

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of

Education and Skills

Whole-School Evaluation Management,
Leadership and Learning

Abbey Community College, Ferrybank, Waterford

Roll Number: 76082H

Date of inspection: 20 January 2011

Date of issue of report: 29 April 2011

Whole-School Evaluation Management, Leadership and Learning

A whole school evaluation of management, leadership and learning (WSE-MLL) was undertaken in January 2011, in Abbey Community College, Waterford. This report presents the findings of the evaluation and makes recommendations for improvement. During the evaluation, the inspection team met with the school's board of management, in-school management, groups of teachers, parents and students. Inspectors also reviewed a range of school documentation and responses to questionnaires and examined other data in relation to the operation of the school. As part of the evaluation, a range of lessons across a number of subject areas was inspected.

Introduction

Abbey Community College is situated in a residential area on the outskirts of Waterford city. The school was formed in 2000 following an amalgamation of the Sacred Heart of Mary Secondary School and Slieverue Vocational School, and is under the trusteeship of the Sacred Heart of Mary sisters and County Kilkenny Vocational Education Committee (VEC). The school enrolls students from a diversity of socio-economic backgrounds in the immediate catchment area and from the hinterland around Waterford city. The enrolment has increased steadily over the years, resulting in a waiting list for places each year. The current enrolment is 645 students: 342 males and 303 females. The school provides the Junior Certificate, an optional Transition Year (TY) programme, the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) and the established Leaving Certificate.

1. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

1.1 Key Findings

- Abbey Community College is a high functioning, inclusive and progressive school.
- The senior management team provide exemplary leadership in the management of students, staff, facilities and resources.
- Distributed leadership is promoted in the school with roles, responsibilities and structures clearly identified, implemented and reviewed.
- High expectations are set for students in all aspects of their attendance, participation and attainment.
- A culture of review and self evaluation is embedded in many aspects of the school.
- The promotion of a learning community is central to the work of the school
- A good standard of teaching and learning was observed during the evaluation, with instances of exemplary practise noted in a number of lessons
- The school's broad curriculum is in most cases timetabled effectively.
- Management's intention to review the scheduling of study periods for some students is noted, given the impact of that practice on the school's obligation to ensure that all students receive the minimum twenty-eight hours tuition time in compliance with circular M29/95.
- School development planning is well advanced and documented
- A varied standard was noted in the quality of subject department planning.
- The school's facilities are excellent and very well maintained.

1.2 Recommendations for Further Development

- Curriculum review should ensure the appropriate deployment of staff and timetable arrangements for Physical Education.
- Consideration should be given to further developing the school's processes to inform parents and support students with their subject choices.
- The school's RSE policy should be reviewed and updated.
- Future school improvement should include subject department planning and self-evaluation.
- A renewed focus on the use of assessment-for-learning and active teaching and learning strategies should be adopted on a whole-school basis.

2. QUALITY OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP

2.1 School ownership and management - the Board of Management

Composition, functioning and fulfilment of statutory obligations

The composition of the board complies with statutory obligations and meetings of the board are held at regular intervals. Training has been provided by the patron and has been availed of by all board members. Agendas for meetings are set and include a comprehensive principal's report and a review of the administrative, pastoral and curricular functioning of the school. Discussions are open and inclusive, with all decisions reached through consensus and taken in the best interests of the school community. The work of the board is effectively communicated to the wider school community through an agreed report.

The school has an open and inclusive ethos and is welcoming of students of all abilities. Students are very well managed in the school and the board ensures that appropriate structures and supports are in place to monitor students' attendance, participation and welfare. Funding, by the board, of three hours per week for a home school community liaison (HSCL) teacher is highly commended as this ensures that relevant students and parents are appropriately supported. The board ensures that the facilities are maintained to the highest standard and all elements of the work of the school are appropriately resourced. A commendable feature of the board's work is its focus on teaching and learning. It considers the appropriateness of the school's curriculum and facilitates the continuing professional development of teachers. The board reviews students' performance in the state examinations each year and uses the results to identify aspects of curriculum provision and teaching and learning that may require further development and support.

The board presented as an experienced, knowledgeable and committed body. Board members demonstrated a good understanding of the school's practices, policies and procedures. The board is aware of its role in school development planning and has contributed to and ratified each of the school's policies, including the legally required policies on admission, attendance and participation, behaviour, guidance, special education and safety. A considerable number of additional policies have been developed to guide all aspects of the school's work. The current Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) policy should be reviewed and updated.

Confirmation was provided that, in compliance with post-primary circulars M44/05 and 0062/2006, the board of management has formally adopted the Child Protection Guidelines for Post-primary Schools (Department of Education and Science, September 2004).

