

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

**Whole-School Evaluation
REPORT**

**Mercy Secondary School
Tralee, County Kerry
Roll number: 68070E**

Date of inspection: 9 December 2011



A N R O I N N | D E P A R T M E N T O F
O I D E A C H A I S | E D U C A T I O N
A G U S S C I L E A N N A | A N D S K I L L S

WHOLE-SCHOOL EVALUATION

A whole-school evaluation of Mercy Secondary School, Mounthawk, Tralee was undertaken in December 2011. This report presents the findings of the evaluation and makes recommendations for improvement. During the evaluation, the quality of teaching and learning in five subjects was evaluated in detail, and separate reports are available on these subjects. (See section 7 for details). 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

Mercy Mounthawk is a Catholic mixed voluntary secondary school under the trusteeship of Catholic Education an Irish Schools Trust (CEIST). The school was established in 2001 with the amalgamation of two existing Mercy schools, St John's, Balloonagh and St Mary's, Moyderwell, thus allowing for the continuation and enhancement of the long history of educational provision of the Mercy sisters in the town.

The school is located on a sixteen acre site on the outskirts of the town. It serves both an urban and a rural population. The urban catchment includes three areas that form part of the Revitalising Areas by Planning, Investment and Development (RAPID) scheme. The two main feeder schools are located in the town of Tralee and the school has a further seventeen feeder schools. It provides Junior Certificate, Transition Year (TY), Leaving Certificate, the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) and the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP).

This developing school has experienced a number of significant changes since its foundation. Built for 1,000 students, it is oversubscribed with a current enrolment of 1,168. The school has revised its admissions policy and procedures to obviate difficulties experienced in the past when parents queued for places. The increased enrolment means that space is currently an issue for the school. The changing nature of the enrolment, whereby there has been a shift in the gender balance with a gradual increase in the number of boys attending the school, has had implications for staffing and curriculum provision. There have also been a number of changes at senior management level since 2001.

Mercy Mounthawk celebrated its tenth anniversary in 2011. It was clear to inspectors that the school has established itself fully respectful of tradition and most open to ongoing transformation.

1. QUALITY OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT

1.1 Characteristic spirit of the school

The evaluation found that in Mercy Mounthawk there is a keen awareness of the centrality of characteristic spirit to the fabric of the school and to the quality and cohesiveness of its provision. The unique characteristic spirit is firmly rooted in inherited tradition, is reflected in the mission statement and is infused by the CEIST charter.

The characteristic spirit of the school is encapsulated in its guiding principles – Tuiscint (Understanding), Treoir (Direction and Guidance) and Trócaire (Mercy) - and embodied in its mission statement which sees the school as 'a witnessing community' committed to fostering: 'the full potential of all staff and students'; 'a positive partnership between all members of the school and the wider community' and 'the highest standards of teaching,

learning and performance'. The mission statement was devised by the staff at the time of the amalgamation and, in line with the school's commitment to ongoing evaluation and improvement, is currently under review. The collaborative review is examining the student experience in the school and is focusing in particular on student formation.

The trustees clearly endorse the school's mission and actively support the school community to deliver on it in practice. The level and quality of the ongoing communication and support involved was evident to the inspection team. The support provided to the school in the creation of its faith development programme for staff, 'Joining the Dots', is a case in point. This successful programme was subsequently extended to other CEIST schools. The school is also most fortunate in continuing to enjoy the commitment of the Mercy sisters to the school through the invaluable ongoing work of four of its sisters.

Commitment to the realisation of the school's mission is tangible at all levels in the school, from the board of management, to in-school management, to staff, teaching and ancillary, parents, support agencies and the wider school community generally. The mission itself is clearly communicated in the school's brochure and on the school website. The mission statement is also contained in the preamble to key documents such as the staff handbook and the student journal. The focus of the current review demonstrates the extent of the active concern to deliver in practice on the mission as articulated in theory. This active concern is also reflected in the practice of the annual identification of a clear set of goals to guide student formation. The theme this year is 'Discover your truest self'. Spiritual development is taken seriously in the school. It is evident that the characteristic spirit is being forged in practice.

The following examples serve to illustrate how the school fosters student and staff potential, partnership and standards. The school is committed to the personal and professional development of staff. Members of staff are facilitated to engage in relevant professional development and are encouraged to explore school-based opportunities for personal professional development also. The school has been proactive in its efforts to build a learning community through initiatives such as The Learning School Projects that have focused on the undertaking of school-based action research projects. Other internally-organised professional development opportunities have been offered to staff in relevant areas of legislation, in teaching learning and assessment, in student behaviour and staff and student care.

Students are supported to achieve their potential in a whole variety of ways. The level of care provided to the student provides the basis for the achievement of personal and academic potential. Attention to the student at key moments such as transfer from primary to post-primary school, and the guidance offered in relation to learning-related decision-making, support the student to achieve his/her potential. The breadth of the curriculum and the provision of a wide variety of programmes also support the student to achieve his/her potential. It is clear that the school is aware of the needs of both the gifted and the more challenged student. Great attention is paid to the importance of personal well-being as evidenced in the ongoing work of health promotion in the school. The very extensive extracurricular programme is further evidence of the practical measures taken to support all students to realise their potential. The extra supports provided to support new students, those personally, socially or academically challenged and their families, is most impressive.

