

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

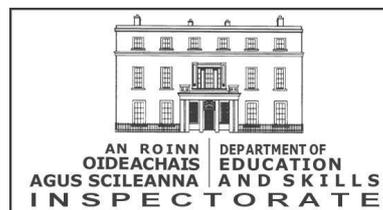
Department of Education and Skills

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

REPORT

**Scoil Dara
Kilcock, Co. Kildare
Roll number: 61691B**

Date of inspection: 25 April 2012



Whole-School Evaluation Management, Leadership and Learning

A whole-school evaluation of management, leadership and learning (WSE-MLL) was undertaken in April 2012 in Scoil Dara. 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 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

Scoil Dara is a voluntary secondary school. It is the only post-primary school in the town of Kilcock. The school was established in 1991 following the amalgamation of two schools, the Presentation girls' and the Christian Brothers boys' secondary schools in the town. It has an inclusive ethos and operates under the trusteeship of CEIST (Catholic Education, an Irish Schools Trust). At the time of the evaluation there were 826 students enrolled. It has strong links to the local community and students come from a diverse range of backgrounds, both urban and rural.

1. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

1.1 Key Findings

- The school is well managed by an efficient board of management.
- The principal has a wealth of educational experience and has given many years of dedicated service to the school.
- The effective senior management team works skilfully and diligently together and provides clear educational leadership to the school community.
- The senior management team is well supported by a flexible and dedicated middle management team.
- A proactive and committed parents association provides significant support to the school.
- A comprehensive and inclusive timetable supports teaching and learning across the range of student abilities.
- Communication systems in the school are excellent and reflect the collaborative and consultative approach adopted by school management.
- Student care and student support is of a very high quality.
- The overall quality of teaching and learning observed was very good.
- The school has a very good capacity for self evaluation and review.

1.2 Recommendations for Further Development

- A three year whole-school action plan should be developed with details of specific targets, proposed interventions and review dates.
- A root-and-branch review of the Transition Year (TY) programme should be carried out.
- All subject departments should include action planning for improvement in their subject planning documentation.

- The code of behaviour should be further reviewed in consultation with the student body.
- Issues relating to student attendance and punctuality should be addressed.
- *Assessment for Learning* (AfL) and keyword approaches should be further developed.

2. QUALITY OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP

2.1 School ownership and management – the Board of Management

Composition, functioning and fulfilment of statutory obligations

A new board of management is in place since October 2011. Board members are deeply committed to and involved in the school. The board is properly constituted and meets regularly. All members of the board have had training in relation to their roles and responsibilities. The expertise of board members greatly enhances the board's capacity to lead and manage the school effectively.

The board is very supportive of the principal and is kept well informed of issues in the school by high quality principal's reports. It has progressed a wide range of policies. These are dated and regularly reviewed. High quality communication between the board, staff, students and parents was evident. Agreed reports are prepared for staff and parents after each board meeting. It is suggested that members of the school community, for example staff members working on school policies or members of the student council should be asked, from time to time, to address the board.

The board is very supportive of staff continuing professional development (CPD) and has facilitated a wide range of in-service courses and supports for staff. The chairperson of the board has met with subject departments following subject inspections. The board should continue to ensure that recommendations in reports have been implemented. Where deficits are identified that are impacting seriously on student learning, the principal, under the direction of the board of management, should follow agreed procedures and processes to redress these deficits.

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*.

The board of management has the support of a proactive parents association. The parents association has contributed in a significant way to the development of the school. For example, the parents association, in cooperation with the school, is working on a plan to replace hard-copy textbooks with e-books.

The school's priorities for development

A number of priorities for development have been identified including policy development, the expansion of facilities, staff development, and the broadening of the curriculum to include an additional modern European language. Very good consultation with staff and parents in regard to the selection and development of these priorities is noted and commended. Good leadership by the board was evident, for example, the board, in consultation with staff, has progressed a staff-development policy document.

It is clear from the minutes of board meetings and interviews undertaken that the board has engaged in a very thoughtful and considered way with developmental school planning. It is recommended that this be formalised and that a three-year action plan be developed with details of specific targets, proposed interventions and review dates. By implementing this form of planning, a level of consistency will be maintained that will allow the board to keep track of existing priorities, and after its cycle, to pass on a legacy document outlining its achievements, current projects and the areas that require further development.

