An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Whole-School Evaluation
Management, Leadership and Learning

REPORT

Saint Attracta’s Community School
Tubberculurry, County Sligo
Roll number: 91512Q

Date of inspection: 13 May 2015
Whole-School Evaluation
Management, Leadership and Learning

A whole-school evaluation of management, leadership and learning (WSE-MLL) was undertaken in May 2015 in St Attracta’s 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 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 Attracta’s Community School is a co-educational post-primary school, with a current enrolment of 605 students. The school resulted from the amalgamation, in 2002, of the former Marist Secondary School and Banada Abbey Secondary School. Trusteeship of the school is shared by the Marist Sisters, the Catholic Bishop of Achonry and, Mayo, Sligo and Leitrim Education and Training Board (MSLETB). Students are drawn from a wide geographical area and the school’s management and staff actively foster links with the wider school community. A new school building opened in 2002 under the Public Private Partnership (PPP) programme.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

Key Findings
- The board of management has a clear understanding of its role in the management of the school.
- The school does not currently have a parents’ association.
- The respective roles of the principal and deputy principal are very well defined and they both exercise leadership and management roles.
- The posts of responsibility were recently reviewed by staff, with the assistance of an external facilitator, and teachers’ engagement with this process was positive.
- Student care is an evident priority in the development of school systems, the allocation of posts and in interactions at school level.
- The school timetable is in compliance with the weekly required instruction time but some groups are not in receipt of the required yearly number of instruction days.
- The school is very well resourced and teachers make very good use of the range of resources, especially information and communication technology (ICT), to support school administration and teaching and learning.
- The quality of teaching and learning ranged from good to very good in almost all the lessons observed with some exceptionally good practice evident in a number of them.
- A range of teaching and learning strategies was evident though there is scope to build in more opportunities for students to learn collaboratively in lessons.
- Homework is regularly assigned, though its role as a mechanism for assessing students’ learning is underdeveloped.
• The school is making good progress in relation to self-evaluation, and many strengths are evident at school level which will support its further development.

Recommendations for Further Development

• A plan should be agreed for increasing parents’ involvement across a range of school activities with the ultimate objective of establishing a viable and active parents’ association.
• To complement the proposed annual review meetings, individual post-holders should complete a brief written report for management outlining developments in their role.
• The school’s management must ensure that all students’ entitlement to the minimum number of days’ of instruction per year, as outlined in Circular Letter M29/95, is met.
• Subject plans should be further developed with a specific focus on developing the schemes of work to more actively support teaching and learning.
• A review of the homework and assessment policy should be undertaken with specific emphasis on developing systems to provide students with formative feedback on their work.
• Strategies to promote more opportunities for co-operative learning for students should be agreed and implemented across all subject areas.

1. QUALITY OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP

1.1 School ownership and management

The board is appropriately constituted and meets monthly with very high attendance. Clearly evident in the board’s operation are the support of the trustees and the commitment of all board members to fulfilling their roles in a diligent manner.

The board’s agendas provide a useful guide to structuring the discussions while also ensuring that the board has both an operational and learning focus in its work. The board’s minutes indicate its commitment to enhancing students’ learning through curriculum provision and to maintaining and developing the quality of students’ educational experience, taking account of the school’s allocated teaching resources.

The board’s well-established objective of reviewing up to five policies each year provides a good reference framework for its oversight of school development planning. One aspect on which to focus in future is ensuring that the policies completed are fully contextualised to the school and accurately reflect the school’s procedures. The board also indicated it supported the introduction of annual updates from post holders on the completion of their duties. While the board has established procedures for circulating an agreed report from its meetings to staff, the absence of a parents’ association makes it difficult for the board to communicate directly with the wider parent body. With this in mind, the board is advised that it should draw on its existing experience and provide an annual report on its operations and activities to the wider school community.