The school's priorities for development

A number of priorities are identified each year by senior management through the school's consultation and review processes. These are then presented and discussed at board level. Current development priorities fall into four main categories: initiatives to support teaching and learning; policy development and school development planning; curriculum review and planning; and monitoring and improving the student support systems. The established priorities are clearly focused on further developing the high quality of educational provision in the school. Well developed strategies are in place to achieve these priorities. The principal provides regular updates to the board on progress with the identified priorities. In addition, the board has also identified several issues to be discussed and progressed during its term, including a comprehensive review of the current admissions policy and the impact of budgetary decisions on enrolment, staffing and curriculum provision. The proposed review of the admissions policy is welcomed, given the heavy demand for student places.

The board facilitates the active involvement of parents in the work of the school. A strong, committed and well-informed parents' association is actively encouraged and very well consulted with in policy development and make a meaningful contribution to the school's decision-making process.

2.2 Effectiveness of leadership for learning

Leadership of staff

As a team, the principal and deputy principal provide exemplary leadership in all aspects of school management. They provide a clear vision for the development of the school and demonstrate leadership qualities that enable and empower the whole school community. These qualities ensure the effective leadership of the organisation, of people, of change and particularly of learning. They work well together, and bring complementary skills to their work, characterised by clarity of direction, frequent communication and shared decision-making. Both maintain a visible presence in the school and ensure that all elements of the school organisation are working effectively and efficiently. The principal demonstrates particular commitment to working with staff and students in mutual respect and collaboration to bring about change and to promote a high level of commitment.

The senior management team displays a strong commitment to its professional responsibilities and its members have engaged in extensive personal professional development studies. The promotion of a learning community is central to all aspects of the work of the school. The regular attendance of staff at continuing professional development (CPD) events and courses is supported and facilitated by the board and senior management. This has contributed to a good professional capacity to lead initiatives that further support the quality of teaching, learning, student support and organisation in the school.

Management has introduced initiatives to support teaching and learning over the past four years. These include involvement in a Teaching and Learning for the 21st Century project (TL21), peer observation, assessment for learning (AfL), and more recently the Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment (Moodle) project to promote the use of ICT in planning, teaching and learning through an online virtual learning environment. This latest project is exemplary in actively supporting students' to become independent learners and in promoting subject planning, organisation and collaboration amongst teachers within and across subject disciplines.

Distributed leadership and empowerment of groups and individuals are clearly in evidence throughout the work of the school community. Well developed teams are in place to manage the various programmes and structures in the school including the year head team, the programmes co-ordinator, the TY and LCVP co-ordinators and teaching teams, the learning-support and care teams. Roles, responsibilities and structures are clearly identified, implemented and reviewed periodically. Working groups have been established to support a structured approach to policy development within reasonable timeframes. These provide valuable opportunities for teachers to contribute to the practices and direction of the school and their contribution is expected and appreciated. A number of

innovative policies are currently in draft format, such as the curriculum policy and a policy on evaluating student progress and attainment. The post-of-responsibility structure is regularly reviewed and both post holders and non-post holders demonstrate a willingness to undertake duties to meet the needs of the school.

Structures are in place to support subject department planning and management ensures that annual subject department plans are documented and available for review. The role of subject co-ordinator is rotated amongst members of each subject department and this provides good opportunities for these teachers to gain valuable experience in leading their peers. The quality of subject department planning was varied and this is an area that should be further developed.

Questionnaire results from the cohort of students and parents surveyed as part of the evaluation indicated exceptionally high levels of satisfaction with how the school is run and how staff support students' welfare.

Leadership of students

Leadership of students is based on the school's mission to care and provide for the individual in a positive and holistic manner. Students have positive attitudes towards the school and their teachers. They feel that their opinions are valued and they feel cared for and supported by teachers.

There are very effective procedures for the admissions and management of the transition of students from primary school into post-primary school and also from junior cycle into TY or fifth year.

A broad and diverse curriculum is provided for students. Subject and programme provision is kept under constant review, which is good practice. The provision and withdrawal of the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) according to student demand and the provision of Applied Mathematics after school are examples of some recent curricular decisions to suit the needs of students. A comprehensive guidance programme is provided for students with an appropriate balance between input at junior cycle and senior cycle. Arising from the questionnaire results, consideration should be given to reviewing the school's strategies for informing parents and students on the various subject option choices.

