An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

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

REPORT ISSUED FOR SCHOOL RESPONSE

**Skerries Community College
Skerries, County Dublin
Roll number: 76078Q**

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AN ROINN | DEPARTMENT OF
OIDEACHAIS | **EDUCATION**
AGUS SCILEANNA | **AND SKILLS**
INSPECTORATE

Whole-School Evaluation
Management, Leadership and Learning

A whole-school evaluation of management, leadership and learning (WSE-MLL) was undertaken in April 2016 in Skerries Community 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.

Introduction

Skerries Community College is a coeducational, multidenominational post-primary school under the patronage of Dublin and Dún Laoghaire Education and Training Board (DDLETB). The school was transferred in 1999 to the then County Dublin Vocational Education Committee following the amalgamation of the town's Catholic voluntary secondary school and vocational school.

The current-year 2015/16 enrolment of 909 students has the school close to full capacity; demand for the 180 first-year places available is oversubscribed. The school offers the Junior Certificate, Leaving Certificate and the optional Transition Year (TY) programme.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

Key Findings
- The senior management team of principal and deputy principal (SMT) provides very good-quality leadership to the school.
- The school has introduced the assignment of students to base classes wholly on a mixed-ability basis; this more inclusive approach has been well supported within the school community.
- The special educational needs department has become a pivotal influence in developing teaching and learning.
- The quality of teaching in the majority of lessons was either good or very good with some excellent practices in a small number of lessons, including skilful differentiation and assessment practices.
- Reflection and review are very strong features and inform many aspects of school life.

Recommendations for Further Development
- A representative group should be established to review and redraft the whole-school guidance plan.
- The school plan should include a cycle of review of policies; sufficient time should be provided to address policies in as broad a consultation process as possible.
- The school timetable should make specific provision for Civic, Social and Political Education (CSPE) in all years of the junior cycle and for Physical Education (PE) in fifth and sixth years.
- The school should extend its current differentiation and assessment practices in order to cater for all of the learning styles of students.

1. QUALITY OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP

1.1 School ownership and management

The quality of management structures in the school is very good, beginning with the board of management. The board is properly constituted and members have availed of training. They showed a very good knowledge of the school and board functions. The board also includes members with considerable experience in senior positions of school leadership.

The SMT of principal and deputy principal together provides very good-quality school leadership. Both are in the second year of their appointments. They have jointly identified an ambitious programme of modernisation and improvement that was developed following an early period of observation and consultation with the staff. Key objectives include the greater inclusion of students in school life by ensuring access to a fuller curriculum and raising academic expectations generally. This will involve increasing participation rates at higher level in subjects and improving attainment in the certificate examinations. The strategy to achieving these ends places priority on developing the experience of students as learners and developing a community of reflective and shared practice among teachers.

The board showed very strong confidence and support for the SMT and the improvement programme. Time was set aside from the normal agenda at each meeting to date to consider where these initiatives can best be supported; the board has now identified a very worthwhile portfolio of developmental priorities for the immediate future.

In discussion, the board was mindful of the need for an ongoing review of all school policies. Some very important policies have been reviewed and approved in quite recent times. Among these are the anti-bullying, attendance and punctuality, health and safety, critical incident and dignity in the workplace policies that have involved wide consultation. The special educational needs (SEN) policy is central to the objective of creating a more inclusive school. This policy aims to make learning support and SEN strategies familiar to all staff members and adaptable to all classroom settings. These are very positive developments.

The core policies of admissions and code of behaviour, however, date from 2009 and 2008 respectively; the guidance plan is a work in progress. The current review of policies is therefore both needed and opportune; the review of the admissions policy has started. The whole-school guidance plan needs to include more detail as to guidance provision; a representative group should be established to review and redraft it. The plan should include specific detail on what guidance and pastoral supports are provided to each year group as well as a detailed description of the roles and responsibilities of everyone involved in providing guidance and student supports at whole-school level. Following consultations with the school community, the plan should go before the board for approval and ratification.

Some other policies are recommended for consideration, these include an assessment policy and a healthy lifestyle policy. A cycle of review of policies should be included as part of the school plan. The cycle should allow sufficient time to address policies in as broad a consultation process as possible.

The board indicated an intention to publish a report for the school community on the operation and management of the school. This would be an ideal place to include a summary of the school plan objectives together with a brief progress report. Such a report would also raise awareness of the current board's role and work for the school; the responses to both parent and teacher questionnaires indicated a need to raise awareness of this.

The parents association (PA) is active and is involved as requested by school management in reviewing policies. The PA organises information events both for parents and the community; it fundraises to enhance school facilities and organises an end-of-year sale of schoolbooks. One such event coincided with the evaluation, addressing the current focus on student wellbeing and mental health; it attracted a capacity attendance.

The school has a democratically elected student council; it is one of a number of student teams providing leadership development opportunities. The board of management has affirmed the role of the student council and has met with representatives to receive a report on council activities. While the board affirmation acknowledges the student voice, the student questionnaire responses indicate that this is an area for further development.

