

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

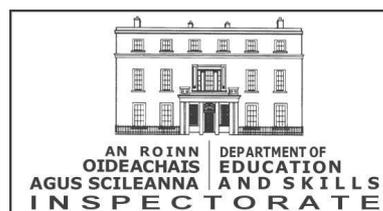
Department of Education and Skills

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

REPORT

**Rockbrook Park School
Edmondstown Road,
Rathfarnham, Dublin 16
Roll number: 60321J**

Date of inspection: 22 September 2011



Whole-School Evaluation Management, Leadership and Learning

A whole-school evaluation of management, leadership and learning (WSE-MLL) was undertaken in September 2011 in Rockbrook Park 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.

Introduction

Rockbrook Park School was founded in 1973 by a group of parents who were inspired by the work of St Josemaria Escriva, the founder of Opus Dei. The trustee body is FamEd Ltd. The school emphasises the importance of character development and academic excellence as twin pillars of education. The school's mentoring system, working in co-operation with parents and teachers, is central to the fulfilment of its aims.

The school has a growing enrolment – currently 155 students – and the school's aim is to increase this to 260 students. The first phase of the school's building programme was completed in 2008 and further facilities are planned. Students come from the local and wider Dublin area extending from Greystones to Naas. The school endeavours to foster a genuine respect for others and a desire for learning. School management is committed to supporting parents in their role as educators. The board of management was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the evaluation, and the response of the board will be found in the appendix to this report.

1. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

1.1 Key Findings

- The principal has a clear vision of the development priorities for the school. This vision places a strong emphasis on character development, mentoring, academic excellence and teaching and learning.
- The board of management supports the principal in improving the quality of education offered to students and in strategies to increase enrolment. The frequency of board meetings does not fully support this goal.
- School development planning and policy development are driven by the dedication and expertise of senior management. Enhanced involvement of the board and the whole school community in this process is necessary.
- Leadership of teaching and learning is evidenced through increased focus on assessment, trialling of new initiatives and the roll-out of ICT in classrooms. School management has shown a capacity for reflection and school self-review. All teachers, with support from management, need to increase their awareness of previous subject inspection recommendations and how they may universally improve the quality of student learning.
- In supporting learning and in the establishment of a learning community the school emphasises teacher-student relationships, meaningful involvement of parents, positive interactions across year groups and particularly, pastoral care of students.

- A vibrant learning community has been established in the school. The overall quality of learning and teaching observed was very good.

1.2 Recommendations for Further Development

- The board of management should lead school development planning, policy enactment and review. In collaboration with the whole school community, the board should set clear goals and strategies and set timeframes to achieve stated targets.
- While policy development, review and ratification should be prioritised by the board, the role of teachers, parents and students in the policy consultation process should be enhanced.
- Teacher working groups should examine particular developmental, curricular or educational priorities and bring the views of all staff members more fully to the decision-making processes.
- Ongoing school development planning and review should include teacher professional development, curriculum development, timetabling, guidance, and learning support and resource provision.
- Measures to support students should include further awareness of relevant school policies, enhanced timetabling in some areas, curriculum review and more detailed information on subject choice.

2. QUALITY OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP

2.1 School ownership and management – the Board of Management

Composition, functioning and fulfilment of statutory obligations

While the present board is properly constituted, there has been some difficulty in maintaining the required number of parent and teacher nominees throughout the lifetime of the board. The members of the board bring a complementary range of experiences and skills to their work and their diverse experiences contribute to the board's effectiveness.

The board has met legislative requirements regarding policy formation. The policies developed by the board reflect its commitment to diversity and respect for the individual. Some aspects of the admission's policy require revision to better reflect the inclusive nature of the school and its respect for diversity which is evident in many school practices. The code of behaviour, while implemented in a fair way, requires revision to strengthen positive rewards and merits. The development of a critical incidents policy should be prioritised. Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) provision, practice and policy should comply with Circular 27/2008. The policy on inclusion should be cognisant of the Departments' post-primary guidelines.

