An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Whole School Evaluation
Management, Leadership and Learning

REPORT

Ainm na scoile / School name	Athy Community College
Seoladh na scoile / School address	Tomard Athy Co Kildare
Uimhir rolla / Roll number	70650L

Date of Evaluation: 07-11-2018

An Roinn Oideachais
agus Scileanna
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WHOLE-SCHOOL EVALUATION – MANAGEMENT, LEADERSHIP AND LEARNING

Whole-School Evaluation – Management, Leadership and Learning reports on the quality of teaching and learning and on the quality of management and leadership in a school. It affirms good practice and makes recommendations, where appropriate, to aid the further development of educational provision in the school.

How to read this report

During this inspection, the inspectors evaluated and reported under the following headings or areas of enquiry:

1. Quality of school leadership and management
2. Quality of teaching and learning
3. Implementation of recommendations from previous evaluations
4. The school's self-evaluation process and capacity for school improvement

Inspectors describe the quality of each of these areas using the Inspectorate's quality continuum which is shown on the final page of this report. The quality continuum provides examples of the language used by inspectors when evaluating and describing the quality of the school's provision in each area.

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.

CHILD PROTECTION

During the inspection visit, the following checks in relation to the school's child protection procedures were conducted:
1. The name of the DLP and the Child Safeguarding Statement are prominently displayed near the main entrance to the school.
2. The Child Safeguarding Statement has been ratified by the board and includes an annual review and a risk assessment.
3. All teachers visited reported that they have read the Child Safeguarding Statement and that they are aware of their responsibilities as mandated persons.
4. The Child Safeguarding Statement meets the requirements of the Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools 2017.
5. The records of the last three board of management meetings record a child protection oversight report that meet the requirements of the Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary schools 2017.
6. The board of management has ensured that arrangements are in place to provide information to all school personnel on the Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools, 2017
7. School planning documentation indicates that the school is making full provision for the relevant aspects of the curriculum (SPHE, Stay Safe, RSE, Wellbeing).
8. Child protection records are maintained in a secure location.

The school did not meet the requirements in relation to 5 above and therefore was not fully compliant with the checks undertaken. However, the school has subsequently furnished evidence of compliance with these requirements.

WHOLE-SCHOOL EVALUATION – MANAGEMENT, LEADERSHIP AND LEARNING

Dates of inspection	16–18 October 2018
Inspection activities undertaken - Meeting with Board of Management - Meetings with principal and deputy principal - Meetings with key staff - Review of relevant documents - Student focus-group interview	- Meeting with parents - Analysis of parent, student and teacher questionnaires - Observation of teaching and learning - Examination of students' work - Interaction with students - Feedback to senior management team, board of management and teachers

School context

Athy College is a co-educational second-level school operating under the auspices of Kildare and Wicklow Education and Training Board. The school participates in Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS), the action plan of the Department of Education and Skills for educational inclusion. The enrolment at the time of the evaluation was 425.

The school is in a period of change: enrolment numbers have grown steadily in recent years, there has been a significant changeover in the teaching staff recruited to the school and a major school extension is imminent.

Summary of main findings and recommendations:

Findings

- The overall quality of leadership and management, including leadership by teachers, is very good.
- The middle management is undergoing a restructuring process and, commendably, a number of staff have undertaken leadership roles on a voluntary basis.
- Overall student behaviour was noted to be very good during the evaluation; there is scope to both review and ensure consistency in the implementation of all aspects of the code of behaviour.
- A broad and balanced curriculum is in place; there is scope to further integrate Junior Cycle School Programme (JCSP) class groups in some subject areas.
- The overall quality of teaching and learning was good or very good in the majority of lessons, this was supported by very positive staff engagement in continuing professional development (CPD); aspects of satisfactory practice were noted in a small number of lessons.
- The implementation of recommendations from previous inspections is very good and the school has engaged very positively with school self-evaluation (SSE) processes.

Recommendations

- The board of management should progress the review of the post structure in order to further strengthen and delineate the roles assigned to middle management as well as ensuring the positions support teaching and learning and student management structures, in the context of the changing needs of a growing school.
- The board should ensure that the planned review of the code of behaviour is expedited, with a focus on ensuring greater consistency in the implementation of the code.

