

**An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna**

**Department of Education and Skills**

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

**REPORT**

**Ashbourne Community School  
County Meath  
Roll number: 91495T**

**Date of inspection: 17 April 2013**



**AN ROINN OIDEACHAIS  
AGUS SCILEANNA** | **DEPARTMENT OF  
EDUCATION  
AND SKILLS**  
**I N S P E C T O R A T E**

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

A whole-school evaluation of management, leadership and learning (WSE-MLL) was undertaken in April, 2013 in Ashbourne Community School. This report presents the findings of the evaluation and makes recommendations for improvement. During the evaluation, the inspection team met with the school's board of management, in-school management, and groups of teachers, parents and students. Inspectors also reviewed a range of school documentation and responses to questionnaires and examined other data in relation to the operation of the school. As part of the evaluation, a range of lessons across a number of subject areas was inspected. The board 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.

### ***Introduction***

Ashbourne Community School will celebrate its twenty years in existence in 2014. It is a co-educational school, multi-denominational in ethos, which operates under the joint patronage of County Meath Vocational Education Committee and the Catholic Bishop of Meath. A 2002 extension increased capacity to 1,000 students, and current enrolment stands at 1,026. A sports hall and a three-classroom extension were under construction at the time of the evaluation.

A broad curriculum is provided, offering almost all programmes. These include the Junior Certificate, established Leaving Certificate, Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA), and Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP). The optional Transition Year (TY) programme attracts a high uptake. An adult education programme is also provided.

The school welcomes the development of a second post-primary school locally, planned for 2014, as it will relieve demand for places.

## **SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT**

### ***Key Findings***

- The board of management is very effective and provides good support for the senior management team.
- The senior management team provides very effective and cohesive leadership for the school.
- Leadership for learning is of high quality and is a well-established and inherent part of the culture of the school.
- Almost all lessons visited were of high quality, and included examples of excellent practice.
- In a number of lessons deliberate efforts were made to develop independent learners by providing opportunities for collaborative and reflective learning.
- There is significant capacity and enthusiasm among the staff at all levels to use reflective practices to inform school improvement plans.

### ***Recommendations for Further Development***

- The board is urged to consider providing an annual report on the operation and performance of the school, with particular reference to the achievement of objectives as set out in the school plan.

- The senior management team should consider a more formalised approach to professional dialogue with, and affirmation of, teachers.
- Care should be taken to review the outcomes of piloted strategies and to plan for successful whole-school implementation across subject departments and on a whole-school basis, as appropriate.
- The time is opportune to further explore strategies to support exceptionally able students.

## **1. QUALITY OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP**

### ***1.1 School ownership and management***

The board of management is very effective, has a high profile within the school community, and provides good support for the senior management team. Board meetings are regular, well attended, and minutes indicate a full awareness of current issues, policy review functions, and targets for development.

The board fully supports the principal in the day-to-day management of the school and indicated full confidence in the quality of senior-management leadership. The board supports the areas for school improvement and development identified through the school planning process.

An agreed report of board meetings, for early transmission by representatives of parents and teachers, is suggested. The board is also urged to consider providing an annual report on the operation and performance of the school, with particular reference to the achievement of objectives as set out in the school plan.

The admissions policy merits further review and would benefit from greater clarification in respect of: the number of places available, financial contributions, the scope and nature of interview processes, and avenues of appeal.

A very good partnership exists with the active parent body which includes teachers in its structure. A high level of trust is evident between the association and the senior management team. Good communication from the school and accessibility of management and staff members received a high endorsement from parents.

The senior management team provides very effective and cohesive leadership for the school. Its members are also active in contributing their expertise and experience at national level in the context of continuing professional development programmes for existing and aspiring school leaders. The team is well organised, holds scheduled meetings twice a week, and implements a partnership approach to encouraging responsibility and developing leadership capacity among the staff. This approach is both well received and productive.

Devolving responsibility for the management and implementation of initiatives to volunteering teachers indicates a strong commitment by senior management to the development of leadership capacity. The very high approval rate among parents of how well the school is run is a further positive indicator of the quality of leadership.

There are several very good examples of staff members who are committed to significant areas of responsibility beyond the post-of-responsibility structure. These include subject co-ordinators, the Green Schools initiative, homework club, school tours, Junior Cycle reform and involvement in many extracurricular activities.