Partnership has been espoused and promoted in Mercy Mounthawk since its establishment as evidenced by the value placed on the notion of 'le chéile'. The school clearly promotes effective collaborative partnerships and has been very successful in exploiting them for very positive impact. Positive collaboration is evident in the many and varied relationships developed and being fostered in the school. This is the case at the level of the trustees, the board of management, in-school management and in-school management teams, subject

departments and also in relation to the parents' and students' councils. The strength of volunteerism in the school, the loyalty and involvement of former staff members and the proactive involvement of external agencies are striking features of this very effective partnership. Such partnerships also demonstrate the school's success in developing a cohesive approach to its work.

Concern for standards is kept to the fore. Student progress is tracked and analysed. In-school management and the board of management maintain an oversight of standards generally. Staff professional development is underpinned by the desire to maintain and improve standards.

Commitment and a clear sense of moral purpose are evident hallmarks of the characteristic spirit of this school. 'Potential', as referenced in the school's mission statement, provides a wonderful guiding principle and should always be used as an aid in policy-making and as the measure of success both in relation to individual student achievement and to that of the school as a whole.

1.2 School ownership and management

The current board of management is in the third year of its term of office. It is correctly composed and constituted and attests to fulfilling its statutory obligations. The chair of the board has served previous terms thus bringing valuable knowledge and experience to the position. Inspector engagement with the board and examination of its work provided clear evidence of much exemplary practice. The tremendous commitment required is duly recognised and acknowledged.

The board has a very clear and definite understanding of its role. Good systems and structures are in place. It operates an effective sub-committee structure, and establishes further sub-committees, as may be required, to deal with particular issues. The board is most efficient and organised in its work. It holds frequent meetings, ensures systematic coverage of key areas, takes good minutes and agrees a report for communication to relevant parties. Communication with parents is also facilitated by virtue of the fact that the principal or one of the deputy principals attends the monthly meetings of the parents' council. The board receives ad hoc parental delegations if required. It was suggested that it might consider inviting representatives of the students' council to present to one of its meetings. Consideration might also valuably be given to the idea of inviting the programme coordinator or the coordinators of the various senior cycle programmes to make a brief annual presentation to the board. This would provide a leadership opportunity and an opportunity for engagement with these key areas of curricular provision.

The board takes its role in policy development and planning very seriously. Policies are devised, circulated in draft at consultation stage, amended, agreed and ratified as required. The board is also very proactive in relation to policy review.

The board displays very thorough knowledge of school-related matters. It has identified challenges and priorities for attention which suggest a very positive proactive approach to its work. The board has agreed a three-year plan for the work of the school and it monitors and reports on the implementation of this plan on an annual basis. Inspectors noted in particular the excellent practice of the preparation and provision of a very complete annual report on the school year to the parent body. The support which the board provides to in-school management and to the staff at large was acknowledged by both parties.

1.3 In-school management

The current principal has held the position for four years. He worked previously as deputy principal in the school and came from one of the two amalgamated schools thus bringing both experience and commitment to the Mercy ethos. The school has had two principals, including the current principal, since its establishment. The importance of the leadership of these individuals to the successful establishment and ongoing functioning of the school should not be underestimated.

The principal leads by example, sets high standards and creates high expectations. He consults and seeks advice and is very effective in harnessing the support of the generous school community as a whole. He is both forward and outward-looking, and is proactive in his desire for ongoing school improvement. This is evident from the extent to which he maintains an interest in developments in education generally and by the way in which he seeks to create and foster a learning community in the school. It is to his credit that a number of initiatives undertaken in the school have been emulated by others.

The principal's personal conviction and sense of responsibility in relation to the school's mission are obvious. Effective systems and structures have been put in place across the school, and practices thus established to support the sharing of the vision in and through practice. Belief in the importance of enculturation is reflected in the development of a teacher induction programme in the school. The principal makes considerable personal investment in the position. The challenges of running a big and complex school are evident. This was reflected in the concern expressed by the board in relation to the demands it places on an individual principal.

A number of factors support the distribution of leadership in the school. Staff demonstrates great willingness and selflessness with regard to the undertaking of responsibilities. Roles and responsibilities are clearly defined thus supporting those to whom responsibilities are assigned. The encouragement of project-driven skills-focused learning in the school also supports the distribution of leadership. Leadership opportunities provided have afforded training and development to members of staff who have since moved to positions of leadership in other schools.

The senior management team comprises the principal and two deputy principals. The senior management team is very well qualified, plays to its strengths and continues to learn on the job also. The team is supported by ten assistant principals and nineteen special duties teachers in the work of managing the school. Roles and responsibilities at senior management level were clearly delineated in 2008 and have been refined as required since. The principal assumes overall responsibility and reports on same to the board and deals on an ongoing basis with all matters relating to staff and plant. Each of the deputies assumes a very significant level of responsibility in her own right. One of the deputies takes responsibility for curriculum and matters relating to the senior house while the second deputy has responsibility for student support and matters relevant to the junior house. The commitment, hard work and dedication of the deputy principals are very evident.

