

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

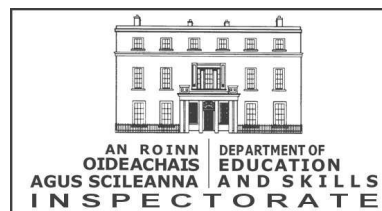
Department of Education and Skills

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

REPORT

**Mercy Secondary School
Inchicore, Dublin
Roll number: 60872A**

Date of inspection: 18 January 2012



Whole-School Evaluation Management, Leadership and Learning

A whole-school evaluation of management, leadership and learning (WSE-MLL) was undertaken in January 2012 in Mercy Secondary School, Inchicore. This report presents the findings of the evaluation and makes recommendations for improvement. During the evaluation, the inspection team met with the school's board of management, in-school management, groups of teachers, parents and students. Inspectors also reviewed a range of school documentation and responses to questionnaires and examined other data in relation to the operation of the school. As part of the evaluation, a range of lessons across a number of subject areas was inspected.

Introduction

Mercy Secondary School is a voluntary secondary school with 184 female students. It is under the trusteeship of Catholic Education, an Irish Schools Trust (CEIST) and provides post-primary education for the students from Inchicore and the surrounding area. The school currently participates in the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) initiative. The board of management of the school was given an opportunity to comment on the findings and recommendations of the report; the board chose to accept the report without response.

1. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

1.1 Key Findings

- The present board of management is well placed to continue the effective leadership and management of the school.
- Good work has been completed by the outgoing board of management in progressing school development planning in addition to other aspects of school management.
- Senior management has successfully empowered staff and students to contribute to overall school development.
- The strong ethos of care and compassion for students is reflected in the range of academic and pastoral supports provided.
- The overall quality of teaching and learning was good or very good.
- The work of the board, senior management and staff and their engagement with the recent whole-school review reflects the school community's willingness and capacity to engage in a meaningful self-evaluation process.

1.2 Recommendations for Further Development

- Year head duties should include mentoring and the tracking of students' academic progress to complement the strong ethos of care for students' personal development.
- Strategies to further improve student attendance and to increase the uptake of higher level in certificate examinations should be prioritised as part of a whole school initiative to raise academic attainment.
- In relation to teaching and learning, active methodologies to engage students in their own learning should be further developed.

2. QUALITY OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP

2.1 School ownership and management – the Board of Management

The composition of the recently appointed board of management, with its blend of experience and professional knowledge, is such as to ensure continuity in the effective leadership and management of the school. The minutes of recent meetings indicate that the previous board of management was kept informed of all school activities and demonstrated an awareness of the needs of students and staff. The board also supported a range of initiatives introduced to promote school improvement and to facilitate ongoing professional development for teachers. There has also been a praiseworthy focus on maintaining good communications with all those involved in the educational welfare of its students. This is reflected in the issuing of an agreed statement following all board meetings to both the teaching staff and to the parents' association and in the positive links forged within the local community. These good practices are set to continue with the present board of management.

Both the outgoing and present boards of management have dealt with matters relating to the school finances, the maintenance of the school plant and relevant aspects of day-to-day management. Discussion of school development planning has also formed part of the agenda at board meetings. Updates on policy development and review are provided to the board and, when completed, policies are ratified. It is recommended once a policy has been ratified that all previous versions be deleted or archived in a separate folder. The main focus of school development planning at recent meetings has been the progress of the DEIS plan.

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 boards of management and senior management have been proactive in identifying a number of areas for development. A whole-school review involving the board, staff, students and parents has been initiated as a first step in bringing to fruition a strategic vision for the future of the school. Priorities identified to date include the development of a five and a ten year plan for the school and the progression of the DEIS plan for the next three-year cycle.

The parents' association, although small in numbers, is supportive of school management and is committed to improving the overall welfare of the students in the school. Parental involvement is a key factor in motivating students and raising attainment. School management and the current members of the association should therefore explore ways to increase membership of the parents association.

2.2 Effectiveness of leadership for learning

Leadership of staff

Senior management, comprising of the principal and deputy principal, provides strong and dynamic leadership for all members of the school community. The principal sees her role as future oriented, planning for the emerging needs of the school, while the deputy principal concentrates more on the day-to-day management tasks. Much of their work in recent years has focused on creating an environment which enables teachers to take on increased ownership of school development and improvement. This supports effective leadership and

management, in addition to providing teachers with opportunities for their own professional development.

