An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Whole-School Evaluation
Management, Leadership and Learning

REPORT

Athy College
Athy, County Kildare
Roll number: 70650L

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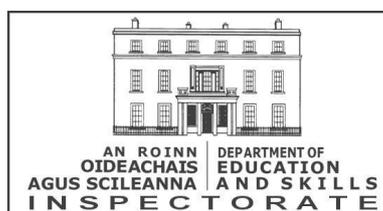
Whole-School Evaluation
Management, Leadership and Learning

A whole-school evaluation of management, leadership and learning (WSE-MLL) was undertaken in September 2011 in Athy College. This report presents the findings of the evaluation and makes recommendations for improvement. During the evaluation, the inspection team met with the school's board of management, in-school management, 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 was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the report; a response was not received from the board.

Introduction

Athy College is one of two coeducational post-primary schools in the town of Athy, County Kildare. In 2010, the school moved to occupy a newly built school building at a new location in the town. It is one of four schools on this campus which is owned by County Kildare Vocational Education Committee (VEC). The other three schools on campus are primary schools, one of which is an Irish-medium school.

Athy College is located in a RAPID area and is a participant in the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) scheme. In addition to the second-level education provided, members of the community can also access Post-Leaving Certificate provision in the school. The school has a current enrolment of 256 post-primary students.

1. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

1.1 Key Findings

- All partners share a vision for Athy College as a centre for learning for all.
- The manner in which school staff approach their work is characterised by professionalism, care and enthusiasm.
- The quality of learning and teaching was very good in the majority of lessons.
- The school development processes and practices engaged in are of a very high quality.
- The school is led effectively by a senior management team who actively promote improvement in students' learning experiences and develop leadership among staff and students.
- There are very good processes and practices in place to support school self-evaluation and a high level of capacity to affect school improvement.
- Very effective use is made of the ICT infrastructure to make learning accessible to staff and students.

1.2 Recommendations for Further Development

- The board of management should make arrangements for the ratification of a school plan and ensure all members are familiar with the functioning of the school in order that the board can better support the senior management team and school staff in achieving the vision for the school.
- The assessment data available should be used to identify strengths and areas for development, be more clearly integrated into the subject planning and inform the monitoring and review processes.

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 board of management (the board) is correctly constituted. While the board has been involved in the development and ratification of policies, the current board has not adopted a school plan. Furthermore, records of board meetings indicate that meetings have been infrequent in recent years. In order for the board to fulfil its functions in leading and managing the school in line with legislative requirements, it is vital that the board agrees a schedule of regular meetings to take place throughout the school year.

Some members of the board have participated in training provided by the VEC. To enable the board to better support senior management and school staff in achieving their vision for the school as a centre for learning for the community into the future, it is imperative that all members access relevant training. Where practicable and resources permit, it would be desirable that all members access training as a group.

Parents are represented on the board but a parents' association has not been established. To date, it has not been the practice of the board to issue an agreed report on the functioning of the school to parents. The board should address this and, while acknowledging that good progress has been made, it is recommended that the priority of forming a parents' association be achieved.

In line with its mission statement, Athy College is an inclusive school and caters for a student population which is culturally diverse and which presents with a wide range of learning ambitions and abilities. In this context, reference in the admissions policy to the delayed entry of students with special educational needs should be revisited.

Confirmation was provided that, in compliance with Post-primary Circulars M44/05 and 0062/2006, the board of management has formally adopted the Department's Child Protection Guidelines for Post-primary Schools (Published September 2004). Confirmation was also provided that these child protection procedures have been brought to the attention of management, school staff and parents; that a copy of the procedures has been provided to all staff (including all new staff); and that management has ensured that all staff are familiar with the procedures to be followed. A designated liaison person (DLP) and a deputy DLP have been appointed in line with the requirements of the guidelines.

The school's priorities for development
School development processes and practices in Athy College are of a very high quality. The integration of the practices of target setting, monitoring and reviewing of plans at whole-school level and at subject department level are well advanced as part of the culture of the school. In order that target setting better serves the school development process, it is recommended that more attention be given to ensuring that the agreed targets are measurable.