1.2 *Effectiveness of leadership for learning*
SMT leadership for learning is of very good quality. The two SMT members work as a team; there was strong evidence that showed them as principled and reflective leaders, committed to supporting fairness, inclusivity and respect as the core values that tie the school community together. They communicated the aims of improving students' sense of belonging and of improving the experience of learning in the classroom as their first priorities. Many examples of good leadership by the SMT were evident.

From the start of the current year the school assigns first-year students to base classes wholly on a mixed-ability basis. Assessments of incoming students are based primarily on cognitive ability tests, in place of tests in English and Mathematics but retaining Irish. The intention is to provide all new students with a fresh start to learning at second level. More fluid arrangements are used in forming fifth-year classes; these changes have opened up access to higher level in the core subjects for all students and have raised expectations both in teaching and learning. These arrangements sit well with the aim of greater inclusion of students and were strongly endorsed by parent representatives interviewed.

Staff continuing professional development (CPD) has been well addressed to meet the developments in more open class formations. A post-holder leads the interlinked portfolio of school development planning, school self-evaluation and CPD. A blend of in-house and external facilitators has been used with teachers encouraged to share skills with the staff. Recent examples include the SEN department delivering whole-staff CPD on differentiation and assessment techniques.

The SEN department has been a pivotal influence in developing teaching and learning through raising awareness and knowledge of more inclusive teaching methods. SEN and learning-support practices have promoted a more interventionist approach to enhancing student learning with additional supports more focused on co-teaching; this has opened up a new experience for both teachers and learners.

The collaborative SEN department operates well; it receives administrative support from the post-of-responsibility structure. The number of special-needs assistants (SNAs) has increased significantly to the current 4.5 allocation. The evaluation confirmed that SNAs are clear on their roles and are well guided in their work. The timetabled weekly SEN department meeting is attended by a SMT member. In its ongoing review and development of SEN strategies, the department is urged to consider the category of gifted student.

The duties assigned to the middle-management team of six assistant principals and twelve special duties teachers allow a valuable contribution to the operation of the school. A review of post-of-responsibility duties, supported by an external facilitator, was an early SMT initiative. Some significant realignment of duties followed. These include the dean of

students post, an attendance officer, and an expanded information and communications technology (ICT) co-ordinator's post to include e-learning.

The profile of middle management has been developed by scheduling full-team meetings, recognising all post-holders, beyond year head positions. In line with developing reflective practices, it is recommended that post-holders prepare an end-of-year report on their post duties, including areas for development or change. This account could inform the review of posts with the SMT now agreed to take place every two years.

There were many examples of distributed leadership positions open to all staff. Teachers who do not hold a post of responsibility are among four discrete groups that meet with the SMT. Leadership of SEN is a good example; it is led in all cases by teachers qualified in SEN who are outside the formal middle-management tier. Other such groups include the positive behaviour team and the steering group to oversee the numeracy plan.

A post-holder has presented to staff on attainment trends in certificate examinations relative to national data over a five-year period. This analysis is the starting point in a whole-staff conversation on targeting improvements in higher level participation rates across subjects and improved attainment. This target is complemented by developing more active and engaging strategies in the classroom. Teachers confirmed that the SMT took a supportive interest in teaching performance, provided affirmation, supports and encouragements. There were also instances of targeted strategies for improvement. A positive picture emerged of high expectations complemented by support and ongoing development within subject departments.

The school provides a broad and balanced range of subjects. German has been restored to the first-year options list, thus providing students with a choice of three modern languages. At senior cycle, three science and three business subjects are available, and there is a full range of practical subjects. A fully open choice of optional subjects operates in both cycles with the provision of subjects commendably following student demand. Teachers have become more involved in promoting subjects to students and parents and in making links to potential career paths. These positive developments were endorsed by the majority of parents surveyed who agreed they had received helpful advice in choosing subjects.

Some omissions from the curriculum were evident; Civic, Social and Political Education (CSPE) was not shown on the first and second-year timetables, Physical Education (PE) was absent from the fifth and sixth-year timetables. These omissions should be addressed.

The optional TY programme provides a rich list of subjects and a range of learning opportunities; students encounter some subjects for the first time in line with TY best practice. The programme is very well coordinated; applications consistently exceed the number of places available. Access has recently been increased from two to three class groups; efforts are ongoing to increase this to four. This would accommodate close to sixty per cent of the total third-year cohort. The intention of reviewing the reintroduction of LCVP should be carried out as soon as possible.

Student care structures are well developed with a year head and tutor system operating in all year groups. A fulltime counsellor and psychotherapist deals with all counselling matters through a referral system and interviews with first-year students. A core care team targets interventions for identified at-risk students; it meets regularly and includes the SMT, student counsellor, chaplain, guidance counsellor and learning-support and year-head representatives where relevant.

Opportunities for student leadership are numerous, most notably in the mentor, prefect and student chaplaincy teams that operate throughout the school. The range of co-curricular and

extracurricular opportunities, which include prominent roles for music and drama, is very extensive. By the school's calculations, these opportunities are catering for close to eighty per cent of the student cohort.