The board of management demonstrated a vision for school development, has recently implemented successful strategies for school improvement and provides ongoing support for the principal.

While the current school plan focuses on short-term and day-to-day activities, the board should adopt a leadership role in school development planning, policy development, enactment and review. However, the frequency of board meetings, at four times per year, does not fully support this goal. In collaboration with the whole school community, the board should set clear goals and strategies to achieve stated targets. An agreed report after each meeting should be drafted for dissemination to parents. In addition, an overall board of management report should be furnished to the wider school community on an annual basis, as required by the Education Act 1998. This would provide greater insights into the

school's management and decision-making processes. The board encourages the school to maintain strong links with the local community and plays a leading role in this regard. The board should consider inviting the officers of the student council to address it annually on the activities and achievements of the council.

Confirmation was provided that, in compliance with Post-primary Circulars M44/05 and 0062/2006, the board of management has formally adopted the Department's Child Protection Guidelines for Post-primary Schools (Published September 2004). Confirmation was also provided that these child protection procedures have been brought to the attention of management, school staff and parents; that a copy of the procedures has been provided to all staff (including all new staff); and that management has ensured that all staff are familiar with the procedures to be followed. A designated liaison person (DLP) and a deputy DLP have been appointed in line with the requirements of the guidelines.

The school's priorities for development

The school has identified necessary actions so that it can continue to fulfil its founding ethos. For example, the trustees are currently leading a process to identify the practical implications of the school ethos together with clarification of the mission statement.

Examples of the school management's educational priorities include enhancing the school's academic reputation and the development of the range and quality of subjects on offer. It is envisaged that the planned increase in student intake together with the recruitment of additional permanent staff will help achieve this outcome. However, the deployment of staff in a minority of cases should be examined in order to ensure that teachers are qualified and registered to teach their timetabled subjects. School management has prioritised the further development of the successful school mentoring system with staff training in life-coaching and mentoring skills. Teacher development and training has been identified as a key priority for school management.

While acknowledging the contribution of parents to the school, the board supports the principal in further engaging parents in the school community and in parent education in line with the school's ethos. To strengthen this worthy aim, it is therefore recommended that a formalised school parents' association be established to represent the views of parents on all school related matters. Affiliation to the national body should be considered.

2.2 Effectiveness of leadership for learning

Leadership of staff

The principal has delivered on a successful agenda for change, provides clear educational leadership and promotes the maintenance of a high work ethic among all members of the school community. Leading and supporting teachers in the promotion of high-quality teaching is a priority for the principal. Since his appointment, he has focused on improvements in academic excellence and student self-discipline and on increased productivity and collaboration among staff and students. Among his many areas of responsibility, the deputy principal supports the principal in this regard and as senior form master, has special responsibility for discipline at senior cycle and plays a leading role in the fair implementation of the code of behaviour across the school.

The principal and deputy principal have commendable leadership qualities, display complementary skills and present as an effective senior management team. They share a clear vision and understanding of the developmental priorities for the school and are supported by the whole school community in this regard. Both have an active on-the-ground presence in the school and jointly manage the school very effectively on a daily basis. A collaborative and flexible approach with staff is fostered. The senior management

team have leadership qualities which have contributed to the strong sense of community and commitment among the staff and students in the school.

School management promotes leadership opportunities among staff. Meaningful roles are distributed to post holders. The programme co-ordinator post is assigned to Transition Year (TY) co-ordination and the special duties teacher post carries junior form master, homework policy implementation and study quality and co-ordination duties. These duties are carried out effectively. Senior management creates opportunities to foster and to promote excellence by facilitating staff to take on voluntary roles which build leadership capacity among staff and include co-ordination of areas such as the student council, the school house system, talented students, ICT and sport. In addition teachers help with various student programmes, links and exchanges.

The school supports its ethos in many ways: through the student scholarship scheme, the positive staff induction process and in fostering good relationships between staff and students. The provision of a staff handbook is a very praiseworthy development. Staff development days are a key focus of teacher continuing professional development (CPD). To strengthen the consultative process more fully, working groups led by experienced members of staff should examine particular developmental, curricular or educational priorities and bring the views of all staff members more fully to the decision-making processes.

