

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

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

REPORT

**Portumna Community School
Portumna, County Galway
Roll number: 914130**

Date of inspection: 7 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 Portumna 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, 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

Portumna Community School operates under the joint trusteeship of Clonfert diocese and County Galway Vocational Education Committee (VEC). It serves the town of Portumna and its rural hinterland. The school was established in 1990, an amalgamation of a vocational school and a voluntary secondary school. Enrolment is currently 424 students. The curriculum affords access to cultural, academic, scientific and technological subjects. A range programmes facilitates students of differing aptitudes; a post-Leaving Certificate course is also offered. The school supports students with special educational needs and an enabled-education class for students with mild to moderate learning handicap. The board of management was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the report, and the response of the board will be found in the appendix of this report.

1. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

1.1 Key Findings

- The school is well managed. The principal provides insightful and effective leadership.
- The school is well thought of by students and their parents, and has strong profile in the local community.
- The teaching staff are committed to the school and to the pastoral and academic well being of all its students.
- The students are very well managed. They represent themselves through an active students' council.

1.2 Recommendations for Further Development

- An action plan for the development of the school to be drafted by the board and senior management, in order to complete the required statutory school plan.
- Revisit the principles of Transition Year (TY) to ensure appropriateness of content and methodology, and to reduce the current over-emphasis on Leaving Certificate curriculum.
- The principal's role to include actively managing the development of aspects of the school that have a direct impact on learning and to ensure improvement and progress in this regard.
- Senior management to take a lead in prioritising improvement in teaching and learning through upgrading subject department planning culture.
- The board to develop more engagement with teaching and learning policy making.

- Games should be decoupled from physical education and a review of the timetable on foot of this necessary adjustment should be prioritised.
- Review of post holders' duties to better serve the current and future developmental needs of the school. An annual report should be sent to the board by every post holder as a resumé of events and issues.

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 of management is appropriately constituted. Some members have received training, and several have served on successive boards. The board collaborates closely with senior management; communication between them is good. The board is well informed of in-school issues by the principal.

Board meetings are regular; records of these are made and retained. Although agreed minutes are prepared, it is recommended that more effective communicating of these to the generality of parents is devised.

Extensive redrafting is currently ongoing on the code of behaviour. This work is now near completion. Commendably, participation of the school community was apparent in this task. To develop such good practice further, a cycle of revision and update should be devised for all policies.

Generally, the board is directed by the principal. While the board is active and conscientious, it should become more informed and involved with the academic aspects of school life. The board evaluates the success of the school largely on state examination results; it should inform itself of the school's academic profile in more detail.

Educational leadership comes from the principal rather than the board. There is significant scope for a changed approach here and for educational leadership to become integral to the board's role. It is recommended that the board contribute to the long-term development and improvement of the school's educational dimension in the same way that it has been assiduously attentive to improvement of the physical resources and surroundings of the school, which now provide good conditions for teaching, learning and extracurricular activities.

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 (including all new 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

The following are identified by the school as areas for development: refinement and elaboration of tracking and reporting procedures, up to and including the annual report; the new special class; and updating of the school plan by inclusion of policies under

development, including renewing the enrolment policy. These identified areas are not as clear as they might be and lack any well-defined strategy for accomplishing them.

The school plan is incomplete, as no developmental strategy is documented. However, a full range of policies is in place. These policies act as a good permanent blueprint for the operation of the school. A briefly-stated school development action plan should now be drafted, in order to fulfil statutory requirements and to act as a benchmark for school improvement. This action plan should detail development priorities for the duration of the current board's tenure. It is recommended that this action is prioritized.

In general, the board and senior management aspire to ensure the continuance of current courses and services, to raise outcomes for students, and to ensure growth in uptake of third-level opportunities. In relation to student outcomes, the processes by which this is to be achieved needs more focussed planning. Expanding student horizons, experience and expectations is a priority that now needs incremental strategies.

