

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna
Department of Education and Skills

Whole-School Evaluation
Management, Leadership and Learning
REPORT

Abbey Vocational School
The Glebe, Donegal Town, County Donegal
Roll number: 71180F

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**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 September, 2013 in Abbey Vocational 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, special-needs assistants, ancillary staff, 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

Abbey Vocational School is the largest of the fifteen schools administered by the Donegal Education and Training Board (ETB) and is the only post-primary school in Donegal town. It is a non-denominational, co-educational school catering for 760 students. Though formally established on its current site in 1982, the school can trace its development back to the 1940s. The school provides the Junior Certificate programme, a Transition Year option, the Leaving Certificate programme, the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme and the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

Key Findings

- The school is very well managed and students' educational and pastoral needs are well provided for through a broad and balanced curriculum complemented by a wide range of extra-curricular activities.
- All staff members contribute to the efficient operation of the school and work in a cooperative and collaborative manner both with each other and with parents and the local community.
- Good systems to support whole-school and subject planning have produced a wide range of relevant policies and led to the development of good subject plans in almost all areas.
- The quality of teaching and learning in almost all the lessons observed was good or very good with excellent practice in a number of cases: all lessons were conducted in a positive and supportive manner.
- In many lessons, student-centred active methodologies were used to very good effect; however, there is scope for more widespread and consistent use of such methodologies.
- The school has a very good capacity for managing and implementing improvement as evidenced by its high quality engagement with school development planning and school self-evaluation.

Recommendations for Further Development

- In order to draw all the elements of school development planning together, the board should now develop an overarching strategy to achieve its aims over a number of years.
- With respect to the provision for learning support, the school should develop a smaller and more expert learning-support team.
- Relevant arrangements should be put in place without delay in order to ensure the delivery of a full Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) programme for senior cycle students.
- Teachers should share and implement the good practice observed with respect to the use of active learning methodologies.

1. QUALITY OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP

1.1 School ownership and management

The board of management is appropriately constituted and is well supported by the Donegal ETB in providing good management of the school's operational and educational provision. It has a clear understanding of its role, works closely with the principal and carries out its responsibilities in an effective manner. The board has overseen the development of a wide range of relevant school policies and has established a clear system for policy review. It brings a range of complementary skills and expertise to its consideration of issues and consults with others as necessary. The board is very committed to the successful functioning of the school in the best interests of students and parents.

While the principal and deputy principal take responsibility for particular areas, they also work closely together in a very effective co-ordinated manner. They have successfully managed the development and efficient operation of the school over recent years and are highly committed to further progressing the school's developmental priorities.

Staff makes a significant contribution to the efficient operation of the school in a number of ways. The duties attached to posts of responsibilities are carried out in an effective and collaborative manner. Ongoing review of the duties ensures that the posts adapt to the needs of the school. Staff also contributes through their involvement in curricular and extra-curricular initiatives. Ancillary staff plays a significant role in the day-to-day operation of the school.

An active student council provides a valuable forum for students to contribute to school life and the council's views have been sought on issues including policy development. While a survey of students showed that most feel they have a say in school improvement, it would be worthwhile exploring ways to increase awareness of the role and potential contribution of the student council.

Parents' views on policies and other aspects of school life are also sought and valued by the school. Parents are very supportive of the school and the results of a survey of parents showed great satisfaction with the care and educational provision provided by the school. The parents' association is actively involved in a range of school activities such as the organisation of mock interviews and fund raising. The school has strong links with the local community and values its partnership with local businesses.

The key developmental issues identified by the board and senior management are literacy and numeracy, school self-evaluation, the new framework for junior cycle, the integration of information and communication technology (ICT) into teaching and learning and the

maintenance and development of the school building. The school plan categorises school developmental priorities into short, medium and long-term issues, while annual action plans have been developed under two main themes: improvements in school building and facilities, and improvements in school organisation. Management has followed through and completed many of the items listed in the actions plans. However, in order to draw all the elements of school development planning together in a more cohesive way, it is recommended that the board develop an overarching strategy for what it aims to achieve over a number of years. Action plans to achieve these aims should specify more clearly the necessary supports, remits, success criteria, and arrangements for review.