A number of features characterise the work of this senior management team. It is a dynamic team. Both the principal and the deputies are directly and actively involved in, or lead, the work of various sub-committees and key school groups such as the discipline committee, the finance committee, the internal teachers' council planning committee, the health promotion committee, the pastoral care group and the parents' and the students' council. The team is very visible in the school and its open-door policy supports communication. There is ongoing daily communication between the members of the senior management team. They meet very early each morning and also at the end of each day to debrief. All

communication is motivated by an abiding concern for the interests and welfare of the students and the need for the day-to-day smooth operation of the school.

A review of the post structure was undertaken in 2007. Assistant principals and special duties teachers undertake a range of responsibilities. The school's flexibility in dealing with the impact of the moratorium on appointments to some positions is to the credit of all concerned and reflective of the school's general positive 'can-do' attitude. Communication with assistant principals is facilitated by the holding of a monthly meeting. Special duties teachers do not meet as a full group. The benefits of organising such meetings might be considered. Consideration is being given to creating opportunities for members of staff to chair sub-groups at staff meetings or to chair elements of staff meetings. This is encouraged so as to further support the development of leadership skills.

The school has devised an admissions policy which it reviews annually and amends as necessary. Section nine of the existing policy deals with special educational needs. The decision to offer a place to, and accept some students, is expressed with some conditionality. It is advised that this element of the policy be re-examined and re-worded to fully reflect the principles of relevant legislation and the inclusive values as espoused by, and as practised, in the school.

The very complete policy document also includes an appendix with policies on admission to TY, LCA and repeat Leaving Certificate. It is suggested that the policies relating to TY and LCA should also include the criteria for admission to these programmes.

Positive student behaviour is strongly promoted in this school. It is supported by the example of practice, well-thought out, complementary and cohesive structures and systems and the nature and operation of the school's code of behaviour. The recent review of the school's code of behaviour is further evidence of the school's dynamic approach to provision. The code was reviewed collaboratively, involving students, parents and staff, and it is universally acknowledged that the revised code now clearly emphasises positive behaviour. In its operation, the code recognises and rewards such behaviour through measures such as merit stamps and 'hidden hero' letters. The code is clearly documented and communicated. Students report satisfaction with it and see it as fair and consistent. The behaviour support committee also plays a vital role in the operation of the code.

Positive student behaviour is supported also through the class organisation structure and related systems. Subject teachers, class tutors, assistant year heads and year heads play a vital role in the caring and successful operation of this structure. In the spirit of ongoing improvement inherent in this school, a system of sub-class groups has also been introduced in the current first year. Such a system promotes inclusion and communication as does the system of peer mentoring. Concern, vigilance and collaboration within staff and with external agencies mean also that students at risk are identified and supported. The school places an importance on the role of prevention as well as on that of intervention; this is a strength of practice in the school. There is an excellent pastoral care structure in Mercy Mounthawk. It is especially good that the school has investigated, and is gradually introducing, the practice of restorative justice. The introduction of a positive psychology course in fifth year also serves to promote positive behaviour as does the preparation of individual behaviour plans as required.

Mercy Mounthawk values the role of the students' council and has had one since the establishment of the school. The council is representative and, consistent with practice at whole-school level, it has instituted very good structures, systems and processes. It devises an annual plan for its work. The executive holds weekly meetings which are attended by the students' council liaison teacher. Meetings are also attended by a member of the school's senior management as time allows. The students' council is consulted in relation to

developments and in the context of policy-making. It undertakes valuable work and is actively involved in key initiatives in the school such as those in the area of health promotion and the first year fairs' night. This again reflects a particular strength of the school, whereby initiatives are integrated and undertaken collaboratively so as to maximise their impact and effectiveness. Conscious of the importance of training and continuity, wisely the council has also introduced a system of having a head boy and head girl elect. The council plans to make greater use of the school's website to publicise its activities; this is encouraged.

Attendance and retention are taken seriously. The school has developed and published its attendance strategy. There are good systems and structures in place and there is good communication with parents and other relevant bodies in relation to student non-attendance. The proposal to introduce the use of texting and e-portal will enhance the existing systems. It is to the credit of the school that it has endeavoured to be creative in order to maintain systems of monitoring despite changes in staffing arrangements. The school endeavours to retain students at risk through junior cycle so as to support their completion of senior cycle. It may be of interest to the school, in the context of self-evaluation, to reference and cross-reference data in these areas with other relevant school related data in order to enhance understanding and support improvement.

Mercy Mounthawk values its parent community and is very cognisant of the contributions parents make to the life and work of the school. The school has had a parents' council since its foundation. The council is affiliated to the National Parents' Council Post-Primary (NPCpp) and plays an active role in the school. It is professional in its work and has devised its own plan. It meets monthly and these meetings are attended by a member of senior management. The school consults with the council and it is involved in policy-making and review and in liaising and communication with the students' council. The council played a lead role in the recent anniversary celebrations in the school.

A number of facets of parent involvement in, and with, the school are striking. A most selfless group of parents has volunteered to provide additional individualised support to students who need it. Support has been provided in the areas of numeracy and literacy. This has been most welcomed in view of the fact that the school no longer has a home-school-community-liaison teacher. Parent volunteers also operate a second chance uniform and book scheme. The school works to provide support to parents through courses such as that provided in positive psychology. It supports the student-parent relationship by involving both parent and student in nights such as the aforementioned first year fairs' night. The parents' council welcomes the annual report it receives from the board of management. It publishes a newsletter for parents and encourages direct communication from the parent body generally through the use of a dedicated email address. As in the case of the students' council, it too intends to make greater use of the school's website in the future.

