

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

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

REPORT

**Gort Community School
Gort, County Galway
Roll number: 91498C**

Date of inspection: 10 November 2015



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

Whole-School Evaluation Management, Leadership and Learning

A whole-school evaluation of management, leadership and learning (WSE-MLL) was undertaken in November, 2015 in Gort 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 of the school 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

Gort Community School is a multi-denominational, co-educational school serving students from the town of Gort and from a surrounding hinterland. It has an enrolment of 687 students in 2015/16, drawn from a range of social, cultural, and economic backgrounds. The curricular programmes offered by the school are Junior Certificate, optional Transition Year (TY), Leaving Certificate, Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA), and the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP).

Two challenges identified by the school as impacting significantly on its student enrolment in recent years were the transition of a school fifteen kilometres away from a single sex to a co-educational establishment and the impact of the national re-organisation of school bus transport provision. Specific initiatives were taken by the school, through consultation among staff, parents and the board, to address the two challenges. First-year student enrolment is now back to where it was before the two developments.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

Key Findings

- Parents surveyed expressed overwhelmingly high levels of satisfaction with how the school is run and with how their children are progressing. Students expressed very high levels of agreement that there is a good atmosphere in the school and that they feel safe and well cared for in the school.
- The board of management provides very good leadership and the parents' association provides very good support to the school.
- The principal and deputy principal have a very effective working relationship and model an ethic of hard work in striving to achieve continuous school improvement.
- Holistic development of students is provided by a very broad curriculum, by very good student care structures and by co-curricular and extra-curricular activities voluntarily provided by teachers.
- There was significant variation in the extent to which subject and programme plans had been developed.
- Teaching was good or very good in most lessons observed. In a small number of lessons, there was scope for development in teachers' practice.
- In the majority of lessons observed, the quality of students' learning was good or very good.

- All recommendations from previous inspection reports directed at school management have been implemented whilst other key recommendations still need to be addressed.
- Very successful school improvement has been achieved in relation to campus development, student care, and school enrolment in recent years.
- Action planning focused on broadening the range of teaching and learning strategies in use to support student engagement and even higher achievement, through school self-evaluation (SSE), is now required.

Recommendations for Further Development

- The board needs to continue to strengthen its oversight of the implementation of recommendations from previous evaluations and to initiate oversight of SSE progress.
- Subject, programme and SSE planning work needs to be prioritised in the school.
- A teaching and learning task group should be formed to lead developments, over the coming years, in whole-school adoption of differentiation, active learning, and additional strategies for giving students' feedback for improvement and the work of this group needs to be monitored and supported.
- A multi-stakeholder approach is recommended to support the continued development of e-learning in the school.

1. QUALITY OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP

1.1 School ownership and management

The board functions effectively and collaboratively. It has tenaciously advocated for the school to help address its enrolment challenges as described above, and has led the strategic development of school facilities and of shared amenities with the local community. It is commended that a customised in-house training session was provided by the chair and secretary to the new board when it commenced its term in August 2015.

There are strong links between the board and the parents' association (PA) and the chair of the board has met with the student council over a number of years. To further enhance communication with parents, it would be useful to develop a dedicated section of the school website as a means of publicising the work being done by the board.

To support the school's work on school self-evaluation, the board should add SSE as a routine agenda item for its meetings, initially providing briefings to members on the process, and then seeking updates from related staff teams on the school's progress, before ratifying and then overseeing the provision of the school's self-evaluation and improvement plans to the school community.

Through survey returns completed as part of this evaluation, parents expressed overwhelmingly high levels of satisfaction with how the school is run and with how their children are progressing. The PA makes an excellent contribution to the achievement of school improvement priorities through activities such as administering the junior and senior-cycle book rental schemes, fundraising, and supporting school events including the school musical and a Junior Certificate Results Night Party.

1.2 Effectiveness of leadership for learning

The principal and deputy principal have an excellent working relationship, addressing distinct responsibilities that best suit their strengths. In responding to the enrolment challenges identified by the school in recent years, senior management has demonstrated strong leadership. Most recently, senior management has focused on strengthening and extending the range of student support structures. Senior management is highly commended for the various developments it has led in these areas. With these fundamentals in place, setting specific targets for continuous improvement in learning is now possible.

