

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

**Whole-School Evaluation
Management, Leadership and Learning**

REPORT

**Athboy Community School
Athboy, County Meath
Roll number: 91517D**

Date of inspection: 15 January 2014



Whole-School Evaluation Management, Leadership and Learning

A whole-school evaluation of management, leadership and learning (WSE-MLL) was undertaken in January 2014 in Athboy Community 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

Athboy Community School is a co-educational second level school under the joint trusteeship of the Catholic Bishop of Meath, the Mercy Sisters and Louth and Meath Education and Training Board. The school was established in 2004 through the amalgamation of St. James' Vocational School and St. Joseph's Secondary School. Athboy Community School has seen considerable demographic change in recent years. It moved into the current new building in 2011. The school has recently added an adult education programme to its provision. It has a well-resourced learning centre for students with autism called *An Cuan*.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

Key Findings

- The board of management is very committed to the school, attends to policy development and has established developmental priorities.
- Senior management demonstrates strong commitment to quality improvement and to building the capacity of staff.
- Very good student support structures are in place and a broad and balanced curriculum is provided.
- Some good work has been done on subject planning.
- The quality of teaching overall was good or very good with some examples of exemplary practice.
- The quality of learning was good in the majority of lessons but there was scope for improvement in a significant minority: there is a need to improve overall attainment.

Recommendations for Further Development

- The board should ensure that a current whole-school plan is in place and structures should be created to support school self-evaluation and whole-school planning.
- Senior management needs to engage in constructive dialogue and communicate its vision more effectively in order to ensure the full co-operation of staff.
- Subject department planning should target improved attainment, good practice in planning for learning should be shared and there should be a specific focus on written teacher feedback in copybooks to direct the learning of all students.

- Learning support should be developed in a number of areas.

1. QUALITY OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP

1.1 School ownership and management

The board of management is appropriately constituted and is supported by the trustees. It is very committed to the school.

The board communicates with parents and staff through oral reports. It is suggested that the reports be written to ensure consistency. The board should also consider reporting annually to stakeholders on the achievement of its objectives. This could be easily achieved through the school website. To improve communication further, the board could also arrange to meet staff members and representatives of the student council from time to time so that they can report on specific projects undertaken.

Mandatory policies have been adopted and it is commendable that key policies are published on the school website. Policies are reviewed and updated as needed and the board aims to address policy development and review in a systematic manner.

Planning priorities are appropriate and relevant. However, it is not clear to what extent these have emanated from a formal consultative process with stakeholders. A current school plan should be put in place that has been developed collaboratively with all the school partners. A survey carried out as part of the evaluation indicates support for more parental and student involvement in the working of the school.

There is scope for the board of management to be more proactive in ensuring that its decisions are primarily influenced by concern for the quality of the student learning experience.

There is good communication between the board of management and principal. Senior management roles and responsibilities are understood and decision-making processes are open. The principal and deputy work very well as a team, have well-defined duties and meet daily.

The school has recently established a democratically elected student council and meetings are now regular. A special duties post has been assigned to the role of liaison teacher. This represents the school's commitment to the student voice within the school.

Leadership roles are distributed to middle management. Post holders interviewed felt empowered and affirmed. Good work is being done by many staff members in various areas of student leadership and management. The schedule of posts is clearly described. However, there is a notable imbalance in the range of duties assigned to posts and this needs to be addressed. A full review should take place with the school's needs being the central consideration. It is desirable that all post-holders should report annually on their work to senior management.

It is positive that non-post holders who expressed an interest in leading projects are facilitated and encouraged. This is good practice since it assists teachers in their professional development. The role of tutor is voluntary and those involved are highly commended for their very good work.

Many initiatives conceived and implemented by senior management are for the good of the school. However, there appears to be a breakdown in communication between senior management and some staff members so that the full co-operation of all staff is not assured.

It is recommended that senior management examine how it might engage in constructive dialogue with staff in order to more effectively communicate a vision for school improvement so that all staff members are united for a common purpose.

Commendably, the school's information management system allows parents to access their children's attendance and attainment records on line. Written reports are sent home and many parents surveyed expressed satisfaction at the quality of information imparted. The school surveyed first-year parents to establish how students were coping with the transfer to post primary. Other modes of communication include the school website, face-to-face meetings, open nights and the school newsletter. One of the most effective media is the school journal which has to be signed by parents and is closely monitored by tutors and year heads.

The Parents' Association (PA) meets regularly. It has been consulted in regard to relevant policies such as the code of behaviour. The principal attends meetings and there is a good line of communication with the school. The PA should consider additional ways in which to reach a wider cohort of parents.

1.2 Effectiveness of leadership for learning

Senior management is deeply committed to school improvement and is attempting to build capacity in the staff. The team has demonstrated leadership for learning and teaching in a number of ways. Staff has been consulted, there is a staff handbook and a staff induction programme. Continuing professional development (CPD) events in areas such as assessment for learning (AfL) and information and communication technology (ICT) have been organised.

