

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

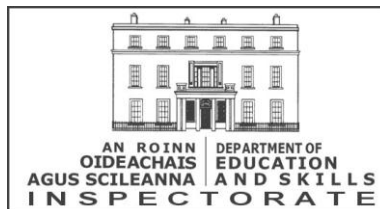
Department of Education and Skills

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

REPORT

**Seamount College
Kinvara, County Galway
Roll number: 63050T**

Date of inspection: 16 May 2012



Whole-School Evaluation Management, Leadership and Learning

A whole-school evaluation of management, leadership and learning (WSE-MLL) was undertaken in May, 2012 in Seamount College. 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 was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the report; a response was not received from the board.

Introduction

Seamount College is a co-educational voluntary second-level school located in Kinvara. In 2010 trusteeship of the school transferred to the Roman Catholic Bishop of Galway. This transfer followed a decision by the previous trustees to relinquish their trusteeship of the school. In light of its possible closure at that time, a vigorous campaign was launched within the community to retain the school to provide second-level education for a predicted rise in student numbers in the wider area. As a consequence the school continues to enjoy strong support from the local community and two years ago expanded its intake to include boys. There are currently 254 students enrolled in the school.

1. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

1.1 Key Findings

- The school is in a period of transition and growth and there is evidence that the school's management and staff are committed to dealing with the opportunities and challenges that this presents.
- The school benefits from strong support from the local community, the parents, the students and the trustee.
- Students are organised in mixed-ability class groups and the levels of uptake of higher level in all subjects are consistently high.
- The formation of the guidance planning group, including its focus on student care, is very good.
- The quality of teaching and learning observed during the evaluation ranged from good to very good.
- Students' engagement varied in accordance with the teaching methodologies used. They were most active when the mix of teaching methodologies used accommodated the range of learning styles present in the class concerned.
- Senior management encourages continuous improvement of teaching and learning by promoting subject and lesson planning.

1.2 Recommendations for Further Development

- The board of management along with senior management and the teaching staff should undertake a review of curriculum provision in the context of the school's changing needs.
- The role of the tutor in the student care system should be evaluated.
- Improvements are needed with regard to the information provided to students about subject options at key transition stages including entry to post-primary and the transition from junior to senior cycle.
- Good practice in effective assessment and literacy strategies should be shared within and across subject departments and be included in subject plans.
- A wider range of strategies for active and collaborative learning should be developed and implemented.

2. QUALITY OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP

2.1 School ownership and management – the Board of Management

Composition, functioning and fulfilment of statutory obligations

The board was appointed two years ago following the transfer of the trusteeship of the school. It is properly constituted and its balanced composition has resulted in a range of expertise among its members that greatly enhances how it exercises its ongoing functions.

Given the now co-educational status of the school, the board has identified key policies as priorities for review. Among those that have been ratified already, or are currently under review, are the admissions policy, the code of behaviour and the guidance plan. Based on a comparison of the newly ratified or drafted policies with earlier versions, it is clear that considerable work has been undertaken both by the board and school staff in carrying out this task.

While the board has identified the development of the school's physical infrastructure as a priority it is also cognisant of its role in overseeing the development of the school's curriculum. It is seeking to develop capacity within the teaching staff to meet both the current needs of the school and those that would arise in the context of extending the subjects offered within the school's curriculum. The board's focus on capacity building is a positive feature of its work in supporting the development of the school.

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 school's priorities for development

The stated priorities of the board and senior management are: to upgrade facilities; to change policies in a systematic way so as to reflect the school's co-educational status including a broadening of the curriculum; to manage the health and safety issues arising from the increased student numbers in terms of access, parking and drop-off and continued liaison with the Department of Education and Skills in relation to school development.

These priorities are entirely appropriate given the needs of the school and the current and projected increase in student numbers, especially in the context of the school's co-

educational status. Work on policy development is well underway and the board and principal are in ongoing contact with the Department in relation to the development of the school's facilities.

In the interests of coherence and of having a clear focus in advancing the priority of curriculum development, it is recommended that the board of management, along with senior management and the teaching staff, articulate their long-term vision for the development of the school's curriculum. A whole-school strategy should be developed to make this vision a reality. The curriculum review should focus on the needs of all students in the school, consulting with parents as appropriate.

2.2 Effectiveness of leadership for learning

Leadership of staff

The principal was appointed two years ago and the deputy principal six years ago. In addition to progressing the school's development priorities they visibly lead learning in the school through, for example, the work of the principal in directing subject planning and the deputy principal's significant role as a classroom teacher.

The growth in student numbers and the ongoing work towards developing the school's facilities have been critical factors influencing the work of the principal and deputy principal. Also central to their evolving roles has been the management of personnel in the context of the retirement of long-serving members of the teaching staff and the recruitment of new staff. Initial work has been undertaken on drafting a teacher induction plan that focuses on areas such as student support and disciplinary structures. This plan needs to be further developed to focus on agreed whole-school approaches in the key areas of assessment and of teaching and learning strategies.

