

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

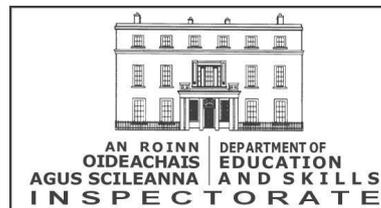
Department of Education and Skills

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

REPORT

**Saint Mary's Secondary School
Macroom, County Cork
Roll number: 62320R**

Date of inspection: 6 April 2011



Whole-School Evaluation Management, Leadership and Learning

A whole-school evaluation of management, leadership and learning (WSE-MLL) was undertaken in April, 2011 in St Mary's Secondary School, Macroom. 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, 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 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

St Mary's Secondary School is a Catholic, girls' school under the trusteeship of CEIST. It is one of three schools in Macroom serving a largely rural community. Recent changes in senior management have ended a long period of uncertainty regarding the permanency of the posts of principal, deputy principal and associated posts at middle-management level that had been filled in an acting capacity. The board of management has also undergone change with the appointment of a new board in the autumn of 2010, at the end of the term of office of the previous incumbents. A new building was erected and used for the first time in 2007 and, as a temporary measure, some use is still made of the older buildings, now formally part of the adjacent convent.

1. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

1.1 Key Findings

- The board of management supports the work of staff and senior management and is well informed on all matters relating to the school's educational provision.
- The senior-management team is proactive and shares complementary talents.
- The priorities for the development of the school have been identified.
- School staff is loyal and demonstrates the potential to contribute to ongoing whole-school improvement.
- Students are well disposed to the school, are well behaved and have a very high rate of attendance.
- The facilities and infrastructure are generally very good and are well maintained.
- The teaching and learning observed was, in the main, very good.
- Students achieve well in certificate examinations, especially in the middle range of grades.
- The recommendations of previous evaluations have been implemented, where feasible.

1.2 Recommendations for Further Development

- The calendar of school activities and closures should be in keeping with Circular M29/95 and Circular 0025/2011.

- Provision should be made to ensure the timetabling of Physical Education (PE) for all students and to ensure the timetabling of Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) for all junior-cycle students.
- The responsibilities assumed by holders of posts of responsibility should be examined annually in light of the needs of the school.
- The tasks necessary for the effective functioning of the school should be reviewed.
- The good practice observed in teaching and evidence gathered in the course of reviews and evaluations should be interrogated and used to establish baseline data and indicators on which to base plans.

2. QUALITY OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP

2.1 School ownership and management – the Board of Management

Composition, functioning and fulfilment of statutory obligations

The board of management is properly constituted. Continuity has been achieved by the reappointment of some members of the previous board, by a common commitment to the school's firmly established mission and ethos, and by the inclusion of new members with considerable experience of education in Ireland. This is good practice. The board has engaged appropriately and effectively with its managerial functions, including that of monitoring the school's finances, establishing development priorities and implementing the code of behaviour and admissions policy. A significant feature of the board's procedures is the formation of an agreed statement at the conclusion of meetings for communication by members to their nominating bodies. This is a commendable approach.

Information for parents is accessible and clearly presented. It should be more clearly stated in the school literature that the subscription requested of them in the course of registering students is voluntary and is not a school entrance fee.

The school's priorities for development

In consultation with senior management, the board has identified four major priorities: Firstly, to allow time for the establishment of professional relationships in management and for the consolidation of the management strengths in the context of those relationships; Secondly, the further integration of information and communication technology (ICT) into teaching and learning; and, thirdly, the promotion of the school in the community. A long-standing objective of the board to improve or replace the PE hall has also been prioritised.

