

**An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna**

**Department of Education and Skills**

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

**REPORT**

**Glenstal Abbey School  
Murroe, County Limerick  
Roll number: 64150F**

**Date of inspection: 3 March 2014**



**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 2014 in Glenstal Abbey 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***

Glenstal Abbey was founded as a Benedictine monastery in 1927 and a secondary school for boys, attached to the monastery, was opened in 1932. This fee-paying boarding school has a current enrolment of 206 boys. Almost all students attend as seven-day boarders while a small number of students now also attend as day boarders. The monks of Glenstal continue to play a significant role in the life of the school through their management and leadership within the school that includes fulfilling the role of headmaster. They are actively engaged in sustaining the ethos of a Benedictine school within a Benedictine monastic community underpinned by the values of reverence, respect and responsibility.

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

### ***Key Findings***

- The principal and the deputy principal provide very high quality leadership and management for the school community.
- Very good quality teaching and learning, with examples of excellent practice, were observed in lessons.
- A wide-ranging curriculum, based on student-centred subject choice and a commitment to small class sizes, is offered to students.
- Achievements in certificate examinations and uptake of higher-level in subjects are significantly strong.
- A committed, professional and very effective staff including teachers, technicians, house-masters, nursing-care staff, coaching staff, a secretary and librarian, housekeeping, catering and care-taking staff provide significant support for students in the school.
- A very well-organised and effective pastoral care structure, including Guidance, provides very effective student support both within the classroom and in the boarding school.
- A comprehensive programme of co-curricular and extracurricular activities is provided.
- Very positive and mutually respectful relationships amongst the students and with adults are evident within daily interactions in the school.

- Questionnaires completed by parents and students of second year and fifth year provided a comprehensive endorsement of the quality of the school management, teaching and learning, and of the support and care provided by the school.
- An evident culture of reflective practice, dialogue and communication has led to significant review, change and improvement in the school in recent years.

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

- Teachers and school management should, over time, engage in high-level dialogue, reflection and action research towards developing and sharing student-centred pedagogy based on current very effective practice.

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

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

The board is actively and effectively engaged in its role and is pro-active in its engagement with maintaining, developing and sustaining the life of the school based on its ethos, its traditions and its identified needs and demands. The board is appropriately constituted and includes members nominated by the Abbot and the Benedictine Monks of Glenstal Abbey as Patron, and by teacher and parent nominees. The board meets regularly and ensures very effective and formal communication with teachers and parents. Its role and work is underpinned by clarity of vision, awareness of challenge and the changing needs of teachers and students in a boarding school environment.

The board has recently overseen the completion of a very high quality new school building that was funded by Glenstal Abbey, and the introduction of a board of governors as trustee to represent the Patron in sustaining the school ethos and mission. Other on-going initiatives include the introduction of day-boarding for a small group of students within each year group, a comprehensive review of policies, and a wide-ranging review of the provision for sporting and other leisure activities in the school. The board has privately employed a number of staff including an information and communication technology (ICT) manager to embed and support recent ICT initiatives and a laboratory technician. The board has also supported the principal in ensuring compliance in relation to weekly instruction time through timetable revision, and changes in curriculum provision in relation to Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE), Physical Education (PE) and Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE).

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*.

While it is clear that the board has ensured full compliance with Child Protection policy and procedures within the school, as outlined above, it should now however consider, in its documentation, the visibility of the school's Child Protection policy within the wider context of Glenstal Abbey's Safeguarding Policy and Procedures document (2013).

The board should also review the school's admissions policy with particular reference to prioritising admissions criteria, clarifying the purpose and timing of assessments within the enrolment process, and reviewing some statements in the policy concerning potential

conditionality relating to the enrolment of students with additional educational needs. It is evident however that enrolment practices reflect openness and inclusion.

A formal parents' association has not been formed due to the wide geographical distribution of the parents of students who board on a seven-day basis. However, the school communicates comprehensively and regularly with parents through letter, email and at parent-teacher meetings. A large number of parents routinely visit the school each Sunday during school term to attend mass and to visit their sons. Parents regularly attend school rugby matches that feature prominently on the school calendar. An annual parents' day and the sports / family day provide further opportunities for parent engagement with the school.