2.2 Effectiveness of leadership for learning

Leadership of staff

The principal brings a wealth of educational experience to his role and has given years of dedicated service to the school. His style of leadership is consultative, compassionate and respectful. The open-door policy of the principal was commented on many times during the evaluation. The principal and deputy principal form an effective senior management team and work skilfully and diligently together to provide clear educational leadership to the school community. They are supportive of one another and their teachers, have had good training for the role, share a common vision for the school and have engaged fruitfully in forward planning and review. They prepare each year a comprehensive inclusive timetable and ensure that communication strategies in the school are of a very high standard. For example, a staff newsletter is issued each day and members of the senior management team meet regularly with a range of individuals and groups across the school community. The commitment of the senior management team to the school and the students in their care was evident to the evaluation team. Many parents, students and teachers interviewed expressed their appreciation of the support they receive from the principal and deputy principal.

Leadership is devolved to staff through the posts-of-responsibility structure and through a number of committees. Post-holders carry out their duties effectively. It is very positive that these duties are outlined in the comprehensive staff handbook. Assistant principal post-holders meet with members of the senior management team once a week. Interviews conducted and minutes of meetings reviewed indicate that they form a vital middle-management layer in the school. Special duties post-holders also make an important contribution to the running of the school.

The number of posts has been reduced due to retirements and other factors. Some of these are in the process of being filled. A committee was set up to review the schedule of posts. This is another indicator of the consultative and collaborative management structures in the school. The school development planning post is at present vacant. This is a pivotal role and should be re-accommodated in the revised post structure, when resources permit. The post-holder should co-ordinate planning for school policies and work with the senior management team and school planning teams in preparing, overseeing and reviewing the school plan.

A meeting between the principal and each post-holder takes place at least once a year. Post-holders prepare a short report on achievements, challenges and planning for the role. This is very good practice. It is suggested that this report be made available to the board of management.

Members of staff interviewed indicated that the induction of new teachers carried out by the principal and deputy principal is very good. Teachers are facilitated in their attendance at CPD. The comprehensive staff handbook contains a good range of helpful information and

advice for staff. It is suggested that it be reviewed to include the current Child Protection Guidelines.

Meetings of subject departments take place regularly. A review of subject department folders showed evidence of good subject department planning overall. Common schemes of work and common assessment are in place in most departments. Some departments analyse examination results. Evidence of reflection and forward planning in relation to examination results, or indeed planning for improvement in general, was noted in a small number of subject planning folders. It is recommended that all subject departments draft a short action plan for improvement each year. This should be available to the principal and board of management.

An optional TY programme has been available for a number of years. The school has identified this programme for review and some actions have been taken to progress this review, including a teacher survey. Parents, staff and students interviewed expressed dissatisfaction with some aspects of the programme. Examination of the TY folder indicates that planning for most subjects and modules is heavily content-based. At present, students cannot exercise choice in any modules undertaken. Assessment procedures were unclear in some areas. Work experience accounts for a considerable portion of the school year although this is being cut back in the next school year. It is recommended that a root-and-branch review of the programme is undertaken and that all relevant subject departments are involved in conducting this review. Teachers should consult with the relevant documentation at national level about the aims and purposes of TY when reviewing this programme.

Teachers across the school, within and outside the post structure, contribute very effectively to the school through their involvement in co-curricular and extracurricular activities such as the school choir and school teams and their membership of school committees. Students and parents interviewed were very appreciative of the dedication and commitment of teachers.

Leadership of students

Care of students and student learning is at the heart of the school. Transitions from the local primary schools are well managed in a systematic and efficient way. For example, students are invited to a summer camp prior to entry. Almost all parents surveyed indicated that the school made their child welcome when starting in the school.

Student and parent interviews and questionnaires indicate that there is a very good level of care in the school. The role of the year head came in for particular mention in this regard. Good procedures to address bullying are in place. A post-holder has responsibility for this area. A tutor has responsibility for each class group. Year head and tutor meetings should take place frequently to ensure consistency of approach across year groups.

There is a good focus on student learning and the school has a proud academic tradition. Student attainment in certificate examinations is very good in most subject areas. An advisory board of studies is in place and year heads closely monitor the academic performance of students. This level of student support is commendable.