Posts of responsibility have been reviewed and positions of heads of junior and senior cycle, entitled year heads, have been established for the purpose of developing a more meaningful middle management structure. The year heads, both of whom are assistant principals, currently work with the class tutors and the members of the care team to ensure that students presenting with problems of a disciplinary or pastoral nature are appropriately managed. Weekly timetabled meetings have resulted in greater consultation between senior management and assistant principals. Special duties post holders contribute to the effective management of the school through the range of administrative and co-ordination duties carried out. Non-post holders have also been encouraged to take on a range of responsibilities. Steering committees such as the school development planning team and the curriculum committee are further evidence of distributed leadership in practice. It is good that teachers with varied experience and from a number of disciplines are members of these committees.

Leadership of students

As a single-sex voluntary secondary school, Mercy Secondary School welcomes all girls who wish to enrol in the school. The school offers a range of programmes to meet the varied needs of the student cohort. The success to date of the Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP) in supporting student progress and retention has resulted in a decision to offer it to all students in junior cycle. Transition Year (TY) is compulsory for all students who intend to take the established Leaving Certificate programme. The Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme is also offered. Students expressed satisfaction with both of these programmes during the course of a meeting between the inspectors and a student focus group.

The curriculum currently offered includes a range of compulsory subjects in junior cycle with a small number of optional subjects. A committee has been established for the purpose of reviewing curriculum provision in light of proposed changes at junior cycle. It is recommended that this committee progress its work by firstly assessing how current provision meets the needs of the student cohort. As part of this review, consideration should be given to introducing a taster programme to support students when making subject choices. There is good allocation of time and timetabling provision for most subjects.

Students are timetabled for a weekly tutorial class with their class tutor who deals with relevant issues and supports their personal development. This is in addition to Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) for each year group. Roll call is also taken by the tutor each morning prior to students moving to their classes. While the provision of designated tutor time is good practice in supporting students' holistic development, the allocation of one class period each week is impacting on time for other subjects. It is thus recommended that the tutorial class period be replaced by a formal ten minute tutorial time each morning for roll call and for dealing with tutorial related issues. This would ensure tutors' daily contact with the students in addition to maximizing time for the delivery of the curriculum.

The school's code of behaviour is set out in terms of an overall statement in relation to what is expected of students and the sanctions for breaches of the code. There is a ladder of referral in place to address issues of indiscipline. While the code reflects a positive approach to discipline, the findings of the student questionnaires indicate that only a minority felt that all students were treated fairly. In order to address this issue, the current code of behaviour should be reviewed and the school rules should be articulated in simple terms of behaviour that reflects respect for oneself, one's peers and for those in authority.

In this way students, will learn that the school rules support a life-skills approach to appropriate behaviour.

An examination of the school's returns to the National Education Welfare Board (NEWB) indicates high levels of absenteeism among students. The school has made good effort to address this issue, through the introduction of the e-portal system for roll call, the texting system to inform parents of student absence and the appointment of an attendance officer in the school. The recently-appointed Home School Liaison co-ordinator (HSCL) is also introducing initiatives to encourage parents to come into the school. It is hoped that greater parental involvement in the school will, in time, improve student attendance. While some progress is noted in the most recent returns regarding absences of over twenty days, the number of casual absences has increased. Further strategies are thus needed as absenteeism can impact negatively on students' academic progress. A more detailed analysis of absences identifying the student cohort and year group most at risk, and the days of greatest absenteeism is recommended. This should then inform school management and staff as to where more targeted strategies are needed.

A member of staff has recently qualified as a guidance counsellor. This has facilitated the delivery of guidance at senior cycle through timetabled lessons. It also affords time for counselling and for guidance interventions in junior cycle. The current guidance plan relates to the delivery of guidance as a subject. A whole school guidance plan should also be developed linking up guidance with the delivery of SPHE and related services such as the additional counselling supports provided in the school. The presence of a guidance service should also help students make more informed subject choices.

There is good provision for the delivery of learning support and resource teaching through the creation of a small core team. The preferred option for assisting students with literacy needs is through in-class support and team teaching, where possible. A similar approach has been adopted for mathematics support. Sixth-year students with additional numeracy needs have an additional mathematics lesson each week. Special needs assistants (SNA) provide additional support to individual or small groups of students within the classroom for all general subjects.

A care team, comprising senior management, year heads, the guidance counsellor and the HSCL coordinator, meets each week to discuss students' behavioural and personal needs and to refer them on to the relevant personnel or external agencies where appropriate. Given the depth of concern for students' personal well-being, it is recommended that the year head duties be revised to focus more on students' academic progress, which in turn would complement this strong ethos of care. Mentoring and the tracking of students' academic progress from entry into the school, coupled with a range of motivational study supports are recommended to improve student attendance and engagement and result in enhanced academic outcomes.

