

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

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

REPORT

**Mountmellick Community School
Mountmellick, County Laois
Roll number: 91426A**

Date of inspection: 8 February 2016



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AGUS SCILEANNA | DEPARTMENT OF
EDUCATION AND SKILLS
INSPECTORATE**

Whole-School Evaluation Management, Leadership and Learning

A whole-school evaluation of management, leadership and learning (WSE-MLL) was undertaken in February, 2016 in Mountmellick 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 accepts the report as the final inspection report available for publication and wished to respond formally to the report. The Board agrees that the response submitted will be included as an appendix to the published report. The board's response is submitted below.

Introduction

Mountmellick Community School is a co-educational school operating under the trusteeship of the Presentation Sisters, Laois and Offaly Education and Training Board and the Diocese of Kildare and Leighlin. The school has been catering for the educational needs of students from the town of Mountmellick and its hinterland since 1990. The last four years have seen changes to the school's senior management team and, with the support of staff members and the board of management, significant improvement in the operation of the school and the morale of staff is evident. The enrolment of the school, which had fallen dramatically is now increasing and at the time of the evaluation, the school had an enrolment of 396.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

Key Findings

- The school's board of management is appropriately constituted, operates effectively and is supportive of the senior management team.
- The board needs to become more cognisant of the school self-evaluation (SSE) process.
- Since the appointment of the present senior management team, very good progress has been made in relation to whole-school planning.
- The quality of leadership of staff and students is very good and management responsibilities are effectively delegated to the in-school management team.
- The staff of the school is dedicated, caring and committed.
- Teaching and learning varied from good to very good with some examples of excellent practice.

Recommendations for Further Development

- The admissions policy and code of behaviour should be reviewed without delay.
- The proposed taster programme in first year should be introduced following research on how such programmes operate in other schools.
- Timetabling provision for the core subjects needs to be rebalanced to ensure that the time available for teaching Irish is on a par with that for Mathematics and English.
- The model for learning support should be reconfigured with a view to reducing the number of teachers involved in its delivery and utilising more diverse models of support than is currently the case.

- Engagement by senior management with subject departments relating to student performance in the certificate examinations should continue and should lead each subject department to set targets for improvement and develop action plans to attain them.

1. QUALITY OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP

1.1 School ownership and management

The board of management is properly constituted and its members have a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities. The board is well supported by the trustees and, in turn, is very supportive of the senior management team.

Very good progress is evident in relation to whole-school planning. A comprehensive school plan is in place and all of the mandatory policies have been adopted. All policies have clear and unambiguous review dates attached. The board members are less familiar than is desirable with the school's SSE process and briefings in relation to how the process is progressing should be provided to the board at regular intervals.

The school's policy review process should now focus on the admissions policy and the school's code of behaviour. The admissions policy should be redrafted to reflect the school's growing enrolment and make explicit reference to the availability of Transition Year (TY) and, when available, the taster programme in first year. Information on parental financial contributions should also be stated in the school's enrolment documentation and clarity in relation to what the monies are used for should be communicated to parents of each year group in line with Circular Letter 0065/2010. The admissions policy should be subject to annual review.

The language of the code of behaviour is quite austere. It places insufficient focus on developing student leadership and does not reflect the positive behaviour which is evident in the school's day-to-day activities. In rewriting the code, attention should also be placed on differentiating the ladder of referral to reflect the diversity of the student population and to reflect the need to take the context of each case into account when decisions on sanctions are being made.

The board communicates very effectively with the trustees and the school's parent body. Responses from the teachers' questionnaires about its leadership and management role indicate that communication with the teaching staff is less effective. In order to address this, it is advised that the previous practice of teacher representatives on the board reporting to staff shortly after each board meeting be reinstated. It is also advised that a notice requesting the teaching staff to provide items for inclusion in upcoming board meetings be posted in advance of the meetings.