There are very good opportunities for student leadership in place such as the prefect system, the student council and the *Meitheal* group who support first year students. A student council is representative of the student body. It meets regularly and actively engages with school issues. A report from the student council is regularly presented to board of management meetings. This is very good practice.

Student retention rates are very good. An examination of the attendance statistics presented by the school to the National Education Welfare Board (NEWB) indicated a high level of student absenteeism in the previous school year. The school reported that this was due, in part, to students presenting late being marked absent for the day. Every effort should be made to ensure that the statistics presented to the NEWB are accurate. Systems, including cross checks, should be put in place to redress this matter and issues relating to student punctuality and student attendance should be addressed.

The code of behaviour is a consultative document, in keeping with the school's mission statement and CEIST values and with clear details evident on how the school responds to inappropriate behaviour. Students interviewed were aware of sanctions but less aware of the award systems in the school. Student behaviour observed was generally good during the evaluation but meeting records indicate that at times the behaviour of some students gives cause for concern. This evidence is supported by student and parent questionnaires. It is positive that the school has engaged with the National Behaviour Support Service (NBSS) and has an NBSS strategy committee in place. The school has been granted an additional eleven NBSS hours next year for a Positive Behaviour Liaison Teacher. Management and staff should plan carefully for the use of these hours. It is suggested that the code of behaviour be reviewed, in consultation with the student body, to place more of an emphasis on positive behaviour. There should be a consistency of approach across the school in regard to the management of student behaviour. Supervision systems in the school should be tightened up, including corridor supervision during class time. Students' journals should be used to their full potential to support positive behaviour and, thereby, teaching and learning.

Students are accommodated in mixed-ability classes for the most part with setting arrangements in place for core subjects. This ensures that students have appropriate support but also open access to higher and ordinary levels. These inclusive practices are commended. Timetabling for individual subjects is very satisfactory with additional support available for certificate examination classes. Students have good access to a range of optional subjects and to information and communication technology (ICT).

Members of the SEN team are reflective, flexible and collaborative, as evidenced by their willingness to adopt new initiatives and the high-quality planning documentation evident in the department folder. Student-support hours are well used. It is commendable that students who are not studying Irish to Leaving Certificate level are offered an additional subject. A small number of individual education plans (IEPs) has been prepared but this should be progressed. Management should consider reintroducing team teaching as an additional method of support as this offers additional flexibility to members of the SEN team as well as support to a wider range of students.

Students and parent interviews and questionnaires indicate that guidance support in the school is very good. All students have appropriate access to guidance information and good communication with students' homes was evident. A whole-school guidance plan is being prepared at present. Each first-year and second-year class group is divided for Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) between the SPHE teacher and one of the guidance counsellors. This, while being resource-intensive, does provide students with additional guidance support. It is important, however, that frequent meetings of the SPHE team take place and that both the guidance and SPHE teams work closely together to ensure the full delivery of the SPHE programme. Appropriate time should also be set aside to facilitate student access to individual counselling, where necessary.

The school provides a good range of programmes to meet the needs of students, including TY, Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) and the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme

(LCVP). Very good planning for LCA and LCVP was evident. As all of these programmes have a work-experience element, it is encouraging to see that the school has compiled a work-experience handbook for employers. Good preparation of students is evident prior to their going on work experience. The school should arrange onsite visits to workplaces from time to time. It is noted that work experience for LCVP students, at present, takes place over the summer months. It is recommended that it takes place over the course of the school year so that the school is in a position to offer support, if necessary, to students and employers.

2.2 Management of facilities

There are very good facilities in the school, including a gymnasium, specialist rooms and sporting facilities. The principal and board of management have been proactive in seeking improvements to these facilities. The parents association offers significant fundraising support to the school.

The ICT systems in the school are very well managed. An ICT committee is in place with a good focus on *eLearning*, maintenance and review. It is positive that the school has engaged with the Green Schools programme.

3. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

3.1 The quality of learning and teaching

Thirty-three lessons from a variety of subjects and programmes were observed during the evaluation.

The overall quality of teaching and learning was very good with a number of excellent lessons in evidence. There were also a small number of lessons in which there was significant room for improvement.

