

**An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna**

**Department of Education and Skills**

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

**REPORT**

**Ashton School  
Blackrock Road, Cork  
Roll number: 81008W**

**Date of inspection: 29 February 2016**



**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 February 2016 in Ashton School. This report presents the findings of the evaluation and makes recommendations for improvement. During the evaluation, the inspection team met with the school's board of management, in-school management, and groups of teachers, parents and students. Inspectors also reviewed a range of school documentation and responses to questionnaires and examined other data in relation to the operation of the school. As part of the evaluation, a range of lessons across a number of subject areas was inspected. The board accepts the report as the final inspection report available for publication and wished to respond formally to the report. The Board agrees that the response submitted will be included as an appendix to the published report. The board's response is submitted below.

### ***Introduction***

Ashton School was established as a co-educational comprehensive school in 1972 following the amalgamation of two private schools: Rochelle School and Cork Grammar School. It is under the joint patronage of the Church of Ireland Bishop of Cork, and Cork Education and Training Board (CETB). The school has a current enrolment of 518 students. It offers a comprehensive curriculum and a range of programmes at second level, as well as a significant Adult Education programme.

## **SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT**

### ***Key Findings***

- Very effective management and leadership of learning was evident in the work of the board of management and the senior management team.
- The principal and deputy principal demonstrate a deep commitment and loyalty to the school.
- Parents, teachers and students are very positive in their views of the school.
- Students benefit from a positive and caring learning community.
- The curriculum is broad and balanced as befits a comprehensive school.
- The quality of teaching and learning was very good in the lessons observed.
- A wide range of extracurricular activities is provided for students.
- The new school facilities are of a very high quality.
- Student achievement in the certificate examinations is strong.
- The school has demonstrated a high level of engagement with the school self-evaluation (SSE) process.

### ***Recommendations for Further Development***

- Strategies should be developed to strengthen communication and consultation between partners in the school community.
- A core student-support team with a regular meeting time should be established in order to strengthen and consolidate the current student-support structures in the school.
- The special educational needs (SEN) policy should be reviewed and updated in light of Circular 70/14.
- The preparation of a new Health and Safety Statement should be prioritised.

## **QUALITY OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP**

### ***1.1 School ownership and management***

The board of management of Ashton School is in place since November 2011 and is the first board to hold office under the terms of reference for Ashton Comprehensive School. As a result, the make-up of the board now includes representatives of parents and staff. The members of the board have significant links with the school, and demonstrate expertise, experience and commitment as well as a sense of pride in the school. The board carries out its work in a spirit of partnership and with a focus on consensus. Additional advice is also provided to the board as required by Cork ETB, from the Association of Protestant Comprehensive Schools, and the Irish School Heads' Association.

The board provides very effective management and leadership for the school. In recent years, the board has played a significant role in managing the development of the new school building. A number of sub-committees have been formed to progress the work of the board in the areas of building and finance, while a member of the board also sits on the school's development committee.

The board is aware of its statutory responsibilities and has ensured that mandatory policies have been adopted. In addition, priorities for the review of policies have been identified. The board is very supportive of senior management and has identified policy formulation, teaching and learning, and the development of the school's facilities as some of its priorities for the future.

While there are structures in place to facilitate communication between the board and the school community, there was some variation on the issue of communication in the findings of the parental and staff surveys carried out during the evaluation. While a high majority of parents agreed that the board reported annually to them on the work of the school, the staff survey found that only a minority agreed that the board kept teachers informed about its leadership and management role. The survey also found that less than half the staff agreed that the views of teachers were valued in the school's decision-making processes. The board, therefore, should look to identify ways of improving communication and consultation with staff and with the school community.

The school benefits from the support of a well-structured and active parents' association. Senior management and two staff members attend its meetings, and the practice of sharing an agreed report with parents following board of management meetings has been introduced. The members play a consultative role in the development of relevant policies such as the anti-bullying policy. The parents' association has strong links with the students, and its members attend many school events such as the first-year evening. A very high percentage of the parents surveyed agreed that they feel welcome in the school and that overall they are happy with the school. It is suggested that the board of management should consider meeting formally with members of the parents' association each year in order to strengthen the links between the two groups.

The principal and deputy principal form a very effective senior management team. They demonstrate a deep loyalty and commitment to the school, its ethos, history and traditions. The deputy principal has held the position for a decade while the principal is a more recent appointment. As a team, they demonstrate a shared sense of purpose and have a clear understanding of the strengths that they bring to their roles, whether in the area of administrative or operational systems, in mentoring individuals, in the attention to detail, or

in the level of reflection that underpins their work. Their roles and areas of responsibility are clearly identified and a visible presence is maintained around the school, thus ensuring a calm school atmosphere. They provide very good leadership of student learning as evidenced by their ambition for all students to achieve to their potential, as well as by their commitment to the school and its place in the community. The quality of their management of the school is borne out by the results of the parent and teacher questionnaires, where a high percentage of respondents stated that the school is well run.