Student attendance and punctuality, the possibility of providing a taster programme in first year, student well-being and mental health, peer-to-peer collaboration in relation to teaching methods and a review of the modes of assessment have all been identified by the board as priority areas for development. Very good progress has already been made on a number of these, including a school-wide initiative addressing positive mental health.

The taster programme should be introduced following a review of how such programmes operate in other schools and given the possibilities presented by the peer-to-peer approach, whereby teachers collaborate in sharing good practice, it should be adopted as a key process in driving improvement in teaching and learning.

The senior management team, comprising the principal and deputy principal, is dedicated and hardworking, they operate in a collegial manner and are highly motivated. Senior management has identified: promoting the school; rebuilding enrolment; and maintaining and developing the school's curricular programme as central to their work in the immediate and medium term. Very good progress has already been made in all of these areas.

Senior management communicates very well with the entire school community and is building a shared vision for the school. The annual review process whereby all teachers and post holders are asked to provide feedback on the operation of the school and the bi-monthly newsletter to parents are just two examples of how the senior management team endeavours to build consensus and maintain open channels of communication.

Management roles are delegated to the in-school management team. The schedule of posts has recently been reviewed and, given the school's changing demographics, should be subject to frequent ongoing review. As the school population grows there may well be need to extend the scope of some posts and to amalgamate others. This should in the first instance see each year head take responsibility for monitoring attendance and punctuality of the students in their year group.

The year heads are a very important part of the in-school management team and contribute greatly to the running of the school. They are highly experienced and committed and retain a clear focus on supporting the students in their care. As the year heads retain the same group as they progress through the school, the schedule of work for each year head should be documented and shared with the group. This would assist in planning their myriad of activities.

A very active and well-informed parents' association is in place. The members of the association are very positive about their role in the school and the support they receive from school management and the teaching staff. The association is consulted during policy formation, organises fundraising and other activities supportive of the operation of the school. The parents' questionnaires indicate that the vast majority of parents are happy with all aspects of the school's operation but that there is room for improvement in the manner in which the parents' association communicates with the general parent body. In addressing this, consideration should be given to the inclusion of a short report by the association in the school's bi-monthly newsletter.

A range of initiatives to develop student leadership is in place. A representative student council, a *Meitheal* group and a team of prefects all contribute positively to the manner in which the student body encounters and influences life in the school. The student council is involved in policy formation and organises fundraising. However, there is scope to raise the profile of the council amongst the general student body. In addressing this, the council should contribute frequently to the school's newsletter and the possibility of attending an annual meeting with school's board of management should also be considered.

1.2 Effectiveness of leadership for learning

The senior management team provides effective leadership for learning and teaching and is committed to excellence and quality improvement. Members of the teaching staff are deployed in line with their qualifications and arrangements for enabling teachers to attend relevant continuing professional development (CPD) courses are very good. For their part, the teachers are committed to their ongoing CPD as their high-level of engagement with the process demonstrates.

Curricular provision is very good. TY was introduced this year leading to a reduced number of students in fifth year. Despite this, management has successfully maintained a very good

range of subjects in fifth year. The introduction of TY has proved very successful. It is popular with both parents and students and provides a very good range of subjects and extra-curricular activities. The operation of the TY programme benefits from enthusiastic and reflective co-ordination. All of the participants, their parents, employers during work experience and the teaching body are surveyed in relation to their experience of TY with a view to enhancing future provision.

The availability of the extensive range of subjects in a school where numbers are growing, places inevitable strain on the school's timetable. This is evidenced in the reduced amount of time currently allocated to Irish compared to English and Mathematics in junior cycle and sixth year. This anomaly needs to be addressed.

There are very good structures in place to facilitate collaboration. These involve discussion groups at staff meetings, weekly meetings of the assistant principals and planning teams and consultation with parents and student bodies. Discussions with teachers and responses from the teacher questionnaires testify that the majority of teachers are very satisfied with the quality of support they receive from senior management and the atmosphere of collegiality in the school.

