

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

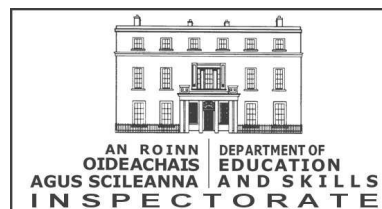
Department of Education and Skills

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

REPORT

**Saint Gerard's School
Bray, County Wicklow
Roll number: 61811I**

Date of inspection: 8 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. Gerard's 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 Governors, 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.

Introduction

St. Gerard's School is a lay Catholic, co-educational, fee-paying day school in the voluntary secondary school sector. The school was founded in 1918 by John James and is currently administered by a board of governors as a charitable trust. The school has a Montessori, junior and senior campus. The senior school opened in 1973 for students aged twelve to nineteen. Students complete a six-year programme that includes a compulsory Transition Year (TY). Currently there are 486 students in the senior school; approximately half transferred from the junior school.

The school, in the spirit of its patron saint, Gerard, aims to foster the moral, spiritual, social, cultural and physical development of each individual's full potential so that students will become educated, resilient learners who are thinking and caring individuals. The board of governors was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the evaluation, and the response of the board will be found in the appendix to this report.

1. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

1.1 Key Findings

- The board is proactive in its duties, actively supports educational initiatives, is familiar with the day-to-day operation of the school and regularly evaluates its practices.
- The senior management team is effective and is led by a principal with a clear vision for the school. A model of distributed leadership is being developed.
- Very good channels and methods of communication exist in the school.
- A friendly, homely atmosphere is evident in the school. Students have pride in their school. The building and grounds are maintained to a high standard.
- Students have good opportunities to articulate their views and avail of leadership roles. There are potential opportunities to include the student voice in school development planning.
- Teaching was good overall and in some lessons exemplary practice was observed. However, in a number of lessons the methodologies used did not facilitate the development of key skills or engage students in higher-order thinking.
- Student learning was good overall and in lessons where students assumed ownership of their own learning it was very good. Students had high expectations, were articulate, confident and responsive.

- Almost all of the recommendations from previous subject inspections reports have been implemented. Issues relating to subject choice and delivery of learning support remain to be addressed.
- Staff and management have the capacity and skill to provide an environment in which students will become independent and resilient learners.

1.2 Recommendations for Further Development

- The school's management structures should include all the stakeholders.
- Subject plans need to be further developed and subject departments need to consider how information and communication technology (ICT) can be fully exploited and developed for student learning.
- Students should make their subject choices for Leaving Certificate in the second half of TY.
- The recent practice of increasingly placing students in set ability groupings for certain subjects should be seriously reconsidered.
- Learning support should be provided as much as possible in the mainstream classroom, and should not be timetabled against core non-examination subjects. Interventions for specific learning difficulties can be provided in small groups on the understanding that withdrawal from peers is not a permanent fixture.
- The teaching and learning task force should disseminate the very good practices observed to bring about overall improvement and to deliver 'the classroom of excellence' which is the school's stated aim.

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 school is managed by a board of governors which also fulfils the role of trustee and patron. Currently there are eleven serving members on the board, of whom two are female. The board has devolved an executive role to the principal in relation to the day-to-day operation of the school. While board members are parents of current or former students themselves, there are no formal nominees from the parent body or the teaching staff on the board. It is envisaged in the Education Act of 1998 that schools should be managed in a spirit of partnership and that nominees from the parent body and teaching staff should be involved in the management body. The board is currently reviewing how it is constituted and operates. As part of this review the board should seek to ensure that all stakeholders are represented in the management structure of the school and should consider co-opting an external educational expert to give an added dimension to its work.

The board is proactive in its duties. It has established six sub-committees and three task forces each with a specific function in relation to the evaluation of processes and planning of developments in the school. These committees have forged good links with the day-to-day operation of the school. Of particular merit is the close co-operation of the board's senior education committee and the school's senior management team on the development of the five-year school plan.

Currently the board is reviewing three policies in tandem with the school's steering committee and is seeking views of teaching staff, the parents association, and students in instances where there are specific student-related issues. Some policies have not been reviewed for a number of years; a three-year review cycle would be prudent.

Confirmation was provided that, in compliance with Post-primary Circulars M44/05 and 0062/2006, the board of management has formally adopted the Department's Child Protection Guidelines for Post-primary Schools (Published September 2004). Confirmation was also provided that these child protection procedures have been brought to the attention of management, school staff and parents; that a copy of the procedures has been provided to all staff; and that management has ensured that all staff are familiar with the procedures to be followed. A designated liaison person (DLP) and a deputy DLP have been appointed in line with the requirements of the guidelines.