The middle management team is an important structure in supporting senior management. A whole-school review of the school's schedule of posts was underway at the time of the evaluation. It is acknowledged that over the past five years, a significant reduction in the school's middle management team has taken place. As the whole-school review of the schedule of posts takes place, it will be important that a balance between the administrative, pastoral and curriculum needs of the school informs the process.

A key strength of the school is its committed and hardworking staff. Staff members are facilitated and supported to undertake continuing professional development (CPD). It is commended that inputs from staff members on particular areas of their learning are included in some staff meetings. A formal audit should be conducted to record topics of further study that individual staff members have engaged with, as well as suggestions from staff on their current professional development needs, to aid planning for the whole-staff CPD programme to support learning.

The school plan comprises all the required mandatory policies and a register of ratification and projected review dates for those policies. There was significant variation in the extent to which subject and programme plans had been developed. Many folders included minutes of only one annual, formal meeting of the subject or programme team. Subject and programme planning now need to be prioritised in the school. Expanded utilisation of administration software features could facilitate the allocation of more planning time for teaching and learning within staff meetings. Also, the provision that up to five of Croke Park Agreement hours can be utilised for "planning and development work on other than a whole-school basis and as approved by management" could also facilitate this work.

A clearly-structured code of student behaviour is implemented through the work of subject teachers, voluntary class tutors, year heads, and senior management. The student support team shares relevant information in a systematic manner and planned interventions are discussed collaboratively, are informed by guidance from external agencies, and are undertaken in a distributed manner. The attention that is paid by senior management and staff to implementing child protection and anti-bullying procedures is particularly commended. When the next review of the code of behaviour commences, more short-term, positive rewards could be built into the code of behaviour, as a concrete support to engagement.

The school's pastoral care team is a pro-active group who update care-related policies and protocols, who schedule external speakers on mental and physical health topics, and who plan cross-curricular initiatives to communicate consistent, positive messages about topics such as an anti-bullying week. Valuable links have been forged between this team and the PA, resulting in a number of very relevant parent information presentations being organised.

Through survey returns completed as part of this evaluation, students expressed very high levels of agreement that there is a good atmosphere in the school and that they feel safe and well cared for in the school. Extra-curricular and co-curricular activities provided in the school are also key supports to student wellbeing and to the development of very positive student-teacher rapport. Parents and students interviewed praised teachers' volunteerism in

providing lunchtime or after-school training for sports competitions, preparation for the school musical, for debates and public speaking, for subject-specific competitions, and in organising co-curricular outings and tours.

A self-reflective guidance service is provided in the school through a mixture of timetabled classes, team teaching arrangements, and one-to-one sessions. The guidance department reports high levels of parent and student engagement with its customised online communication mechanisms. It is suggested that the guidance department could provide some inputs on different career areas to students who do not opt for LCVP at senior cycle.

A very wide range of subjects and programmes is currently provided by the school. There is evidence of very good provision for and teacher commitment to the school's LCA programme, a key support to senior-cycle student retention and inclusion. Uptake in TY is good and students and parents highly commended the TY subject-sampling arrangements and the co-curricular and extra-curricular opportunities organised within the programme. However, the significant reduction in the school's middle management team over the past five years has affected the co-ordination of TY and LCVP. While there is a mechanism in place whereby the logistical elements of TY are co-ordinated, planning for the taught modules varies considerably in quality and opportunities for cross-curricular synergies and for streamlining of efforts by teachers of the same subjects are being missed.

The school operates an open, inclusive admissions policy. The progress of a number of the school's students of Brazilian origin from language support classes to undergraduate study testifies to the very effective instruction and pastoral support provided to those students by their very dedicated language support teacher and also to the work of their mainstream teachers. Flexible arrangements are in place to support students with high and low-incidence special educational needs (SENs). Weekly reviews of progress commendably underpin planning for the students supported by the school's ASD class. Also, it is good practice that a detailed register of the use of allocated additional educational needs support hours is maintained by the school.