Mixed-ability class groups are formed for most subjects. In some instances, setting occurs and this is facilitated by the concurrent timetabling of some subjects. Good efforts are made to ensure that teachers are appropriately deployed to their subject specialisms and to the range of programmes and subject levels. It is important that all classes in Physical Education are taken by the school's qualified physical education teachers, as three periods per week are currently assigned to unqualified personnel. The timetable is generally very well constructed. However, the scheduling of study periods for some students results in these students receiving less than the required minimum of twenty-eight hours per week as outlined in circular M29/95. Commendably the school is reviewing this practice.

There are very good systems in place for monitoring and tracking attendance, punctuality and overall retention rates. The school's detailed code of behaviour and discipline system strives to promote respect for people, the learning environment and property. The points system to monitor students' behaviour is very well understood by all students and is effectively and consistently implemented. Student behaviour observed was exemplary.

The school has made effective use of its resources to provide for students with special educational needs. The school allocates teaching resources at the time of timetable construction and clearly documents the manner in which each student receives support. Student education plans (SEPs) are developed to meet the learning needs of each student. Weekly planning and progress records are also completed by teachers providing support lessons. It is suggested that the template be adjusted to include the intended outcomes of such support. It is also recommended that the school continue to

expand the models of support including co-operative teaching to support inclusive principles and practices.

There is a strong focus on ensuring that students achieve at or above their potential and that all experience academic success. The excellent student learning initiative established by the principal and an assistant principal is an example of a practical, motivating and supportive system to promote students' organisation and study skills and to monitor their attainment. Students' expressed their appreciation for this system and viewed it as very worthwhile. The system of monitoring students' progress relative to their expected outcomes is highly commended. A comprehensive analysis of results in certificate examinations is undertaken and discussed by the principal with the board, each subject department and individual teacher, ensuring that student performance is central to the work of the school.

A range of opportunities are provided for students to assume leadership roles and responsibilities, as through the school council, the student council, the prefect system and the sports prefects. Appropriate structures are in place for students to report to management and to their peers on many aspects of school organisation and management.

Extra-curricular activities play an important part of school life for the majority of students. Students are provided with a range of opportunities which complement the academic curriculum, including arts, sports, music, debating and drama and an electronics club.

2.3 Management of facilities

The school's facilities are well managed and very well maintained. Good attention is paid to health and safety practices. Efforts to gain the International Green Flag are welcomed and will provide a positive endorsement of the school's focus on environmental responsibility. The school's canteen provides a valuable service and attention to good behaviour and to the provision of healthy options was noted.

An excellent range of information and communication technology (ICT) facilities and resources is available to support planning and administration and teaching and learning in the classroom. The continuous monitoring, maintenance and upgrading of the high quality ICT infrastructure are commended. ICT is effectively integrated into many classrooms in the school. The school also has an excellent website which gives detailed information and is regularly updated.

There is good communication with parents through the school's website, regular newsletters, the student record book, and a texting system. Internal communication is also well developed through the staff handbook, Friday Flyer, the electronic notice board and various notice boards in the staffroom.

Great use is made of displays of photographs and artwork throughout the school to celebrate and affirm the work of individuals, groups and sports teams.

3. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

3.1 The quality of learning and teaching

Twenty-five lessons were observed, encompassing all year groups. In almost all of the lessons observed, the quality of teaching and learning was good or very good. In a few instances, there was scope for development of teaching practice or student learning.

Returns from the questionnaires administered to parents and students reflected a high level of satisfaction with teaching and learning. Almost all students responded that they are encouraged to work to the best of their ability and this was verified in lessons observed; students demonstrated high levels of motivation and participated productively in the range of tasks presented to them. Almost all students responded that teachers check their work regularly and most reported that teachers tell them how they can improve their work.

Lessons were characterised by good structure and organisation, with teachers very well prepared. Lessons were held in subject-orientated classrooms or specialist rooms with stimulating learning environments in terms of equipment and displays, which often included very good samples of students' work. In most lessons, subject-specific terminology was reinforced by teacher questioning and student responses and by visualisation on the board. Teachers made very good use of the board, with ICT effectively used in many lessons. Text books were used for reference and homework and never dominated lessons. Homework was assigned in most lessons and was linked directly to lesson content and previous learning.

In most instances, teachers mapped out the intended lesson content for students at the outset. In only half of lessons, the intended learning outcomes were shared with students initially and most of these saw the revisiting of these goals at the summary phase to assess progress and achievement. This strategy helped to motivate students to work purposefully toward the learning goal. The use of learning outcomes at appropriate phases of lessons ought to be given greater time and consideration and be more consistently applied.