2.2 Effectiveness of leadership for learning

Leadership of staff

Good management of staff has resulted in a positive and pleasant school atmosphere which facilitates the achievement of high standards. The principal has led in policy development and revision, team building, and extending the capacity and professionalism of teaching staff. The role of the recently appointed deputy principal is still evolving in relation to the school's needs, but is currently focussed on management-level interaction with staff and students, and on teaching.

The principal and deputy principal provide good direction and support for staff in their teaching and pastoral roles. A mentoring programme is in place for new staff and a *Staff Resource Handbook* supports the organisation and delivery of academic and pastoral services. Regular staff days are provided and continuing professional development is accessed. Senior management has affirmed the work ethic and dedication of the staff, who are professional, capable and dedicated.

Assistant principals have regular meetings, support senior management and contribute valuably to the school. Following the reduction in the number of posts available, a review of the duties of all post-holders is now strongly recommended. A balanced and equitable allocation of duties to posts needs to be achieved. It is recommended that all post holders furnish a yearly report to the board documenting the achievements and challenges of their post.

A review of the deployment of staff in their academic roles is now also necessary. Traditionally, the school has provided time slots for games and school-team training within the tuition timetable. This has a knock-on effect on scheduling of the curriculum throughout the whole timetable and an undesirable loss of correct deployment of staff. It is not appropriate that the loss of class time for curricular subjects due to frontloading games should continuously affect so many students. It is therefore recommended that Physical Education (PE) be decoupled from games training. A PE programme should be delivered by appropriately qualified personnel.

Good arrangements are in place for formal pastoral-care personnel meetings, and these are supported by many informal meetings. A ladder of referral is found in the revised code of conduct, applicable to all students. Students with special educational needs are referred using the year head and SEN coordinator arrangements in place. All staff involved in counselling students should attend supervision, as per regulations. The mentoring programme should include more contact between principal and teachers in class, in order to

ensure highest quality delivery of subjects across all subject departments. An emphasis for leadership needs now to be on subject department effectiveness, sharing of established good practice, the universal implementation of subject inspection recommendations across all subject departments, and general advancement of planning culture. It is recommended that senior management now proactively promulgate modernising approaches. Commendably, there is an academic advisory group to monitor and develop learning and achievement in the school. Attention needs to be paid to the appropriateness of the deployment of teachers to TY, especially where the capacity to use varied teaching methodologies is concerned.

Arrangements are underway to install an e-portal system which will make redundant the morning tutorial period, thereby freeing up considerable teacher time for curricular subjects. Further leadership opportunities will arise on foot of e-portal usage; these are likely to be utilised to improve student outcomes.

The new special class is evidence of long-term attention to the needs of students with special educational needs. Further development of this provision, in terms of wider local needs, has been planned for. This plan is due to culminate in a purpose-adapted unit later this year.

Some students are allowed to opt out of the study of a continental language, because the University of Limerick and some other colleges do not require it as a condition of entry. The educational acceptability of a continental language being optional from second year onwards as school policy now needs to be reviewed.

Leadership of students

Leadership of students is of high quality. In questionnaires and interviews, students were positive about school life. There is strong agreement amongst parents that the school is well run, that home-school communication is good and that discipline is effective.

The curriculum offered in the school is broad, and is reviewed in the light of changing staffing situations. Management tries to facilitate students' subject choices, though the potential to offer two European languages is diminishing. An empowering range of programmes are offered in an effort to differentially address student needs, and to aid student progression and retention. Provision for students with special educational needs is well planned and resourced. The assisted-learning class is evidence of the management's attention to the needs of all students.

The school has an open admission policy. Good communication and information-gathering systems with its feeder schools are in place. First-year students are not offered a taster programme. This has later subject-choice and vocational-path implications; it is recommended that the school review this issue.

There is a good guidance programme, and students have access to personal counselling. Information nights about first-year and senior cycle subjects are much appreciated by parents.