The school's priorities for development

Senior management, in consultation with the board, has identified a number of priorities which have formed the basis of a five-year plan. This plan is a work in progress and seeks to look at all aspects of the educational and extracurricular provision for the student body. The plan formulates the future vision for the school and its role as a caring and supportive learning community. As part of this process a Catholic ethos document is in development to articulate the role the school plays in society. To enhance the development of the plan it is advisable in the spirit of partnership to seek the views of students, parents, school staff and the wider school community with regard to their future vision of their school.

Currently there are ten school-based committees and six taskforces operating at school level. Almost every member of the teaching staff is actively involved in one or more of these groups. There is scope to streamline some of the groups through amalgamations and re-focusing of functions, while not compromising the good input from members.

2.2 Effectiveness of leadership for learning

Leadership of staff

The involvement of teaching staff in committees and taskforces provides opportunities for leadership development, co-operation and collaboration within the school. Good channels and methods of communication exist between all groups, middle management and senior management. This is testament to the good democratic and administrative practices that the principal has developed. He is an effective leader with a clear vision for the further development of the school.

The senior management team and year heads have clearly defined roles. The board has facilitated the use of the school's own financial resources to fund an additional deputy principal, six year heads and eight additional posts of responsibility. A distributed model of leadership is being developed and this is desirable. However, senior management should ensure that Department-paid posts are fully deployed to meet the priorities and needs of the school as per Circular 25/2011.

There is excellent ICT infrastructure in the school. The aim of creating a virtual learning environment is worthy. The ICT and teaching and learning task forces have been involved in peer tutoring in the use of this resource in the classroom. This is delivered on a subject department basis and is effective; however, there is further scope to develop ICT as a teaching and learning tool.

Subject plans are developed for each programme and subject offered in the school. All plans follow a similar template where methodologies, teaching resources, homework procedures and curriculum topics are listed separately. It is recommended that each of these elements be aligned with student learning outcomes for each topic. This will ensure that teaching and learning practices are at the centre of subject development planning.

Leadership of students

The admissions policy was last reviewed in 2007 and is a very brief document. While the school enrolls students with additional educational needs, the written policy does not accurately reflect actual admission practice. The board is commended for its swift action in putting right other anomalies in the policy and its commitment to reviewing it.

Students have opportunities to articulate their views and develop leadership skills. Students seek election to the student council, can be appointed a school prefect or monitor and can become an ambassador to promote an aspect of school life. A TY module on development of leadership skills and personal effectiveness is provided. Recommendations in this report on teaching and learning methods complement the school's aims regarding the development of independence and responsibility in students.

Senior management and the board constantly review the range and provision of subjects in all the curriculum programmes. They aim to provide a broad range of subjects and are proactive in investigating the introduction of new subjects in order to maximise student choice. First-year students sample all subjects on the junior cycle curriculum for the duration of the year. In the latter half of first year parents complete a subject options survey for their children. The aggregate of these choices form the option bands for second year, when students choose two out of six optional subjects.

In third year, students select subjects for the Leaving Certificate. All third-year students complete a module of career guidance as part of the SPHE programme and have their competencies across a range of areas profiled. Students take their preferred subjects in TY and generally continue with them into fifth year. While students can change their desired options in fifth year the potential to use the TY year to sample subjects areas is underdeveloped. The practice of making subject choices for Leaving Certificate in third year should be discontinued and measures adopted to ensure that students make an informed subject choice during the latter half of TY. Parent and student responses to the questionnaire were very positive in almost all areas of school life, but significant numbers responded negatively to the question relating to subject choice.

While the TY log book is a good development, the thrust of the school's current TY programme is not entirely fitting in with the desired aims and ethos of the programme. In a significant number of TY curriculum plans, content and methods reflected delivery similar to that at Leaving Certificate. While some Leaving Certificate material can be chosen it should be explored in an original and stimulating way. The TY programme can provide an opportunity for the teaching and learning task force to experiment with new and innovative methodologies and, in doing so, to evaluate their outcomes.

The school has a mixed-ability intake including a number of students with approved resource hours. The learning support department is well supported and appreciated by school management. Almost half of the teaching staff delivers resource teaching with an emphasis on subject-specific support. Although this support is well co-ordinated, a greater focus on addressing students' underlying difficulties through more targeted learning strategies is advised. An additional area of concern is the withdrawal of students from mandatory subjects such as SPHE. Best practice would be to offer support in the mainstream classroom and to give targeted support for specific problem areas in a small group setting. Withdrawal from peers should not become a permanent fixture.

