admissions policy is currently under review and in line with the school's ethos provides for equality and inclusion of all students.

Students have a clear understanding of the code of behaviour and there is a very well organised system in place, including class tutors and year heads, to support its implementation. The school celebrates and promotes positive behaviour in a variety of ways.

The various support mechanisms for students with special educational needs (SEN) are very well organised and managed. The introduction of an autism unit demonstrates the school's commitment to inclusion. Apart from some specialist teachers, a large group of teachers is involved in providing learning support in small groups and in one-to-one settings. Best practice would be to enhance the level of expertise among a smaller team. However, it is good that a clear strategy is in place to facilitate a consistent and focused approach between the subject teachers and the support teachers. In addition to the strategies currently in use, it would be worthwhile exploring the use of team-teaching as another model of supporting students with special educational needs.

Very good support structures are in place to provide for the well-being of students. Guidance, counselling and care strategies including Social, Personal and Health Education and Relationships and Sexuality Education programmes are in place. A core team meets weekly and coordinates follow-through on any issues which arise. Survey results show that students feel safe and cared for in the school and that parents agree with this. Students particularly noted the friendly and caring atmosphere in the school.

Subject planning is well established. A lot of effort has been put into developing planning folders and coordinating the work of teachers within subject departments. Good practice is evident in the sharing of teaching resources, the development of schemes of work, the regular department meetings and the strong focus on literacy over a number of years. There is scope for more in-depth consideration of subject-specific classroom practice on issues such as effective teaching methodologies, supporting SEN students, and literacy. It would be good to capture and share, at subject department level, the good practice that is currently in place among teachers and to develop such practice further over time.

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 accommodation, which has been extended several times, is maintained to a high standard. A very attractive learning environment has been created through the display of students' work in public areas and in classrooms. The school's commendable support for students with special needs is evident in the various initiatives which have improved access to the building for all students. Teachers are classroom based and have customised their rooms to support provision in the relevant subject area. Specialist rooms are well resourced. Information and communication technology (ICT) facilities are of a very high standard, with data projectors and good internet access throughout the school. A health and safety statement is in place and it was good to see a practical emphasis being placed on safety during tutorial time.

2. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

2.1 The quality of learning and teaching

The quality of teaching and learning was good, with very good practice observed in a significant number of lessons. The uptake of subjects at higher-level and attainment in state examinations is very good. Lessons were very well managed with all teachers placing an emphasis on the establishment of classroom procedures. A very supportive, caring and respectful atmosphere was evident in the interactions between teachers and students. Displays of subject-related materials and student work created an atmosphere of learning.

Lessons were very well prepared in terms of the production of resources, such as worksheets and equipment, and the very structured format of most lessons. Practical activities were well organised and allowed students to actively engage in hands-on tasks in many lessons.

All lessons had a clear focus and widespread use was made of learning outcomes to structure lessons. Best practice was evident where the learning outcomes were used again, during or at the end of the lesson, to assess progress and where students knew how to judge their own success. In these cases, students were enabled to develop a sense of ownership or independence with respect to their learning. In some cases, the learning outcomes were used more simply as a checklist of what would be done during the lesson.

There was good support for the development of students' literacy skills. Key words necessary for the understanding of lesson content were highlighted and explained in many lessons. Best practice was observed where understanding of unfamiliar vocabulary was developed and embedded. For example, in some cases students were asked to explain the unfamiliar terms in their own words or were asked to use them in a new way. Displays of key words and other subject-specific material in classrooms highlighted the importance of literacy.

The majority of lessons included a good variety of teaching approaches. For example, good use was made of brainstorming to elicit prior learning. Pair and group work were used to good effect in some lessons. Teacher-led instruction, however, was a frequently used methodology. There was some scope for a greater variety of approaches to ensure that all learning styles are catered for.

Generally there was a very high level of student engagement. Students were kept busy during lessons and worked purposefully under their teachers' direction. There was scope to allow for a greater level of student-centred activity in some lessons and in general for teachers to take more of a guiding role in the learning process.

Students' progress was generally well monitored through questioning, observation, and completion of set tasks or tests. There were some very good examples of formative feedback, self and peer-assessment. These strategies enabled students to work more independently as they required the students to be more involved in the assessment process. In some cases, there was scope for a greater level of differentiation and challenge.

