

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

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

REPORT

**Dominican College
Sion Hill, Blackrock, Co. Dublin
Roll number: 60070K**

Date of inspection: 22 February 2010



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 2010 in Dominican College, Sion Hill. 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 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

Dominican College, Sion Hill, founded in 1836, is one of the oldest secondary schools for girls in Ireland. Though trusteeship of the school has recently transferred to the Le Chéile Schools Trust, the school is strongly committed to carrying on the Dominican approach to education which is based on the ideal of developing the whole person. The school's mission is 'to help each student achieve her full potential academically, spiritually, physically, emotionally and socially in a happy secure environment'. Commitment to achieving this was evident throughout the evaluation, and was strongly acknowledged in questionnaire responses from students and parents.

The school provides the Junior Certificate, a compulsory Transition Year (TY) programme, and the established Leaving Certificate. Enrolment in the school has grown steadily over recent years and it now caters for 341 students who come from economically, socially and culturally diverse backgrounds. A noteworthy feature of the school is the provision it makes for students learning English as an additional language (EAL).

1 SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

1.1 Key Findings

- The school has the management and leadership capacity required to deal with ongoing issues and priorities identified for future development.
- Effective leadership is provided through collaboration and partnership across the school community, and is based on a shared vision for the school.
- School self-evaluation and reflective practice have been used very effectively as the foundation for implementing change and improvement in the school.
- The school is very well organised and has very good systems in place for providing for the needs of students.
- The quality of teaching and learning was good or very good in most lessons observed, with exemplary practice noted in a significant number of lessons, and there was some scope for development in a few instances.
- The senior management team provides strong, confident and focused leadership for the school.
- Some minor differences between the school's Child Protection Policy and the Department Guidelines were noted.

- The school timetable showed a shortfall in the required number of hours of instruction provided per week.

1.2 Recommendations for Further Development

- The school's Child Protection policy, and the Relationships and Sexuality Education policy, should be checked against the Department's Child Protection Guidelines for Post-primary Schools and amended, where necessary, to ensure accuracy and consistency.
- It is recommended that the school's timetable be reviewed to ensure compliance with the minimum of twenty-eight hours instruction per week set out in Circular M29/95 *Time in School*.
- Future subject department planning should focus on further strengthening teaching and learning through the exploration and sharing of good practice within and across subject departments.

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 Dominican College is properly constituted and operates in an effective manner. A strength of the board is the open and participatory manner in which its members are able to contribute individual expertise and views.

Over and above the fulfilment of statutory duties, the board is committed to supporting and implementing partnership throughout the school community. The board works in a collaborative manner and there is a high level of consultation with members of the school community. For example, the board formally meets with the Parent Teacher Association and the Student Council annually. The leadership provided by the board is based on a strong culture of self-evaluation which it sees as the key to ongoing improvement. Whole-school surveys have been completed at regular intervals and staff members, including senior management, participate in annual reviews of their work and the work of the school. This commitment to working in a spirit of partnership was evident in many other areas of school life.

The board is very aware of the challenges and opportunities presented by the transfer of trusteeship from the Dominican Sisters to the Le Chéile Schools Trust, and the transition is being very well managed. The board is very proud of the history and traditions of the college and is committed to preserving the distinctive spirit of the school into the future.

School development planning is well established in Dominican College and many policies, including those that are required by law or circular, are already in place. In this context, the board has taken a measured approach to the development of school policies. Three policy areas are under review or development at present and in view of the increasing numbers attending the school, the board plans to review the school's admissions policy. However, some policies did not show when they were either adopted or last reviewed. In order to ensure clarity with regard to the status of policies, all policy documents should show clearly when the policy was implemented in the school or last reviewed.

Confirmation was provided that, in compliance with Post-primary Circulars M44/05 and 0062/2006, the board of management has formally adopted the Child Protection Guidelines for Post-primary Schools (Department of Education and Science, September 2004). However, it was found that there were some minor differences between the school's policy

and the Department Guidelines. It was also noted that references to child protection procedures in the school's Relationships and Sexuality Education policy require updating. Thus, it is recommended that both policies should be checked against the Department Guidelines and amended, where necessary, to ensure accuracy and consistency.

The school's priorities for development

The school has clearly identified several priorities for development over the coming years. Some of the priorities, such as the focus on increasing intake from the locality, reflect the efforts of the school to consolidate the growth of recent years. Other priorities, such as the integration of information and communication technology (ICT) into teaching and learning, focus on continuing to improve the educational experience provided for students.

It was evident that the school has the capacity to deal with priorities which it has identified. It adopts a structured and systematic approach to development based in the first instance on the analysis of data from reviews, surveys of staff, students and parents, and research outside the school. Responsibility for progressing particular areas is delegated to working groups or committees, including student committees. Regular feedback and consultation between the working groups and the whole staff and the board have resulted in a shared sense of ownership in the successful outcomes achieved to date. The setting out of a timeframe for addressing priorities in the school plan is a further example of good practice.