Formal communication with parents is very thorough in the school. Parent-teacher meetings are held regularly and an open-door policy facilitates informal communication also. The school sees the matter of communication with an increasingly diverse parental group as an area for development. Some consideration might be given to the merits of inviting students to accompany their parent(s) or guardian to parent-teacher meetings.

School management and staff have worked to build links with the community and to reinforce previously existing links. The community knowledge of the sisters and staff has supported this. Links with the parish, business and primary school communities are strong. Such links anchor the school in a faith community, provide invaluable support for work experience and initiatives such as Young Social Innovators (YSI) and enable successful transfer and induction of first year students to the school.

Mercy Mounthawk has been especially proactive in forging links with external agencies. The extent to which these links support and enhance provision is evident. School management and staff are open and skilled in building collaborative relationships with agencies such as the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) and Jigsaw Kerry. The quality of collaborations such as these is due in no small part to the generosity and commitment of the individuals involved in the various agencies.

Ongoing reflection, and clear commitment to development and improvement, mean that self-evaluation is valued in this school and that decisions are thought-through and considered. Self-evaluation is part of practice at board of management and senior management level and is supported and promoted by them also. Self-evaluation is inherent to the work of development planning in the school. It is very positive to see the gathering and use of evidence-based data in the context of the monitoring and review of policies relating to student well-being for example. The school's involvement in initiatives such as the Learning School Project has also allowed some opportunity for up-skilling in relation to the use of baseline data. Student progress is monitored and outcomes for students carefully analysed.

1.4 Management of resources

Resources are well managed in this school. Successful management of resources again illustrates the level of constant oversight and forethought which characterises the work of the school.

The weekly tuition timetable is in line with department requirements. Daily assemblies are held. These assemblies also allow an opportunity for a focus on student formation. Maximising the use of assembly time for this purpose is advised.

The staff of Mercy Mounthawk is very large. Teachers are deployed in line with school needs and based on qualifications. Contextual factors such as the size of the school and its ongoing development impact on staffing and deployment of staff in a number of ways. There has been considerable turnover in staff which has required the attention and time of the board and senior management. The changing nature of the gender balance in the student cohort has implications for staffing needs also. Subject departments can be very large thus posing challenges in terms of cohesion and the development and maintenance of expertise among a core group of staff in particular areas. The flexibility of staff in facilitating the amalgamation and in responding to the evolving needs of the school is acknowledged as is the work of senior management in managing provision in the context of changes to allocations. The board is vigilant in terms of current and future staffing needs. It has expressed concern at the lack of a school chaplain and home-school-community-liaison teacher. Commendably, it supports the work of subject departments by the allocation of annual budgets.

The school has a very dedicated support staff whose work is widely recognised as vital to the operation of the school. Support staff contributes significantly to the quality of student life and relationships as experienced in the school.

The new school building offers excellent accommodation. Accommodation needs are evolving in the light of student numbers, the reality of practice and the lived experience in the school. Plant and resources are a key aspect of the focus of planning in the school. The completion of an extension to replace a number of prefabricated buildings is a priority for the board. The school has worked within its limits to improve accommodation with the recent addition of a parents' room, offices and a fitness suite, and the designation of some

subject base-classrooms. Other changes desired stem clearly from a concern for the welfare and well-being of students in the school.

There has been progress with regard to information and communications technology (ICT) in relation to both infra-structure and provision and this is ongoing. Most classrooms are equipped with data projectors and each teacher has been supplied with a laptop computer thus supporting the integration of ICT. This has been further supported by the in-house teacher up-skilling and peer-mentoring enabled by the school's involvement in the Learning School Project Two. Teachers were loud in their praise of colleagues in this regard. As part of the school's ICT policy and e-learning plan, it is now proposed to increase individual student access to ICT and to make greater use of Moodle also.

Health and safety are serious considerations for the school. It has recently reviewed and revised its health and safety policy to comply with current requirements. The policy has been ratified. Risk assessments are undertaken and an audit of health and safety in the school was undertaken by an external consultant. Health and safety is monitored in the school; the board is currently prioritising this issue in relation to the size of the woodwork room in the school. Fire drills are organised and the school has a trained student first-aid team in place.

The school is aware of its responsibilities both in relation to the quality of its own environment and in relation to environmental education. The school is well-kept and the environment cared for. The student council is involved in the Green-Schools initiative and in Eco-Unesco. It also plans to explore how to improve waste management in the school by researching how this is done in another school in the county.

2. QUALITY OF SCHOOL PLANNING

2.1 The school plan

School development planning is integral to the culture of this school and to its successful operation and development. There is a very good planning structure in place. It is representative and works collaboratively. The planning group, the teachers' council, approaches its work most professionally; operates on the basis of a constitution, holds regular weekly meetings, minutes its meetings, agrees an action plan and reports on its work. Planning sub-groups are formed as required.