In light of the recent move of the school to new buildings and a situation in which it shares a campus with other schools, the school community is very aware of the need for the strategic management of the future development and growth of the school. In this regard, consideration has already been given to benefits and changes which will ensue from

increased enrolment, curriculum development, increased staffing and partnership with schools sharing the campus.

2.2 Effectiveness of leadership for learning

Leadership of staff

The senior management team provide strong and effective leadership for the entire school community. They work collaboratively to ensure the efficient operation of the school on a day-to-day basis, to maintain a strong focus on the quality of learning and teaching and to plan the development of the school into the future. The focus the team places on the continuing development of pedagogical practice in the school and their active participation in initiatives, along with other staff members, and the reflective practices engaged in is a significant strength in the school.

School staff approach their work with professionalism, care and enthusiasm. In fostering ownership of the school among staff, senior management has developed a very strong level of leadership across the staff. Opportunities to instigate and implement initiatives are welcomed and supported. Initiatives engaged in at the time of the evaluation provided clear evidence of the school staff's commitment to its focus on the quality of learning and teaching and the school as a learning community. A prime example is the Teaching and Learning Club which has operated effectively in the school for a period of years. Other examples include participation in the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment's Key Skills project for senior cycle and the development of a staff training DVD based on pedagogy which forms part of the school's induction and mentoring programme for new teachers.

There is a very good and open culture of continuing professional development among staff and the school's comprehensive continuing professional development plan reflects an appropriate emphasis on learning and teaching. The school evaluates its participation in various initiatives and it is noteworthy that students' opinions on new approaches have also been sought.

The active involvement of all staff in various working groups, such as subject departments and DEIS task groups, demonstrates the shared responsibility for leading and managing change and improvement within the school. Very good processes are in place to ensure ongoing monitoring, review, and target setting, both in subject and whole-school planning. The recent review conducted by each subject department, which included the setting of priorities for development, is a very good example of these processes. However, it would be useful for the school to conduct and review outcomes of analyses of student assessment data in order to firmly establish baseline data and to measure progress in student learning.

Leadership of students

The students in Athy College have a strong sense of role as members of the school's community. Parents and students met with during the evaluation and respondents to questionnaires provide evidence of the strong sense of care afforded students in the school in keeping with its ethos.

Pastoral aspects of students' learning are well planned and managed and the curriculum is used to good effect to support the students' development in this area. The student care team which is to be established should further enhance this provision.

In keeping with its ethos and its admissions policy, the school provides educational opportunities for all students. This is reflected in the range of programmes and subjects offered in both cycles, the efficient use of learning support and resource hours and the preparation, including a programme of professional development for teachers, which is

underway to open the school's Autistic Spectrum Disorder Unit. Students' access to their choice of optional subjects is maximised. The curriculum is regularly reviewed and new subjects are introduced in response to student demand as resources permit. The introduction of Spanish and Chemistry are recent examples of this.

The school's Guidance allocation is fully utilised to provide a service for the students. Guidance is integrated into the curriculum through Social Personal and Health Education, Relationships and Sexuality Education and timetabled classes for senior-cycle students in addition to students' access to one-to-one provision. In line with good practice, the guidance policy provides evidence that tests used as part of the service are reviewed.

The assistance of relevant external support agencies is sought and availed of where necessary. The school's Home School Community Liaison officer and School Completion Programme contribute to the encouragement of parental involvement in students' learning and in expanding and enhancing the students' learning experiences throughout the year.

Links with primary feeder schools are well established. Information on students' attainment and learning needs is sought and is used to plan for their smooth transition into first year.

Students, through an active student council, are given opportunities to contribute to the school and its operation. Members are democratically elected and all year groups are represented.

2.3 Management of facilities
The school building provides a very modern learning environment and boasts very good amenities and facilities which are maintained to a very high standard. In addition to the very well equipped and bright classrooms, the school's sports facilities are very good and provide ample opportunity to forge links between all the schools on campus and the school's extended community. It was evident, through the various activities on offer and planned for, that Athy College is well on its way to becoming a focal point for the community.

The excellent ICT infrastructure is used to very good effect to make learning accessible to all staff and students, both in in-school and non-school settings.

The school's health and safety statement is current.

3. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

3.1 The quality of learning and teaching
The quality of learning and teaching was very good in the majority of lessons observed. The pace and structure of lessons showed that considerable thought had been put into their preparation. Advance preparation was also evident in the wide range of resources used to support learning. In particular, the use of ICT as a tool to enhance learning was very effective. It was also evident that careful consideration had been given to the layout of the classroom so that it was easy for students to work together in pairs or larger groups. A minority of lessons observed were in need of improvement. In these instances greater attention should be paid at the planning stage to the time available, learning objectives of the lesson, the structure of the lesson, the students' learning styles and assessment, including the strategies to be used. Class contact time is very valuable and therefore, and with reference to one instance, revision classes also require a clear structure, and the material presented should be differentiated in order that it appeals to different levels of learning abilities and styles.

Teachers used a wide range of appropriate methodologies and strategies to make complex concepts and content accessible to students. The use of student-centred activities such as pair work and group work, placemat activities, drama and role play ensured that students were actively engaged in their own learning. Written tasks assigned to students on work sheets and for homework were not differentiated. It is recommended that subject departments explore the use of differentiated tasks with a view to ensuring that students of all abilities, and particularly those of higher ability, are appropriately challenged.

Literacy and numeracy needs of students were catered for in most lessons through an emphasis on key words and subject-specific terminology. Students' different learning styles were also addressed through the use of audio-visual and concrete resources.

In keeping with the school's mission statement, lessons were conducted in a supportive and caring atmosphere. Interactions between students and teachers were respectful and a positive rapport allowed students and teachers to work well together.

The students' progress during lessons was well monitored. Some very good examples of questioning styles which elicited deeper understanding were observed. Formative assessment was used to good effect in some instances, for instance, where teachers' comments on written work and to verbal responses guided students in improving their responses and progress. As was reflected in students' responses to questionnaires, their learning is regularly assessed and monitored through the regular assignment and correction of homework. While all subject department plans included outcomes of analysis of students' attainment in state examinations, there is scope to make greater use of them to inform planning for learning. In order to better inform planning, and with a view to increasing the number of students taking higher level in a broader range of subjects, the strengths and areas for development identified in the analyses conducted should be documented. Attainment in house and other examinations should also be taken into account when monitoring progress and reflected in the planning documentation.

4. IMPLEMENTATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS FROM PREVIOUS EVALUATIONS

4.1 Management
School management considers all inspection reports issued to the school and integrates findings and recommendations in these reports into the schools' curricular development and planning work. Good progress has been made in implementing recommendations in previous reports: The move to a new building has helped address issues relating to the art room; a guidance counsellor is in place; History forms part of a wider curriculum option.

4.2 Learning and Teaching
Two recurring themes in recommendations in the area of learning and teaching in previous evaluations were focussed on during the course of classroom visits. It was evident from classroom observation that the recommendations concerning the sharing of expected learning outcomes at the outset of lessons and the creation of opportunities for students to actively engage in learning through, for instance, pair work and group work, were implemented. Management and staff have been proactive in their engagement with the outcomes of previous inspections and have used the reports and their participation in the learning and teaching initiative to extend good practice across subject departments. For example, in almost all lessons, opportunities were created for students' active participation in their learning. In over half the lessons observed, the expected learning outcomes were shared with students at the outset. This practice was most effective when the expected

outcomes were briefly reviewed at appropriate stages or at the end of the lesson. A review of subject department plans suggests that the incorporation of expected learning outcomes into the planning templates in a greater number of areas should support the extension of this good practice across the curriculum.

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

At in-school level, the school has very good structures and processes in place to guide self-evaluation. The senior management and teaching staff demonstrated a clear commitment and the ability to use the school self-evaluation process to benefit improvement in outcomes for students. The identification of areas for development and the process of review and self-evaluation are managed through a very good structure of committees such as the curriculum committee and the management committee. The board, through the adoption of a school plan and the regular monitoring and review of agreed and measurable targets for development, should benefit from the already established very good practice at in-school level.

The focus of various initiatives engaged in by the school to improve learning and teaching provides strong evidence of the school staff's capacity for school improvement. During the course of this evaluation the school conducted a review of the WSE-MLL experience. The questions and responses to questionnaires completed by teaching staff demonstrated a clear awareness of areas for school improvement.