

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

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

REPORT

**Tarbert Comprehensive School
Tarbert, County Kerry
Roll number: 81006S**

Date of inspection: 7 March 2013



**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 March, 2013 in Tarbert Comprehensive 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 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.

Introduction

Tarbert Comprehensive School is a multi-denominational school which was established in 1973. The school is a co-educational college with a current enrolment of 612 students. There is an inclusive ethos and the school seeks to provide a quality education for each individual student subject to their particular needs. A wide curriculum is offered, providing the full range of available programmes. The school promotes links with the wider community and pursues a shared approach to decision-making which involves staff, parents and students, as appropriate.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

Key Findings

- The quality of teaching and learning in lessons observed was of a very high standard.
- The board of management carries out its responsibilities effectively and has identified appropriate priorities.
- There is a highly effective senior management team which displays strong leadership for learning.
- There is a clear sense of distributed leadership across the school community.
- A caring atmosphere supported by a very well-structured care team is evident throughout the school.
- The continuing improvement of learning and teaching is a consistent theme for staff and management.

Recommendations for Further Development

- In the development of the school improvement plan, literacy, numeracy, co-operative learning and "learning to learn," should be viewed as coherent and consistent elements, supporting the enhancement of students' learning experiences.
- The school and subject departments should move towards the development of time-bound action plans over the coming year.

1. QUALITY OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP

1.1 School ownership and management

The board of management is properly constituted and carries out its role and responsibilities appropriately. Board members are committed to their task and display considerable dedication to the school and its students. There is a strong sense of the school's ethos among board members. Pastoral care, inclusion of all students and the need for a consistent focus on student learning and links with the community featured as important concerns for the board during meetings with the inspection team. Following meetings of the board, an agreed, written report is communicated to staff. An oral report is communicated to parents. It is recommended that, as a further development of current good practice, an agreed written report should also be communicated to parents in the future.

The board has identified clear priorities for the development of the school which include the advancement of school self-evaluation processes, a sustained focus on teaching and learning, and support for students' literacy and numeracy skills. In addition, developments in the areas of information and communication technology (ICT) as a teaching tool, the development of the PE hall and the reframing of the school's anti-bullying policy are in hand. The identification of these areas, alongside actions already undertaken, are indicative of the pro-active approach adopted by the board and the school community to ensure continuing improvement is maintained as a central concern of the school organisation.

A wide range of policies has been developed. A consultation process is undertaken in the development of policies, which involves all of the education partners, as appropriate. Policies are reviewed and adjusted when necessary. As a further support for the development and review of policies, it is suggested that a concise list of policies, along with the dates of ratification and review, should be included in the school plan. Overall, the board has been pro-active in advancing the change process in the school.

1.2 Effectiveness of leadership for learning

There is a highly effective senior management team which displays strong leadership for learning. Roles within the team are complimentary, with a clear division of responsibility. The senior management team implements an inclusive style of leadership. Leadership is delegated effectively and staff have responded very positively to this approach, most strikingly where challenges have been faced, and surmounted, by the school. The formation of a staff advisory committee to inform decisions arising from the wider economic environment is one key example of the success of this approach. There is a clear, robust and inclusive vision for the school which incorporates a strong focus on advancing teaching and learning. This is particularly expressed through a consistent commitment to providing continuing professional development (CPD) opportunities for staff. Staff have displayed considerable commitment in taking up these opportunities, leading to a range of initiatives focused on providing a continually improving learning environment for students. There is a high level of collegiality and morale, and this is most evident in the spirit of volunteerism which permeates the school community, with staff members willingly giving their own time to support students' learning experiences in many different forms.

There are strong communication systems in place. These encompass a wide range of meetings with and between staff, very effective utilisation of the journal system to support student behaviour, and an electronic folder system. The latter has proven particularly useful as a means of enhancing communication regarding resources for teaching and learning and serves well as a support for planning for students with special educational needs. In addition, there is regular communication with students and the wider school community through student assemblies based on particular learning themes, newsletters, parent-teacher

meetings, information sessions and reports. The very positive impact of these approaches was very clear in responses provided for parent and student questionnaires distributed during the evaluation. These included strong evidence of student and parent clarity regarding key aspects of the school's structures and expectations. On a broader note, these questionnaires provided a strong endorsement of the work of senior management and staff. Of particular note in the current work of the school is the attention given to the induction and support of new teachers. This is both prudent and appropriate as a means of maintaining and enhancing the very good quality of the professional environment which is a significant part of the school's culture. As a further, logical extension of current communication structures, it is recommended that work on the school website should be advanced. It is suggested that the website should include areas to support communication by both the student council and the parents' council.