- The senior management team (SMT) should review existing class formation practices in order to consider further opportunities to integrate JCSP students into mainstream settings.
- Teachers should collaboratively devise strategies, including professional peer review practices, to extend the highly effective teaching and learning practices observed in many lessons.

DETAILED FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. QUALITY OF SCHOOL LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT

The overall quality of leadership and management is very good.

Leading learning and teaching

A range of appropriate curricular programmes are on offer, to cater for the school's diverse student cohort; including Junior Cycle, the JCSP, the Leaving Certificate (Established) and the Leaving Certificate Applied. An optional Transition Year (TY) programme was introduced in September 2018.

A broad and balanced curriculum is in place, with deliberate and informed efforts made to meet the needs of the students. In response to parental demands, SMT have diversified the range of subjects provided in the school, to include recent additions such as Physics, Music and Coding. The school is also proposing to extend the subject range at senior cycle to include, for example, Agricultural Science.

Appropriate time is allocated to each subject on the school timetable. On entry to the school, most students are assigned to mixed-ability groupings. Each year, discrete JCSP classes are formed and practices surrounding their creation are regularly adjusted with the needs of individual cohorts of students in mind. Data reviewed indicated poor attendance amongst some JCSP cohorts. In order to better support the achievement, attendance and behaviour of all students, further ongoing review should consider the possibilities for additional integration of the JCSP class groups, such as further inclusion within mixed-ability settings.

The SMT, supported by the board, promote a range of initiatives that support learning and teaching, including Instructional leadership, TL21, Cosán and Droichead. There has been a very positive engagement in such programmes by staff and the benefits of this involvement were evident in many lessons. To further optimise this investment, and given the recent significant changes in staff in the school, professional peer review practices could usefully be further developed for the sharing of in-school expertise. This would also build on the commendable plans already in place to commence "teach-meets", which should support additional sharing of practice.

The school regularly provides placements for student teachers. Such engagement in initial teacher education programmes is welcome and is included among the standards in the Teaching Council's *Code of Professional Conduct for Teachers* as it can provide valuable professional benefits for teachers, student teachers, students and the teacher education institution. The SMT also provide and manage a mentoring programme whereby they support new staff, Newly Qualified Teachers (NQT's) and Professional Master of Education (PME) students, after school on a weekly basis.

Student care emerged as a key success and strength and this area of school life is prioritised through a very good range of supports. Staff, parents and students all referred to the comprehensive range of supports offered within the school, which creates a welcoming and hospitable atmosphere for students. The school indicated that this venture also supports student learning and encourages attendance.

The school benefits from the services of a psychotherapist, a qualified Guidance Counsellor, the School Completion Programme and the home-school-community liaison. Care team meetings take place weekly and are facilitated by SMT. Guidance features on the student timetables for most year groups. Going forward, further opportunities for the Guidance team to meet periodically with third year and TY class groupings should be considered.

Overall, SEN practices within the school are very good. A SEN policy has been formulated in line with recent guidelines. At staff meetings, presentations have been provided on a variety of SEN-related areas. SEN models in operation in the school include one-to-one tuition, team teaching and small class groupings. The inclusive ethos of the school is exemplified by the addition of the Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) unit.

Managing the organisation

The board is well informed and undertakes training to fulfil its governance role. It was reported that the current vacancy for a parent representative on the board will be filled in the near future.

The board is aware of its statutory obligations and mandatory policies are either in place, or in draft form. Commendably, an overall policy framework document is also in operation, allowing for cyclical and systematic review of policies. The school's open Admissions Policy is currently being updated in line with the Education (Admission to Schools) Bill 2016. Going forward, the draft internet acceptable use policy should be ratified by the board.

The board keeps abreast of ongoing school developments through presentations they receive from staff and the principal regarding teaching and learning initiatives within the school, including digital learning, DEIS and SSE initiatives.

Minutes of board meetings indicate a variety of issues for discussion, including policy ratification, teaching and learning initiatives, the introduction of new subjects to the school and infrastructural developments. It is, however, recommended that the board of management receive reports on the numbers of suspensions and bullying cases, and that these are referenced in BOM minutes.

An oral agreed report is provided to staff following board meetings; going forward this could be conducted on a more formal basis in order to further enhance communication between the board and staff.