The permanent section of the school plan contains policies already developed and ratified. The pastoral care and anti-bullying policies are currently under review. Work on a policy for literacy and numeracy began in advance of a specific requirement for such a policy. It is intended to review the school's policy on study and to devise a policy on learning; this will offer valuable opportunities for reflection, will support the school's emphasis on the building of a learning community and should allow for the greater impact of generic aims at student level. It is also planned to develop a policy on faith development.

The permanent section of the plan is complemented by a development section which contains a three-year action plan. This action plan focuses on the achievement of tangible improvements in practice in relation to priorities for the school as they have been identified and agreed. Priorities are identified under five headings: plant and resources; guidance and pastoral care; community; curriculum, teaching and learning and ethos. It is very positive that the plan is very clearly communicated to all and that reporting is equally transparent and professional. The three-year plans ensure also a connection between current and future work in the school.

Annual departmental action plans are also required. Subject departments are guided in their preparation by a generic plan covering key areas. In the current year these areas are ICT; assessment for learning and differentiation. There is scope to further integrate and reflect such generic aims into planning and practice within subject departments.

It is very evident that policy development provides a framework and direction for the work of the school and that the action plan facilitates delivery on actions in specific areas. Planning has impacted positively on the quality of experience and provision in the school.

Confirmation was provided that the board of management has formally adopted the *Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-primary Schools* (September 2011) without modification. The school is compliant with the requirements of Post-primary Circulars M44/05 and 0062/2006. School authorities provided evidence that arrangements are being put in place to ensure compliance with the requirements of the recently published Circular 0065/2011 and *Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools* as a matter of priority.

3. QUALITY OF CURRICULUM PROVISION

3.1 Curriculum planning and organisation

Mercy Mounthawk offers a very broad range of subjects and a wide range of programmes in line with its documented philosophy of provision. It is evident that all concerned are actively conscious of curriculum provision in the school and are responsive to current and anticipated student needs.

It is school policy to offer an open menu of subjects to maximise student access to subjects of their choice. In junior cycle, concurrent timetabling of English, Irish and Maths from second year onwards enables the creation of higher, ordinary and foundation level groups. In optional subjects students are facilitated to take either higher or ordinary level as they wish.

There are two systems of class organisation at junior cycle. In first year, students are organised into class groups on the basis of choice of first modern language. In second year, students are organised into two bands on the basis of Christmas and summer assessments in first year and on the basis of teacher recommendation. There are four predominantly higher level class groups in one of the bands and five groups in the other. The creation of five class groups allows for smaller numbers in these classes. Students study History, Geography, Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE), Civic Social and Political Education (CSPE), Religion (RE) and Physical Education (PE) in their base class groups. Whilst appreciating the complexities involved in class organisation, the possible impact of this banding structure on student expectation, teacher expectations and student performance was of some concern to inspectors and was discussed with school management and members of the guidance team. It is recommended that the issue of possible impact be examined and that the matter be kept under review.

General curriculum planning is an integral part of ongoing school development planning and oversight of timetabling needs is also maintained and changes made as necessary. In recent times adjustments have been made to the options bands in first year and to the timetable to accommodate provision of a double period in PE. The number of TY class groups has been capped at four as have numbers taking first year Spanish so as to ensure ongoing promotion of all modern languages. The school worked most creatively, in partnership with St Joseph's, Ballybunion, to provide Agricultural Science at senior cycle.

The changing profile of the student cohort and changes in staffing are informing current management timetable planning.

The three senior cycle programmes offered in the school also demonstrate a quality of system and structure seen at whole-school level. Programmes are operated by core teams which meet weekly. All three programmes are monitored and kept under review and continue to evolve. Computer programming has been introduced to TY; subject booklets have been put together for Maths and Physics and will be prepared in other subject areas. A system of portfolio assessment operates in TY and improvements have been made with the advent of clearer assessment statements for portfolio work and an improved system of the tracking of the involvement of students in various activities has also been introduced. The choice of a cross-curricular theme for the year brings cohesion to the programme. The programme document has been thoroughly prepared. It was suggested that subject content should be clearly specified in all areas and that the benefits of introducing a generic module on the development of project skills be considered.

The LCA programme supports retention in school and transfer to Post-Leaving Certificate courses. The school has responded to recommendations made in a previous inspection of the programme. Student access to ICT has been enhanced in the LCVP programme. Whilst numbers are relatively small in this programme currently, it is intended to work on increasing them by encouraging students of Business at senior cycle to undertake the programme.

3.2 Arrangements for students' choice of subjects and programmes

Every effort is made to facilitate student choice in relation to the selection of programmes and subjects and to ensure that students and parents have adequate information to support the making of informed choices.

First year students take a core curriculum which includes English, Irish, Maths, History, Geography, PE, SPHE, RE, CSPE, a modern language and science. Currently they choose four optional subjects from four option blocks. Science is not currently part of the core curriculum from second year onwards and it was advised that this be re-considered.

Information and support to incoming first year students and their parents is thorough and clear. An information booklet is supplied to parents ahead of the admissions' day and is supported by presentations made by the guidance team on the admissions' day itself. The implications of subject choices are made clear to parents and students. A similar process pertains in relation to the selection of subjects for second year. In term two of third year, students are given an information booklet regarding choices for senior cycle. An information evening is then held also. Such information evenings are supplemented by class visits by the guidance teachers.