The middle-management team is assigned to relevant and appropriate duties with encouragement to develop the roles further. At assistant-principal level there is a close involvement with senior management. Frequent meetings of year heads, and direct and equal involvement of both deputy principals in the discipline line of referral, ensure a high level of communication and cooperation.

Duties attaching to posts of responsibility are reviewed from time to time to ensure that they are meeting the needs of the school. The staff is involved, as appropriate, in these discussions. This is a healthy and appropriate review mechanism. Ongoing evaluation of the relevance of posts of responsibility and of the quality of work undertaken by post-holders is facilitated through meetings with the principal at the start and at the end of the year.

The rotation of duties is also encouraged and the switch of duties from year head to school development planning (SDP) is a significant example of encouraging post-holders to broaden their experience. A more formalised approach to providing an annual report or self-reflection on the performance of their duties and opportunities to indicate interest in future roles would provide a path to diversification and renewal for holders of posts of responsibility.

### ***1.2 Effectiveness of leadership for learning***

Leadership for learning is of high quality and is an inherent part of the school culture. Senior management has led this development and there has been a conscious shift towards effecting improvement in the quality of teaching and learning.

Staff members are assigned, in almost all cases, to teach subjects in which they are appropriately qualified. Senior management keeps informed of teachers' professional performance, may visit lessons of newly-appointed teachers, and strongly promotes and supports continuing professional development (CPD).

Affirmation is provided to staff informally, and accountability for professional performance is expected. There would be merit in the senior management team considering a more formalised approach to professional dialogue with, and affirmation of, teachers without loss to the positive relations evident between senior management and staff.

Induction of newly-qualified teachers (NQTs) and mentoring and liaison of PGDE students are important functions assigned to the two deputy principals. Substitute teachers are, commendably, given the opportunity to shadow colleagues. It is important that all available professional supports are provided to substitute teachers, and that interventions are made where the need arises.

Particular emphasis is placed on improving the quality of subject department planning and on having all new initiatives anchored in those plans. Some subject department plans are exemplary and demonstrate a reflective and progressive approach to teaching and learning. Best practice is seen where plans focus on skills development and learning outcomes that are linked to curricular content, timeframes, resources, teaching methodologies and assessment. All subject plans should continue to be developed using this approach.

The SDP process is firmly established, well co-ordinated at assistant-principal level, and strongly led by senior management. Planning has moved beyond the production of required policies and members of staff are actively engaged in action planning for improvement in teaching and learning.

The school plan provides an excellent record of progress to date and includes strategies and timeframes to review the many areas that form the school's agreed priorities. The benefits of this proactive approach are seen in the school's active engagement with change and the collegiality that has been engendered among members of staff. Commendably, the school is involved nationally as a pilot school both in school self-evaluation (SSE) and in Junior Cycle reform.

At many points during the evaluation, inspectors encountered staff members who were involved in initiatives designed to enhance learning and the learning experience of students. Among these were teachers with a particular focus on assessment for learning (AfL), academic tracking of students in specific subject areas, a study skills programme, and preparing for embedding the key skills of Junior Cycle reform specifications into teaching and learning practice. These initiatives will be evaluated in line with action planning principles.

Another project operating with one group of third-year students has the commendable aim of optimising A, B, and C grades in the Junior Certificate examination. The full implications of setting aside mixed-ability class formations should be considered in the evaluation stage of this project.

The development of the science department website and the involvement of parents and students in the ongoing electronic monitoring of student performance, and in completing assignments, is another example of staff members demonstrating leadership for learning.

The school has an extremely busy and ambitious agenda of priorities for development in the area of learning. Given the diversity of initiatives and the potential for overlap, it will be important to take time to review the outcomes of piloted strategies and to plan for successful implementation across subjects departments and on a whole-school basis, as appropriate.

Attention to the needs of students is evident in the development of the curriculum and in the transparent process of forming optional subject bands. Japanese and Agricultural Science are recent additions to the senior cycle curriculum and Chinese language and society is provided as a Transition Year module, complemented by a recent visit by students to China.

The school is fully compliant with providing students with twenty-eight instructional hours. The school has made all reasonable efforts to maintain subjects that attract low numbers. German at senior cycle is a particular example while alternative arrangements have been made for Applied Mathematics. The profile of Physical Education (PE) at senior cycle has been strengthened with the removal of the study option formerly available.