A postal questionnaire to the parents of second-year and fifth-year students as part of this evaluation provided a comprehensive endorsement of the quality of the school management, teaching and learning, and of the support and care provided to students within Glenstal Abbey School.

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

The principal, referred to in the school as the headmaster, and the deputy principal provide very high quality leadership and management for the whole-school community. Both have established a very clear and positive professional relationship with defined and complementary roles. Trust and communication inform their teamwork as school leaders.

Leadership has been distributed among key teams within the school community focusing on the development and embedding of a pastoral-care student-support structure, the widening of the learning support structure and the on-going development of the sports and housemaster structures. Leadership of the school community has found expression through leadership of learning, of change and of people.

Leadership of learning is evident in the development of a culture of planning and review that has empowered subject departments, has engaged all teachers in a curriculum audit, has established school self-evaluation and the development of a realistic and manageable school improvement plan. The introduction and on-going review of an iPad tablet computer project for students in junior cycle and the facilitation of in-house and externally sourced continuing professional development reflect further examples of leadership for learning in the school.

The principal and deputy principal in conjunction with the board have guided the school through a recent period of significant change. The new school building has facilitated the creation of base classrooms, print and visually rich learning environments and the integration of ICT. Curricular change has included the timetabling of SPHE, PE and RSE and both the expansion and development of supports for students with additional educational needs to include a tentative engagement with team teaching. Support for students has become focused on a pastoral-care team to discuss and support the individual needs of students.

Other significant changes include a change in timetabling to provide a two-week timetable structure combining an increase in number of class periods per week and a subsequent reduction in the duration of class periods. These changes have ensured compliance with circular M29/95 that requires that students be provided with twenty-eight hours of instruction per week. A particular policy and practice focus has been placed on the prevention of bullying and on the encouragement of positive behaviour by students through a card and student award system.

Throughout this period of significant change, both the principal and deputy principal, in collaboration with the teaching team, the monastic community and the board, have attempted

to, and succeeded in, preserving the spirit and homely nature of the boarding school and the ethos of the school as reflected in its mission.

Leadership of staff has empowered teams and individuals within their classrooms and subject departments, through a recent post of responsibility review, engagement with school self-evaluation, through their involvements with particular projects and through their engagement with ICT in the classroom. The support of the ICT manager has been significant in this regard. There is an evident culture among teachers that reflects unity of purpose, informality and volunteerism towards supporting the needs of students. Teachers display a clear professional engagement, high expectations for students and they actively engage in dialogue concerning the development and enhancement of the school.

Students are provided with a wide range of subjects for both Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate and school management is committed to the maintenance of small class sizes. Some subjects are provided outside of school hours to allow students to access particular subjects. The board of management privately employs some teachers to expand curriculum provision for the relatively small student cohort. Therefore, every effort is made to accommodate students' preferences within an open subject-choice process.

A very well-organised, high quality, compulsory TY programme provides a positive and appropriate transition for students into senior cycle. This programme provides a core curriculum, a subject-sampling layer of subjects, a number of high-profile TY appropriate activities, and a good quality work-experience programme. Of particular note are the quality of communication with parents and the culture of review that informs the development of the programme. Assessment processes within the programme are also appropriate involving a combination of summative and formative assessments. Awards for engagement and participation in projects are combined with a very good quality portfolio assessment process that both motivates and rewards students' engagement with the programme.

Subject options for Leaving Certificate are based on students' preferences. The wide range of subject options provided includes Classical Studies, Latin, and Art. RSE is now timetabled on alternate weeks with Guidance. This very positive development that is informed and underpinned by policy, acts as an important social and developmental support to the boys in senior cycle in the school.

The school pays particular attention to the assessment of students' progress to reflect the context of a seven-day boarding. A system of 'card marks' is used to provide a continuous assessment of each student's progress. These assessments are reported to students and their parents on an ongoing basis, and are combined with the outcomes of end-of-term and end-of-year examinations.

The curriculum could be further enhanced by consideration of the provision of the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP), and of Design and Communication Graphics (DCG) in the context of the national emphasis on the advancement of Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) subjects. An increase in the timetable provision for Gaelige, in line with that of Mathematics and English, should also be considered. A key challenge for the future is to focus teachers and students on the interrogation and development of the use of the iPad and other ICT as learning tools for students.