1.2 Effectiveness of leadership for learning

Senior management has provided very effective leadership and management to support good quality teaching and learning. Two key features in this regard have been the creation of a calm and orderly environment which allows teachers to focus on teaching, and the innovative introduction of a comprehensive information management system.

Students encountered during the evaluation were polite and confident young people who worked well with their teachers. The school has been successful in adopting a restorative justice approach to discipline. Strategies to promote good behaviour are clear and consistently implemented. Timetabling of subjects is good. Subject planning and teachers' professional development have been supported.

The school's information management system provides a comprehensive platform for gathering and analysing data on student needs and learning outcomes. The introduction of this system is being implemented on a phased basis and its benefits and uses will continue to evolve over time.

Regular staff and subject department meetings allow for dissemination of information and discussion of issues. Teams such as the pastoral care team and the literacy and numeracy committee allow teachers to work in a collaborative and collegial manner. More opportunities to lead initiatives may arise from the development of action plans to support strategic planning.

Subject department planning is well established. Regular formal meetings are supplemented with considerable ongoing informal collaboration. Subject plans provide a good overview of provision made in most subject areas. Good practice is evident in the sharing of resources and the use of agreed schemes of work based on learning outcomes. Some plans showed a good level of analysis and reflection on students' examination outcomes. However, there is scope for development of this good practice. There is also scope for development of the overall subject plans for Social Personal and Health Education (SPHE) and Civic, Social and Political Education (CSPE) in order to ensure that they reflect more accurately the actual provision in this school.

For the most part, teachers are deployed according to their qualifications and expertise. However, though the school has a number of teachers with relevant special educational needs qualifications, learning support and resource teaching are provided by twenty teachers, most of whom are taking a relatively small number of hours in addition to their mainstream subjects. It would be better practice to reduce the number of teachers and to enhance the level of expertise among a smaller learning support team.

The school provides a broad and balanced curriculum which has evolved over time. The school's commitment to meeting the needs of students is evident in the continuing efforts to provide the LCA programme, though numbers opting for it are small. The timetable and school calendar are well organised and provide the appropriate instructional time.

A recently reviewed admissions policy reflects the characteristic spirit of the school and outlines clearly the enrolment procedures. The school has good systems to support students' transfer from primary school.

The school has good systems in place to support students and parents in making subject and programme choices. Most parents and students expressed satisfaction with the support received but surveys conducted by the school and during the evaluation showed that some parents and students would like more support in this regard.

Excellent use is made of the school's information management system to monitor attendance and punctuality. The analysis of data has allowed management to easily identify and deal with any issues that arise.

The code of behaviour provides a clear and effective structure for creating an environment conducive to learning. Responsibilities of students, subject teachers, class tutors, year heads and management are clear. Student achievement and positive behaviour are affirmed in daily interactions and through a more formal awards system.

Good structures, including guidance provision, are in place to support the pastoral care of students. The school has taken a proactive approach to implementing measures to counteract bullying behaviour. It has a Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) policy and is engaging with an outside agency regarding delivery of some aspects of RSE to senior cycle students. In order to ensure the delivery of a full RSE programme, it is recommended that the relevant arrangements be put in place without delay. It would also be useful to review the current RSE policy which has been in place since 2009.

The school aims to ensure that the school community is kept well informed of school activities. The school's website and other social media are used to disseminate relevant information.

The formal curriculum is complemented by a wide range of extra-curricular sporting and cultural activities. Students' achievements are affirmed and highlighted as part of the daily life of the school.

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 has a very good range of facilities such as specialist rooms, sports areas and a library to support both the formal curriculum and extra-curricular activities. The accommodation is maintained to a high standard and is available to local community groups.