The successful promotion of high behaviour standards in the school is commendable. In the last five years, improvement in student-behaviour management has been achieved; School rules are clearly stated and are understood by the students. Familiarity with the rules by students is actively promoted. Very good student conduct was witnessed during the evaluation. The principal and deputy principal maintain high levels of supervision. Effective procedures for daily monitoring of attendance are in place. It is commendable that an attendance strategy is in development. The National Education Welfare Board (NEWB)

returns were not available for recent years. The making of returns to the NEWB is now the duty of a new post holder. There are relatively few suspensions of students from the school.

Parents testify that management and staff take great interest in students' needs, progress, development and success; that students are supported well in their learning, and that there is a successful state-examinations profile. After-school study is provided during the week and also on Saturdays, from January onwards, for third and sixth year students. This provision supports students in the necessary continuity in study patterns for effective learning, particularly for students in examination years. The emphasis on study opportunities is part of a developing whole-school culture of increasing attainment and outcomes for students. Subject department planning for homework needs to focus on its type, appropriateness and ultimate aims as part of students' learning efficacy; this should be part of increasing learning outcomes. Study-skills courses have been provided but need to be available at every stage of a students' career, not only during examination years.

There is good social and personal support for students. School masses and awards ceremonies affirm belongingness and success. A student buddy system operates, providing peer support and building leadership capacity amongst senior students. Pro-social attitudes prevail. Every year the -Leaving Certificate students make a significant gift to the school, reflecting their appreciation.

A student council is in place. Its members have been facilitated to access training, meet regularly, and they have a liaison teacher, all which enhances their potential as a positive element of school life. The council has brought its influence to bear on school uniform enhancement and adoption of a healthy-eating canteen menu. Questionnaire responses revealed that students generally don't feel that they have a significant voice; it is recommended that this be addressed.

2.3 Management of facilities

Good use is made of existing facilities to allow optimal and effective educational activity. Summer work schemes have upgraded the buildings.

General cleaning and maintenance is good. Atria and courtyards are well kept and aesthetically pleasing. A purpose-designed oratory has been created. The specialist classrooms are well utilised and maintained.

Racks have been fitted to hold schoolbags ensuring safety in corridors. The construction of an outdoor loggia to accommodate lockers has facilitated management of crowds indoors.

The school has constantly supported subjects through upgrading the necessary equipment and plant. Investment in information and communication technology (ICT) has been significant and ongoing.

3. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

3.1 The quality of learning and teaching

During the evaluation, twenty classes were observed in thirteen subjects across a wide range of subjects. Considerable variety in quality of the lessons applied. Teaching and learning were good or very good in a majority of lessons. The remaining lessons were fair to weak.

Very good lessons were characterised by strong planning, integration of stimulating and appropriate teaching resources, a focus on learning outcomes, and integrated assessment. In such lessons students were engaged and active, and the different needs and aptitudes of the

group were catered for. Exceptionally good music and art lessons were seen, and a TY English class made impressive use of ICT.

Where teaching was less than good, it tended to be overly textbook driven, failed to stimulate student interest, and the focus on learning outcomes was marginal. There was an imbalance between teacher talk and student talk and a passive, though dutiful, class atmosphere prevailed. There was generally little emphasis on higher-order skills development. Often, no new material was presented. To counter these shortcomings, more attention to facilitation of learning through interest and stimulation, active methodologies, and differentiation needs to be frontloaded in subject department planning. It is recommended that senior management take a proactive stance in prioritising improvement in teaching and learning through a variety of strategies designed to enhance good practice and remediate undistinguished teaching and learning. Dissemination of good practice across teachers and departments should be prioritised. Very good practice identified in subject inspection should be disseminated across subject departments. It is recommended that literacy and numeracy strengthening approaches are embedded in all subject department plans.