Curricular review should form a central strand of planning for the future. Themes for discussion should include continued promotion of Assessment for Learning (AfL) and further integration of computers as classroom learning tools. Parents and students praised the quality of the TY programme for its diversity and life skills. The TY programme, while substantially meeting student needs does require review. There should be enhanced timetabling to enable better continuity of the curriculum and the curriculum should be broadened to include subjects not currently offered by the school, for example technology. TY planning requires further development in line with Department guidelines.

Leadership of students

The focus on mentoring, study skills, regular assessment and reporting and the facilitation of leadership days for students are some examples of the ways in which the work ethic enshrined in the school ethos is promoted. A significant majority of students surveyed said that teachers encourage them to work to the best of their abilities. This is a very positive acknowledgement of the efforts of teachers. The development of the role of subject co-ordinator would further contribute to student learning through planning, co-ordinated development of work schemes, looking at methodologies, sharing resources and taking responsibility for leadership within departments.

The overwhelming majority of students stated that there is a good atmosphere in the school and that they felt safe and cared for. The form master system is a good example of how distributed leadership is effective in the management and care of students. The standard of maintenance of the journal varied considerably between different students and class groups. It would be worthwhile addressing this difference in practice to ensure that the journal is an effective resource for all students, teachers and parents. Parents stated that the school is well run, there is good contact between home and school, and they know who to talk to in the school if there is a problem.

School assemblies provide excellent opportunities to acknowledge achievements, whether academic, sporting or personal. The integration of the school community through various projects and activities further promotes the ethos. The school's 'Clann' system promotes leadership skills and student relationships. The development of the nature trail is a positive development which forges enhanced links with primary schools while developing

leadership skills in TY students who have been trained in this regard. Students are provided with a range of opportunities which complement the academic curriculum. The reconstituted student council is increasingly active and is making a meaningful contribution to promoting self-discipline and individual responsibility among students.

The guidance and the learning support departments play a key role in the care and support of students. Learning support is provided through individualised teaching and differentiated classroom strategies. Through timetabling and careful monitoring, management should ensure that the utilisation of allocated resource teaching hours is responsive to the learning needs of students. The capacity of the staff to cope with the range of students with additional needs should be addressed by management. The guidance plan, while outlining levels of support to each year group requires revision in line with National Council for Guidance Education (NCGE) guidelines before enactment.

2.3 Management of facilities

Marked improvements in the school's infrastructure in recent years, following the establishment of a development committee by the trustees and the board of management, have impacted very positively on the working environment for teachers and the learning environment for students. Further development is planned. Recent focus has been on the expansion of resources, specifically ICT in classrooms and specialist rooms. Environment sustainability is promoted through the work of the Green Schools initiative.

3. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

3.1 The quality of learning and teaching

Overall the quality of learning and teaching in the twenty-three lessons observed was very good. The majority of lessons were well planned and structured to promote learning and to motivate students. Teachers were very knowledgeable of their subject areas and well prepared, using appropriate resources to challenge and engage learners. A number of teachers set clear learning objectives for each lesson, shared them with the class at the outset, and then used them at the end of the lesson to summarise and to evaluate the learning. This good practice should occur in all classrooms.

A positive working atmosphere was established in all classrooms and classroom management together with student behaviour were good. Teachers know their students well and hold high expectations for both student achievement and behaviour. Students responded well and strove to meet these expectations. Teachers were caring and supportive of their students who in turn were well behaved and respectful of their teachers. Good relations between students were also evident in interactions such as group activities and discussions.

The majority of class groups comprised students with a range of abilities as well as students for whom English was an additional language. Some teachers successfully included all of these students through a range of practices including differentiated instruction. This was noted particularly in the use of both higher and lower order questioning, and the individual attention afforded to students. This good practice should be extended to include greater use of differentiated tasks. In some lessons the lack of differentiated instruction resulted in a lower level of student participation and engagement. Most lessons featured predominately teacher-led activities but the more effective teachers were innovative in their use of technology, key words, mind maps, and active learning.