2.2 Effectiveness of leadership for learning

Leadership of staff

The senior management team provides strong, confident and focused leadership for the school. They are committed to bringing about change through working with people in an atmosphere of mutual respect and collaboration. The foundation for leadership of staff in Dominican College is a shared sense of direction and aspiration amongst the school community towards achieving the school's mission. It was evident that an analytical and solution-focused approach has been successful in bringing about change and improvement in many areas of school life. The way forward for dealing with any issues has been based on a very good level of self-review.

Distributed leadership was evident in the role played by staff in the school. For example, middle management provides very good support to senior management with regard to taking responsibility for managing specific areas of school life. Furthermore, it was also evident that a sense of responsibility for managing and leading was shared across the staff. This was particularly evident in the high level of commitment of staff to the various initiatives and projects observed during the evaluation.

There is clear evidence of leadership for learning in the school. For example, subject department planning is very well established and supported by management. Learning is also supported by the high level of organisation evident across the school in terms of the curriculum, timetabling, deployment of staff, provision of resources and opportunities for continuing professional development of staff. However, analysis of the overall school timetable showed a shortfall in the required number of hours of instruction provided per week. Hence, it is recommended that the timetable be reviewed to ensure compliance with the minimum of twenty-eight hours instruction per week required by Circular M29/95 *Time in School*.

Leadership of students

Like other aspects of the school, the leadership provided for students is based on the school's mission to care for the individual in a positive and holistic manner. The school provides a highly inclusive environment. It has created a positive and supportive

atmosphere based on respect and tolerance and there is a strong awareness of, and appreciation for, the diversity brought by the multi-cultural nature of the student body.

The school has made effective use of its resources to provide for students with special educational needs and those learning English as an additional language. The strategy of supporting such students through a whole-staff approach with specialist input as required is working well.

A range of policies and procedures, such as the pastoral care policy, the code of behaviour, the guidance plan and the newcomers' policy, provide very good support for the progress of students through the school. Students are very aware of the support available to them in the school and know who they should consult when difficulties arise. The provision of individual student support is shared among the year heads, the guidance counsellor, and outside agencies as appropriate.

The school places a particular emphasis on the affirmation of positive behaviour. For example, a number of awards events held throughout the school year formally highlight achievement in a range of areas such as academic, social and personal development. Informal affirmation was evident in the interaction between staff and students during the evaluation. The wide range of co-curricular and extra-curricular activities provides very good support for personal development and the teachers are to be commended for their commitment and efforts in this regard.

There are effective procedures for admissions and management of the transition of students from one level to the next throughout the school. For example, the induction process for incoming students involves visits to the relevant primary schools and interviews with parents. Students are also well informed with regard to subject choices as they proceed from first to second year, and from junior cycle through to senior cycle.

The development of leadership skills by students is also well provided for by the school. This is evident in the role that the Student Council and other student committees play in the life of the school. Students also have opportunities to act as prefects and to assist in providing support to new students entering the school. The tutor classes are used very effectively to provide a forum for the student voice to be heard.

The school provides very good support for students with respect to their academic progress. Students are placed in mixed-ability groups with setting facilitated where appropriate. The school has focused on promoting academic achievement through the introduction of an integrated system of target setting, and regular formal monitoring of each student's progress throughout the year. Good use is made of tutor periods to provide an opportunity for students to reflect on their own progress. All students are interviewed individually at some point in the year and support or guidance is provided as necessary. These initiatives will be further supported by an analysis and review of state examination results across all subject areas which is currently underway.

There are very good systems in place for monitoring and tracking attendance and punctuality at the start of the school day and at break times. There was very good punctuality observed during the school day in terms of attendance at lessons. In view of the increase in enrolment over recent years the school has identified attendance and increased in-take from the locality as areas for continuing attention.

2.3 Management of facilities

The current facilities are very well managed and maintained. Considerable efforts have been made over recent years to improve the facilities available in the school. For example, the gymnasium, canteen and staff areas have been refurbished, a wireless network has been

installed, and ICT resources have been provided in many classrooms. The refurbishment of the school's concert hall through the voluntary support of parents, past-pupils and the wider community has been a highlight of the improvement works, and the school is now planning a similar initiative to provide an all-weather hockey pitch. A grant of €700,000 recently sanctioned by the Department will be used to replace temporary accommodation and the school is actively pursuing a further building programme.

There is good communication with parents through the school's website, regular newsletters, the student journal, and a texting system. Internal communication is also good as seen from initiatives such as the staff handbook and the electronic display of notices in the staffroom.

Great use is made of displays of photographs and artwork throughout the whole school to celebrate and affirm the history, traditions and current life of the school. Teachers are generally based in their own rooms and this has allowed for the creation of a very attractive subject-specific learning environment in many of these rooms.

The school has been very successful in raising environmental awareness through its involvement in the Green Schools initiative. A health and safety policy provides a framework for dealing with any relevant issues that might arise.