School management has a focus on increasing student attainment in state examinations. Outcomes in state examinations are analysed and compared to national norms and these data are presented at board and staff meetings for discussion. Deviations from the national norm are discussed with the relevant subject departments and strategies are devised to increase attainment. There has been a move to setting in some subjects as a means to

improving state examinations outcomes. However, setting should not be the first strategy used to increase attainment. The school is committed to a mixed-ability ethos and there should be a greater focus on differentiation and a variety of pedagogical approaches to suit the varied learning styles of students. The plan to establish a task force to consider the needs of gifted students is laudable.

2.3 Management of facilities

A member of staff has a post of responsibility for recycling and environmental issues and their work along with staff and students in the school has enabled the school to secure a green flag. The building and grounds are maintained to a high standard. Students have pride in their school and are mindful of their role in maintaining the school environs.

In 2008 a newly constructed school building was opened. The design of the building took account of environmental concerns and provided a good physical learning environment. Senior management and the board have plans to further develop certain aspects of the school's infrastructure. Health and safety procedures in the school are adhered to. There is a health and safety committee and a designated teacher with a post of responsibility in the area.

3. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

The quality of learning and teaching

Twenty-seven lessons were observed covering a range of core, optional, practical and non-examination subjects, and including all years, levels and programmes offered in the school. In a significant majority of the lessons observed, the quality of teaching was good or very good and in some cases exemplary. While little poor classroom practice was noted, teaching and learning processes in a minority of lessons offered scope for greater use of active and co-operative methodologies. There was evidence of good learning generally, although with scope for greater levels of engagement in some instances. Learning of a very high quality was noted in many lessons.

Strengths noted included well-planned learning activities, effective higher-order questioning, some excellent use of ICT, experiential learning strategies, purposeful class discussion, high expectations conveyed to students and developmental feedback to students. Exemplary practice was noted in lessons where the learning outcomes were stated explicitly in terms of what students would know and be able to do by the end of the lesson. This approach engaged students as agents of their own learning and, at a practical level, ensured that lesson time was productively and purposefully used. Language lessons were most effective where students had varied opportunities to use the target language themselves.

In the well-planned lessons observed, good resources had been prepared. These included ICT resources such as helpful visuals, historical footage, and explanatory diagrams. They were often used as triggers for student activity in the form of discovery learning, identification exercises, or student explanation. In lessons where students were most engaged in their learning, teachers communicated expectations of good participation, and the sequencing of the learning activities ensured that students had every opportunity to reinforce and deepen their learning. In an exemplary use of a game strategy, teams scored more for displaying a grasp of key concepts than for offering basic information, thus creating an explicit focus on higher-order thinking skills.

Scope for development in teaching and learning practices was noted in lessons where a focus on examination preparation predominated and students practised processes rather

than engaging with deeper learning of underlying concepts. In these instances, more enabling and active methodologies that develop skills and require students to engage in higher-order thinking and critical analysis are recommended. Outside of practical lessons there was little use of group work, and a small amount of pair work. More extensive use of co-operative learning is recommended. Experiential and discovery learning methods were employed successfully in a number of subject areas, and their greater use would help to emphasise the role of the teacher as facilitator of learning.

Homework was regularly given. While some very good written feedback was given, all substantial assignments merit evaluative guiding comments. Formative assessment of this kind was not fully understood or used, and summative assessment with a focus on results was more prevalent. Assessment for learning merits a more central place in subject planning and teaching and learning practices. It would support student attainment across the spectrum of ability and help to further improve outcomes in state examinations. Formative assessment emphasises students' responsibility for their own learning and, used thoughtfully, would support the school's aim of producing independent and resilient learners.

Stimulating and visually rich learning environments had been created in many classrooms. Classroom management and atmosphere were almost universally good. In the rare instances where disengagement was noted, more active and purposeful learning methods would be appropriate.

Planning and delivery based on clearly understood learning outcomes would align with the focus on skills and concepts indicated above. The teaching and learning task force should lead further dissemination of the very good practices observed to bring about overall improvement and to deliver 'the classroom of excellence' which is the school's stated aim.

4. IMPLEMENTATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS FROM PREVIOUS EVALUATIONS

4.1 Management

Since 2006, inspections of Irish, English, Physics, Technical Graphics, and Design and Communication Graphics have taken place. They contained recommendations relating to resources; the numbers involved in delivering learning support; the timing of subject choice for Leaving Certificate; and the appointment of teachers with subject-specific qualifications. School management has greatly improved provision of ICT and other resources, and has addressed issues relating to teacher recruitment.