The guidance department plays a key role in both the provision of information to students and their parents and in supporting decision-making. The programme coordinator and the coordinators of individual senior cycle programmes also play a very important role in relation to the programmes for which they are responsible. There are clear processes and procedures in relation to application and entry to the various programmes. Entry is on the basis of set criteria and involves an interview if required. TY students are required to pay a course fee. It is suggested that linking of the payment of the fee to the securing of a place in TY be reviewed.

3.3 Co-curricular and extra-curricular provision

Co-curricular provision is enabled in a variety of ways: as part, or an enhancement of, classroom provision, through subject-focused themed weeks such as that organised in History, through initiatives such as the health promotion week which by its nature supports curriculum provision generally and cross-curricularly, and through the extra-curricular activities such as debating and the science, art and Irish clubs.

Extra-curricular provision is a real strength of this school. The breadth and variety of the programme is widely acknowledged as is the role and impact this area has played in the development of this new school. The selflessness and commitment of all involved is exemplary.

The programme offered includes activities of a cultural, aesthetic, sporting, community and social nature. The school puts on a play or musical each year. It is very positive that additions to the programme have occurred following a survey of staff, and students' identification of needs in particular areas. Features of note in relation to the area of extra-curricular activities include the policy framework in place and the high rate of student participation and involvement at an organisational level. The flexibility and awareness of school personnel to ongoing and emerging student needs whereby the co-curricular and extra-curricular programme can be expanded to support student inclusion, socialisation and well-being are further features of note. The creation of a social club, a garden project, a soccer league and a lunchtime art club are examples of the latter.

4. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN SUBJECTS

4.1 Planning and preparation

A high quality of planning and preparation for teaching and learning was observed in the subjects evaluated. Subject departments have been established and meet at regular intervals. Inspectors noted, in various subject areas, admirable skill in planning and communicating with colleagues and the manner in which teachers supported each other on an individual basis. In one instance, it was recommended that, while recognising the very good work undertaken by the subject co-ordinator, the role should be rotated within the department in order to ensure the development of a wide leadership skills-base. In another subject, the good work undertaken by the core planning team was acknowledged. In the context of the relatively large number of teachers involved in the subject department, however, it was recommended that consideration should be given to the organisation of meetings for groups of year-group teachers which could then be led by members of the core team.

Diligent work undertaken in subject departments in the creation of substantial subject plans or policies was noted in all cases. In one instance, the admirable skill displayed in departmental planning was noted, while in other subjects the comprehensive nature of the subject plan was highlighted. Of particular note was the move, in a number of instances, towards engagement with an action-planning cycle as part of the subject-planning process. This is good practice. In a number of subjects, common programmes of work had been or had begun to be developed. This is worthwhile, and it is recommended that common programmes of work developed should be adhered to across all subject departments. Such an approach will provide opportunities for discussion of teaching and learning while also supporting a clear view of students' achievement across each year cohort. The organisation of common examinations has also been undertaken in some cases and it is recommended that this good practice should be adopted by subject departments wherever practicable. This will support the implementation of common plans, while also avoiding the needless

duplication of work within subject departments. The school has an up-to-date safety statement and, where relevant, this was reflected in subject planning documents.

Individual teacher planning was noted as good or very good in all subject areas. Inspectors variously noted the good organisation and pacing of lessons, the careful preparation of resources and materials, and the manner in which good preparation by teachers enhanced students' classroom experiences.

4.2 Learning and teaching

The quality of teaching and learning was generally very good with some lessons of an exceptional standard observed. Lessons were well organised, with a wide variety of carefully chosen resources being used to support teaching and learning. In many instances, the intended learning outcomes were shared with the students at lesson outset. Best practice was where these were further incorporated into lesson delivery, including reviewing them at the recapitulation stage of the lesson. It is recommended that this practice be adopted in all lessons.

Teachers sought to establish continuity for students and enhance learning by referencing topics previously explored. There was some evidence too of the linking of topics with students' everyday experiences thus making subject matter more interesting and relevant.

A range of methodologies was utilised. These were generally student-centred, requiring the active participation of students in their own learning. Some lessons offered opportunities for co-operative learning. Teachers are encouraged to explore further the place of co-operative learning, both formal and informal.

Some teachers differentiated for students' abilities by, for example, setting different tasks or responding in appropriately different ways to students' efforts. A further focusing on strategies to engage students in mixed-ability classroom settings at subject department planning meetings would support even greater sharing of the good practice observed in these instances.

The effective use of ICT was observed, with some teachers demonstrating high levels of competence in its use. The use of this technology by teachers in order to provide appropriate visual images was particularly noted. All teachers are encouraged to continue to engage with this powerful teaching resource. The school's plan to increase student use of ICT is also encouraged.

Good quality questioning and classroom discussion were observed. The inclusion of higher-order questions was also noted and praised. Teachers supported students in the further development of their answers. Students appeared comfortable in asking questions of their teachers, reflecting the safe and respectful atmosphere of the lessons, but there was little evidence of students being given an opportunity to ask questions of one another. In one instance, it was suggested that chorus-answering be discouraged.

