

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: 8 February 2010



**AN ROINN | DEPARTMENT
OIDEACHAIS | OF EDUCATION
AGUS SCILEANNA | 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 2010, 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, teachers and students. Inspectors also reviewed a range of school documentation and responses to questionnaires and examined other data in relation to the operation of the school. As part of the evaluation, a range of lessons across a number of subject areas was inspected. The board of management was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the report, and the response of the board will be found in the appendix of this report.

Introduction

Ashton School was established in 1972 by the amalgamation of two grammar-type schools, Cork Grammar School (founded in 1882) and Rochelle School (founded in 1829). The School is a Church of Ireland school under the patronage of the Church of Ireland Bishop of Cork, Cloyne and Ross. It is comprehensive and co-educational, serving students in the local community as well as the Protestant community in Cork. The school has had a consistently steady enrolment for many years, with more applicants than it can enrol. The school has been involved in efforts to secure new accommodation for a number of years and there have been recent, positive developments in this regard.

1. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

1.1 Key Findings

- Ashton School has a proactive board of management that is centrally involved in the effective running of the school.
- Staff and parents are not formally represented on the board, although the board is keen to proceed with enlargement of its membership.
- Interactions between all partners in the school are characterised by a keen sense of tradition and a strong sense of community.
- The school has an effective senior management team demonstrating leadership and a strong personal commitment to students and to the school.
- There is a very evident culture of care in the school and the school's learning-support structures are having a positive impact on students.
- The school's intranet is a significant asset in the management of students and as a teaching and learning aid.
- The quality of teaching and learning is good, although teacher-led approaches dominated in many of the lessons observed.
- Genuine attempts have been made to implement the recommendations of all previous evaluation reports.

1.2 Recommendations for Further Development

- Issues related to enlargement of the board of management should be clarified as soon as possible so as to facilitate formal representation of staff and parents on the board.
- Minor changes are suggested to the school's admissions documentation and consideration should be given to making school policies available on the school's website.
- The annual attendance report should be communicated to parents.
- The automatic withdrawal of students from French for learning support should be reviewed.
- The school should engage with students on matters relating to the running of the school and consult them, where appropriate, regarding policy development and ratification. Other avenues to take greater account of the student voice should also be explored.
- Opportunities for more active learning and more student-led activity in classes should be explored as well as opportunities for more differentiation in assigning tasks to students.

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 of Ashton School operates on a five-year cycle and consists of five members in total, including the Church of Ireland Bishop of Cork, Cloyne and Ross, two other nominees of the Bishop, the Chief Executive Officer of the City of Cork Vocational Education Committee and an Inspector of the Department of Education and Science, which is in line with the original composition of a comprehensive school board. The board is anxious to proceed, as soon as possible, with enlargement of the board to include parent and teacher representatives, as is now the case with other comprehensive schools. It is understood that the preliminary work to enable this is under consideration between the legal representatives of the Bishop of Cork, Cloyne and Ross and the Department of Education and Science.

The board is commended for its proactive involvement in the operation of the school and the strong sense of community which has been established in Ashton. The board is conscious of its educational responsibilities, a remit which it fulfils particularly through overseeing and guiding the work of the development, academic, discipline, pastoral and building committees. The valuable work of these committees contributes to a real sense of partnership among the school community, as they are representative of all stakeholders in the school. The fact that many of the present board members and parents are past pupils of the school means that the board is keenly aware of its role as a custodian for its community and of the proud traditions of the school. This strong sense of community and tradition permeates all aspects of school life and is particularly evident in the care structures of the school where respect of self and of others are key elements. The board supports teachers, students and the school community through a wide range of measures including the provision of good facilities and equipment, supporting the evident commitment of staff to the many extracurricular and co-curricular activities taking place and making sure that teachers can avail of continuing professional development opportunities whenever these become available. The board monitors the achievement of students and leads teaching and

learning chiefly through the work of the school's academic committee. Although the formal structures in place inform the board as to the operation of all aspects of school life, the informal network of contacts between parents, board members, staff and senior management is equally important in helping the board to make sure that the school continues to provide the best possible education and care for students. The board is meeting its statutory obligations with regard to Child Protection legislation.

The school has an open and inclusive ethos which is welcoming to students of all abilities and talents. The personal involvement of the principal and deputy principal in the enrolment process, the excellent induction and mentoring procedures for new students and the commitment of all staff have contributed to a very high level of satisfaction from parents regarding the process of enrolment of students to the school. A minor change is suggested to the school's admissions policy so that the absolute right, under Section 29 of the Education Act (1998), to appeal a decision not to enrol a student, is made clear. Consideration should be given to making this policy and related documentation, together with other school policies, available on the excellent school website.