Large numbers of teachers are still involved in delivering subject-specific resource teaching, as already discussed at 2.2 above. Leaving Certificate subject choices should be made at the end of TY to avail of the sampling opportunities afforded during that year. In many of the reports the use of learning outcomes and assessment for learning practices was recommended and whole-staff CPD was delivered in this area. As noted above, further development is required in this area.

4.2 Learning and Teaching

A review of subject plans indicated that most of the recommendations have been acted upon. School management has supported subject departments in addressing specific recommendations and they have considered the reports carefully. Actions taken have included the introduction of the optional oral assessment in Junior Certificate Irish, the

response journal in Leaving Certificate English, and continuous assessment of Physics notebooks. Planning recommendations are being worked through and, to ensure their full implementation, renewed attention should be given to the articulation of learning outcomes; their alignment with effective teaching and learning approaches; and their central placing in each subject plan so that teachers' individual planning also reflects them.

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

The board of governors evaluates its own practices and constantly strives to provide the best education possible for students. Senior management, through the implementation of the five-year planning process, is evaluating all aspects of school life. It now needs to consult all the stakeholders for their views and then construct a 'SMART' plan with built-in review dates and procedures. The expertise of external educational personnel should if possible be engaged in this process. While some targets of the plan will be easy to monitor and evaluate, other targets, due to the human dimension, are not quantifiable. The measurement of the added value that the students gain in academic, social and personal development should be considered.

The school aims to produce 'resilient learners' in 'classrooms of excellence'. The school has the teaching staff, management and leadership capacity required to do this and to deal with ongoing issues and priorities as identified for future development.

Published November 2011

Appendix

School response to the report

Submitted by the Board of Governors

Area 1: Observations on the content of the inspection report

The Board of Governors of St. Gerard's school wish to acknowledge the positive and affirming WSE-MLL report received following the inspection of St. Gerard's Senior School in April, 2011.

We would like to take this opportunity to make the following observations and comments: In the first instance, given the uncompromising priority afforded to promoting quality teaching and learning in St. Gerard's School, the following points made by the Inspectorate are particularly noteworthy:

- That "staff and management have the capacity and skill to provide an environment in which students will become independent and resilient learners";
- That "students had high expectations, were articulate, confident and responsive";
- That "in a significant majority of the lessons observed, the quality of teaching was good or very good and in some cases exemplary";
- That specific strengths noted included "well-planned learning activities, effective higher-order questioning, some excellent use of ICT, experiential learning strategies, purposeful class discussion, high expectations conveyed to students and developmental feedback to students";
- That learning support is "well supported and appreciated" within the school.

We consider the above five points to be of utmost and integral importance as they reflect the ethos of St. Gerard's which promotes student learning of a very high standard and which continuously strives to ensure that each individual pupil has the opportunity to fulfil their unique potential.

In the second instance, we are pleased that the Inspectorate noted, affirmed and has re-enforced the following hugely positive aspects of our school:

- That "a friendly homely atmosphere is evident in the school" and that "students have pride in their school";
- That "good democratic and administrative practices" have been developed, that the senior management team is effective and that the Principal is "an effective leader with a clear vision for the further development of the school";
- That "very good channels and methods of communication exist in the school";
- That "students have opportunities to articulate their views and avail of leadership roles";
- That there is an "excellent ICT infrastructure in the school"; and
- That the Board of Governors "evaluates its own practices and constantly strives to provide the best education possible for students."

Finally, we note with satisfaction that "almost all of the recommendations from previous subject inspections reports have been implemented".

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 Inspectorate notes that the Board “is proactive in its duties, actively supports educational initiatives, is familiar with the day-to-day operation of the school and regularly evaluates its practices”. Furthermore, the Report notes that senior management, through the implementation of the five-year planning process, is “evaluating all aspects of school life”. In continuing to do so, and in order to ensure that we continue to provide the highest quality education for our pupils, the school notes the Inspectors’ “Recommendations for Further Development” and they are being given due and in-depth consideration by all relevant stakeholders.

Finally, the statement that “the school aims to produce ‘resilient learners’ in ‘classrooms of excellence’” and that “the school has the teaching staff, management and leadership capacity required to do this” sums up the vision of education in St. Gerard’s. Furthermore, the statement that “the [five-year] plan formulates the future vision for the school and its role as a caring and supportive learning community” affords us great satisfaction as we strive to ensure that St. Gerard’s continues to provide an education of excellence for all of its pupils, building on the “Key Findings” of this Report.