2.2 Effectiveness of leadership for learning

Leadership of staff

The school has adapted well to the changes at board and at senior-management levels. A good working relationship has been established by the senior-management team of principal and deputy principal. Both have undergone training for senior managers since their appointment in 2010. Their complementary talents have been used effectively in the elucidation and implementation of clear developmental strategies. These include a focus on teaching practice, exemplified by engagement with the Learning School project, and a clear commitment to review and self-evaluation, exemplified by a number of questionnaire surveys undertaken among parents, staff and students. These are valuable data on which to base developmental plans. The data should be used in conjunction with other information, such as the questionnaire data gathered in the course of this WSE-MLL, as baseline data in the formation of success indicators for prioritised plans and for addressing staffing and timetabling issues as they emerge.

Relationships among staff were observed to be good. Effective channels of formal and informal communication have been established that include weekly meetings of holders of middle-management posts and senior management, and meetings of members of the student-support team and senior management. This promotes distributed leadership. Staff meetings are held regularly and are minuted. A staff handbook has been developed, which is circulated early in the school year to all staff and to new staff members. A document circulated to staff, entitled *Channels of communication*, is indicative of the high value placed on good communication and of good management practice.

School staff is loyal to the school and demonstrates the potential to contribute to ongoing whole-school improvement. Staff members have the competence and experience to develop their roles, particularly in the middle management of the school. The changes already mentioned demand a review and prioritisation of the tasks and duties necessary for the optimal functioning of the school. The responsibilities assumed by holders of posts of responsibility should be reviewed annually in light of the needs of the school and in order that interested staff may have opportunities to gain middle-management experience and leadership opportunities. This should also enable senior management to divest some middle management roles assumed as a temporary expedient in the light of the recent changes.

The establishment of subject departments has been encouraged and each department has devised a subject plan. The minutes of departmental meetings have been included in some subject-department plans. It is clear that matters discussed at staff meetings have been discussed, in turn, at subject-department level with the encouragement of senior management. These include discussion of the results of certificate examinations, of the school's standing in the community and of continuing professional development (CPD).

There is scope for more widespread capacity building through subject-department planning. Good practice seen in some plans should be adopted more formally across all subject departments. These include whole-school issues such as literacy, numeracy and the additional needs of students, such as those with exceptional ability and those for whom English is a second language. Similarly, the practice of including short-term and longer-term plans based on subject-department reviews and self-evaluation evident in some subject plans should be extended to all subject departments. It is further suggested that, because of the implications of some school policies for subject department plans, plans should be cross-referenced with school policies and with the plans of other departments, where relevant.

Leadership of students

The attendance rate of students is remarkably high and the rate of absences of greater than twenty days is remarkably low. Questionnaire data obtained from students show that eighty percent of students admit to being proud to be in St Mary's Secondary School. Students regard the comprehensive code of behaviour and its associated policies to be fair. The success of staff and management in this regard is reflected in the generally positive view of students about the school, about teachers and about their peers, and in the responsible behaviour of students observed in the course of this evaluation. Senior cycle students, for example, support their younger peers through mentoring and peer tuition under the direction of staff members.

In addition to regular meetings of the student council and subsequent meetings with senior management, the opinions of students have been polled on a number of occasions in the recent past with a view to the inclusion of the voice of students, and of parents, in the planning process. This is very good practice. The results of such self-evaluation and reviews should be used to establish baseline data and indicators on which to base plans.

To augment the academic curriculum, students participate in a diverse range of extracurricular and co-curricular activities that display involvement not only in sporting, leisure and cultural activities, but also in social action through, for example, Young Social Innovators projects, currently on the theme of mental health, and in an anti-bullying week organised in the school. The school's annual musical production is a long-standing tradition in Macroom and exemplifies the collaboration of staff, students and community in its planning and execution and promotes co-operative learning. Activities involving students as individuals and in small groups are ongoing and include activities observed at lunchtime and during breaks, such as playing games, the playing of musical instruments and the use of ICT.

The calendar of school activities and closures shows that, due to the arrangement of planning meetings at the outset of the school year, the tuition time available to students is not in keeping with Circular M29/95 and Circular 0025/2011. This should be rectified.