Student attendance has been targeted for improvement; data provided strongly supports the need for such a focus. Annual aggregated attendance data over the past five years shows wide variations in attendance from the very positive to levels of concern. Celebration of improved attendance rightly defines the new strategy.

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 school grounds and buildings were clean and well maintained; the school has recently retained its Green Flag status. Student achievement was well celebrated in wall-mounted displays. The library provided a stimulating learning environment and was widely cited as a welcoming centre for many learning and social occasions.

The school has developed good links with community sports clubs, and students of the college use these resources. The school sports hall facilities are excellent. Sporting endeavours are prominent in the lives of many students.

Subject to available resources the school might consider a wish expressed by parent representatives' that a previously significant adult education programme be restored.

2. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

2.1 *The quality of learning and teaching*
The quality of teaching in the majority of lessons was either good or very good with some excellent practices in a small number of lessons, including skilful differentiation and assessment practices. A small number of lessons were satisfactory.

Long-term and short-term plans were prepared and available in all subjects. Topics, learning intentions and timeframes for successful completion were clearly defined. Particularly good reflective practices were evident in a number of subject plans where the outcomes of the certificate examinations were used as one mechanism to inform discussion at planning meetings and to guide improvements in the subject department.

Preparation for all lessons was very good in terms of resources, materials and equipment. Most lessons were linked to previous learning, were well structured, and in the best cases, provided for a summary of the learning achieved at the conclusion of the lesson. A supportive, respectful atmosphere generally prevailed in all lessons. Teachers set appropriate expectations of students' learning and students worked purposefully.

All lessons began with a clear statement of the learning intentions. In the majority of lessons, these were expressed in terms of what the students would know and be able to do. Over the course of the lessons observed, a range of effective teaching methodologies was used; these included question-and-answer sessions, active learning experiences, practical work, teacher explanation and learning games. Typed worksheets supported and reinforced learning in many lessons. Students' written work was monitored and, in some cases, well

annotated with constructive comments provided to guide improvement. Some lessons incorporated key words which were presented and explained at the start of the lesson and referred to throughout the lesson.

In a small number of classes, the teacher was too central to the lesson; too much attention was concentrated on the acquisition of information which in some cases became information overload. This information was also sometimes delivered in a manner that was overly examination-focused. These lessons generally did not facilitate adequate levels of student engagement and resulted in long periods where students were inactive.

Very good lessons were well planned and included an appropriate balance between teacher input and student activities. All students were engaged by the wide variety of teaching and learning strategies deployed. Opportunities were provided for discussion either through question-and-answer sessions or pair and group work. Some attention was paid to developing students' skills in literacy and, in some cases, in numeracy. Students were required to report on and explain their learning which appropriately challenged the more-able students. ICT was generally used as an alternative to the whiteboard to display information, record feedback or display slideshow presentations.

Lessons which showed excellent practice incorporated inquiry-based learning where students were encouraged to solve problems for themselves or designed an activity themselves to solve a particular problem. ICT was used as a mechanism to generate discussion. Group work was well managed, students were assigned specific roles which ensured the active involvement of all. Differentiated tasks were allocated to students in addition to the inclusion of differentiated oral questions. Peer and self-assessment strategies were used in addition to teacher marking.

The quality of learning in lessons was generally very good. Lesson intentions were achieved and students demonstrated a development in their knowledge either through their oral responses to questions or in their written work. In the majority of subjects, performance in certificate examinations compares favourably with national norms.

Student behaviour throughout the evaluation was exemplary, both in lessons and in general interactions. Student questionnaire responses showed that a clear majority surveyed have a positive view of student behaviour in general. The teacher questionnaire finding of a small majority agreeing that the code of behaviour is implemented consistently by staff, and a significant minority disagreeing, seemed in contrast to the evidence available. It would be desirable therefore to achieve a revised code that has the confidence of all parties.

3. IMPLEMENTATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS FROM PREVIOUS EVALUATIONS

3.1 Management
There was considerable evidence to show that school management has examined all of the available reports for recommendations that will impact on improved teaching and learning.

Management has organised whole-school CPD on effective questioning techniques and practices based on comments in the most recently published inspection report on Science and Biology. Further advice was secured on developing subject department plans collaboratively and school management has created and provided a template as a guide to a consistent approach across subject department plans.

3.2 *Learning and teaching*

Written evidence of actions taken following inspection visits and reports indicate that learning and teaching recommendations are shared with the whole staff and not confined to the subject areas in which they arose. There was evidence also that the whole-staff reflections on certificate examination attainment across the curriculum has informed subject department planning meetings.

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

School self-evaluation (SSE) and reflective practices have informed the SMT approach to implementing a programme of modernisation and improvement in teaching and learning. The appointment of a post-holder with specific responsibility for SSE has strengthened the process. The use of the six-step SSE process has informed the school's plans on literacy and numeracy to date.

Significantly, the school has selected teaching and learning in the mixed-ability setting as the focus for the next strand of SSE. This resonates with the core aims of senior management. All evidence during the evaluation pointed to good structures in the school and good relations; these combined indicate a high capacity for school improvement.