The school reports that attendance at parent-teacher meetings is very good and that parents are supportive of their children’s engagement with the school’s curricular and co-curricular activities. While there is no parents’ association the board at present, the board and senior management are anxious that an association be established to affirm the school’s relationship with the wider parent body. The school has also established strong links with community-based organisations. This obvious goodwill and these existing good relationships should be drawn on to develop a viable and active parents’ association.
1.2 Effectiveness of leadership for learning

The principal and the deputy principal work very well together and have a clear vision for the development of the school. The primary principles underlying their work are the creation of a respectful and calm school environment which values each student individually and the provision of a positive working environment for all staff. Their respective roles are very well defined and they have established a complementary working relationship where their individual strengths and abilities are reflected in the roles, including their leadership roles. They have a strong sense of awareness of the implications of decisions made and the need to allocate the school’s resources in a manner that maximises the learning experience for students and maintains continuity in the school’s curricular provision.

The middle management post holders completed a review of their roles in May 2014. This review was necessitated by a change in the number and profile of post holders, the need to achieve greater equity in the distribution of duties, and to ensure that the duties reflected the level of responsibility attached to the post. Teachers’ engagement with the change process was positive. Annual scheduled meetings between management and individual post-holders will provide a forum to discuss how the posts are operating and how they might evolve to further meet the developmental priorities of the school. This will provide scope to agree changes that might be necessitated where aspects of the posts no longer remain relevant to the school’s needs or are not practicable.

Considerable effort and teacher involvement underpins the school’s extra-curricular and co-curricular provision with successes in a number of national competitions in the current school year. The breadth of activities is balanced between sporting and academic and provides a full range of opportunities for students to engage in an activity that is suited to them.

The school’s timetable is well organised. In recent years the number of instruction hours per week was reduced to the minimum of twenty-eight hours for all class groups in order to maximise the allocation of teaching resources. The main impact of this change was some reduction in time allocation at junior cycle, though management has endeavoured to balance the impact of the changes with equity in provision for the core subjects of Irish, English and Mathematics. Restoration of the allocation to these subjects should be prioritised in the event of any future whole-school curriculum review. Continuity in provision of optional subjects between junior and senior cycle is a priority for school management.

Within the popular TY programme the four layers of core, sampling, modular and calendar events are present and commendably, they serve to foster students’ skills within and beyond the classroom. In addition, the subject sampling layer of the Transition Year (TY) programme is used to promote subjects where patterns of student demand may have changed. Planning for TY would be further supported by agreeing a range of common teaching and learning strategies to be used across the programme. It would also be beneficial to provide parents with the outline calendar of the majority of planned TY calendar activities at the beginning of the year.

The staggered start of formal classes at the start of the school year, and the early finish of TY students in May both contribute to reducing the overall number of teaching days available to certain students per school year and bring some class groups below the 167 days required by Circular M29/95, Time in School. It is recommended that school management address this.
Links are well established with the main feeder primary schools. The deputy principal initially visits the feeder schools and the school has a well-designed enrolment and induction process. As well as the work of staff in supporting students transition to post-primary, first-year students are also supported by volunteer mentors drawn from TY. This is a valuable support to incoming students in addition to providing leadership opportunities for TY students.

The student council is long established, correctly constituted and has a defined role in school activities. Under the guidance of the student council liaison teacher, plans are in place to review the council’s constitution. Areas to consider in this review would be the length of time that members serve on the council and the development of a protocol for the officers of the council to report directly to senior management.

The school has the services of both a guidance counsellor and chaplain. Both are an integral part of the school’s student support system which centres on the work of the care team which includes senior management, the guidance counsellor, chaplain, special educational needs (SEN) co-ordinator and year heads. The team meets regularly throughout the school year and its work is also informed by ongoing informal interaction with teachers. Given its size it is not possible to meet weekly. Therefore, it may be beneficial to consider meeting as two groups, for example, a senior and junior cycle group with the guidance counsellor, SEN co-ordinator and chaplain common to both groups. The school also has access to supports from the external Home School Youth Liaison Service.

The school has a well-developed code of behaviour. The code is positive in tone and sets out clearly the ladder of referral for students where breaches of the code occur. Of particular merit is student testimony which indicated that once a student completes the process that they start afresh. This is a very positive approach and the ongoing good work of the class tutors and year heads in the system is critically important to its success.

The school’s SEN team is small which is positive in assisting the development of agreed approaches to the delivery of supports for students with SEN. The co-ordinator is developing systems and processes including the compilation of the SEN register. This work should enhance communication systems in relation to supporting students with SEN.