The SMT comprises the principal and deputy principal, who present as a highly effective team. SMT meetings are held regularly on both an informal and formal basis. An open door policy is in place for the school community to engage with senior management. Findings emerging from the questionnaire responses, conducted amongst teachers, students and parents as part of the evaluation, indicated high satisfaction with school life across a range of areas.

Middle management comprises of assistant principal post-holders and a number of vacancies are due to be filled in the near future. In addition, non-post holders have volunteered for management roles, including year head duties. Overall, duties are carried out diligently and effectively. The board, in consultation with staff, has recently reviewed the post structure in light of the needs of the school and Circular letter 0003/2018.

Continued review and development of the posts of responsibility duties should ensure that the structures in place further support senior management in reaching the school's identified goals to support teaching and learning as well as student management structures. This should lead to the development of a long-term sustainable model, while further strengthening the role of middle management within the school.

Student attendance has improved over recent years with the overall trends in terms of the percentage of students absent more than twenty days declining. This is a very positive development. Strategies that focus on attendance amongst specific student cohorts within the school, for example JCSP, where trends in the attendance data were less favourable, should now be addressed.

In the course of the evaluation, during lesson observations and in meetings with staff, student punctuality for lessons was identified as an issue that could impact on student learning. The planned review of the code of behaviour should also consider additional strategies to encourage punctual attendance at lessons.

Current student management structures include a tutor for every class group. The tutors undertake a significant day-to-day management role, including disciplinary duties. For all junior-cycle year groups, the year head fulfils a dual role as class tutor for one class group, in addition to their year head duties. Furthermore, at present, the deputy principal is acting year head for all senior-cycle year groups. While overall student behaviour observed during the evaluation was very good, findings from the questionnaires indicate some inconsistency in practice with regard to the statement that all students are treated fairly and respectfully in the school. It is now timely that the roles of both tutor and year heads are redefined and documented to provide for greater delineation of the duties associated with each role within the ladder of referral in the school. A year head specific to each year group should also be considered to support greater consistency in the management of students.

Positive behaviour is encouraged through a series of strategies, including endeavour awards and a 'student of the month'. Furthermore, the board has prioritised the need for review of the code of behaviour and it is advised that such review provides greater clarity and consistency regarding the detention structures in operation and that a review of the specific duties pertaining to the roles of tutor and year head takes place.

The buildings and grounds are maintained to a very high standard and optimal use of the facilities is ensured through a variety of school, summer and evening activities.

Leading school development

All essential elements that constitute a school plan were presented during the evaluation and the board could now usefully index these files into an overarching document that would provide a cohesive structure to a school plan.

The board is committed to the school and current priorities include the development of the school's infrastructure and further embedding of information and communications technology (ICT) practices within the school. The school is also planning appropriately for the successful introduction of an Irish-language stream, An Sruth, as a means of offering further choice to students from the local Gaelscoil.

In meetings with the SMT, responding to the needs of the community was outlined as the guiding school vision. To accommodate the significant ongoing growth in student numbers over the last decade, as well as expected growth into the future, plans are at an advanced stage for major infrastructural development with a school extension imminent.

Very constructive relationships and links have been established with the local community, with parents, and a range of relevant agencies, including a cinema club and links with the local primary schools. This is very positive and has served to further embed the school within the community.

Commendably, the school has been involved in the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) project for senior cycle reform, serving to input to the development of upcoming national educational reform.

Furthermore, the school's involvement in areas ranging from positive mental health to an initiative that encourages students to 'Turn to Teaching' has served to lead school development in these valuable areas of concern.

Developing leadership capacity

A culture of widespread staff engagement in CPD to develop leadership capacity is strongly embedded and encouraged by the SMT in areas ranging from instructional leadership to '21st century teaching'. This is highly commendable.

Minutes of staff meetings indicate a variety of items for discussion. Teachers have presented at these meetings on areas including virtual learning environments and child safeguarding. Senior management also communicate with staff through a weekly bulletin, thus ensuring clear channels of communication.

Staff teams and working groups have been formed, serving to positively lead development in key areas, such as DEIS action planning. Independent of the post structure, staff are also encouraged to take on leadership roles, including in the area of subject co-ordination, as tutors, Student Council leadership and programme co-ordination (JCSP).