Very good use was made of ICT to deliver content, for example through the use of PowerPoint presentations. In some cases, a more interactive use was made of ICT to involve students in learning activities. For example, in some lessons students were required to complete worksheets or some other task while ICT was used to deliver stimulus material. ICT was also used in another case to access the most current up-to-date material relevant to the lesson by using a podcast of that day's news programme. This more varied and innovative use of ICT could be developed further across all subject areas.

The *Forbairt* project, mentioned previously, is an example of excellent practice in the development of teachers' skills in the use of 'assessment for learning' strategies in the classroom. In order to build on this development, and to address some of the areas noted above, it is recommended that staff continue to develop strategies for capturing, developing and sharing good classroom practice.

3. IMPLEMENTATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS FROM PREVIOUS EVALUATIONS

3.1 Management

Management has given serious consideration to recommendations from previous inspections, and good progress has been made on their implementation. For example, RSE has been introduced for all senior cycle students and the team of teachers taking higher level Mathematics has been expanded.

3.2 Learning and teaching

Subject departments and management have carefully considered the implementation of recommendations relating to teaching and learning from previous inspections. Subject plans have been adapted in line with relevant recommendations. For example, an assessment policy has been drawn up by the SPHE department.

Findings and recommendations from subject inspections have been disseminated to all staff, and teachers are encouraged to consider these in developing their own practice. While all relevant subject departments showed great commitment to implementing such recommendations it would be useful to implement a more formal strategy for recording changes in classroom practice arising from the implementation of recommendations in inspection reports.

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

The school has actively engaged in a formal school self-evaluation process and produced a school improvement plan focused on literacy. Over and above the more formal school self-

evaluation process, the school is constantly keeping areas of school life under review and seeking to implement improvements. Consultation with staff, parents and students is valued as contributing to finding the best solutions to issues. Good structures to support dialogue such as the parents' association and student council are in place. Improvement is seen as a collaborative exercise.

The school is very well supported by the trustees and strives to implement the ethos and tradition of the Loreto philosophy of education. The board is very committed to, and actively supporting, the continued success of the school. There is an excellent senior management team in place. Staff have demonstrated a strong commitment to engaging with school improvement. All of these factors point to a school that has a very good capacity for managing and leading school improvement.

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Appendix

School response to the report

Submitted by the Board of Management

Area 1: Observations on the content of the inspection report
The board of management of Loreto Secondary School welcomes the very positive findings in this WSE-MLL report. These findings, some of which are noted below, acknowledge and reflect the excellent practice and good work being done by all members of our school community.

- The board of management is very supportive and committed to ensuring the continued success of the school.
- The school's tradition and ethos of caring for students' academic, social and personal development is very well supported by the trustees, board, senior management and staff.
- Very good support structures are in place to provide for the well-being of students and the survey results show that students feel safe and cared for in the school.
- The school's active engagement in a formal school self-evaluation process and the promotion of excellence and quality improvement across the school.
- The excellent practices noted in the observation of teaching and learning included *'the very structured format of lessons' 'the high level of student engagement' 'very good examples of formative feedback' and 'the very good use of ICT'*.
- The staff's high level of collaboration and collegiality is particularly evident in their willingness to lead out new initiatives. The *Forbairt* project was specifically mentioned as *'an example of excellent practice'*.
- The development of leadership in the school through '*the well organised student council' 'the prefect and monitor system'* and the '*distribution of leadership roles at middle management level'*
- The implementation of good systems and procedures to manage various areas of school life has resulted in a very well organised and well run school.
- The recommendations from previous subject inspections have been implemented.

As a board we are very proud of our school and in particular we wish to highlight the following:

- The excellent facilities provided for all students and the various initiatives which have improved access to the building for students with physical disabilities.
- The excellent teaching and learning delivered by a highly motivated and dedicated teaching staff.
- The percentage of students who take subjects at higher level and who achieve A and B grades in both the Junior and Leaving Certificate is well above the national norms.
- The commitment of staff to the provision of extra-curricular activities is exceptional.

The board wish to acknowledge the ongoing support and the excellent working relationship with the Loreto Education Trust and the parents' association.

Area 2: Follow-up actions planned or undertaken since the completion of the inspection activity to implement the findings and recommendations of the inspection
As has been the practice of the school, all recommendations and suggestions contained in the report will be discussed with the various stakeholders and the necessary action regarding implementation will be taken.

Since the evaluation the teachers have availed of:

- a one day workshop on teaching methodologies and deep learning with Paul Ginnis
- a short presentation at a staff meeting on Team Teaching
- the sharing of practice in relation to student feedback.