Surveys involving a sample of parents and students were conducted as part of the WSE-MLL. At school level some additional follow up should be undertaken to further explore the responses given, especially those in relation to subject choice, information to parents, homework, Relationship and Sexuality Education (RSE) and drugs awareness and to assess what further actions may be required.

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 was built as part of the Public Private Partnership programme and the school’s building is managed by a private company in co-operation with the Department. The facilities and building are maintained to a very high standard and all parties during the evaluation remarked on the quality of the physical working and educational environment available to them. The board has prioritised the refurbishment of external playing grounds to support the schools extra-curricular and co-curricular programme. The school is not involved in the Green-Schools programme and is considering involvement in this and other
whole-school ‘flag’ programmes. Teachers make very good use of the ample range of resources available, especially ICT, to support school administration and teaching and learning.

2. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

2.1 The quality of learning and teaching

Subject plans have been developed across all subject areas using an agreed template. This year the teachers and school management have prioritised subject planning as the theme for additional planning meetings and these meetings are well documented. It is evident greater scope exists at these meetings to focus the discussion on pedagogical themes specific to in-class practice including teaching and learning approaches to be used. The whole-school organisation aspects of the subject plans have been well developed. However, the schemes of work are underdeveloped, specifically in relation to linking teaching and assessment strategies to the learning outcomes.

Very good individual lesson planning was evident in almost all the lessons observed. Of particular merit was the preparation of customised worksheets by many teachers to cater for the range of students’ learning styles and abilities.

In lessons where teaching and learning was good or very good, lessons were characterised by the structured use of learning intentions, associated with good pace and smooth lesson transitions. Teachers also made good use of students’ prior learning and knowledge to frame the lesson content and questioning was successfully used as an assessment mechanism throughout the lesson.

Where exceptionally good practice was noted, lessons were exemplified by teachers adapting both their teaching methodologies and the range of resources used to challenge all learners to achieve their full potential through whole-class engagement, peer learning or individual learning. In these lessons the teachers concerned used a range of techniques including structured pair and group work and questions that were differentiated both upward and downward and for one-to-one intervention.

In a very few lessons, there was scope for improvement in the teaching and learning approaches used. These improvements centred mainly on the need to align the lesson activities more closely to the lesson intentions and to ensure that all students were engaged with the range of activities planned for the lesson.

Though pair work was frequently evident in the lessons observed, there was very little group work evident during the evaluation. In a number of instances the pair work task was not well planned and did not achieve the outcome of enhancing the students’ learning. Where practice was most effective, the task was allied to the lesson content and students were given ample time to discuss and formulate their responses to the questions asked, while also having the opportunity to share their findings with the wider class group. A small number of excellent approaches to group work were observed where the focus of the task was either to consolidate the students’ learning within the lesson or to challenge the students to evaluate or assess a new range of material. These very good practices should be exemplified and shared in order to strengthen the development of co-operative learning opportunities for students, thereby building their capacity to learn, both by doing themselves and from observing their peers.

In a number of lessons, the teachers used a facilitative style of teaching. Students learned from each other and were allowed to work both independently and collaboratively. The
variation in the output from tasks demonstrated that students could, when facilitated in this way, achieve outcomes beyond what might otherwise be expected of them.

The management of students was exemplary in all of the lessons observed and the student interactions with each of the inspectors was courteous, good humoured and respectful.

Homework is a key component of the school’s approach to assessing students’ learning. Though homework is assigned, practices between subject departments vary as do the approaches to providing students with feedback on their progress. Where homework was a learning or revision task, teachers customarily led the follow-on lesson with a question and answer session to check on the learning. For written tasks, practice varied from teacher overseeing completion rates at the start of the lesson, to periodic date stamping or initialling to affirm completion rates. There is considerable scope therefore, to improve the use of homework as a tool for consolidating students’ learning and for all students, especially the more able students to learn for improvement through the teachers’ reflection on the quality of the work produced and the provision of guidance for improvement.

The learning environment in the classrooms, corridors and common areas is print-rich with many examples of student-developed materials. One observation during the evaluation is that there is scope to alter the seating arrangements in classrooms to provide additional scope to promote collaborative learning approaches. The promotion of oral literacy and the use of subject-specific language is a particular strength across all teachers’ practice.

