

**An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna**  
**Department of Education and Skills**

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

**Laurel Hill Secondary School FCJ**  
**Laurel Hill, Limerick**  
**Roll number: 64260M**

**Date of inspection: 13 May 2015**



**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 May, 2015 in Laurel Hill Secondary 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***

Laurel Hill Secondary School FCJ is a voluntary secondary school for girls operating under the trusteeship of the Le Chéile Schools Trust. The strong catholic ethos of the school draws heavily from the philosophy and tradition of the FCJ Sisters. A focus on academic achievement is combined with the provision of a wide range of extra-curricular and co-curricular programmes.

The school adjoins and shares some learning facilities and extensive grounds with its FCJ Irish-medium sister school Cnoc na Labhras. The facilities occupied by Laurel Hill Secondary School comprise the original FCJ convent, founded in 1844 and other later additions. The complex maintenance and upkeep demands of those buildings and also of the school's historical grounds are a key challenge that all school partners are working together to address incrementally.

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

#### ***Key Findings***

- The board of management functions actively and effectively, providing very good support to the school.
- The senior management team provides very effective leadership and is proactive, progressive and ambitious for the school.
- A vibrant and engaged parents' association provides a range of practical and financial supports to the work of the school.
- The school's migration to an online system for student management in 2015 provides scope to re-define the role of year heads.
- A wide range of very good student supports is in place, including support for students with special educational needs (SEN).
- School planning is informed by consultation with staff, the parents' association and the board of management. There is scope for greater consultation with the wider parent body and students.
- There is a very high level of commitment among staff to providing a wide range of extra-curricular and co-curricular activities.
- Good or very good learning and teaching was observed in all lessons with some examples of excellent practices also noted.

- Management, staff and students demonstrate a strong commitment to the achievement of academic excellence and this is reflected in the consistently high levels of achievement of students in the certificate examinations.

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

- A more substantive role in academic monitoring should be integrated into the role of year head.
- A structure should be put in place to manage the gathering and analysis of data relevant to student learning to support school self-evaluation (SSE) work.
- A shared vision for the further integration of information and communication technology (ICT) into learning and teaching should be developed and implemented.
- Management should seek the views of parents and students more regularly to support SSE and school improvement.
- Student learning should be further enhanced by expanding the whole-school repertoire of assessment for learning (AfL) and differentiation strategies.

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

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

The board of management is appropriately constituted and a high level of expertise, including in the field of education, is evident among board members. The board is committed to perpetuating the FCJ ethos through facilitating staff attendance at FCJ and Le Chéile events. Agreed reports from board meetings are made available to staff and to the parents' association and there are regular interactions between the board and members of staff. The chairperson of the board meets occasionally with members of the student council and the board provides funding for student council training. It is recommended that the board provides an annual report to parents on the work of the school.

The board has an active role in finance, policy formulation and review, development of facilities and supporting staff continuing professional development (CPD). Members of the board are well informed and the board takes an active role in monitoring the quality of learning and teaching in the school through the analysis of examination results and inspection reports. The board, in consultation with senior management, has identified an extensive range of developmental priorities relating to school ethos, learning and teaching, refurbishment and school planning, among others. It is advised that this list of board priorities be rationalised in the medium term, to ensure that core priorities are achieved.

The parents' association provides active support in areas such as fund raising, policy development and organising guest speakers. Parent questionnaires indicate that the wider parent body is not as informed as it could be on the work of the parents' association. It would be useful to develop a dedicated section of the school website that could be used as a means of publicising the very good work that is being done by the parents' association. School management should also elicit the views of parents more regularly to support SSE and school improvement.

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

The principal and deputy principal provide highly effective leadership to the school community and work very well as a team. They are proactive, progressive and ambitious for the school. They lead by example, are very hard-working and have a very strong focus on student care. They have led extensive developments in the school campus, learning and teaching and student support since their appointment in 2009. They have also managed

significant changes in both staffing and resources. Both the principal and deputy principal have had to take on a significant number of additional duties due to the loss of middle-management posts of responsibility and have put a very large amount of time and personal commitment into meeting the demands associated with these additional duties.