Subject planning is well established and very good practice was evident in some subject plans such as the sharing of resources, action planning for improvement and an ongoing review of schemes of work. The schemes of work in the best plans lay appropriate emphasis on teaching methods and effective integration of resources. All of the plans, however, would benefit from an enhanced focus on student learning in the schemes of work. With this in mind, the focus of the peer-to-peer collaboration initiative mentioned earlier in this report should be extended to include lesson planning in addition to teaching methods.

In addition to subject department meetings, which run concurrently at various stages during the year, the senior management team has initiated a process of holding meetings with each subject department to facilitate discussions on student performance in the certificate examinations. Student performance is uneven with students in some subjects performing above the national average and, in others, below it. The initiative is designed to prompt reflection at subject department level on how improved outcomes for students can be realised. Each subject department should, therefore, identify priorities for improvement and set specific, measureable and time-bound targets. Action plans to ensure that these targets are met should then be developed. A short report detailing progress against these targets should be submitted to the board of management annually.

The care and support systems in the school are very good and benefit from the strong sense of community that permeates the school, the work of the year heads and the very good guidance and social personal and health education programmes.

Practices in relation to identifying the needs of students with special educational needs or requiring learning support are very good. Comprehensive channels of communication with the primary schools from which the students come ensure that the student profiles that emerge during the transfer process are accurate and that the advice subsequently provided to the relevant teachers is valid. The model used to deliver support, primarily through one-to-one withdrawal, is unwieldy and is in need of review. There are currently too many teachers delivering support and a small core team should be established with time provided for this team to hold planning meetings. Additionally, consideration should be given to incorporating team teaching and in-class co-operative support in the delivery model.

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 is very well maintained. It is bright and colourful and features displays of student work, materials relating to SSE and extra and co-curricular activities. The school maintains very good partnerships with the local community and has access to the local track and field facilities and use of the local library.

In the past, the school boasted a well-equipped library that subsequently fell into disuse. Work has started on reopening and re-equipping the library. This welcome development will provide a welcome resource to promote reading and support the school's literacy plan.

Great credit is due to school management for the manner in which it has managed the development of the school's information and communications technology (ICT) infrastructure. Prior to any further investment, planning in this area should focus on the instructional model to be implemented and how ICT can be used to facilitative teaching and learning and collaborative whole-school and the subject-department planning.

2. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

2.1 The quality of learning and teaching

The quality of teaching and learning in the lessons observed during the evaluation was consistently good or very good with some examples of excellent practice. All lessons featured very respectful classroom interactions and student-teacher rapport was very good.

In all lessons, classroom management was exemplary. In almost all classes, students were affirmed and encouraged for their efforts and contributions. In some lessons, very good use of ICT was evident but, in general, further consideration needs to be given to how ICT can be used to optimise learning.

Learning intentions were shared with students at the start of almost all of the lessons observed. In lessons where excellent practice was in evidence, the learning intentions were fully explored and a comprehensive plenary was conducted prior to the lessons' conclusion to establish the extent to which the learning outcomes were achieved.

Teaching and learning were most effective where active teaching methods that allowed for student-centred activities including group and pair work were incorporated. While elements of this good practice were evident in almost all lessons, further discussion among teachers in relation to how to optimise the benefits of collaborative learning is recommended. There is a need for greater attention in the planning of lessons for the inclusion of student-led activities to accommodate and exploit the students' different learning styles, interests and abilities.

Student surveys indicated that they receive very good advice from their teachers on how to improve their learning and rigorous and ongoing correction of homework was evident in many lessons. However, the quality of written formative comments varied. Where consistent provision of good formative written feedback was provided, it led to a visible improvement in students' written work. It is therefore recommended that greater prominence be given to this form of feedback than is currently the case.

Very good use was made of questioning to involve students in their own learning and to assess progress. However, the use of global questioning and chorus answering should be minimised in favour of directed higher-order questions designed to encourage students to speculate, develop hypotheses, and defend their reasoning.