In many cases, student learning could have been enhanced by structured activities to facilitate students in working together. Such co-operative learning activities can provide an

alternative way of structuring the classroom so that students work together to accomplish goals, accommodating each other's differences and finding ways to encourage and nourish high levels of achievement and positive social interaction.

Language lessons extensively and effectively employed the target language for communication and instruction. This encouraged successful student engagement.

A range of assessment modes were employed including questioning, facilitated discussion, oral feedback and in-class testing. Teachers took note of student attendance but also kept records regarding student attainment and effort. Homework was assigned regularly in most subject areas. Teachers were seen to collect and check homework and frequently gave verbal feedback to students. The practice of giving written, formative feedback was not always evident. This is an essential element of assessment for learning (AfL) and the school should strive to implement it in every subject area.

4. IMPLEMENTATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS FROM PREVIOUS EVALUATIONS

4.1 Management

Meetings with senior management, the board of management's presentation and the meeting with relevant subject department teachers very clearly outlined the actions taken in response to recommendations made in previous subject inspection reports. These include the provision of an enhanced classroom environment including the provision of ICT facilities, the adjustment of the school timetable for various subjects and the revision of subject department plans. Further development of subject plans including the setting of long term goals for each subject should inform future planning. Key areas outlined which still require the attention of school management include teacher qualifications, subject co-ordination, TY planning, AfL strategies and differentiation. The impact of previous recommendations on some generic aspects of teaching and learning has yet to be fully realised and it is recommended that school management put appropriate structures in place for dissemination of these recommendations.

4.2 Learning and Teaching

The quality of teaching and learning in the subjects previously evaluated was very high. Teachers have attended well to the implementation of many of the recommendations made in previous subject inspection reports. Subject departments have taken a range of actions in response to these recommendations. The image-rich and print-rich classroom environment has been enhanced. Specific improvements include the use of the target language, development of oral language skills, the development of the range of methods to enhance students' decision-making skills and the implementation of an enhanced range of methodologies. Areas for improvement include the sharing of lesson objectives at the outset of many lessons and placing key words and concepts on the board.

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

Senior management takes a reflective and self-evaluative view on each year's initiatives and records progress and decisions taken in the annual staff handbook. This is good practice. The school has the capacity to bring about improvement where necessary. This capacity is evident in its ongoing focus on character development, mentoring, curricular reform, school promotion and infrastructural achievements. Renewed focus on academic excellence is praiseworthy as are innovative pastoral initiatives. Many initiatives are in

place to support sustained efforts to maximise students' potential and to consolidate the work of parents. To further develop self-evaluative practices, the board should consider making some time available for self-review.

Published March 2012

Appendix

School response to the report

Submitted by the Board of Management

Area 1: Observations on the content of the inspection report

The newly-appointed board of management thanks the inspectorate for its evaluation. The acknowledgement by the inspectors of effective leadership, very good teaching and learning, and a strong sense of community and commitment among staff and students bears out our view that Rockbrook is a truly effective learning community. The board has drawn up a list of action points based on the recommendations in the report, some of which, since then, have become school practice.

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

Since September, the board has switched to a monthly meeting schedule with a view to taking a more hands-on approach to policy development and review, while using more formal consultation processes than heretofore. The board has met with the student council for 2011/12 and has a plan in place for regular meetings with the Council. The return of a regular school newsletter now allows for the easy dissemination of meeting outcomes to the whole school community. The school's reconstituted parents' association held its annual general meeting at the end of 2011. The board also has recently adopted a critical incidents policy.

Current work by the board on developing a parent handbook and on revising the student journal will help in increasing the whole school community's awareness of school policies.

The board were happy with the evaluation's assessment that the overall quality of teaching and learning was very good, as it reflects the professionalism with which the staff approach their work. As additional time for staff meetings have now become part of all schools' planning processes since September 2012, this will allow for a more universal application of standards of excellence across all subject areas, for further development of assessment for learning processes and for all staff to be more involved in decision-making processes.