3 QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

3.1 The quality of learning and teaching

In most of the twenty-six lessons observed during the evaluation, the quality of teaching and learning was good or very good, with exemplary practice noted in a significant number of lessons. The questionnaire responses from students and parents reflect high levels of satisfaction with teaching and learning in the school.

In those lessons where the quality of teaching and learning showed significant strengths, the lesson had been planned and implemented in a way that enhanced the learning experience for students. The lessons were approached from the point of view of learning, both with regard to the content of the lesson and how student engagement with learning would be facilitated. The lessons were structured so that a staged approach to the acquisition of knowledge or skills allowed students to consolidate their learning at key points during the lessons.

In most lessons an emphasis on active student-centred learning was evident in the task-based approach, especially where time was allowed for reflection on the learning activity or task. Very good use was made of well-chosen resources including ICT. Consistent use of the target language and the development of practical skills were a strong feature in the relevant subject areas. A good balance of targeted and global questioning was used to assess the progress of individual students as well as the whole class. Questions which facilitated the development of higher-order thinking featured in the strongest lessons. Students in these lessons also had a greater opportunity to ask questions and to discuss the topic under consideration. Good use was also made of assessment for learning strategies in these lessons.

In a few instances, there were some weaknesses with respect to teaching for effective learning. In such cases, the pace and structure of the lesson, or part of the lesson, did not facilitate the consolidation of learning. For example, students were either not challenged enough or not engaged sufficiently with lesson content. As mentioned previously, subject department planning is strongly established in the school and the school has shown a great

commitment and capacity for on-going improvement. In the context of this commitment and capacity, it is recommended that future subject department planning focus on further strengthening teaching and learning through the exploration and sharing of good practice within and across subject departments. For example, very effective team teaching was observed during the evaluation and this could be explored further as a means of sharing good practice and professional development.

Students were very well behaved in all of the lessons observed and had a good rapport with their teachers. An atmosphere of mutual respect was also evident throughout the school and at other events observed during the evaluation. Teachers showed great care and respect in their dealings with students.

4 IMPLEMENTATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS FROM PREVIOUS EVALUATIONS

4.1 Management

The board's presentation very clearly outlined the actions taken in response to recommendations in subject inspection reports and indicated both a reflective and a practical approach. Recommendations with regard to the Transition Year programme were carefully considered; an activity afternoon was introduced which has proved very successful. A recommendation in another report related to improving the structures for supporting students with additional educational needs. Arising from this, school management, in consultation with staff, assigned an assistant principal post to this area. School management acted promptly on a recommendation in a recent English inspection report that the English department carry out an analysis of state examinations results. Following on from this, school management has considered all results in both the Junior and Leaving Certificate and has asked all subject departments to engage in this process of analysis. These actions reflect openness to change and an ability to take ownership of recommendations made.

4.2 Learning and Teaching

Teachers have attended well to the implementation of recommendations made in previous subject inspection reports in relation to learning and teaching. Recommendations that were specific to each inspection have been considered and it was evident that practices have changed or have been developed in response to them. The subject teachers involved were clearly open to the process and reported that external evaluation complemented the reflective practice already established.

Other recent reports concerned the TY programme and EAL provision in the school. Recommendations in these reports regarding teaching and learning were relevant to a wide range of subject areas, and there was good evidence of their implementation. For example, there was more extensive cross-curricular planning in TY through the development of the activities programme, and TY students' computer skills are now reinforced through project work in all subjects.

With regard to teaching and learning processes for EAL students, good work has been done by many subject departments in identifying and defining key terms in their subjects, which both EAL and subject teachers can focus on and reinforce. This emphasis on the language of instruction is commended. Greater use of appropriate ICT in EAL lessons was recommended in the EAL report. While access to the computer room is a limiting factor to greater use of ICT in teaching and learning, ICT was used in a significant minority of the lessons observed.

Appendix

School response to the report

Submitted by the Board of Management

Area 1: Observations on the content of the inspection report

The Board welcomes this excellent report and commends the staff and students of the College for what they have achieved.

The Board wishes to comment, however, on the inspectors' recommendation that "the school's timetable be reviewed to ensure compliance with the minimum of twenty-eight hours instruction per week set out in Circular M29/95 *Time in School*"

Most schools in Ireland use the equivalent of 3 days per year for staff days and staff meetings. If such schools operate an eight period day then this amounts to a loss of 24 periods (or about 16 hours) per year. The inspectorate appears to accept this and makes no reference in such schools to time shortfalls.

Meanwhile, the Principal and staff in Dominican Sion Hill have created a dynamic system of weekly staff meetings using one shortened period each week. Thus over the year, about 17 hours are lost due to staff meetings – very similar to schools that adopt the "acceptable" method of conducting staff meetings.

The Board is very happy with the very effective whole-school approach to staff meetings which is currently used and instead looks at how schools deal with the issue over a full school 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

1. The school's Child Protection and RSE policies have been reviewed.
2. See comment above re the school timetable.
3. Subject department planning is being further strengthened as suggested.