Most of the classes visited were mixed ability. The use of differentiation strategies, to support students at the point of need and challenge the more able, is essential in such circumstances and was generally observed as an area requiring development. In lessons where high expectations of student achievement were evident, students were provided with rich tasks that engaged and challenged all of the students at a level appropriate to their abilities.

Classrooms were bright, colourful and provided a most appropriate setting for learning. The majority of classrooms displayed a print-rich environment that promoted individual subjects and celebrated students' work. In many classrooms the learning environment was further enhanced by having the seating arranged in a manner that facilitates collaborative and active learning.

In some lessons, due attention was given to the explicit development of students' literacy and numeracy. In order that the school's SSE process impacts positively on student learning, explicit reference to the school's SSE targets and how lesson delivery can be modified to achieve them should be included in all subject department plans.

Student learning is strongly enhanced outside of the classroom by participation in extra-curricular and co-curricular activities including guest speakers and school tours relating to a variety of subject areas.

3. IMPLEMENTATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS FROM PREVIOUS EVALUATIONS

3.1 Management

There are good structures in place to ensure that recommendations contained in subject and programme inspection reports are implemented. Consequently, very good progress has been made in addressing the various recommendations.

3.2 Learning and teaching

In relation to learning and teaching, very good progress was evident in the use of the target language in relevant lessons and in the universal use of the learning intentions at the beginning of lessons. There is still scope for the greater interrogation of the learning outcomes as the lessons unfold and for the use of a plenary, prior to the lessons' conclusion to establish the degree to which the intended outcomes were achieved.

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

The SSE process benefits from very good leadership at school level. A school improvement plan (SIP) for literacy has been developed. However, the strand relating to numeracy was suspended prior to the development of a SIP. Therefore, the school's numeracy team that

fell into abeyance should be reconvened and work on developing a whole-school plan for numeracy recommence.

Despite the suspension of the numeracy strand, work on the third strand, selected following consultation management, staff and parents is already underway. This strand utilises student performance in the assessment tests taken during their transfer into first year to predict subsequent attainment in house and certificate examinations. The use of data from house examinations is particularly welcome as it provides timely indications of student performance and means that targeted interventions can be put in place in instances where underperformance is evident. While the implementation of this strand is in its very early stages, good progress is already evident from the quality of baseline data collected and targets that have been set.

The management structures in the school, which involve wide-ranging consultation and consensus building offer significant evidence of the school's capacity to identify areas requiring improvement and to set appropriate targets. There is scope, however, to involve the board of management more fully in the process and to ensure that the various SSE strands have the intended positive impact on learning and teaching.

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 Mountmellick Community School welcomes this very positive WSE / MLL report and wishes to congratulate and thank the whole school community for its contribution to this outcome. The Board welcomes the excellent findings in the management, leadership & learning practices taking place in our school. It is delighted with such a positive endorsement of our school & the affirmation of the excellent work taking place therein. Reference to our *dedicated, caring and committed* staff, *examples of excellent practice* in terms of teaching and learning, our commitment to *excellence and quality improvement, comprehensive channels of communication, the care and support systems* being regarded as very good, and recognition that *in all lessons, classroom management was exemplary* reflect accurately on our school.

The Board also acknowledges the courteous & professional manner in which the inspectors interacted with the management, staff, students and parents of our 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.

Since the WSE / MLL the following recommendations have been acted upon

- The Admissions Policy and code of Behaviour have been reviewed and ratified by the Board of Management
- Timetabling provisions for the core subjects have been rebalanced in timetable 2016 / 2017 to provide equitable allocation to Irish, English and Maths
- Changes have taken place in Learning Support to reduce the number of teachers involved in its delivery
- Teacher nominees to the Board of Management convey an agreed report to staff after each Board meeting

We are currently considering the following

- A taster programme in first year
- Other initiatives to further enhance student performance in state examinations
- Review of our posts of responsibility to cater for our growing school population

With the intention to address these issues in the short term