A year-tutor team monitors students' progress in class and in relation to study, achievement and progression. This student-centred system combines very effectively with the housemaster team that supports students in the after-school period of their lives within the boarding school. Overarching student support and care is focused by a pastoral-care team that meets weekly and includes the principal and deputy principal, the director of boarding, housemasters and the guidance counsellor. Appropriate personal, educational and vocational

guidance is also provided to students through timetabled classroom engagements with the guidance counsellor and through individual counselling based on individual students' needs.

The learning-support team supports students' learning. Reports from primary schools are combined with in-school assessments, parent-generated assessments and discussions with teachers to provide a profile of the range of learning supports required for students. Models of support include team teaching, co-timetabling of class groups and the provision of small class group in some subject areas. The learning support team is very well organised and is significantly advanced in meeting the on-going needs of students. The formal inclusion of the learning support co-ordinator on the pastoral care team should however, be considered.

Students are courteous, appropriately assertive and respectful of their peers, teachers and other adults in the school. Students have a voice in the school through an active and well-organised student council and also through their informal interactions with teachers, monks and school management. The outcomes of the student questionnaire suggest however that the potential for a deeper consultative voice for students could be further exploited. A more formal consultative role for students in wider policy development and student support should be considered.

As classes end each day, students are provided with a structured sport and leisure programme, supervised study followed by evening supper, a further period of study and some free time before 'lights out' in their dormitories. The student's life in the school is enhanced by the very good quality academic and personal supports provided by teachers, by the emphasis on the rugby tradition, the other sporting and extracurricular programmes and the provision of additional experiences in the arts, music, choir, drama, history and archaeology, access to additional subjects and opportunities for individual creativity. The students also benefit from interaction with the monks throughout the school day, through access to the excellent school library and interaction with the librarian. They benefit too from the wide-ranging care provided by the matron, nurses and the house-masters, from the work of the ICT manager and laboratory technician, and the house-keeping, catering and care-taking staff. All these aspects of the students' experience appear to be woven into a fabric of care, support and pedagogy to nurture the academic, social and personal development of the students while in the care of the school.

### ***1.3 Management of facilities***

The school grounds are set within the extensive parkland, gardens and farmland of the original nineteenth century baronial castle that is the central focus of the monastery and is linked to the new school building. Sport facilities include rugby pitches, athletics training grounds, all-weather tennis courts and an indoor gymnasium and sports hall.

Facilities in the school are of very high quality reflecting recent and on-going investment by the board and the monastic chapter in a state-of-the art school building. The building seems to enhance the sense of community in the school through the open plan design and the positioning of seating for the students. Classrooms, on two levels, open on to a bright atrium space that facilitates students to interact. This space is also used for formal and informal gatherings. The provision of base classrooms for teachers has facilitated the development of print and visually-rich classroom learning environments. The availability of an ICT manager and a laboratory technician provide further human resources that enhance the management of these high quality facilities. A safety statement for the school is in place and a timely audit and review is now planned in the context of the recent completion of the new school building.

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

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

The quality of teaching and learning observed in lessons was very good, with examples of excellent practice. Twenty lessons were observed in the course of the evaluation. Lessons were very well planned and paced with an effective balance between the individual needs of the student and the demands of syllabus and examination. Lessons were interactive, participative and task-based, and actively engaged students within a clear learning intention and structure.

Teachers and students demonstrated a positive and shared commitment to learning within these lessons. There were clear and established routines regarding lesson structure, homework and tasks. There was a seamless integration of strategies to develop students' literacy and numeracy and the appropriate integration of ICT as a teaching and learning tool in many lessons. Classroom interactions were very positive and relationships between students and teachers in their classrooms were characterised by high expectations and mutual respect.

Students' learning was evident through their engagement and participation in discussions, in their responses to teachers' questions and in the quality of their work observed in their copybooks and folders. Outcomes for students in certificate examinations and uptake of higher-level in subjects are significantly strong.

Excellent practice was observed when the learning intention was shared with students at the outset of the lesson and the outcomes of that learning were reviewed appropriately. Constructing and developing learning based on students' previous learning, in the context of the teaching for understanding or assessment for learning frameworks, also represented examples of excellent practice. Engagement with higher-order thinking skills, questioning, wait-time and reflection, and the very good use of the iPad for research and for the presentation of students' work, also reflected excellent classroom practice.