Parents contended that too many class periods were spent being supervised as study periods due to teachers being away for games, or being absent. They also stated that better time management of Leaving Certificate project work by teachers would facilitate necessary final-term homework revision opportunities for all other subjects. Both these significant observations need to be examined by senior management and the board.

Developing engagement with learning in subjects for students at the lower end of the aptitude and engagement spectrum needs to commence early in courses. An emphasis on the broad skills required by syllabuses should become the focus in department planning. Overemphasis on State Examinations Commission (SEC) requirements too early in courses should be avoided. Senior management is committed to embedding differentiation across the curriculum and such leadership will potentially improve habitual classroom practice. A strong ICT background has been established in the school and it is recommended that this is further utilised in the teaching and learning continuum.

Leadership in challenging the traditional gender profiles of various subjects needs to be strengthened. It is recommended that gender becomes a topic for the academic advisory group, and for career guidance. The board should be apprised annually of progress in gender mainstreaming.

Drama and European Studies are among the successes of the TY programme. Leadership that brings the aims and objectives proper to TY back into clear focus in those subjects where it has defaulted, and renders TY significantly less dependant on Leaving Certificate content in all subjects, needs to be prioritised.

4. IMPLEMENTATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS FROM PREVIOUS EVALUATIONS

4.1 Management

School responses to published reports show school management taking these seriously and following through with appropriate actions. For example, maps are in place now for Geography. All key recommendations are in the process of being implemented except for the first year taster programme; it is recommended that this be further considered in the light of longitudinal improvement of student outcomes.

4.2 Learning and Teaching

Lesson observation in the course of the evaluation suggests that while some of the recommendations are being implemented by individual teachers, many of the same recommendations need to be made all over again to a different set of teachers. It is recommended that subject department action plans be devised to ensure follow through on advice in subject inspection recommendations, with regular reviews of progress. In general, more emphasis in planning documentation on explicit statements of learning outcomes linked with content is required, as is the need for greater emphasis on active teaching methodologies

In future, more direct review of how the recommendations in school inspection reports have been implemented and how planning documentation has been upgraded should be pursued by senior management. The board should also be aware of how these recommendations are being applied to habitual classroom and department practice through a report by the subject departments and the principal.

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

The principal's attitudes and approaches to school functioning and operation in all its facets are a key enabling factor in school evaluation and improvement. The deputy principal's holistic approach to education complements this and their joint professional openness augurs well for self evaluation and improvement. The principal's productive relationship and communication patterns with the board, post holders and staff ensure that facets of school operation are constantly being evaluated. The academic advisory group are a key part of the school's own evaluation of its academic efficiency.

Further leadership opportunities that will arise on foot of e-portal usage are seen by the principal as significant for development and innovation in the school. The positive attitudes, professionalism and skills discernible amongst the teaching staff are a most positive indicator of the capacity in-house for school improvement. Motivating the staff to further adopt modernised approaches to learning, to focus on skills rather than content in first year, and to revise approaches to teaching and learning in TY, however challenging, will build on the good practices already evident. However, it is clearly discernible that the professionalism and good work ethic that has been developed overall will be empowering to the further development of self evaluation and to innovation now imminent in the school.

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 accepts in good faith the WSE-MLL report with some misgivings in relation to the feasibility of implementing all the recommendations due to the recent cutbacks affecting key staff and management personnel.

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 Board of Management has decided to address the recommendations through an action plan which has been drafted to complete the school development plan and to address matters raised:

Teaching and Learning: The Board is setting up a sub-committee to prepare policy to be completed by mid-March 2012 and to liaise with staff who will begin work on upgrading subject planning thereafter.

Games and PE: Due to the impossibility of re-timetabling the school during the year the Principal will review the feasibility of the recommendation and report to the Board at its May 2012 meeting.

Transition Year: Teachers will review practice against the guidelines and adapt if needed. This will be completed by June 2012.

Post Holders: Re-assignment of some posts is underway in keeping with the new agreed schedule and further discussions and re-assignments are pending.