Students are also afforded a range of leadership opportunities. A properly constituted student council is in place and procedures have been established for reporting back to students. The officers of the student council meet with senior management to discuss how issues raised at meetings might be resolved. Members of the student council have also been consulted about policies of relevance to them. The findings from the student questionnaires are very positive in relation to the questions about having a say in making the school a better place. A student prefect system is in place to support incoming first-year students. Appreciation of this provision was mentioned by students from all year groups.

The school participates in initiatives organised by some of the universities and third level institutions to encourage greater student progression into further education. Students are

introduced to these institutions as early as first year in school and this has resulted in an increased number of students progressing to third-level education in recent years.

2.3 Management of facilities

The school is very well maintained. Classrooms are teacher based and attractive subject-specific environments were evident in many classrooms to support student learning. Recent grants for information and communication technology (ICT) have been used to upgrade facilities and to facilitate the integration of ICT into teaching and learning. Investment in the school library, the deployment of a part-time librarian and the availability of a wide range of books ensure that all students are afforded opportunities to develop a love of reading thereby enhancing their knowledge and literacy skills. Students are also made aware of their environmental responsibilities and they are currently working to achieve their first green flag.

3. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

3.1 The quality of learning and teaching

The quality of teaching was good or very good in the majority of lessons observed. Areas identified for improvement in a small number of lessons included greater use of active methodologies to engage students in the learning process. Most lessons were well structured and planned. Teachers began by sharing learning outcomes with the students. Good practice was also noted where the learning outcomes were revisited prior to the end of the lesson.

Best practice was noted in lessons where a good balance was maintained between teacher instruction and student activity and where learning activities were well-planned with effective higher-order questioning, active methodologies, purposeful class discussion, and developmental feedback to students. Language lessons were most effective where students were afforded opportunities to use the target language themselves. Ongoing use of these methodologies is recommended in all subject areas in order to challenge students and optimise academic outcomes.

There was good use of resources in many lessons. ICT supported learning when used to initiate class discussions through the projection of resources such as graphic organizers, visuals, and explanatory diagrams. The judicious use of ICT should be further exploited in order to enhance teaching, address various learning styles, build up students' knowledge and engender greater enthusiasm for the subject.

There was good classroom management in all lessons. Students applied themselves to the work in hand and engaged well with the tasks assigned. Homework was assigned in most of the lessons observed, but a review of some student journals suggests that students are not recording these assignments. According to the findings of the student questionnaires, homework is regularly assigned. However, a significant minority of students disagreed with the statement that homework is regularly corrected. This needs to be addressed.

An analysis of outcomes in the state examinations indicates a need for greater vigilance concerning the uptake of levels, particularly at Junior Certificate. To ensure that all students are taking levels most appropriate to their ability and to achieving their full potential, teachers should conduct an annual analysis of student outcomes, looking at trends for each subject and benchmarking individual outcomes against their other subjects.

4. IMPLEMENTATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS FROM PREVIOUS EVALUATIONS

Six subject inspections have taken place since 2006. Recommendations arising from the inspections included improvements in subject planning, the sharing of learning outcomes, the use of more active methodologies and the development or implementation of assessment protocols to improve attainment.

4.1 Management

School management has facilitated the implementation of many of the recommendations made in inspection reports. There is better allocation of time for English in first year and for junior-cycle Physical Education. However, the allocation of time for senior-cycle Physical Education still needs to be addressed. The health and safety recommendations contained in the Science report, the continued provision of History as a senior-cycle option and the building of capacity within the History department have also been addressed.

Learning and Teaching

The recommendation to include learning outcomes in subject plans and to share them with the students has become part of whole-school policy and this was evident in most of the lessons observed. Teachers reported that the other recommendations relating to subject planning have been implemented and have resulted in improvements in both planning and classroom practice. All subject departments should now ensure that their subject plans and schemes of work reflect the learning outcomes to be achieved. They should also document the proposed methodologies, resources and assessment protocols to be used. This will enable them to evaluate their work and, where necessary, to amend their plans and practices in order to optimise the overall quality of teaching and learning.

While the use of active methodologies was evident in many of the lessons observed, there is still scope for development in some instances. To this end, school management should communicate the generic findings and recommendations from all future subject inspections to the entire teaching staff, and, where necessary, relevant in-service should be provided to ensure that best practice is implemented in the classroom.

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

The leadership style of senior management and the subsequent empowerment of teachers in the management of change reflect the school's capacity for ongoing improvement. This is further enhanced by the energy and commitment of many teachers in their efforts to improve classroom practice and to provide additional services for their students. The whole-school review recently undertaken also indicates the school community's willingness to evaluate its own policies and practices and where necessary to bring about change that will enhance the educational experience of its students. The outcomes of this review carried out by an external facilitator, and the findings and recommendations arising from this evaluation help the school progress its own self-evaluation process. The school is well placed to engage in a meaningful and fruitful self-evaluation process.

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