Within the individual classroom settings teachers were confident and dialogic in their use of the target language in language classes, and in their presentation of lesson topics to engage students. There was very good monitoring of learning and individual assistance was provided to students during the lessons. Students were encouraged and affirmed by the energy, humour and enthusiasm of teachers.

Students displayed a very evident work ethic, were very focused on their own work and engaged at a high level with their learning. Students were facilitated to engage in topics as independent learners and equally, were relaxed, confident and articulate in asking and responding to questions.

Where recommendations were made, they encouraged teachers to explore the possibilities offered by peer learning and assessment. The potential offered by new classrooms to change the seating arrangements to enhance effective group work and collaborative activities should also be embraced. The further development of the potential of team teaching could also be considered in this context. The balance between the use of ICT and the need to gather students' responses or suggestions on the whiteboard in lessons should also be considered.

To further enhance and develop classroom practice subject departments should now consciously and overtly engage with the further integration of literacy and numeracy strategies in classroom practice across the curriculum and advance the potential of ICT as a learning tool as set out in the collaborative school improvement plan.

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

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

Evidence was provided that recommendations from previous subject inspection reports referencing issues to be addressed by school management have been implemented in the context of the completion of new classrooms and specialist facilities, and in the revised timetable provision for some curricular areas.

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

Recommendations from previous subject inspection reports relating to teaching and learning have been addressed as evidenced in the planning documents reviewed and arising from classroom practice observed.

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

A culture of review, dialogue and consultation has been developed, as has a culture of distributed leadership involving individuals and teams in key roles. School self-evaluation has been embraced and a school improvement plan based on literacy and numeracy integration and on reviewing the effectiveness of the iPad to support students' learning has been set out. The school community clearly has the capacity to engage in robust, targeted and effective school self-evaluation based on this improvement plan. A key challenge for the future will be to maintain the current inclusive culture of self-review among teachers and other staff towards on-going improvement that is now clearly evident within the school community.

Building on the current school improvement plan, senior management, teachers and other staff are now well placed to engage in high-level professional reflective practice to further develop, share and enhance the quality of learning and teaching through their interrogation of current very good classroom practice, through further engagement with literacy and numeracy and team teaching, and through their integration of ICT as a learning tool. It is therefore recommended that teachers and school management should, over time, engage in this high-level dialogue, reflection and action research towards developing and sharing student-centred pedagogy arising from the current very effective practice observed in classrooms.

## **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 Glenstal Abbey School welcomes the publication of this overwhelmingly positive report and readily accepts its findings. It particularly welcomes the report's endorsement of the school's Benedictine ethos and its particular context as a project of a Benedictine monastery.

The Board welcomes the report's recognition of the very high quality leadership and management and the very good teaching and learning in the school. The Board notes the inspectors' endorsement of the positive and mutually respectful relationships between students and adults in Glenstal and welcomes their recognition of the cohesiveness and fruitfulness of the work of the many different teaching, boarding, administrative and other staff in the school in weaving 'a fabric of care, support and pedagogy'.

The Board is committed to continuing to support and foster the culture of reflective practice, dialogue and communication which has led to such significant change and improvement in the school in recent years.

## **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 will work with the Abbey's Safeguarding Team to ensure greater visibility of its Child Protection Policy in future versions of the overall suite of safeguarding documentation for Glenstal Abbey. The Board notes with satisfaction that the entire Glenstal campus was also audited in the last year by the National Board for Safeguarding Children in the Catholic Church in Ireland, and was found to have fully met 44 out of 48 safeguarding criteria, and the remaining 4 partially. That report commended the Board of Management and the monastic community for putting in place "*an excellent network of important and connected policies and procedures to keep children safe*".

The Board notes the report's recommendations regarding the admissions process and has already altered the timing of assessments in that process as suggested.

The time allocation for Gaeilge will be increased from September 2014.

The report's one recommendation for further development – that teachers and management reflect and work together towards developing and sharing the best possible pedagogy – will be a central priority for the new Headmaster, who takes office in September 2014.