Attention to students' literacy was evident in many lessons. Observed good practice included the development and use of subject-specific key word sheets, an emphasis on spelling and the development of students' note-making skills. Further emphasis on students' literacy in all subjects is encouraged, as is a greater emphasis on developing opportunities to enhance students' numerical skills.

In most lessons evaluated, it was considered that teachers had high but realistic expectations of their students, which contributed to the creation of an atmosphere that

challenged and motivated the students. General classroom atmosphere was positive, founded on good quality teacher-student relations. Overall, students participated very well in lessons. Students responded to teacher direction, with some teachers demonstrating high levels of proficiency in the management of the more challenging student. The diversity of students, both in terms of ability and enthusiasm for learning, was evident in lessons. However, it was clear that classroom activities focused on the inclusive learning and care for all students. In some lessons, student learning was advanced by encouraging students to engage in reflective practice and to self-evaluate their own learning. This approach is further encouraged.

Homework that was provided was systematically recorded in students' journals. It was recommended that teachers might provide specific product goals when written work is assigned, so that students might be directed towards the learning goals connected to each exercise. This will, in turn, support peer-assessment and self-assessment as well as teachers' assessment of students' work. There was frequent evidence, in students' copybooks, of the use of comment-based assessment by teachers. This is further encouraged.

It is recommended that the school consider how existing structures and systems might be used to support the realisation of some of these suggestions. Discussion and the sharing of good practice at departmental level, the use of subject-specific action plans, and the possible inclusion of reference to key aspects of teaching and learning in the staff handbook might be considered. The school's teaching council could lead this work through the intended development of a whole-school policy on learning which would also allow for the sharing of good practice.

4.3 Assessment

Student progress is monitored through regular tests. Records are maintained and progress reported to parents. Parent teacher meetings are held for all year groups. Consideration could valuably be given to the idea of inviting the student to attend these meetings with his/her parent(s) or guardian(s).

It was recommended that common assessments be used at key times during the year, in order to ensure standardisation of learning among class groups in each year. Student performance in the certificate examinations is analysed. Outcomes for students in certificate examinations are very good. Uptake of higher level and the level of attainment at this level are equally good. A significant number of students also achieve high grades at ordinary level in the Junior Certificate. Teachers and school management should monitor uptake and levels of attainment at ordinary level with a view to further challenging students to attempt the higher level examination.

5. QUALITY OF SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS

5.1 Inclusion of students with additional educational needs

Senior managers have a clear understanding of their role and their leadership supports the inclusive practices and self-review undertaken in the school. The overall quality of teaching and learning observed in this area was very good, with excellent practice frequently witnessed. All students have access to a broad and balanced curriculum. There are very good structures in place that are responsive and flexible in meeting students' needs and maximising students' strengths. The school engages in many activities that promote inclusive learning and recognises the interdependence between the promotion of inclusive learning and overall school improvement. Policies and practices are student-centred with

good lines of communication evident among staff. Continuing professional development is a central feature of the school's improvement agenda and some teachers in the department have shown considerable leadership in this regard. The hard working, reflective and effective team of teachers qualified in special education is central to the school's success in providing meaningful and personalised learning. Their leadership, as seen through their engagement with one another, with other teaching colleagues and with special needs assistants, is a significant strength of the school and can be a key driver in further school improvement.

The key role of the mainstream teacher requires that ongoing attention is given to issues relating to assessment, learning and teaching, and to building capacity among all teachers through formal and informal learning opportunities. While additional resources are used for the purposes intended, there are currently too many teachers involved in delivery of these resources. Renewed attention to timetabling issues and the place of team-teaching in the provision for special educational needs is recommended. It is also recommended that the existing good practices associated with assessment of students' ability and progress be further developed through a range of qualitative and quantitative activities. An accompanying report, specific to an evaluation of the quality of teaching and learning in the provision for special educational needs (SEN) is appended to this report.

There are a number of students who are studying English as an additional language (EAL). Good work has been undertaken in creating structures to support these students. Information regarding the needs of EAL students has been distributed to staff along with teaching methodologies which will support their language acquisition and learning in mainstream classrooms. Individual profiles of EAL students have been developed. Training has been accessed and the school maintains links with the English Language Support Teachers' Association (ELSTA). Significant teaching resources have also been collated by the EAL department. The *English as an Additional Language Post-Primary Assessment Kit* is used to assess the English language proficiency of EAL students, along with their progress in this area. This is good practice.

There is some crossover of personnel involved in the support of EAL students and students with special educational needs. This promotes good communication between these areas of the school. It is important that the potentially differing affective, cognitive and language needs of EAL students and students with special educational needs be kept in mind in both mainstream and support settings. During the evaluation the EAL department acknowledged this point and suggested that it was aware of this as a significant element in the practice of the school.

In the context of the very good work currently being undertaken, it is suggested that some consolidation of good practice in the areas of intercultural education and EAL could be undertaken. An intercultural and EAL element in an overall inclusive learning policy for the school could achieve this aim. The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) publication *Intercultural Education in the Post-Primary School* could prove useful in such an endeavour. It is acknowledged that the school received a Yellow Flag for Intercultural Endeavour in the school year 2009- 2010.