Most lessons appropriately balanced teacher instruction and the facilitation of students' self-directed learning, most often through pair work or the setting of a series of constructive learning tasks. Tasks were clear, achievable and timed, often with roles assigned and always with outcomes processed. Tasks were combined with timely input from the teacher and opportunities for students to ask questions. These lessons were effective. Effective differentiation was noted in most lessons, particularly through questioning, where students were challenged according to their ability. Some lessons were over reliant on teacher-directed learning and lacked opportunities for students to apply and generalise their knowledge, through active or self-directed learning. In addition, while very good oral feedback was given to provide guidance and to support learning, the application of written feedback on student assignments was sometimes less impressive. Some effective lessons saw students being asked to reflect on how they could improve their own work next time or engage in peer review or peer conversations. The expansion of the learner's active role in his or her own learning could be approached by revisiting the principles of assessment for learning through subject departments or on whole-school basis.

4. IMPLEMENTATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS FROM PREVIOUS EVALUATIONS

4.1 Management

The vast majority of recommendations from previous subject inspections and programme evaluation have been implemented. For example, a modern European language is now a core component of the junior cycle curriculum, the language component for LCVP is now embedded in the senior cycle timetable, while most classes are timetabled for a double period of Physical Education. A dedicated graphics module is also provided as part of the TY programme. Management is commended for the attention given to these recommendations.

4.2 Learning and Teaching

Previous inspection reports have highlighted the need for more detailed and considered subject department planning and the desirability of using assessment-for-learning strategies and more active learning methodologies. Some good progress was noted particularly in the use of active learning methodologies. Examples of these strategies were evident during the evaluation and when used, resulted in good levels of student engagement and learning. Progress has been made in subject department planning, and with assessment-for-learning strategies, and these remain areas for ongoing development. A whole-school approach to ensuring a consistently high quality of subject department planning and the adoption of assessment-for-learning strategies is recommended.

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

The school has excellent capacity for improvement. A culture of review and self-evaluation is embedded in many aspects of the school. This culture has been fostered by the excellent leadership provided by the senior management team. An exemplary whole-school review done in 2006 has helped to focus the school's planning priorities over the past four years.

Teachers provide written feedback on their involvement in various projects and initiatives, contributing to further development and improvement. As highlighted previously, students' attendance, performance and attainment is meticulously monitored.

A commendable aspect of the school's self-evaluation process is the high level of feedback sought from students. First-year students' opinions of the positive discipline system are surveyed, all TY and LCVP students provide feedback on their experiences of the respective programmes, while sixth-year students complete an "exit survey" about their experiences of the school.

It is recommended that future school improvement should also include subject department self-evaluation. This should involve the quality of planning for coherent programmes of work, effective pedagogy and assessment strategies that support and enhance learning.

WSE-MLL GENERAL SCHOOL INFORMATION				
School Name and Address: Abbey Community College, Abbey Road, Ferrybank, Waterford				
Roll number: 76082H	Phone: 051- 832930		Fax: 051- 851110	
School Type: Community College	E-mail: admin@abbeycommunitycollege.com		Website address: www.abbeycommunitycollege.com	
Name of principal: Mr Tommy Lanigan			E-mail: tlanigan@abbeycommunitycollege.com	
Name of chairperson of the board of management: ~1 Mr Richard Dowling			E-mail: Dickdowling2010@gmail.com	
Name of chairperson of parents' association: Mrs Elaine Kearns			E-mail: krnsfoxfield@hotmail.com	
Name of school patron (CEO of VEC if appropriate): Ms Eileen Curtis (Acting CEO) Religious of the Sacred Heart of Mary			E-mail: ecurtis@kilkennyvec.ie aaed@indigo.ie	
<i>NB: E-mail addresses are required fields. These are necessary so that the draft report can be sent to the principal and chairperson of the board for Factual Verification and School Response and for issue of the final report to all four recipients listed above.</i>				
Enrolment	2007 / 2008,	2008 / 2009	2009/2010	Current year
Males (mainstream)	317	307	327	342
Females (mainstream)	318	318	304	303
PLC Students				
Total	635	625	631	645
Curricular Provision (Current Year)		Males	Females	Total
Junior Certificate		213	170	383
Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP)		0	0	0
Transition Year: Optional		23	20	43
Established Leaving Certificate		67	73	140
Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP)		39	40	79
Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA)		0	0	0
Total Mainstream Enrolment		342	303	645
Post Leaving Certificate Courses (PLC)		0	0	0
Adult and Continuing Education Courses		24	80	104
Other relevant school information:			Yes	No
Disadvantaged Status				NO
Home School Community Liaison Officer				NO
Other initiatives or programmes: Please list. • The school assigns and funds three hours per week for a Home School Community Liaison Officer.				