Student leadership opportunities include the recently re-established students' council. The students' council is democratically elected and it was reported that members will soon receive training for their roles.

A range of extra and co-curricular activities is provided in the school, including sporting activities and educational programmes, all of which is supported and co-ordinated by staff. This is commendable and impacts positively on the student experience by broadening their opportunities to extend their learning beyond the classroom.

2. QUALITY OF TEACHING AND LEARNING

Twenty lessons were observed in the course of the evaluation. The quality of teaching and learning was good or very good in the majority of lessons, with aspects of satisfactory practice noted in a small number of lessons.

Learner outcomes and experiences

In all lessons, learning intentions were outlined at the beginning, and success criteria was shared in a number of instances. In the most effective lessons, the learning intentions built on students' prior learning. In a minority of lessons, where some scope for improvement was noted, intentions were overly generic and could have been more targeted to the specific topic to support the lesson structure.

Very positive classroom interactions among the teacher and the students were evident in almost all lessons. Students' inputs were welcomed and an affirming atmosphere was observed.

Very high levels of motivation were apparent where the learners' disposition to learning was of a high standard and in lessons where the content and pace were appropriate to challenge and engage the students. In a small minority of lessons, there was scope to deepen the content in order to further progress student learning in the subject area.

Active learning featured in almost all lessons, mostly to very good effect, and served to sustain student interest. Features of highly effective active learning included; appropriate time allocated to the task, time for a plenary session at the end of the activity and meaningful student engagement in the assigned task. In a few instances student learning would have been enhanced through the use of a group or paired activity while avoiding an over-reliance on teacher input. This rebalancing should allow for further enhancement of student engagement in their learning.

Questioning strategies were employed to good or very good effect in all lessons to elicit students' skills understanding and knowledge. In the most effective lessons, questions were employed as a strategy for the promotion of differentiation and there was a balance between the use of open and closed questions with students challenged to extend and justify their reasoning. In a number of lessons students' volunteered responses and also posed questions demonstrating learner engagement and a willingness to share in their responsibility for learning. Strategies that further encourage the student voice in lessons, while facilitating greater student involvement in their learning, is recommended.

Overall, ICT was very successfully integrated into many lessons to support and enhance the teaching and learning experience. Examples included the effective use of visualizers and chrome-casting technology to display student work, and the sharing of content developed by students. SMT support for the successful and incremental introduction of ICT into the classroom is to be commended.

Classroom seating arrangements, in most lessons, were optimal for the promotion of active learning methodologies.

Teachers' individual and collective practice

The quality of teachers' individual practice was very good overall, and some excellent practice was also noted. Preparation of teaching resources was very good in all lessons. In the most effective lessons, planning was clearly aligned to the learning intentions, thus facilitating student motivation and a suitably challenging learning environment which supported developmental learning.

Teacher explanations and instructions were clear in lessons. In almost all lessons, a good variety of methodologies was used. Very good use was made of mind maps, Venn diagrams, place mats and brainstorming activities to support active engagement.

Strategies to promote literacy in lessons were used to good effect. The use in some lessons of dictionaries, topic and subject-specific terminology with very effective practice noted where the spelling of keywords was done to support individual needs. Further attention to encouraging students to use subject specific language is recommended in a minority of lessons. Numeracy strategies were less apparent in lessons, further development of whole-school approaches is advised in this area.

Teachers' collective curriculum planning for subjects' areas is progressing with a variety of templates in use. Some subject plans are overly focused on textbooks and should be reviewed to become bespoke documents that support the learning needs of the specific cohort. The move to an online system will allow a more efficient sharing of resources and, as the junior cycle becomes embedded, the specifications could be further used to develop subject planning. It may also be useful for an annual meeting to be convened between SMT and subject co-ordinators, to discuss overall student outcomes and ongoing curriculum changes in the context of a growing school.

Student outcomes in the certificate examinations are analysed, and in some subject areas, factors affecting attainment have been identified. However, in most cases, action plans for improving attainment require further development with a longitudinal approach to emerging trends and student outcomes over recent years.

Homework was assigned in most lessons but students are not consistently recording homework in their journals. Students should be required to make better use of their journals to support their learning. The inclusion of the target setting section of the student journal is underutilised as tool to monitor and encourage students to share in the responsibility for their learning.