The school has displayed a consistent commitment to supporting the education and welfare of all its students. There is a broad and balanced curriculum, including a commitment to offer the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme despite the inevitable demands on resources which arise as a result. An admissions policy is in place and robust and consistent approaches to attendance are implemented. It is suggested that, in recognition of the requirements of circulars 0025/12, the admissions policy could include further reference to the transfer of information from primary schools as a support for the transition process for new first-year students. There is a strong awareness of attendance patterns and the school's attendance strategy has been updated and further improved in the recent past. There are robust practices in place to support student attendance. These include a new electronic tracking system, along with the use of a text-messaging service to inform parents regarding student absences. The school's caring approach is also evident through the positive manner in which its code of behaviour is structured. Imaginative and supportive approaches towards improving student behaviour have been undertaken in the recent past which further underline the inclusive ethos that permeates the school organisation.

There are well-defined student care structures. A student support team is in place which includes a number of key school personnel. Among a range of initiatives undertaken is a mentoring programme for new first-year students, with sixth-year students supporting students' transition from primary school. In addition, considerable care is evident in the use of students' journals as a support in communication between school and home. In the area of special educational needs, communication is supported through the employment of an electronic record of students' needs and the supports available. This is good practice. It is suggested that a minor extension of current practice would result in an electronic register to aid communication between mainstream and resource teachers. This could also serve to inform parents of the manner in which the school deploys available resources. It is suggested that some formal mechanisms to feed information from mainstream teachers to support teachers could also be investigated and enacted. At present there are a large number of teachers involved in the delivery of support for students with special educational needs. It is recommended that the school should examine the feasibility of concentrating resources among a smaller number of teachers so that the enhancement of expertise can be more focused on members of this group. A smaller team should also help in supporting communication with and between the special educational needs team. These developments could be approached on an incremental basis, within the constraints of available resources.

A student council is in place, with a number of new members having taken position this year. The council meets at lunchtimes and has been involved in commenting on a number of policy documents. As a further development of its current activities, it is recommended that the council could be involved in a policy initiative for which it has responsibility. One possibility in this area is the Green Schools Initiative. Involvement in the Green Schools Initiative could provide considerable scope for the development of important skills by both members of the council and the wider student body.

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*.

1.3 Management of facilities

There is very good management of facilities. A health and safety statement for the school has been developed. The school environs are well-ordered and maintained and there is a consistent commitment from the board, senior management, staff and parents to continuously improve facilities available for students.

Significant work has been undertaken to ensure that the school's information and communication technology (ICT) infrastructure is up-to-date. In addition, an E-learning plan has been developed and this incorporates a focus on the upskilling of staff members in the use of ICT. This has been informed by an ICT survey regarding teacher skills and greater utilisation of ICT in key elements of school life such as attendance. A testament to the impact of these approaches was the fact that appropriate use of ICT as a teaching and learning tool was a consistent feature of lessons visited during the evaluation.

The school's library has been refurbished and now presents as a welcoming and comfortable space in which students can read, research, socialize and attend school events. This is very positive and it is clear that, where literacy and numeracy initiatives are organised, use of the library to promote and celebrate these initiatives will be very worthwhile. The library can operate as a powerful tool in promoting reading and writing as enjoyable and worthwhile activities.

At present, one of the priorities for further development is the school's gym area. The gym is used by a variety of community groups on weekdays and at weekends. A significant amount of money has already been raised by the parents' association to pay for an extension to the gym which would provide opportunities for students to explore a wider range of physical activities and support their commitment to healthy living over the long term. The work of teachers, the board, senior management and parents in advancing this development is indicative of the community approach and commitment to continuing improvement which lies at the heart of much of the school's activities.

The school continues to review the most effective manner in which it can utilise hours provided for under circular 0025/2011. This is worthwhile, particularly in light of expected changes to the curriculum which may necessitate whole-staff consideration of implications for teaching practice and the school community.

2. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

2.1 The quality of learning and teaching

The quality of learning and teaching in lessons observed was of a very high standard. Teacher preparedness for lessons was universally very thorough, with necessary materials and resources accessed and utilised in a seamless fashion. Teachers' interest in and enthusiasm for their subject area was frequently evident. Lessons were universally well-structured and objectives were clear in almost all cases. Where this was not the case, it was suggested that a statement at the outset of the lesson could be considered as a support for student learning.