Looking toward the future, the assessment instruments utilised with incoming first-years in the spring before entry should be extended. Standardised tests should be integrated to help identify those who are performing at or below the 10th percentile in reading or mathematics and thus need to be prioritised for additional support from the general allocation of learning support teaching hours (Circular 70/2014). Those same standardised test results can then support data gathering for literacy and numeracy focused self-evaluation planning.

A diverse array of leadership roles is undertaken by students of the school, ranging across sporting, musical, debating, green schools', student council, class captains, and the newly-developed Meitheal group. In particular, the work of the student council in running a Junior Certificate Results Night Party that aims to divert students from engaging in potentially risky behaviours is commended. If the current TY timetable were reviewed to include a dedicated project work slot, then students could be invited to choose from a menu of projects related to school priorities, thus creating a structured mechanism for involving students actively in the achievement of these goals.

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 senior management team and the board have been visionary in leading the development of school facilities and in making those facilities available to local community groups. Displays of photographs of student achievements contribute to the school's learning environment. Continued green flag work promotes environmental responsibility as a key school value.

The health and safety co-ordinator diligently ensures that whole-school maintenance work and safety drills are performed, in close consultation with the principal and caretakers. Building on school culture where all staff report risks to the office immediately when identified, it is advised that the templates produced by the HSA in conjunction with its 2010 *Guidelines on Managing Safety and Health in Post-Primary Schools* be provided to all staff, for completion at an agreed time each year.

To continue to advance the school's e-learning capacity, it is recommended that support be sought from the PA, from past students, and from a committee of student volunteers, as well as from staff. Building on the board's desire for closer collaboration with its neighbouring South Galway Adult Learner Centre, that centre could also be approached for e-learning support, given its expertise in multimedia instruction.

2. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

2.1 The quality of learning and teaching

Twenty-three lesson periods across a range of subjects and programmes were observed by inspectors. Teaching was good or very good in most lessons observed. In a small number of lessons, there was scope for development in teachers' practice. The quality of students' learning was good or very good in the majority of lessons observed.

The best lessons were characterised by a purposeful pace, high expectations of students, sharing learning intentions for the lesson with students and checking for students' understanding of those intentions towards the end of lessons. Approaches that regularly featured in those effective lessons were questioning to activate students' prior knowledge and to connect new concepts with real-life contexts, using objects/audio/visual and multimedia aids to support student learning, and the incorporation of active and collaborative learning opportunities for students.

Where practice was less effective, classes were characterised by an over-emphasis on teacher exposition with students engaged in listening, volunteers answering questions, and note taking. Where no opportunities for active or collaborative learning were integrated within lessons, this allowed some students to remain passive, sometimes becoming disengaged, during lessons.

Literacy was focused on in many lessons by clear explanation of key terms and the utilisation of tables to help students classify new terms. Areas for development included equipping students with skimming, scanning and comprehension strategies to make meaning from passages of new information. Also, in the language classes observed, structured pair work needed to be incorporated to ensure that students practised the new vocabulary and structures encountered in the class with each other, to build up their confidence in oral production. Numeracy support was much less evident.

Graduated questioning, pre-prepared differentiated assignments and well-managed pair or group work segments supported the learning of students of all abilities in some lessons. In other lessons, neither differentiation of content, process nor product was observed. In those

instances, teachers need to ensure that lesson activities are planned to take into account the full range of abilities in the class.

The main tools used to give feedback to students on their learning are class tests and oral comments following up student responses to questions. Homework completion is monitored by teachers, and some written feedback is periodically provided on student work. In a small number of classes, very effective strategies for providing feedback on how to improve were in use by teachers. Survey returns indicate that students consistently want more feedback on how to improve their learning.

Developing the skills of learning to learn will also help students improve their capacity to engage in self-directed learning and revision. Evidence gathered of learning to learn tools in use by individual teachers included graphic organisers, mind mapping, and utilising online platforms where students can review specified electronic materials or websites to support their curricular learning outside of the classroom. The use of such learning to learn tools is an area where teachers should share practice within and across departments.

3. IMPLEMENTATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS FROM PREVIOUS EVALUATIONS

3.1 Management

All previous recommendations directed at school management for implementation have been addressed.