A review of student copybooks indicated that there are some very good examples of written formative feedback provided by the teachers.

3. IMPLEMENTATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS FROM PREVIOUS EVALUATIONS

Leadership and management
Overall, very good progress has been made with leadership and management recommendations, including increased student access to History and ongoing engagement by staff in teaching and learning strategies. Further strategies should be considered to support the establishment of a parents' association.

Teaching and Learning
Very good progress has been made with teaching and learning recommendations, such as increased use of active learning, differentiation and the use of ICT in lessons. Greater use of formative feedback is an area with further scope for improvements.

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

The School's Self-Evaluation Process
The school has engaged very positively with the SSE process. Baseline data has been gathered, all partners in education have been consulted, targets have been established, and a plan developed. There are very good structures in place to support ongoing DEIS planning with all staff involved in one of the seven core DEIS themes. The board has ratified the school's DEIS plan for 2017-2020 and receives an annual review of progress.

The School's Capacity for Improvement
The school has successfully managed many changes including the increase in the student cohort. Questionnaire results show considerable satisfaction with the school. Staff demonstrate a strong commitment to a welcoming learning environment and to ongoing improvements in teaching and learning through their participation in national initiatives and CPD events. In light of these strengths the school demonstrates very good capacity for improvement.

The Inspectorate's Quality Continuum

Inspectors describe the quality of provision in the school using the Inspectorate's quality continuum which is shown below. The quality continuum provides examples of the language used by inspectors when evaluating and describing the quality of the school's provision of each area.

Level	Description	Example of descriptive terms
Very Good	*Very good* applies where the quality of the areas evaluated is of a very high standard. The very few areas for improvement that exist do not significantly impact on the overall quality of provision. For some schools in this category the quality of what is evaluated is *outstanding* and provides an example for other schools of exceptionally high standards of provision.	Very good; of a very high quality; very effective practice; highly commendable; very successful; few areas for improvement; notable; of a very high standard. Excellent; outstanding; exceptionally high standard, with very significant strengths; exemplary
Good	*Good* applies where the strengths in the areas evaluated clearly outweigh the areas in need of improvement. The areas requiring improvement impact on the quality of pupils' learning. The school needs to build on its strengths and take action to address the areas identified as requiring improvement in order to achieve a *very good* standard.	Good; good quality; valuable; effective practice; competent; useful; commendable; good standard; some areas for improvement
Satisfactory	*Satisfactory* applies where the quality of provision is adequate. The strengths in what is being evaluated just outweigh the shortcomings. While the shortcomings do not have a significant negative impact they constrain the quality of the learning experiences and should be addressed in order to achieve a better standard.	Satisfactory; adequate; appropriate provision although some possibilities for improvement exist; acceptable level of quality; improvement needed in some areas
Fair	*Fair* applies where, although there are some strengths in the areas evaluated, deficiencies or shortcomings that outweigh those strengths also exist. The school will have to address certain deficiencies without delay in order to ensure that provision is satisfactory or better.	Fair; evident weaknesses that are impacting on pupils' learning; less than satisfactory; experiencing difficulty; must improve in specified areas; action required to improve
Weak	*Weak* applies where there are serious deficiencies in the areas evaluated. Immediate and coordinated whole-school action is required to address the areas of concern. In some cases, the intervention of other agencies may be required to support improvements.	Weak; unsatisfactory; insufficient; ineffective; poor; requiring significant change, development or improvement; experiencing significant difficulties;

Appendix

SCHOOL RESPONSE TO THE REPORT

Submitted by the Board of Management

Area 1   Observations on the content of the inspection report

The Board of Management welcomes the positive WSE-MLL report. We are particularly pleased that the very good quality of school leadership and management was noted by the inspectors in the course of the evaluation. We are equally pleased with the recognition of the very good quality of teaching and learning in the College.

The Board was delighted to see the very good quality of student care and support acknowledged, with the wide range of programmes provided to meet students' needs and the school's commendation on the range of initiatives and extra-curricular activities facilitated by staff.

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

We are pleased to report that much progress has been made on the posts structure review and interviews should take place shortly.

The review of the code of behaviour is underway.