A wide range of subjects is available to students in a timetable that is generally well balanced. However, the timetabling of PE has been complicated by the location of the facilities at a distance from the school. In devising the timetable, senior management should ensure access to PE for all students. SPHE is not on the timetable of third-year students. Senior management should ensure that the subject is available to all junior cycle students in accordance with Department circulars. The provision of SPHE to Transition Year (TY) students is noted to be good practice and is in keeping with the proposed development at national level of a senior cycle syllabus for the subject.

The parents' association is active and well informed. A questionnaire returned by parents in the course of this evaluation shows a high regard for the school and, in the main, for its processes. The data provided by the questionnaire should be considered in the context of planning and to inform dialogue between the parents' association and the school. It is suggested that appropriate wording for the request for financial support seen in a letter from the school to parents might be considered in collaboration with the parents' association.

Students are very well supported informally by all staff and formally by the staff involved in catering for their additional educational needs, by the guidance department and by the chaplaincy, including the Religious Education department. Structured meetings of staff are held weekly at which the immediate needs of students are discussed and actions planned in their support. Communication is facilitated by the attendance of senior management at these meetings and by the year head structure through which concerns about individual students are shared and action plans formed. Links with external agencies ensure their inclusion in these plans, as appropriate. These initiatives demonstrate the value placed by the school on support for students as a core element of effective learning and teaching.

2.3 Management of facilities

The new school building is well maintained, clean and tidy. The facilities and infrastructure are generally very good and are maintained and supported by active non-teaching staff. Good use is made of the available space. The development of teacher-based classrooms has enabled a customised approach to their decoration with subject specific and visually pleasing displays of materials including the work of students. Specialist rooms are well equipped and the school's health and safety policy includes an ongoing system of risk assessment that ensures conformity to required safety standards. The board has identified as a priority, and is active in its engagement with plans for the development of PE facilities. Considerable progress has been made in relation to the integration of the ICT infrastructure, facilitated by the interest of staff and recent Department funding.

3. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

3.1 The quality of learning and teaching

The teaching and learning in the lessons observed was, in the main, very good and students achieve well in certificate examinations, especially in the middle range of results. Lessons were well prepared and planned. A variety of teaching methods and activities was observed and teachers used personal styles and approaches to teaching to good effect. The relationship between students and teachers was good. It was clear that teachers were sensitive to the needs and abilities of students. In most instances, questions were appropriate to students' abilities and levels. Students' written work was of a high standard and, although there was clear evidence of teachers' monitoring of the work, some scope exists for more regular formative comment by teachers in written homework. It is suggested that this might be addressed in future reviews of the school's policies on homework and assessment.

Good practice observed in lessons included the use of local knowledge and personal experience as aids to understanding, where appropriate. The use of ICT in some lessons showed clear evidence of the capacity of staff to exploit its potential to enhance lesson content and to make good use of the system as it develops in the school. Similarly, teachers showed a capacity to use methods that deepened the involvement of students in their own learning, either through co-operation with other students in the course of lessons or in discussion with teachers regarding the content of lessons. Some lessons were initiated with a statement of the desired learning outcomes that were introduced either verbally or in written form using a data projector or whiteboard. Some lessons concluded after a brief statement of what had been learned. Bright, well-decorated classrooms, often decorated with samples of students' work, contributed to a conducive learning environment.

Examples of very good teaching were observed in the course of this evaluation. The subject-department plans examined showed some evidence of effective collaborative planning among teachers. This was observed particularly in plans that demonstrated an emphasis on self-evaluation and review. All teaching practice should be interrogated with a view to self-evaluation and sharing of good practice. Plans at all levels should incorporate these processes and their outcomes.

In some cases, plans referred to the mission and aims of the school, to initiatives such as Project Maths, and to communication with parents. Plans also included sections devoted to procedures and practices for including students with additional educational needs and notes on issues such as cultural diversity. Such good practice should be extended to all subject-department plans. References were also made to co-operative learning, to cross-curricular links and collaboration and to performance targets, particularly in the context of certificate examination results. This is very good practice, adding immediacy to plans that are manageable and time-limited and providing clear links to whole-school processes and plans.

4. IMPLEMENTATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS FROM PREVIOUS EVALUATIONS

4.1 Management

The current investment by management in the development of the school's ICT system has already enabled greater use of technology, such as data projectors and multimedia presentations in the course of lessons as recommended in previous evaluations. The development of PE facilities is a high priority of the board of management and, while some

of the recommendations of a PE evaluation have been implemented, interim arrangements are in place, such as the continued use of older facilities, until satisfactory accommodation is available. Management should continue to work towards providing all students with two hours of PE per week, in accordance with Department of Education and Skills recommendations.

4.2 Learning and Teaching

The establishment of the school in its new buildings and of teacher-based classrooms has enabled the implementation of most of the recommendations of previous evaluations, especially where recommendations related to timetabling of subjects, and to the display of visual supports for learning.

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

The school's senior-management team is well positioned to lead the school. The main physical infrastructure is of a high standard. Engagement with the School Development Planning Initiative (SDPI) and with previous initiatives by the Mercy Congregation in the clarification of values and mission has enabled the formation of the requisite policies and plans in keeping with the school's ethos. Considerable progress has been made in self-evaluation and, particularly, with the inclusion of students and parents in the process. Of the parents who responded to a questionnaire associated with this evaluation, ninety percent agreed that the school is well run. Subject departments have been formed and progress has been made in subject-department planning. Staff members display expertise in their professional teaching practice and in school management and have engaged with the Learning School project. The school is well placed to develop a planning focus on improvement through self-evaluation in teaching and learning.

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. Mary's Secondary school would like to thank the Inspectors who carried out the MLL for their professionalism, and the courteous manner in which they carried out the inspection.

The Board welcomes this very positive report which affirms the dedication, hard work and commitment of all members of the school community. The inspection was overall a positive and affirming experience, and the Board are pleased that the following were acknowledged in the report by the inspectors:

- The school has a clear commitment to on-going review and self evaluation.
- There is a wide range of subjects available to students.
- The students are well disposed to the school, are well behaved and have very high attendance rates.
- High student achievement in certificate examinations.
- There is a commitment to examining and improving teaching and learning practice, and to the further integration of ICT into teaching and learning. These remain priorities for the Board and staff into the future.
- There are good working relationships and effective channels of communication among staff.
- The accepted good practice in the school of including the voice of students and parents in the planning process.
- The pastoral care and support that students received in the school and the acknowledgement of the wide range of extra-curricular and co-curricular available.

All subject departments maintain minutes of departmental meetings. Some of these are stored separately to the subject plan.

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 following steps have been or are been taken as a result of the recommendations made by the inspectors.

- Students will be in attendance in school for the required 167 days this year. Closures for school planning are now in line with circulars M29/95 and 0025/2011 and this will remain in place. The Board is looking at ways of addressing the shortfall of 15 minutes tuition time.
- The provision of Social Personal and Health Education in 3rd year has now been implemented. The school was commended for its provision of SPHE in 4th year highlighting the importance placed on the subject by the school.
- The Provision of Physical Education to those senior students following the LCVP programme remains a difficulty. However the school encourages all students to participate in extra-curricular physical activity.
- In light of the positive statements made elsewhere, the Board is unclear about the statement: "The tasks necessary for the effective functioning of the school should be reviewed". However, Posts of Responsibility are currently being reviewed and will be adjusted to reflect the current needs of the school. Difficulties have arisen however due to the moratorium placed on filling vacant Posts.
- It is now clearly stated in school literature to parents that it is a voluntary contribution requested from them and not a school entrance fee. These

contributions are returned to parents if the student does not enrol or leaves the school early in the year.

- Capacity building through subject-department planning will continue to be developed within the limit of present resources.
- The school community will use the recommendations outlined in the report to further enhance the quality of service delivered to students.