There are a number of effective school structures, for example, the year head and tutor system, the care structure and the discipline committee. These facilitate collaborative practices. It is positive that senior management meets year heads on a weekly basis.

Currently, there is no structure to support the development of whole-school planning and school self-evaluation (SSE). A planning group with effective leadership should be established as soon as possible.

Planning activity in the area of literacy is underway and two staff working groups are involved. The school should now consider focusing on numeracy in the next phase of school self-evaluation and planning for improvement.

Subject departments lack leadership in most cases. In order to drive improvement, staff members in each department need to undertake leadership roles. The role of co-ordinator, reconceptualised as a leader of learning, could be undertaken on a rotating basis. The number of formal subject department meetings varies, some being formal, others being informal. Senior management should ensure that there is adequate time for subject planning.

Whole-school guidance is provided in a number of ways but there are areas for development recognised by the school which it hopes to address.

The learning support co-ordinator liaises with staff as necessary. Individual education plans have been developed for some students. There are weaknesses in the planning and delivery of learning support. The plan needs development. Student progress is not tracked and there is no retesting. The model of support could be reviewed to include team teaching. It is recommended that all aspects of learning support be examined in order to deliver an effective programme of learning for all students.

A flexible approach designed to meet individual needs operates in *An Cuan*. Students are integrated into mainstream classes as appropriate. Weekly meetings for planning and monitoring take place.

The school provides a broad and balanced curriculum that is inclusive. A very good range of optional subjects is provided. Current programmes available are: the Junior Certificate, Leaving Certificate, Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP), and, in fifth year only, the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA). This year, the school did not provide the Transition Year (TY) programme. However, it hopes to be able to offer it in the future.

Information on subject choices is provided in a variety of ways. Some students are insufficiently clear about the consequences of subject choices on future career paths. In the next academic year, all first-year students will sample optional subjects and this strategy might go some way to address the issue in the junior cycle.

In a significant number of curricular areas, students are studying subjects ab initio in the senior cycle. It is commendable that the school offers such opportunities. However, care should be taken that they are not disadvantaged in terms of attainment potential as a consequence. The school should gather evidence in relation to this practice to establish frequency, reasons, and impact of such changes on student attainment and progression to third level.

Measures are in place to motivate student effort and improve attainment and this is commendable. Some of these measures include awards and after-school study. Student progress and attendance are tracked. There is regular assessment and reports are sent home. Notwithstanding efforts made at whole-school level, uptake of higher-level and attainment are below what might be expected in many subjects. A multi-faceted approach is needed to address this.

In most cases, instructional hours are in line with Department of Education and Skills guidelines. However, in the case of a small minority who are non-LCVP students, study periods, in some cases four a week, represent a considerable erosion of provision and this needs to be addressed to ensure equality of learning opportunity for all students.

The admissions policy was reviewed in 2012 and is clear and explicit. In the context of recent changes in programme provision, it is suggested that some amendments be made to indicate that the TY and LCA programmes may not be provided in each year.

The school has made considerable efforts to improve attendance and has put in place a number of strategies. It is essential to maintain this effort as a significant rate of absenteeism was noted in some lessons during the evaluation.

The code of discipline was recently reviewed. The code of behaviour is being examined in tandem. Good consultation was noted in relation to review processes. The ladder of referral is clear and sanctions include detention and report cards. Suspension rates have decreased and this represents very good work.

Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) is provided in the junior cycle in line with guidelines. In the senior cycle, an innovative programme of life skills is taught on a modular basis to include relationships and sexuality education (RSE), mental health, road safety and guidance. Ideally, RSE should be taught over two years rather than one and details of guest speakers need to be documented. The school is involved in the Jigsaw programme designed to promote positive mental health. Students, parents and staff sit on the school's Adolescent Health Team. It is very commendable that some of these areas link with the SPHE programme.

In addition to the student council, other opportunities are afforded to students to experience leadership, for example, the prefect system, mentoring roles and coaching in sport. This represents good practice.

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*.

A book rental scheme is available to all students and this is commendable. A good range of extra-curricular and co-curricular activities is provided.

1.3 Management of facilities

Funded through public-private partnership arrangements, the school is new and is very well equipped. Accommodation is maintained to a high standard. Specialist rooms are used for their purpose. The school has very good sports facilities. Information and communication technology (ICT) infrastructure is currently good and it is a school planning priority.

A commercial company manages areas around maintenance, cleaning, and health and safety, including the updating of the health and safety statement. With regard to the area of risk assessment, there are some issues around communication. The board of management should assure itself that the health and safety risk assessment process takes full account of the professional teachers' concerns in the practical subjects. It is suggested that direct consultation take place between all relevant stakeholders.

The school library is not optimally contributing to whole-school learning and this is regrettable. The school is committed to improving the facility.

It is commendable that the school has a canteen. Through the student council, students could be encouraged to engage constructively in review of provision.

The principal is the health and safety officer. Fire drills are carried out as appropriate.

2. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

2.1 The quality of learning and teaching

Improving attainment is one of the school's developmental priorities. Although some good work has been done to systematise planning, there is a need to focus on planning for learning, literacy and numeracy with the objective of improving attainment. In most cases there is no documented linkage between learning, methods, and assessment despite recommendations from previous reports.

Analysis of examination results, in most cases carried out by senior management, does not appear to have impacted on planning for teaching and learning. Evidence-based targets to improve attainment should be documented, appropriate strategies developed to deliver targets and ongoing monitoring take place to evaluate progress.

The quality of teaching overall was good or very good with exemplary practice observed in a few cases. The quality of learning was good in the majority of lessons but there was scope for improvement in a significant minority.

Lesson planning was good in most cases. Resources were varied and well prepared. While ICT was used in most lessons, in only a small number was effective use made of it to

improve learning. Well chosen resources such as “show boards” and “traffic light” cards were used to assess learning. A good handout was designed to build on prior learning and stimulated higher-order thinking.

Pace and structure were generally appropriate. A weakness in a small number was the failure to take a sufficiently stepped approach in the development of concepts. Lesson planning needs review in such cases.

Learning outcomes were clearly communicated to students in the vast majority of cases. This represents very positive engagement with recommendations of a number of previous inspection reports and with CPD. In many cases, learning outcomes were well considered, achievable and phrased to focus on learning. Good practice was noted in particular where the outcomes were clear, specific and achievable within the lesson period. In a small minority of lessons, teachers did not check that learning had been achieved by the end of the lesson. Excellent practice was observed in one senior cycle lesson where the teacher had devised a document aimed at a thorough check of learning achieved.

In the best lessons, activities were adapted to the specific cohort and were sufficiently challenging. Methods were varied in these cases, and efforts were made to actively engage students, for example through collaborative learning in pairs and groups. In a very good junior cycle lesson, students demonstrated their knowledge and skills to the class, using ICT. However, there is a need to share good practice.

Questioning technique was good overall with a fair balance between global and targeted questions and, commendably, good use of higher-order questioning in many lessons. Students had opportunities to express views through questioning in the best lessons and this is commended.

Differentiation was good in a small number of lessons but overall, this is an area for development given the considerable range of ability in the school. All learners should be challenged to achieve to their full potential and high expectations need to be set for all students.

There was a focus on literacy in many lessons. A number of classrooms visited had displays of subject keywords. In two cases, good use was made of words displayed. In the best lessons, there was good reinforcement of content language, facilitating development of oral communication skills. In one lesson, oracy received specific attention for example, encouraging a personal response to a text encountered. In all lessons, students should be afforded opportunities to develop their oral communication skills and should be required to use subject language.

While there was clear evidence of assessment for learning techniques, assessment of written work was not satisfactory in many instances. Formative written teacher feedback should direct learning when correcting homework assignments.

3. IMPLEMENTATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS FROM PREVIOUS EVALUATIONS

3.1 *Management*

Six published subject inspection reports were reviewed as part of the evaluation. Most recommendations related to teaching and learning. The board expressed a good level of engagement in its responses. Attainment shows slight signs of improvement but there is no notable increase in uptake of higher level. There are still very few teachers involved in teaching higher-level Maths. Management’s requests for subject co-ordination have not

been met with a positive response. More subject department meetings should be facilitated to progress planning.

3.2 Learning and teaching

Significant progress has been made in relation to communicating learning outcomes in lessons. In some lessons, students are encouraged to express a personal response. The quality of questioning has improved.

In a minority of cases, progress has been made in relation to planning recommendations and these subject areas are commended. In a few instances, detailed schemes of work were developed. Records of meetings do not indicate discussion of teaching and learning strategies. Recommendations around subject co-ordination were not implemented. Commendably, in LCA planning, some efforts were made to include the voice of parents.

Regarding homework and assessment of written work, while homework is regularly set in subjects, there was very little evidence of formative feedback to direct learning.

It is recommended that the board should consider requesting subject departments to draw up action plans for improvement as a positive response to inspection reports.

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

There is very limited engagement in SSE. The school's capacity for improvement has been demonstrated through policy development processes, some effective structures, the demonstrable success of CPD activity in assessment for learning and the work of the literacy teams. Success in improving attendance and reducing suspensions is attributable to whole-school effort. Both the board and senior management need to communicate a vision for change more effectively and take steps to ensure that all staff members recognise their roles in school improvement in the interests of student learning and progress.

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 Athboy Community School welcomes the findings of the recent WSE-MLL Report which recognises the on-going work by the Board and senior management in the areas of policy development, quality improvement, building capacity of staff, implementing student support structures and providing a balanced curriculum. The Report has also provided helpful recommendations with regard to areas for further improvement in future work.

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 of Management will promote the development of whole-school planning structures and activities to include school self-evaluation.

Senior management will endeavour to ensure the involvement and co-operation of all staff in school improvement work for the benefit of students.

Subject departments will be encouraged to engage on improved student attainment, sharing of practice and provision of written feedback to direct student learning.

The area of learning support will be a particular focus for self-evaluation and school improvement activities.