The school's planned programme of work over the next three to five years will form much of the principal's workload over that period. The collaborative approach to management shared by the principal and the deputy principal will be vital in addressing the day-to-day management of the school during that time. To aid with this work, it is advised that the extensive responsibilities of the senior management team be reviewed in relation to the roles currently assigned to middle management. Tasks such as academic monitoring, currently undertaken by the deputy principal, would be best placed as part of the role of year head.

Staff members demonstrate a strong commitment to the school and are collegial and collaborative in the approach they take to their work. An exceptional level of volunteerism is evident in the provision of a range of extra-curricular and co-curricular activities for students.

The care of students is a central focus for the staff and CPD is recognised as a key driver of progress. An induction and mentoring policy for new teachers is currently approaching completion. This demonstrates a strong commitment to the care of staff.

The focus of the middle-management posts of responsibility is primarily on year-head duties, programme co-ordination and school planning. Current year-head duties include attendance monitoring, signing and commenting on end-of-year reports, discipline and contributing to the care team. The phased migration to an online system for student management provides scope to re-define the role of the year head. The system will allow for the efficient management of student data. Electronic reports should streamline the review process on end-of-term reports and the texting function provides scope for the automatic notification of parents in relation to attendance issues. This will assist year heads, in consultation with the guidance department, to take on a more substantive role in academic monitoring. Management's planned allocation of timetabled slots for year-head duties will be of further assistance in this re-alignment of duties. As well as the duties of post holders, it was very clear throughout the evaluation that work done by non-post holders makes a highly significant contribution to the school.

There is ongoing review of the school's curriculum to ensure that it continues to meet the needs of students. The transition year (TY) programme is very highly regarded by both students and parents. It offers a wide range of experiences for students and a recent evaluation of the programme has led to positive changes. Future development of the TY programme should focus on equipping students with enhanced digital literacy skills rather than following a commercial computing package only. A key-assignment approach should be incorporated into the assessment of TY modules, specifying the criteria for assessment and deadlines for completion at the outset of all courses.

The school timetable is carefully planned and well balanced. Additional provision is desirable in some areas. These include Physical Education in third, fifth and sixth year, Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) Link Modules in either fifth or sixth year and English in first year. The adjustment of the timetable to include two additional periods per week would go a long way towards addressing these shortfalls. The school has been very proactive in the facilitation of after-school study and holiday study for students.

School development planning is well established. All mandatory policies have been developed and are reviewed as appropriate. The code of behaviour should be updated to

reflect consultation that has taken place at staff level in relation to discipline procedures. Results of student and parent questionnaires indicate that practices associated with informing parents about Relationships and Sexuality Education and the related school policy should be reviewed.

Mechanisms need to be put in place to support the gathering and analysis of data in relation to areas such as the tracking of student attainment at different points in each year of study, the further gathering of baseline data in relation to literacy and numeracy skills and the acquisition of feedback from learners. The formation of a steering group charged with these responsibilities could be considered. In addition, SSE reports and school improvement plans should be provided to the school community.

The majority of subject plans reviewed were of a high standard. Examples of best practice included the tailoring of resources, methodologies and assessment modes to particular learning outcomes, evidence of ongoing review, literacy and numeracy strategies tailored to the subject and the maintenance of a detailed log of all CPD attended. In some cases, the minutes of subject department meetings contained evidence of discussion around curriculum and how best to engage students in their learning, combined with self-evaluation and associated target setting. This is very good practice. In a small number of cases, plans lacked sufficient detail to act as a guide for teachers in the delivery of the curriculum.

Students, through interviews and surveys, indicated very high levels of positivity about the level of care they receive and the nature of their relationships with other students and with teachers. A positive atmosphere and respectful relationships were evident throughout the evaluation.