There is a well-developed support system for students, based on considerable delegated authority to year heads who have a close connection to a team of class tutors. The care team comprises all key personnel in student-support roles and is an active body, with regular timetabled slots. Leadership in the area of special educational needs shows that significant expertise is available in the core area of teaching and learning. SEN personnel have shared teaching strategies which have wide application with the whole staff. Examples include team teaching, support teaching, and approaches to differentiation of instruction. The time is opportune to further explore strategies for exceptionally able students.

The recently approved code of behaviour was appropriately revised in line with National Educational Welfare Board (NEWB) guidelines and student representatives are of the opinion that it is operated in a fair manner. In almost all cases throughout the course of the evaluation, inspectors observed very positive student-teacher relationships. The smooth and ordered movement of 1,000 students throughout the single-floor building was also

noteworthy. Aggregated student questionnaire responses to the perception of fairness in the treatment of all students may warrant further reflection on the consistency and effectiveness of the implementation of the code of behaviour.

Student leadership is well promoted through the student council and student mentor, class representative, and head boy and head girl offices. In most cases the representative student roles are filled through application and interview. In view of the positive student-teacher relationship that was observed, consideration should be given to introducing students to the principles of democracy through the election of some of the student representatives by their peers.

Attendance and punctuality strategies are effective and data returns for student absences are good. A comparatively high reliance on suspension as a sanction was also indicated by data returns. The school, in collaboration with students and parents, is urged to explore alternative approaches to suspension.

Reduced guidance provision has been focused on supporting senior cycle students. Networking has been developed to provide alternative out-of-school supports. The school benefits from a chaplaincy service. Parent and student questionnaire replies point to a need to revisit students' awareness of the range of strategies in place to provide advice on subject choice.

Confirmation was provided that the board of management has formally adopted the *Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools* without modification and that the school is compliant with the requirements of the *Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools*.

### ***1.3 Management of facilities***

The management of facilities and the maintenance of the building are of a very high quality. Specialist rooms and classrooms have been upgraded through the provision of information and communications technology (ICT) resources. Summer works schemes have been availed of to maintain the building and address health and safety regulations for dust extraction. A revised health and safety statement is at draft stage and has properly involved staff members in the identification of hazards, risks, and immediate actions needed.

Environmental awareness is well established and the school is currently pursuing its sixth green flag. Recycling bins were prominent in the school, were seen to be used by students, and were well maintained.

## **2. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING**

### ***2.1 The quality of learning and teaching***

Almost all of the twenty-six lessons visited were of high quality, and included examples of excellent practice. A few lessons indicated scope for development and a need for greater impact on student learning.

Planning and preparation were very well addressed and lessons were well framed for both single and double periods. In most cases the learning outcomes were effectively shared with students at the start of lessons, either on the screen or handwritten on the whiteboard, and were used effectively to scaffold learning in the course of the lesson. In some instances these were differentiated in terms of what students must, should, and could learn.

In the best instances, learning was consolidated through revisiting the planned learning outcomes in the course of and towards the end of the lesson. There is scope to develop the concept of learning outcomes by clearly distinguishing them from lesson content. This would enable clear communication of what students will be reasonably expected to achieve in the course of the lesson. There is also room in the planning of lessons to achieve a closer alignment of the learning outcomes with assessment strategies used in class.

ICT was used effectively as a teaching tool in most lessons. In one particularly successful lesson, this included using quality resources quickly sourced from the internet, and encouraging students to make further use of these at home. The good use of visualisers by teachers was noted in some instances and LCA students were seen to make very good use of fizzbooks. Good quality handouts that supported learning had been prepared in many instances and were used to good effect.

Many lessons began with a focused revision of previously covered material while making links to the next stage in learning. This was established through brisk questioning that allowed students to display understanding and recall and introduced a positive note early in the lesson.

Questioning strategies were for the most part very well varied to include factual recall and to display deeper understanding. In some instances there was insufficient challenge, both in the level of questioning and in the short time devoted to it, particularly where very able students were present. As strategies for differentiation have been well addressed in teacher CPD this should become an integral part of planning for lessons.