There are good strategies for student management in place and the school's plans and policies are subject to regular review. The board promotes good attendance through the provisions of the recently revised school discipline policy and an elaborate system has been developed to monitor and report on students' attendance. This has proven very successful with students expressing a very high level of awareness that their attendance is checked regularly. This system also provides ready compilation of data for the annual attendance report to the National Educational Welfare Board (NEWB). It is recommended that this report be also communicated to parents in the school as outlined in the Education Welfare Act 2000, 21(6)(b).

The school's priorities for development

The provision of a new school building is a high priority for the board. The school's building committee has invested a significant amount of effort into this project and the school recently received the welcome news that it has now progressed to stage 2(b) of the building process, indicating that it is to prepare tender documents. Updating of the school library and management of the school web site and intranet are also areas which the board has identified for development. The school has engaged in a thorough curriculum review over the past two and a half years and this process is ongoing. The continuous raising of academic standards through self-evaluation of work practices and focusing on teaching and learning are also aspects that the board is keen to progress. The board's priorities have been established through listening to the views of all partners in the school community and recent work has focussed on raising academic standards. The board took the view that good teaching and high academic standards start with good discipline and order in the learning environment and thus began a review of discipline, attendance, punctuality and academic standards. The board is highly commended for its insight in attending to these matters and for the consequent, excellent strategies which have been put in place. These have included the implementation of a highly elaborate and effective system of recording student absences, lateness and breaches of school discipline.

2.2 Effectiveness of leadership for learning

Leadership of staff

The school has a very effective senior management team who oversee the day-to-day operation of all aspects of school life. Although they operate as an effective team, the principal and deputy principal have well-defined areas of individual responsibility. Both are conscious of the need to lead by example when dealing with staff and students and the "open door" policy which they operate has facilitated good communication both internally

and externally. Every effort is made to support staff who wish to avail of continuing professional development and management are mindful of the need to constantly develop teaching and learning practices in the school. To this end, visiting speakers have provided seminars to staff on a range of topics. Management is highly commended for its vision in promoting and supporting these initiatives. The strong sense of community, already mentioned, is a clear strength in the leadership of both staff and students. The thorough, comprehensive procedures in place for the induction of new staff help to maintain and promote a sense of belonging and the strong sense of tradition which the school greatly values.

A regular review of programmes offered in the school, including Junior and Leaving Certificate, Transition Year and Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme, takes place. A comprehensive review of first-year options has recently been completed and has resulted in the school moving from a relatively fixed band of options to an open choice of option subjects and the operation of a best-fit model for second and third years. The stated intention of the school to move to a similar open choice arrangement in fifth year is noted and regarded as good practice in meeting the varying preferences of each year group. The only negative impact of the breadth of curriculum which the school strives to offer is that, due to staffing restrictions, some minimal amounts of sharing of teachers takes place from time to time in first year. Management is conscious that this is not ideal and is making every effort to avoid this situation while still attempting to provide as broad a range of option subjects as possible.

Leadership of students

The school's code of behaviour contains a clear ladder of sanctions appropriate to breaches of discipline and is regarded as fair by students. Although interactions between teachers and students in the school community are very positive, there is scope for greater emphasis on promoting positive behaviour in the school's written Code of Behaviour. The NEWB publication *Developing a Code of Behaviour: Guidelines for Schools* and DES Circular M33/91 should be consulted for information as to how this can best be achieved in any future revisions to the school's code of behaviour. It is also recommended that formal consultation take place with students regarding any future revisions to the code. This is important in view of the fact that questionnaires completed by students indicate that a minority of students feel that they have a say in how to make the school a better place. This finding may be a consequence of the fact that, due to the loss of a post of responsibility for the co-ordination of the students' council, the council has not met during the current school year. The school should engage with students on matters relating to the running of the school and consult them, where appropriate, regarding policy development and ratification. Other avenues to take greater account of the student voice should also be explored.

The personal interest which senior management takes in the leadership of students is exemplified by the inclusion of a personal, handwritten comment from the principal on end-of-term school reports. Reports are sent home monthly in the case of all fifth-year and sixth-year students, at Easter for third-year and sixth-year students and at Christmas and summer for all other years. Comprehensive information on absences, lateness, leaving school early and the student's effort in each subject is provided to parents in these reports as well as the grades and marks which students have achieved. This quality of information is clearly valued by parents as questionnaire results indicate that the overwhelming majority of parents feel that the school provides them with good information regarding the progress of their children. A similar, overwhelming majority of parents are happy with the school overall, a finding in which staff, management and the school's board can take great pride.

The ready availability of disciplinary information has been beneficial in ensuring that the school's code of behaviour and ladder of sanctions are applied in a fair and consistent manner. Regular monitoring of student achievement takes place and many strategies are in

place to affirm and acknowledge positive achievements by students, particularly at the school prize giving day and at the twice-weekly assemblies where students are publicly acknowledged for their achievements in a wide range of areas.