Retirements have also resulted in vacancies at middle management level that have necessitated the redistribution of existing duties. In-school management has responded to this by absorbing many additional responsibilities and prioritising student support. These changes have been supported by the voluntary involvement of many teachers especially as class tutors. Management has identified a need to up-skill a staff member in educating for special educational needs (SEN). This is a positive recognition by management that maintaining and updating teachers' knowledge, skills and competencies is critical to ensuring the highest standards of teaching and learning. In pursuing this objective it is suggested that a needs analysis be completed among staff and used to inform the development of the whole-staff continuing professional development (CPD) plan, with teaching and learning at its core.

The role of the principal has been central to leading the learning agenda within the school. In addition to her in-school role she is also significantly involved in linking with the community and promoting the school in the local area. Under the direction of the principal, a whole-school guidance planning team was formed at the start of the current school year including, amongst others, the principal, the guidance counsellor, and a learning support teacher. The team is responsible for drafting the whole-school guidance plan and reviewing other relevant policies. This team has become the de facto student-support team with the potential to work collaboratively with both senior management and staff in developing a student-support system to manage the demands that will arise from increases in student numbers. Further work of the group should set out additional detail on the roles and responsibilities of those involved in the care system and on its structures and operation.

At present the school has one assistant principal and three teachers with special duties posts. One additional assistant principal post is unfilled as the teacher is currently on career

break. The principal and deputy principal meet weekly with the assistant principal. The range of duties currently undertaken by post holders is deemed to be appropriate to the needs of the school by senior management. Future reviews of the duties of post holders should include the drafting and agreement of role descriptors for each post.

Leadership of students

A comprehensive review of the school's admissions policy has been completed in light of the changed student intake. Following a review of guidance provision in 2007 the induction process for first-year students was improved. The principal visits the feeder primary schools and an open day is held early in the school year. Later, prospective first-year students attend an induction day in the school that focuses on introducing students to the range of optional subjects. Assessment tests are conducted with first-year students in September and additional resource lessons in English and Maths are provided as appropriate.

Class groups are organised on a mixed-ability basis with setting in Irish and Mathematics from second-year. Each year incoming first-year students rank optional subjects in order of preference and the option bands are generated with the objective that students are accommodated with their first preference subject and either their second or third choice. In recent years, with small numbers of students at senior cycle, the level of choice provided to students has been limited to a large core and a small number of optional subjects but as the number of students in senior cycle increases the school envisages that there will be an increase in optional choices available to students. It is important that this remains a priority.

The student focus group interview as well as the parent and student responses to questionnaires indicated that additional information is necessary to support students in making subject choices both as incoming first years and when they transfer to senior cycle. While information is available, the format and delivery of this information should be reviewed to strengthen the support available to students and their parents when making decisions about subject choice and programme options.

The school's structures for student support have been going through a period of transition. Structural changes including the reduction in the number of post holders especially those with year head responsibilities have meant a change in the role of class tutor. While teachers have actively engaged with the role it is necessary, in the context of increased student numbers, the establishment of the guidance planning team and the revised code of behaviour, that the role of class tutor be re-defined to ensure that the changing needs of the school and students are met in the best possible way. The system whereby tutors teach the code of behaviour to students at the start of the academic year represents an excellent approach.

While the school has a small number of students with SEN, good systems exist to support students with additional needs. School management is appreciative of the voluntary support provided in this area by a nun who is a retired teacher. As more teachers take on roles in learning support it is desirable that a whole-school approach for appropriate teaching approaches be established. Among the strategies to consider are team teaching for specific interventions in relation to Mathematics and English and peer observation.

The parents' council is very supportive of the work of the school and records indicate involvement in its activities from a broad base of parents. It is organised on the basis of representatives from local clusters around the catchment area. The members identify the academic reputation of the school as a main factor in school selection but also indicate that the school's capacity to meet the needs of students with SEN is a recognised strength.

The student council members interviewed were well informed about the contribution that the council has made to the life of the school, including its ongoing role in organising the Christmas concert. The ongoing work on the development of policies provides significant opportunities to strengthen communication and consultation with students in relation to whole-school issues appropriate to them.

Students' learning is supported by the extensive involvement of teachers in a broad range of extracurricular activities.

2.3 Management of facilities

The school is generally clean and tidy despite the limitations on space. Teachers maximise the use of space and students' movement is orderly. Attention has been paid to safe movement of students including the presence of safety railing and paths to external classrooms. In addition, an awareness of safety is demonstrated by both students and teachers in specialist classrooms. A subgroup of the student council is currently involved in promoting the Green-Schools programme. This approach is good and they should pursue this agenda in the long term as many of the students have experience of green schools from the feeder primary schools.

3. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

3.1 The quality of learning and teaching

In the lessons observed during the evaluation the quality of teaching and learning ranged from good to very good. The lessons were coherent and well structured. Planning for the use of additional resources in lessons was generally good, especially in relation to information and communication technology as in a number of lessons live internet links were used. There were a number of lessons where cross-curricular links and themes were explored and developed. The physical environments of classrooms were enriched with examples of students' work, projects and subject key words. In pursuance of the promotion of general literacy, class-sets of dictionaries were available in all general classrooms. There were a number of well planned examples of collaborative learning for example, in Geography, Business Studies and Mathematics. Such good practice should be extended to all subjects.

Classes were very well managed with good student behaviour and sensitive correction of students when necessary and always within a positive framework. The lesson routines observed were good with regular checks on student attendance.

Questioning was used effectively in many lessons though the scope to maximise its use as a technique for differentiated learning should be fully exploited. Where teacher demonstration was used to introduce theory or new material it was done effectively. In addition, a number of very good examples were observed where students were facilitated in applying subject-specific skills.

Overall, the majority of the lessons were teacher-centred with a few exceptions. Interactions were mainly between students and teachers. In a number of lessons there was little, or no, student-to-student interaction. Gauging students' learning in lessons was sometimes difficult given that lessons didn't always include opportunities for the students to be heard. In a small number of lessons peer learning and support was part of the lesson structure and this was well managed. High quality learning was most evident in lessons where students were frequently asking questions and where key concepts were revisited a number of times within the lesson structure to check students' learning. Teachers did make

good efforts to cater for students' learning styles through presenting a broad and varied range of materials and resources in a number of formats. To enhance students' learning, more opportunities should be included in lessons for students to interact, to discuss content and to reflect on learning. Allowing students opportunities such as these can strengthen teachers' capacity to assess their progress as they can make judgements on the quality of students' inputs and responses.

Good practice was observed where the teachers' feedback on written homework was supported by positive verbal affirmation within lessons. In a number of lessons the quality of feedback provided was strengthened by the balance achieved between positive and developmental feedback. In many lessons the students' work was either collected for correction or annotated by the teachers within lessons. Lessons were structured to include revision and correction, including self-correction of homework completed. Students' use of the journal to record homework assigned was good. The amount and nature of written homework assigned was appropriate to learners. Where the homework task was revision or learning, consideration should be given as to how this work will be evaluated in follow-on lessons. One additional strategy for consideration in some subjects is the earlier assignment of homework in lessons so that students can clarify its relatedness to the learning outcomes.

4. IMPLEMENTATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS FROM PREVIOUS EVALUATIONS

4.1 Management

Very good progress has been made in implementing recommendations with whole-school aspects arising from previous inspection reports. A whole-school approach to subject planning is led by the principal. To the extent that it is possible, teachers of civic, social and political education (CSPE) retain class groups from second into third year and the overall time allocation to Science in junior cycle has increased by one period per week in second year. In each year of the senior cycle optional subjects are now timetabled for five periods per week, although the teacher has not been available in all instances to take the extra timetabled class due to a full teaching timetable. All classrooms have examples of student work and some subject-specific resources displayed.

4.2 Learning and Teaching

Following the inspectors' review of previous inspection reports a number of areas were selected for attention in the evaluation.

Learning objectives were shared in the majority of the lessons observed. However, there is scope to develop how these objectives are reviewed within lessons and their impact on students' learning as learning outcomes were only reviewed in a minority of the lessons.

There was scope to improve the variety in the range of active teaching methodologies used in many of the lessons observed. Where lessons were teacher-centred there were insufficient opportunities for students to actively engage with the lesson content.

A number of subject inspection reports recommended development in relation to assessment for learning and strategies for the correction of students' work. In nearly all lessons there was evidence in the students' work or in the lesson interactions, of the teachers correcting or annotating students' work, affirming students' efforts and making recommendations for improvement. A good range of developmental feedback on students' written work was evident but care should be taken to ensure that it is affirming in all cases.

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

5.1

The board and senior management's capacity for self review and evaluation is a significant strength for the school. It is best exemplified by its analysis of the school's contextual factors including enrolment patterns and its identification of priorities for development along with the processes established to action these priorities. Key to the successful implementation of the areas identified for improvement will be the engagement of staff with the developmental agenda as identified by the school's self-evaluation process, and the formalisation of systems of target setting and data monitoring. The establishment of the guidance planning group is a good example of this approach.

There are many teachers within the school who have the capacity to engage with the change agenda and ensure that strategies are developed to progress the school's development priorities. Subject departments, under the guidance of the principal, demonstrate a good capacity for review and improvement as there is a very high degree of consistency in the presentation of subject plans and schemes of work. In addition, work has commenced on incorporating literacy and numeracy strategies within plans and some good work has been done in a number of departments in this area in a short timeframe. In the case of single teacher subject departments there are some very good examples of self-review to match the reflective practice that might otherwise emerge in the context of subject department meetings.