### ***1.2 Effectiveness of leadership for learning***

The school's middle-management structure devolves responsibility and leadership roles to staff through the posts of responsibility structure. Assistant principals and special-duties teachers undertake key roles in the areas of student management and support; as co-ordinators; in public relations and examinations; and as leaders of school self-evaluation committees.

The key roles that are in place in the area of student support include the guidance counsellor, chaplain, year heads, class teachers and co-ordinators. The role of the year head encompasses a range of duties including student attendance and discipline, and year heads meet with senior management approximately three times per year. Appropriate child protection procedures are in place and effective personal, educational and vocational guidance is provided. The provision of guidance helps support the school's focus on positive mental health for students. The work of the chaplain is a key factor in the continuation of the school's supportive Christian culture and ethos.

A positive and caring atmosphere is evident in the school and the care given to students is of a high quality. The commitment shown by staff to their students is very evident. In their responses to the questionnaires, a very high number of students indicated that they felt safe and cared for, while almost all parents stated that their child felt safe and well looked after in the school. Students were also positive in their questionnaire responses with regard to the school's anti-bullying measures.

However, there is a need for more formal structures in the area of student support in order for resources to be organised to benefit all students, and in particular those students who present with additional support needs. At present, there is no core student-support team in place to oversee and co-ordinate the many supports for students that exist in the school, nor is there a regular meeting time for those involved. The establishment of a team together with a regular meeting time, would facilitate the sharing of information and the strengthening of collaborative practice; and the team would be able to offer advice to school management on the development of student-support policies and structures. Guidelines for the creation of such a core team are given in the publication of the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) on student-support teams.

A significant allocation of resources is given to the school to support students with special educational needs. This allocation reflects very positively on the inclusive character of the school, and on its ethos of accepting students of all abilities and multiple intelligences. The organisation of resources is carried out by the learning support co-ordinator and by a small number of resource teachers, each of whom has responsibility for specific year groups. They are assisted by a large number of teachers involved in providing support in the classroom. The good work of all the teachers involved and of the school's special needs assistants (SNAs) is acknowledged. However, in order to facilitate best practice in the deployment of resources, in coordination, and in educational support, the core SEN team should have a regular meeting time. The SEN co-ordinator should also be a member of the student-support team. A reduction in the number of teaching staff timetabled to provide

support would allow for greater continuity of provision, and would enable the core team to provide help and advice to the teachers on educational planning for addressing the needs of the students concerned. As a Department of Education and Skills circular has recently been published giving guidance for schools on the organisation of resource teaching and learning support, the SEN policy and plan should be reviewed and updated in line with Circular 70/2014.

The school offers a broad and balanced curriculum as befits a comprehensive school. A well-organised optional Transition Year (TY) programme is provided as well as the established Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate. A wide range of subjects is offered including many practical subjects, and the school endeavours to give all students their preferences. Efforts are made to facilitate students who wish to take additional subjects outside of the timetabled school day.

Strategies are in place to facilitate the transition for new students from primary school to second level. In addition to the formal admissions process, an Open Day and an information evening are organised and management meets each student individually. The chaplain as first-year head, helps students with their transition to second level. A subject-sampling programme in first year also ensures that students are well informed when they choose their subjects for junior cycle. The school employs a system of mixed-ability class groupings in first year which changes to a streamed or banded system in subsequent years depending on the subject.

The school's response to external initiatives, particularly in relation to SSE and to the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy, is very positive and the implementation of actions is visible throughout the school. New working groups focused on developing teaching and learning have been formed as part of the school's self-evaluation process in areas such as e-learning and assessment, while a committee has also begun to look at the area of well-being.

Subject departments are well organised and structured. Patterns of uptake and achievement in the state examinations are good and reflect positively on the high academic expectations that the school has for its students.

Students are afforded the opportunity to engage in a wide range of extra-curricular sporting and cultural activities which enhance their learning experience, including drama, hockey, soccer, music and chess, as well as language exchanges and school tours. Students have experienced success at local and national level as well as international representation in many areas. The emphasis placed on community action, and on fund-raising for charity, is also very positive.

Good opportunities for student leadership are provided by the student council which carries out its work with the assistance of a member of staff. The members are enthusiastic about their role, and have been actively involved in fundraising and in school issues such as the provision of a flag pole for the new school. The council serves as an important communication link with students through its suggestion box and noticeboard. However, less than half of the students surveyed agreed that they had a say in how things are done in the school. The school should therefore look to promote additional ways of engaging with students and of ensuring that their voice is heard.

The school's head boy and head girl together with the school prefects undertake a number of duties which enable them to develop their leadership skills. Their responsibilities include taking rolls at the weekly assembly, taking charge of lost property, and acting as mentors for groups of new students.

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*.