In a number of lessons deliberate efforts were made to develop independent learners by providing opportunities for collaborative and reflective learning. In a particularly good example, students were asked to describe the method used by them for learning and analysing a written text. LCA students showed familiarity with the scan, question, read strategy to support self-directed learning when reading a new text.

Excellent attention to literacy was noted in some lessons but across the range of lessons this varied. Best practice included the development of a subject-specific language register and exploring students' understanding of words both within the lesson context and in general application.

Students in a mixed-ability first-year class were seen to be able to use and discriminate between sophisticated and challenging words. This was excellent practice. In another lesson a list of words was examined for understanding and meaning and students were encouraged to provide the word to describe the opposite meaning. In other instances, however, significant words, assumed to be understood by the students, were not explored unless students asked for meaning. There is scope to share and extend the good practices noted in the development of literacy to achieve consistent whole-school implementation of literacy strategies.

Classroom management was effective in almost all lessons. Best practice was evident where the code of behaviour was implemented. In a very low number of instances the classroom atmosphere was poor due to lack of enforcement of the code of behaviour.

Questioning was the primary method used in assessment. Some very good AfL approaches were noted. In one instance students were asked to explain what caused them problems in understanding. Very constructive feedback was noted in copybooks. There were strong examples of reflective practice, peer assessment, and evaluation of strategies used in the completion of certain tasks. Assessment in selected areas of PE was used effectively. An

absence of assessment strategies was apparent in only a small number of lessons which tended to be overly teacher-led, while the focus of learning in one instance was overly directed towards examination-technique skills.

The predominant conclusion from lessons visited is that students are routinely exposed to challenging, supportive, and affirming learning experiences where expectations are high both for teachers and learners.

### **3. IMPLEMENTATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS FROM PREVIOUS EVALUATIONS**

#### ***3.1 Management***

Management has been very attentive to all recommendations made in previous inspection reports. Senior management has joined the formal care team, as recommended in the Guidance report. Recommendations from inspection reports are shared with the entire staff and areas of common concern highlighted. The school has published all of the reports on the school website.

#### ***3.2 Learning and teaching***

The school has responded very well to implementing previous recommendations on learning and teaching and all have been implemented. Some have been progressed for wider examination under School Self-Evaluation (SSE) structures. Examples include AfL development and homework.

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

The school has fully embraced the SSE process and is a pilot school in the national initiative. The school development planning process has been guided from early on by reference to the *Looking At Our School* handbook for school self-evaluation. There is significant capacity, and enthusiasm, among the members of staff at all levels to use reflective practices to inform school improvement plans. The involvement of the school as a pilot school in the NCCA Junior Cycle network is a further illustration of its commitment to improvement.

Taken together with the evident strength of SDP to guide whole-school approaches to improving practice, the capacity of Ashbourne Community School for school improvement is beyond question. The pursuit of school improvement is already a hallmark of the school's ethos and practice.



## **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 welcomes this very positive WSE-MLL report and wishes to thank the whole school community for its contribution to the process. The Board congratulates all involved on the excellent findings in the management, leadership & learning practices taking place in Ashbourne Community School. It is delighted with such a positive endorsement of the school & the affirmation of the excellent work being done by everyone involved in the school community.

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

The comments on Page 8 of the report are particularly noteworthy because these reflect the school's ethos & serve to highlight the school community as a place which promotes reflective practice and learning for all: *The predominant conclusion from lessons visited is that students are routinely exposed to challenging, supportive & affirming learning experiences where expectations are high both for teachers & learners. Taken together (involvement in NCCA Junior Cycle network and in the SSE national initiative) with the evident strength of SDP to guide whole school approaches to improving practice, the capacity of Ashbourne Community School for school improvement is beyond question. The pursuit of school improvement is already a hallmark of the school's ethos and practice.*

The reinforcement of these hugely positive aspects of our school is an excellent acknowledgement of the level of commitment which marks the work of all partners/stakeholders in the school community.

### **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 has already made progress on the recommendations made by the Inspectorate. The school plan for 2013/14 reflects a reduction in the number of priorities for development and focuses on the whole school implementation of strategies introduced in the areas of literacy and numeracy. The Admissions Policy and the Code of Behaviour are under review by the Board of Management currently and senior management has a plan in place for professional dialogue with all staff during the latter part of the academic year.