Lessons were well prepared, including preparation of resources. Innovative use of ICT was evident in some lessons observed. Teachers introduced the proposed learning outcomes in the majority of lessons and review of learning took place in some lessons.

In almost all lessons there was some level of appropriate student activity. In some lessons commendable use of co-operative learning strategies, such as pair-work and circle-time, supported student learning. Practical lessons observed were well organised. Good use of the target language was evident in language lessons.

Appropriate use of the board, ICT and teacher circulation supported differentiation in many lessons. Keyword strategies were evident in a small number of lessons only. This approach should be extended as part of the school's literacy strategy. A differentiated work sheet, where questions were graduated according to the level of difficulty, used in one lesson is commended as a very good way to include and challenge all students. In a minority of lessons the work assigned did not appropriately challenge the more able students. It is very important that the different levels in the class are kept in mind when work is being planned.

Homework is given and checked regularly across the school. The practice of giving students formative feedback on their work was evident in some classrooms. This is an essential element of *Assessment for Learning (AFL)* along with other strategies such as introducing the proposed learning outcome at the start of the lesson and finishing with a lesson review. These strategies should be extended across the subject range.

A good student work ethic was evident in most lessons. For example, students took notes in some lessons. There was a caring, supportive, orderly atmosphere evident in the vast majority of classrooms. Classrooms had good ICT facilities and adequate storage, with a print-rich environment in evidence in most cases.

4. IMPLEMENTATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS FROM PREVIOUS EVALUATIONS

4.1 Management

Most recommendations from previous inspection reports have been implemented. Timetable and structural adjustments recommended have taken place and homework policies are in place in many subjects. It is very positive that a whole-school approach has been applied to relevant recommendations such as the integration of ICT into teaching and learning and recommendations regarding subject department planning.

4.2 Learning and Teaching

The quality of teaching and learning in subjects previously evaluated was high. Teachers have attended well to recommendations made. The use of active-learning methodologies and ICT has been extended. Common testing and differentiated questioning is in use across the school. Specific improvements were noted in the use of the target language in language lessons. Areas for attention that still remain are the extension of the use of *Afl* and a broader use of keyword strategies across the range of subjects.

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

A collaborative and self-evaluative approach to school developmental planning is embedded in school culture. For example, the school has often administered questionnaires to inform planning. The consultative leadership style of the senior management team and the excellent communication structures in the school facilitate a range of reflective and proactive review processes. Priorities for development have been agreed through consultation.. All members of the school community interviewed were flexible in their approach and dedicated to the best needs of the students. In short, the school has a very good capacity for self-evaluation and review.

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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 welcomes the report and its recommendations.

A key finding in the evaluation that ‘Care of students and student learning is at the heart of the school’ is a tribute to the clear strong educational leadership provided by the school’s senior management team, the full engagement and effective discharge of duties by middle management personnel, the dedicated and committed work of teachers, and the partnership of the school with parents. The Board congratulates and thanks all staff of the school for their work and commitment which is mentioned so favourable throughout the report. The generosity of teachers in supporting extra curricular activities is appreciated by parents and the Board.

The findings that ‘a comprehensive and inclusive timetable supports teaching and learning across the range of student abilities’ and the ‘experience by parents of the warm welcome their children received when starting in the school’ shows Scoil Dara is living out in modern times the noble traditions of the two religious congregations from which the school is descended.

The school’s ‘proud academic tradition’ applies to all students and the strength of the school’s special educational needs department ensures that special needs students achieve of their best.

Despite difficult times, the Board of Management and the school’s senior management are determined that all the supports available to students, guidance and counselling, wide curriculum and broad range of programmes, opportunities for leadership and extra curricular activities, will be maintained.

In ongoing school development planning for the future, the existing consultative and collaborative management structures, dedication and commitment of teachers, the dedication of the school community to the best needs of students and our good capacity for self-evaluation and review will be the engines that will drive the search for further excellence in all aspects of the school.

Area 2: Follow-up actions planned or undertaken since the completion of the inspection activity to implement the findings and recommendations of the inspection

- (a) The recently vacant school development planning coordinator post has now been filled
- (b) A five year plan is being drawn up by the Board of Management in consultation with all staff, students and parents.
- (c) A number of other recommendations and observations from the report will be considered and implemented at subject planning and staff meetings.
- (d) Staff in-service and staff development will be guided by the report.