The school provides good range of opportunities for student leadership. These include the environmental committee, the TY committee, the head-girl, class captain and prefect systems and the student council. The idea of extending membership of the student council to first-year students should be explored. In addition, it would be worthwhile for the student council to expand its ability to communicate with and survey the general student body, possibly using electronic means. The practice of involving the student council in the development and review of school policies should also be re-initiated.

A whole-staff ethos of student care is evident in the school. There are weekly junior and senior care meetings, minutes are recorded and interventions planned. The school is proactive in relation to bullying prevention by, for example, organising guest speakers on the subject. A committee has been established to review the role of the form tutor and planned training for year heads should further develop the student care system. A review of planning for Social, Personal and Health Education would allow for the further integration of topics and issues arising such as cyber bullying and other issues of wellbeing. Further perusal of the content of *Well-Being in Post-Primary Schools, Guidelines for Mental Health Promotion and Suicide Prevention* would be worthwhile.

Counselling is provided by the guidance counsellor and a part-time chaplain. An FCJ sister also volunteers in a pastoral role. It is a significant strength of the school that both the principal and deputy principal are qualified guidance counsellors and provide support to students and parents on an ongoing basis. Self-evaluation has led the school to develop its supports for students in relation to senior cycle subject choice. Particularly effective supports have been developed by mainstream teachers in the TY programme and by the guidance counsellor through the provision of booklets to parents and students. However, questionnaire findings indicate that some aspects of whole-school guidance may be in need of further review. Management, in conjunction with the guidance department should

conduct some further analysis in relation to these questionnaire findings in order to ascertain whether or not further action is required.

Through interviews with various stakeholders over the course of the evaluation, it became evident that special education is an area in which extensive positive developments have taken place in recent years. The deputy principal has been instrumental in leading these developments and is supported by a dedicated team. The team meets regularly and possesses a high level of qualifications in the area of special education. The provision of supports is flexible and well-co-ordinated.

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**

Maintaining and upgrading the school building and grounds has been one of the main challenges facing school management and the board. The board is very conscious of these challenges and has put a significant amount of effort into securing funding for this work. Very significant advances have been made in creating more classroom accommodation, developing specialist rooms and in upgrading windows and roofing. The school campus benefits from a good range of sports facilities including a state-of-the-art hockey pitch, funded by the parents' association.

Over the course of the evaluation it was noted that improvement works to address issues associated with fire compartmentation and accessibility are to be undertaken within a small portion of the overall school building, namely Laurel Hill House and the Convent Building. While these works will achieve significant improvements in these two buildings, it will be important to undertake similar improvement works in the remainder of the school building in order to provide a safe and suitable learning environment. Irrespective of these developments, issues of student flow will still need to be addressed, along with space for student lockers. Finally, the school would benefit from additional facilities for subjects like Art and Home Economics, to meet increasing student demand.

The school has been awarded four green flags by An Taisce and this is indicative of a commitment to environmental responsibility. Teacher-based classrooms make a significant contribution to an enhanced learning environment and this also facilitates teachers in conducting their own risk assessments. The school's caretaker is commended for the very high quality work completed in a number of areas including the boardroom, art room and in display areas.

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

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

Good or very good learning and teaching was observed in all lessons with some excellent practices also noted. Teachers demonstrated exceptional levels of preparation for teaching. Lessons were well structured and a range of appropriate methodologies was used. Intended learning outcomes were shared with students in almost all lessons and in most cases were clear, relevant and facilitated structured recapitulation at the end of lessons. In some cases, the more explicit sharing of assessment criteria with students is recommended.

The integration of ICT into learning and teaching is a significant strength of a core group of teachers. The judicious use of a range of audio, video and ICT inputs was observed in many lessons. In order to capitalise on this substantial skill base and to disseminate and build upon best practice in the use of technology, it is recommended that an elearning team be established with the remit of creating a shared vision for the further integration of ICT into learning and teaching.

There was good support evident for the development of students' literacy skills and, although planning for numeracy integration is at an early stage, there were some good examples of numeracy strategies also noted in lessons.