## ***1.2 Management of facilities***

The school has recently moved into a new high-quality school building which is bright and airy with well-resourced specialist rooms and teacher rooms. The new building is being skilfully transformed into a visually-stimulating learning environment as artwork and photographs are put on display. At the same time, Ashton House, a building that pre-dates the school, has become a largely administrative space, with the paintings and artefacts on display chosen to reflect the school's long history. Given that the move to the new school building is so recent, it is suggested that time be given to a discussion of how the new space facilitates all aspects of school life, both for students and staff, and of any issues that may have arisen.

With regard to information and communication technologies (ICT), the resources available to staff are very good. A school intranet is in place which facilitates staff communication, record-keeping and the sharing of reports and plans, while teachers are also using technology in an innovative way for teaching languages. The school should look to build on this existing good practice by supporting communication and collaboration through ICT, and through the advancement of a plan for its effective use in teaching and learning.

It is very positive that the school's facilities are made available to the wider community through its wide-ranging and well-organised adult education programme. The courses provide opportunities for learning for the community in the evenings and strong links have been created with the local community as a result.

As the health and safety statement for the old school is now redundant, the board of management is cognisant of the need to prepare a new statement. The drafting of this document, as per the Health and Safety Authority guidelines, should be prioritised.

The valued and professional contribution of the school's administrative, technical, library and ancillary staff is acknowledged and commended.

# **1. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING**

## ***2.1 The quality of learning and teaching***

During the evaluation, inspectors visited lessons across the range of subjects provided in the school. The quality of teaching and learning in the lessons observed was very good.

The classroom atmosphere was positive, creating a calm and supportive learning environment for students, while a very good teacher-student rapport was evident. A high percentage of the students surveyed reported that they are getting on well with their school work and that teachers encourage them to do the best that they can. Results from parent

questionnaires show that almost all parents consider that teaching is good in the school and that their child is doing well.

Individual lessons were well planned and had established routines. A range of well-chosen resources had been prepared including maps, worksheets, games and handouts. There was appropriate use of ICT and some effective use of visualisers in lessons. Good lesson management was evident with a suitable pace and varied activities. There was effective use of questioning strategies and some opportunities for collaborative learning.

Among the very good practice observed was the sharing of a clear learning intention with students at the start of lessons. This was of particular benefit when students were afforded an opportunity to reflect on their prior learning. It was positive to see that students in some classes were clearly accustomed to this practice. While there was time allowed for the consolidation of learning at the end of some lessons, more careful time management was required in other instances. Developing the use of learning intentions to include time for students to evaluate their own progress at the end of the lesson would also help to encourage independent learning.

Lessons were generally well-structured, often commencing with a whole-class introduction to the topic. This approach was successful especially in practical classes, in that it engaged the students' attention, and allowed the teacher to give clear explanations and instructions before students moved on to more individual activities.

In many lessons, there was an awareness of students' individual learning needs, with differentiated questions and tasks allowing students to progress at their own pace. Assistance was provided by the teacher where necessary, with skill shown in motivating students and in the careful monitoring of different levels of ability.

There was an appropriate focus on examination preparation in some lessons, and on the development of skills in structuring an answer. In language lessons, the very good use of the target language by teachers was noteworthy. Students were encouraged to communicate in the language and to practise new vocabulary. Oral literacy was promoted in many lessons through the use of key words and subject-specific terminology, and students were given opportunities to present their work to their peers. They were encouraged to give a personal response and to explain their views. They showed confidence in talking about their work and their efforts were affirmed by the teachers.

Where suggestions were made for further development, the feedback to teachers included looking at ensuring an appropriate balance between teacher input and student talk so as to promote student participation, and how altering the classroom configuration might facilitate more use of collaborative learning.

## **2. IMPLEMENTATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS FROM PREVIOUS EVALUATIONS**

### ***2.1 Management***

Recommendations from inspection reports in a number of subjects were considered as part of the evaluation including Irish, English, Geography and Home Economics. There was evidence of full implementation or of good progress made for many recommendations including e-learning and the planning of resources.

## ***2.2 Learning and teaching***

Good progress was noted in relation to recommendations relating to subject department plans, the promotion of literacy and numeracy, and to strategies for monitoring student understanding.

### **3. THE SCHOOL'S SELF-EVALUATION PROCESS AND CAPACITY FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT**

The school's level of engagement with the SSE process is very high. It is positive that the process has been utilised to advance improvements in a number of aspects of school life, and it is now a key vehicle for school improvement. Committees have been created and the collection and analysis of data has formed part of the process. The school improvement plan indicates a focused and effective engagement with SSE and the school demonstrates clear capacity in this area. The survey findings from staff show that a high percentage of teachers consider that SSE is used to improve students' learning.

# **Appendix**

**SCHOOL RESPONSE TO THE REPORT**

**Submitted by the Board of Management**

**Area 1 Observations on the content of the inspection report**

Ashton School is very pleased with the findings of the evaluation. In particular the school is pleased to note that the management and leadership of learning is considered very effective and the quality of teaching and learning is considered very good.

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

Ashton School is committed to addressing the recommendations given in the report.