The care structures and learning-support structures in place in the school are very good with the important role played by student prefects worthy of particular mention. Students are withdrawn for resource teaching from Gaelige, provided they have the appropriate Department of Education and Science exemption from the study of Gaelige. Students are withdrawn for learning support from French and the school is urged to re-visit this practice as it may not be appropriate for all learning-support students. It may also be worth considering alternative methods of delivering learning support, such as via team teaching for example, and reducing the overall number of teachers involved in the delivery of learning support.

2.3 Management of facilities

The school building and grounds are maintained to a very good standard, although the age of the building means that significant remedial action is regularly required to address some of the more urgent shortcomings, such as leaks in the roof. As already mentioned, the school has been involved in a campaign to get a new school building for a number of years and is hopeful that recent developments mean that this aspiration has moved a step closer. Some important health and safety matters were raised in previous subject inspection reports, particularly in relation to practical subjects, and management has attended to these as a matter of priority. During the evaluation, the school received notice from An Taisce that it had been awarded the International Green Flag. All involved in bringing this prestigious award to Ashton School are highly commended for their efforts.

3. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

3.1 The quality of learning and teaching

The quality of teaching and learning observed during the inspection was good and students were appropriately challenged in all lessons. There was evidence of very good student learning in many lessons with excellent responses to teacher questioning noted. In this regard, the quality of teacher questioning was good with an appropriate mix of general and directed questioning observed, although some scope for greater emphasis on higher-order questioning was also noted. The quality of questions posed by students often displayed a keen insight into the topic at hand and students also frequently demonstrated an ability to recall and apply learning from previous lessons. There was good use of assessment for learning (AfL) noted in many lessons with the sharing of lesson content by teachers at the start of lessons a notable feature. Although this is a useful strategy, the sharing of lesson aims and objectives is preferred as a means of encouraging reflective learning among students and helping them to become more autonomous in the learning process. Very good formative commentary was noted in many of the students' homework copies and this is commended.

Although a good quality of teaching was observed in all lessons, classroom activity was predominantly teacher-led. There is, therefore, scope for much more student-led activity, including pair and group work and more experiential learning. While the behaviour of students in all lessons was exemplary, active learning methodologies are recommended so as to ensure the continued long-term engagement of students in the learning process and to enable them to become more independent learners. It is recommended that the process of encouraging greater use of active learning methodologies should be led by management and facilitated through the school's subject department structure. Previous initiatives involving

the use of visiting speakers covering topics such as differential learning strategies, uses of multiple intelligence practices and special needs education are highly commended in this regard and are worthy of further development. It is also noted that one of the aims of the current review of Transition Year is giving students more responsibility for independent learning. The school should explore how the findings of this review might impact on teaching and learning in all year groups.

4. IMPLEMENTATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS FROM PREVIOUS EVALUATIONS

4.1 Management

The vast majority of recommendations from previous evaluation reports have been implemented, reflecting the effective leadership and management of the school. This has included attending to important health and safety matters in practical rooms in subjects such as Science and Materials Technology (Wood) and Construction Studies (MTW&CS). Plans are in place to include an assessment of risks and details of how these risks are controlled in the woodwork room.

Genuine attempts have been made to investigate the feasibility of implementing curricular recommendations made in subject inspection reports regarding the availability of subjects to different year groups and the formation of subject option blocks as part of the subject choice process. The decision to review the option blocks annually and operate a “best fit” model is regarded as appropriate.

4.2 Learning and Teaching

Previous subject inspections have recommended the use of more active learning methodologies and, while documentation reviewed exhibited progress in relation to this matter in subject and curricular plans, it is clear that this has not yet impacted on the teaching methodologies used in many classes. Consequently, there is scope for providing more opportunities for self-directed learning in lessons. Similarly, although progress is noted in planning documentation with regard to differentiation in assigning of tasks to students, there is further scope for development in this area. This is important in the context of mixed-ability classes where students may not all be able to work at the same level when completing tasks and may benefit from the setting of more ambitious or less ambitious targets, depending on the ability of each student. Learner autonomy was well-facilitated in lessons observed by teachers allowing students to work at their own pace, however. Very good annotation of student copies was also noted with excellent formative commentary noted in many cases. This is regarded as good practice as a key means of motivating students and helping them to improve.

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 pleased to read that the inspectors were impressed by the quality of teaching and learning that was observed. The school will continue to make adjustments to further improve the quality of teaching and learning in the future.

The school is very satisfied with the content of the report and welcomes the recognition of the hard work of the Board of Management and its 'proactive involvement' in the running of the school. It also welcomes the recognition of much hard work done by management and teachers promoting the school. The school is also pleased that the report recognizes the work being done by all parties in processing the building of a new school and of much ongoing work being done in curricular review.

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

The Board is keen at the earliest possible opportunity, through its deliberations with the Department of Education and Skills, to have the Board enlarged. The Board will in time give serious consideration to all other recommendations highlighted in this report.

Ashton School is satisfied that the report accurately reflects the nature and working of the school.