Displays of subject-specific materials, including materials designed to support literacy and numeracy, created an attractive learning environment. Classrooms were well equipped with ICT which allowed teachers direct access to the school's information management system.

Energy-efficient lighting and recycling of waste materials demonstrate the school's commitment to the environment. This sense of responsibility could be further enhanced by initiating a student-led project to achieve a Green Flag.

The school's health and safety statement is complemented by an extensive section on the school's website which provides guidance on issues such as evacuation procedures,

accident reporting, and safety in the curriculum. Management is aware of the hazard created by bags left on corridors and is seeking to find a resolution to this issue.

2. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

2.1 The quality of learning and teaching

The quality of teaching and learning in almost all the lessons observed was good or very good with excellent practice in a number of cases. Very good preparation for lessons was evident in the range of resources used to support teaching and in the structure and sequence of learning activities.

Lessons were very well managed in a positive and supportive atmosphere. Good classroom routines have been well established. Students lived up to their teachers' high expectations of cooperation, attention and application.

Lesson content was communicated clearly through good use of resources such as the whiteboard, and worksheets and through the manner in which teachers explained topics to their students. Good use was made of ICT as a resource to enhance the learning experience.

Practical lessons were well organised and very good use was made of whole-group demonstrations to help students to work independently.

Some excellent practice was observed with respect to supporting the development of students' literacy and numeracy skills. For instance, teachers gave explicit attention to areas such as the use of subject-specific terminology, generic vocabulary used in examinations, and mental arithmetic.

In many lessons, active methodologies were used to very good effect. Such methods required students to engage more deeply with lesson content and challenged them to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding. For example, in one lesson, small groups of students were required to analyse information that had been presented in a video, and to formulate and justify their own opinions. In another lesson, after initial demonstration and modelling by the teacher, students were required to create their own summary notes by identifying and extracting the key points from the text.

However in some lessons, students had less scope to consolidate and demonstrate their learning. Such lessons tended to be dominated by teacher-led activity to the exclusion of significant opportunities for activities such as discussion, group work and self-directed learning. In other cases, questioning tended to be lower-order and only required very brief answers. Thus, it is recommended that teachers share and implement the good practice observed with respect to the use of active learning methodologies which challenge students to think for themselves and to demonstrate the extent of their understanding as well as simple recall of knowledge.

3. IMPLEMENTATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS FROM PREVIOUS EVALUATIONS

3.1 Management

School management has given good support to the implementation of recommendations within its direct remit. Resources, including ICT, have been enhanced where necessary and timetabling adjustments have been made in a number of subjects.

Recommendations with respect to subject planning have been given good consideration and actions have been taken to promote subjects or the uptake of higher-level courses, and most subject plans take a learning outcomes approach to planning schemes of work.

Planning for the TY programme was referred to in a number of previous evaluations. In line with good practice, the TY plan outlines the aims, objectives, topics and methodologies of the courses provided in twenty different subject areas. However, it would also be good practice to identify in the plan the overall aims of this school's TY programme and to relate how the learning outcomes in each subject area support the achievement of those aims.

3.2 Learning and teaching

Recommendations regarding teaching in previous evaluations encouraged the use of learning outcomes in lesson planning, greater use of differentiation, more active methodologies, the development of higher-order thinking, and more use of peer-assessment and self-assessment strategies.

Good progress has been made with respect to the use of a learning outcomes approach. In many lessons, the intended learning outcomes were explicitly stated at the start of the lesson and returned to, both during and at the end of lessons. In other cases, though not explicitly discussed with students, the intended outcome of the lesson was clear or was developed as the lesson progressed.

Teachers' use of differentiated strategies was most evident in their verbal interactions with students and in the level of expectations they set for individual students. In some cases, the development of higher-order skills was promoted. However, there is scope for greater differentiation in terms of posing more challenging learning tasks for the more able students.