3.2 Learning and teaching

Four learning and teaching themes have frequently appeared in the main recommendations or in the body of previous inspection reports. These are more widespread use of assessment for learning strategies (giving students' feedback on how to improve their learning), the use of active and collaborative strategies, differentiation, and the use of information and communications technology (ICT). Some progress in relation to the fourth theme was evident during the inspection. While it is apparent that individual teachers possess skill sets in these various areas within the school, action planning for the development of teaching and learning was generally not evident in the subject and programme plans reviewed during the evaluation. This is an area that needs to be supported by whole-school planning for improvement.

Over the last year, the board has developed a practice of formally requesting subject departments to confirm that report recommendations have been implemented. The board is commended for its leadership in this area.

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

There has always been a culture of school improvement in Gort Community School. It is acknowledged that in prioritising the consolidation of enrolment, the extension of student supports, and the development of campus facilities in recent years, engagement with SSE was postponed. While there was considerable scope for development with regard to progress on the formal self-evaluation requirements as set out in Circular 0040/2012 at the time of the evaluation, the board and school are now ready to prioritise the development of additional learning and teaching strategies through SSE work.

A school team has been very active in developing students' engagement in personal reading and a numeracy team has identified the need to support students' mental arithmetic skills across the curriculum. Leaders of the literacy and numeracy teams have reported on the work of their teams at staff meetings. The next step in the process is to enter into whole-staff agreements about specific strategies that will be implemented across classrooms to support the development of particular aspects of literacy and numeracy.

To address its third SSE priority, the school is advised to form a teaching and learning task group to lead developments in methodologies identified as in need of improvement in previous subject inspection reports and in this WSE-MLL report. That team will need to lead the sharing of in-house expertise in these areas, source relevant external CPD inputs, and measure progress using learner surveys and focus groups as part of the feedback process.

The school has good capacity to engage in school self-evaluation. However, it is essential that action planning for improvement be developed and implemented through formal whole-school planning structures and through formally gathering the views of parents, students, and staff.

Appendix

SCHOOL RESPONSE TO THE REPORT

Submitted by the Board of Management

Part A Observations on the content of the inspection report

The Board of Management wishes to thank all our school partners who engaged with, and embraced the WSE-MLL process in a very professional and positive manner. The Board of Management warmly welcomes the main key findings of the report as they reflect and represent the excellent provision of services that impact positively on student outcomes in Gort Community School.

The following key findings are evidence of the standards of excellence that the school continually strives to achieve:-

- *“Parents surveyed expressed overwhelmingly high levels of satisfaction with how the school is run and with how their children are progressing.”* – quote from Report.
- *“Students expressed very high levels of agreement that there is a good atmosphere in the school and that they feel safe and well cared for in the school.”*- quote from Report.
- It acknowledges the visionary and exemplary work of the Principal and Deputy Principal.
- Teaching observed was good to very good and that the staff was both hard working and committed.
- It acknowledges a clearly structured Code of Behaviour and an excellent Pastoral Care system and a very effective Guidance service and extra – curricular provision in the school.
- It evidenced a strong sense of Partnership between Board, senior Management, staff, students, Parents Association and the community of parents.

This is a summary of the key findings. There are almost sixty positive findings identified by the Board in the eight page report. This report and its findings give great reassurance to all the partners that make up Gort Community School.

Part B Follow-up actions planned or undertaken since the completion of the inspection activity to implement the findings and recommendations of the inspection

With regard to the above, the Principal, Deputy Principal and staff, in consultation with the lead Inspector are putting in place plans and strategies to progress issues raised in the report and these are being currently implemented.

In this context, the School Management team has responded as follows:-

- a) A Teaching and Learning task group has been established and has already met on a few occasions. This will focus on teaching and learning issues identified in the report with a view to enhancing the overall provision for our students.
- b) School Self-Evaluation will form part of the continuous Board of Management discussions at Board of Management level.
- c) A new schedule of Posts of Responsibility duties has been approved by the Board of Management to best meet the priority needs of the school into the immediate future.
- d) Subject Departments have taken on board the advice of the Inspectorate with regard to more standardised and consistent future planning and development of both subjects and programmes.

The Board in consultation with the Principal, will monitor the progress of these improvement plans to ensure that there is full compliance with the Inspectors’

recommendations. Such best practice adhered to by the Board of Management in the past, is acknowledged in the body of the Report.