Students’ engagement with learning was best when the expectations set were high and the lessons were well planned. In these instances students worked purposefully, while engaging in peer learning and in some instances generating their own questions.

Where students’ capacity to learn was best exemplified, students were provided with opportunities to review and critique their own work, reflect on the work of their peers and the learning activities facilitated the development of the visual, auditory and kinaesthetic learner.

3. IMPLEMENTATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS FROM PREVIOUS EVALUATIONS

3.1 Management

A number of the previous subject inspection reports recommend that analysis be undertaken in relation to subject uptake patterns. To progress these recommendations a survey involving both parents and students could be undertaken that would help identify the key information requirements of both groups and possible alternatives to current practice that could be initiated to bridge any gaps that emerge.

3.2 Learning and teaching

Good progress has been made in implementing recommendations concerning teaching and learning made in previous subject inspection reports. In almost all the lessons the learning intentions were shared and reviewed and very good practice was also evident in a number of lessons which used higher-order outcome verbs in framing the lesson intentions. In the majority of lessons the teaching strategies used both accommodated the range of students’ learning styles and active learning was also promoted. In a significant number of lessons there was focus on the development of students’ writing skills either through the use of
writing frames, subject-specific vocabulary or the assignment of written work within lessons. Though written work was assigned in many lessons and was monitored, there remains scope to develop systems to evaluate the quality of the work completed and provide students with feedback for improvement.

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

The school has been actively engaged with the school self-evaluation (SSE) process. There is a co-ordinator in place and teams have been working on both themes of literacy and numeracy. SSE reports and school improvement plans are available in relation to literacy and the school is currently working on the development of the numeracy plan with key whole-school strategies already agreed. Data gathering and analysis is a feature of normal decision making though there is some scope to strengthen the use of data in target setting and review. This year a group of parents was canvassed for its views as the school developed its numeracy strategy and such opportunities should continue in order to engage parents more formally and seek their views when developing or introducing initiatives with a teaching and learning focus.

The school demonstrates very good capacity to engage in self-evaluation. Among the indicators of this are: the commitment of staff to implementing current literacy strategies and the systems and practices that have been established at whole-school level for tracking students’ attainment. This, combined with the strong leadership evident at the level of in-school senior management, augurs well for the future.
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. Attracta’s Community School welcomes this positive WSE-MLL inspection report. The content of the report is an endorsement of the tremendous work being done by all of the partners in education. So too are the results of the student/parent questionnaires which affirmed with high percentages that the school is well run and that students enjoy a positive learning environment which is safe and caring.

In particular, the Board of Management is pleased with references to the following:

- The Board’s commitment to enhancing students’ learning through curriculum provision;
- Ongoing policy review;
- Strong links with the community;
- Clear vision of the Principal and Deputy Principal for the development of the school;
- Complementary working relationship between Principal and Deputy Principal;
- Respectful and calm school environment;
- Quality teaching and learning and use of resources, especially ICT;
- Active engagement with the SSE process;
- Well organised timetable;
- Popular TY programme;
- Guidance counsellor and chaplain are both an integral part of the school’s student support system;
- Agreed middle management structure;
- Positive working environment for all staff;
- Very good individual lesson planning;
- Extra-curricular and co-curricular provision.

The Board acknowledges the recommendations made in the report and will take the necessary steps to address these issues. The Board also wishes to state that, although attempts to set up a Parents Association in the past have not been successful, a number of effective means of communication between school and home have been put in place to ensure that parents are fully informed. The Board will continue to promote positive methods of communication with parents.

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 recommendation with respect to Circular Letter M29/95 has been addressed.
- The Board will request an annual written report from all post holders.
- An Annual Report of the Board will be prepared for circulation to parents every summer.
- Focus on developing schemes of work/opportunities for co-operative learning.
- Homework policy to be reviewed.
- Common teaching and learning strategies to be explored in TY.

The Board, with its partners in Education, will continue to actively engage in addressing issues raised in this report through regular review and evaluation. It will strive, as always, to provide the highest quality teaching in a supportive and caring environment.