Some very good examples of active learning, peer-assessment and self-assessment were observed. As noted previously, it would be worthwhile for teachers to consider the balance of teacher-led versus student-centred activities.

The school has a clear strategy for following up on the implementation of recommendations from previous subject inspections. Key recommendations have been brought to the attention of all subject departments with a view to spreading good practice. Inspection reports are initially considered by the relevant subject department and management have been provided with a written report on the actions taken. However, the level of response provided varied, and in some cases, very little information was recorded other than stating that the recommendation had been implemented. It would be worthwhile in future to require a more in-depth response from subject departments and to consider asking subject departments to present such reports to the board.

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

The school has adopted a very proactive approach to the introduction of school self-evaluation (SSE). A great deal of work has been completed on the gathering of evidence to support the SSE process.

The school's information management system is a very effective tool for capturing quantitative data on students. Analysis of the data has already been used to identify and address issues. It will be a significant support to the ongoing SSE process in the school.

Excellent practice is evident in the use of large scale online surveys of students and parents to provide qualitative evidence to complement the quantitative evidence the school has gathered. These surveys covered a broad range of issues. Actions have already been implemented to address the issues which arose. A more focused approach to the use of surveys is evident in their current use by subject departments to ascertain strengths and areas for development. Another good example is the use of a survey as part of the development of an anti-bullying culture in the school. It will be worthwhile to apply this more focused approach to the developmental priorities identified by the school, such as literacy and numeracy and the integration of ICT into teaching and learning. It would also be good practice to be more specific in terms of setting targets and developing success criteria as part of the action planning process.

As noted previously, the school has engaged well with school development planning over many years. It has adapted and taken action as required. The curriculum has evolved and new initiatives have been taken on board. In light of this record and the manner in which the school has engaged with school self-evaluation, it is clear that the school has a very good capacity for school improvement.

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 of the Abbey Vocational School welcomes the very positive findings of this WSE-MLL report. We are satisfied that the report reflects the school accurately and we are pleased that the following areas were described in the report:-

That we provide a broad and balanced curriculum which meets the needs of our diverse range of students. This is further enhanced by a large variety of sporting and cultural extra-curricular activities where active participation by all is encouraged.

The effective contribution of staff to the efficient operation of the school through whole-school and departmental planning and collaboration, involvement in curricular and extra-curricular activities, and the effective implementation of our posts of responsibility. The board is especially pleased that the inspectors met with our ancillary staff including S.N.A.s, caretaking and office staff and acknowledged the contribution they make to the effective working of the school.

The recognition that we provide excellent academic and pastoral supports for our students including effective supports during the transition from primary school, comprehensive subject choice support and implementing measures to counteract bullying behaviour.

The Board is pleased that the inspectors have described teaching and learning as being good to very good with some excellent practices observed. Our teachers plan their lessons with a focus on learning outcomes while also integrating and supporting literacy and numeracy and with an increased emphasis on using active methodologies.

That a calm and orderly environment has been established in the school which is conducive to effective teaching and learning taking place. This has been achieved through embracing a restorative approach when dealing with students and implementing a clearly defined code of behaviour which has been developed in consultation with all our education partners.

The Board is particularly pleased that the inspectors described our students as “polite and confident young people who work well with their teachers”, and that our students “lived up to their teachers’ high expectations of cooperation, attention and application”.

Area 2: Follow-up actions planned or undertaken since the completion of the inspection activity to implement the findings and recommendations of the inspection

An overarching school improvement plan is being developed as part of School Self Evaluation.

School Management are actively researching ways to minimise the size of the learning support team, while remaining within the constraints of cutbacks to staff allocation and making the maximum possible use of the resources at our disposal.

A number of teaching staff have attended Senior Cycle R.S.E. training and are currently designing an effective method of delivering this programme to our students.

Some staff have attended training in the use of Active Methodologies and we look forward to an increase in the number of teachers incorporating these activities in their lessons.