Project work was used to good effect with some class groups. Student presentations and extension activities were noted in some lessons. Such activities provide opportunities for all students to make meaningful contributions while providing a challenge for the more able students. In some lessons, particularly where whole-class teaching predominated, there was less of a challenge evident for the more able students.

A number of examples of the provision of high-quality formative feedback to students on the quality of their work were observed. This feedback was given both orally during class time and in writing in students' copybooks and folders. In some cases, students would benefit from more in-depth feedback. In particular, provision of feedback on extended pieces of written work should be prioritised.

Self-assessment and peer-assessment were used to very good effect in a small number of lessons. Such practices can be very effective in encouraging students to take greater ownership of their work.

The classroom environments support, encourage and celebrate students' learning and achievements. Almost all classrooms feature displays of students' work. In the majority of lessons observed, the seating arrangements had been adapted to facilitate high-quality interactions between students and the teacher.

There were some high quality examples of 'learning to learn' tools observed throughout the evaluation. These included visual trackers, revision schedules and the implementation of clear lesson routines. The print-rich learning environment is also a good support for students in their learning.

Students demonstrated high levels of engagement in all of the lessons observed and students' work was very well presented in the sample of copybooks, folders and notebooks reviewed.

The achievement of students in the certificate examinations is of a consistently high standard and staff, management and students are commended for their ongoing commitment to the pursuit of academic excellence.

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

#### ***3.1 Management***

Senior in-school management and the board have been attentive to all of the recommendations made in previous evaluations and in almost all cases, the recommendations have been addressed. It is evident that changes made after the Irish inspection in particular have led to benefits for achievement in relation to oral language. It

would be beneficial to formalise links between the three language departments to further support the sharing of teaching strategies that support the key skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing.

At present, a significant amount of planning time is scheduled at the beginning of the school year. To aid in the implementation and monitoring of planning recommendations, management should evaluate the distribution of time for planning and CPD throughout the year.

### ***3.2 Learning and teaching***

The implementation of some key recommendations relating to learning and teaching from previous evaluations was tracked throughout the evaluation. Progress in addressing these recommendations was found to be very good in most cases. There is, however, need for further discussion to take place in relation to the differentiation of the lesson content to provide a greater challenge for the more able students.

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

The school has a high level of management and leadership capacity. It is commended that different groups of staff have engaged in action-research projects focused on literacy, numeracy and pedagogical strategy development over the last three years. This demonstrates a commitment to continuous improvement of the learner experience.

In planning for future SSE it is important that target setting be more closely related to baseline data and that strategies then be selected to meet those targets. Success criteria and monitoring arrangements should be planned in conjunction with this work. A steering group supporting the gathering and analysis of data, including standardised tests and learner and teacher feedback, will be of help in this process. Management should seek the views of parents and students more regularly in the form of surveys to support SSE and school improvement.

Overall, the school with its informed board, its strong senior management team and its committed staff demonstrates very good capacity for continued school improvement.

# **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 of Laurel Hill Secondary School welcomes the recent WSE/MLL Report. The Board acknowledges with deep appreciation the extraordinary commitment and effectiveness of Staff and Senior Management. Parents' active support for the school is acknowledged with huge gratitude.

The following findings are of particular note to the Board:

- A strong commitment to the achievement of academic excellence
- The high levels of engagement demonstrated by students
- Supports for students, especially those with Special Educational Needs, and the whole staff ethos of student care
- Senior management's highly effective leadership
- The Parents' Association's engagement and vibrancy
- School Planning's consultative scope
- The good range of opportunities for leadership provided to students
- Strong commitment to the school by Staff
- Staff's collegial and collaborative approach to work along with their exceptional level of volunteerism made evident in the provision of a range of extracurricular activities
- The active and effective Board of Management which provides good support to the school
- The support, encouragement and celebration of student learning provided by the classroom environments

The Board looks forward to implementation of the report's findings, in a spirit of partnership and in collaboration with Staff, Students, Parents and Management.