Information and communication technology (ICT) was used frequently in lessons, providing access to visual resources in support of the learning and teaching process. This is positive in the context of the school's continuing and developing ICT plan. The commitment to adopting ICT in both the classroom and the wider planning process is commendable and should continue. In this context it is recommended that some further investigation of the potential benefits of adopting an online learning platform should be undertaken. It is positive that steps in this area have already been taken at both individual classroom and a wider school level. In addition, the benefits of both visualisers and audio applications could be investigated by all subject departments, in the context of the school's overall ICT plan.

The relationship between teachers and students in all lessons was very good. Student behaviour in lessons was of an exemplary standard. A caring atmosphere was evident in all lessons observed. There was a consistent and impressive rapport between teachers and students which was of great benefit to the learning process. Student engagement in learning was high in most lessons. In a minority of cases, a greater emphasis on active learning approaches or methodologies could have been of benefit. It is recommended that, as is currently envisaged as part of the school's self-evaluation process, the development of clearly structured co-operative learning activities as a whole-school focus would be of benefit.

Homework was regularly assigned and monitored, with appropriate feedback provided. In the context of the school's current self-evaluation focus, the utilisation of self-assessment and peer-assessment should also be considered. Overall, investigation of assessment for learning activities which will support students in 'learning-to-learn' is a worthwhile area to pursue. This should be viewed as part of a coherent and consistent emphasis in the development of a school improvement plan where ideas such as independent learning, co-operative learning, and literacy and numeracy development support and inform each other. Analysis of performance in the certificate examinations formed an element in those subject plans reviewed as part of the evaluation. This is worthwhile, and this should now be linked to actions undertaken by subject departments as part of the school self-evaluation process.

In many cases a very strong, print-rich environment had been developed in teachers' baserooms and this practice is strongly encouraged. The celebration of student achievement was a very strong feature of the school culture in this regard. A very good feature of the school's overall learning environment was the high expectations regarding student achievement and attainment in all lessons observed. Alongside teachers, students equally displayed high expectations regarding their own performance.

3. IMPLEMENTATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS FROM PREVIOUS EVALUATIONS

3.1 Management

The subject and programme inspections reviewed include Construction Studies and Materials Technology (Wood), Home Economics, Science, Biology and Agricultural Science, LCA, Geography, and Guidance. The school consistently engages with recommendations from subject and programme inspection reports and there has been clear progress in the implementation of recommendations. Specific recommendations which have been addressed include the involvement of students in the evaluation of the LCA programme, the development of a taster system in first year and the inclusion of the guidance counsellor in middle management meetings. The board responds to inspection reports as part of its normal practice.

3.2 Learning and teaching

There have been very significant, and continuing, moves to increase the use of ICT in support of teaching and learning. In addition, the school has identified both literacy and numeracy and the use of active learning methodologies as priorities and is committing significant time and resources to advancing practice in these areas. To consolidate the very good practice the school has in place, it is recommended that a strategic approach to support the implementation of recommendations, which includes the board, should be adopted. In addition, where recommendations in subject or programme evaluations have more general implications across subjects, they should be compiled for circulation to all departments to provide a focus for planning. It should be noted that these points comprise no more than refinements in terms of good practice already in place.

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

The school has undertaken considerable work in the area of school self-evaluation. This has included more established evaluative practice in areas such as programme evaluation, but has also extended to include staff evaluations of senior management and student evaluations of teaching and learning approaches. The school has chosen appropriate themes to inform the self-evaluation process. Most importantly, it is clear that, where evidence gathered has suggested areas for improvement, this has led to the implementation of specific actions to address that improvement. To support the good work already underway, it is suggested that a wider range of evaluation instruments could be utilised which could, in certain instances, be less time-consuming and yield alternative and worthwhile viewpoints. In addition, it is recommended that the school and subject departments should now move to the development of time-bound action plans over the coming year. Overall, it is clear that the school is well placed to engage in school improvement as part of the school self-evaluation process.

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 is very pleased with the findings of the whole school inspection & wishes to thank the inspectors for their thoroughness, efficiency & courtesy during the course of the inspection. The Board appreciates the relevance of the recommendations & will endeavour to implement the suggested improvement in the coming year.

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 of Management will immediately begin the implementation process & believes that the majority of the recommended improvements can be achieved within the next school year. The Board will review the WSE report – May 2014.