Students from a disadvantaged or minority background are supported in a number of ways. The students are supported personally through the well-developed pastoral care programme. They are also supported materially and practically through endeavours such as the St Brendan's Trust, the Second Chance Book and Uniform schemes and the provision of breakfast. The parent volunteer group provides personal and academic support to students who may need it. A member of the SEN department takes a specific interest in the curricular needs of Traveller students in the school. The school is proud of the achievements of its Traveller students who have or are completing their second level

education. The school's involvement in third level access programmes locally and regionally supports retention and transfer to third level.

Communication processes and systems support provision to these students. In the first instance, communication is facilitated by the collaborative approach of teams involved and by the practice of the involvement of a member of senior management in many of these teams. The SEN department operates the good practice of making student-related information folders available to teachers at the start of the year. Senior management operates an open-door policy which also facilitates communication with staff and parents. Mainstream teachers use the year head system to communicate concerns for students. There is ongoing informal communication between classroom teachers and between classroom teachers and year heads. The school also uses a staffroom envelope-system to allow for the discrete communication of student-related concerns. Established and ongoing communication with feeder primary schools is facilitated through the work of a retired sister with home school community liaison experience. This allows for early identification of need and transfer of relevant information. Meetings with parents of individual students are organised when needed. Communication with parents of newcomer students is being improved. Material relating to the admission of students is currently being translated into Polish.

The school has fostered, enjoys and promotes very effective links with relevant outside agencies and bodies. Among the agencies concerned are NEPS, the Special Education Support Service (SESS), and Kerry Youth Diocesan Service (KYDS). It is of note that the links made with such agencies become active collaborative partnerships with school personnel in the interests of support for students. All concerned recognise and value their contributions.

5.2 Guidance and student support in the whole-school context

The quality of student support in the whole-school context is very evident. This is enabled by the excellent pastoral care structures in place in the school and the related work of the pastoral care, guidance and SPHE teams. The work of these groups embodies the mission of the school and reflects the principles of Tuscint, Treoir and Trócaire in practice. As with other areas of school practice, the quality of pastoral care for students is enabled by the existence of good systems and structures. The school has a pastoral care policy and other related policies not previously mentioned such as a policy on substance use and misuse, on a pastoral response to student death through accident or illness, to student death through suicide and on a pastoral response to the death of a member of staff. The pastoral care system works through the class tutor and year head system and through the work of a well-qualified, active, representative, collaborative and highly organised pastoral care team to whom the continuum of care is important. Of note here also is the structured involvement of the NEPS psychologist and the extent to which the pastoral care team endeavours to anticipate student needs in order to enhance the quality of care provided to students. Over time, a number of initiatives, which have enhanced pastoral support for students, have been undertaken in the school.

Currently the school has a 2.14 ex-quota allocation for Guidance. In addition, the Department has sanctioned six hours for professional counselling in this school year. The allocation and the additional hours are used effectively by the qualified and committed professionals involved. It is clear that those involved share the sense of moral purpose common to teachers in the school generally.

The school has devised and ratified a whole-school guidance policy. The guidance department is very organised and structured and has also devised a curriculum plan for

Guidance. The plan is very thorough and well presented. Possible developments to build on this good practice might include the formation of whole-school policies regarding confidentiality, visitors to the school and referrals. The draft curricular framework published by the NCCA should be consulted in relation to curriculum planning.

There are good facilities available for Guidance. The guidance department plans to enhance its current facilities by the establishment of a fully operational guidance library and the facilitation of greater student access to ICT at relevant points in the year.

Provision involves an appropriate balance between personal, educational and vocational guidance. Provision is made for all year groups, for students in the various senior cycle programmes and for work with individual students. The guidance department provides inputs for parents and students at the key transitions between primary and post-primary education, between the junior cycle and senior cycle and from post-primary education. The guidance department assesses and tests students and is proactive in the monitoring and tracking of student progress, performance and destination. Recent developments in provision include the introduction of a learning styles seminar for fifth years and the introduction of a module on survival away from home for TY students.

The extent to which the guidance department works collaboratively and in co-operation with other teams in the school was very clear. Meetings of the guidance department are also attended by senior management. Integration and communication are hallmarks of provision and vigilance with regard to students' needs means that referrals are facilitated and organised professionally when necessary. The guidance department has also established links with the business community, third level institutions, voluntary groups and professional bodies and agencies.

As with other departments in the school, the guidance department has identified priorities for development also. In addition to those already mentioned, these include the introduction of the Reach careers programme in TY, of a careers week and the re-scheduling of junior and senior cycle options talks. In view of the practice of having themed weeks in the school, it might be valuable to consider a week with 'work' as its theme. A review of guidance provision and delivery is planned as part of overall programme planning in the school.

6. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Mercy Mounthawk has established itself as a new school fully respectful of tradition and most open to ongoing transformation.
- There is keen awareness of the centrality of the characteristic spirit to the fabric of the school; this is reflected in the quality and cohesiveness of provision, in the level of commitment displayed and in the shared sense of moral purpose noted.
- Excellent structures, systems, processes and procedures have been put in place to facilitate the operation of this complex organisation.
- School leaders, staff, parents, students and members of the extended school community display selflessness in their work.
- The board of management is very clear on its role and operates most effectively to support the school.
- The senior management team leads by example and is exceptionally committed, organised, open and forward-thinking.
- The breadth of curricular and extracurricular provision in the school supports the development of student potential.
- The quality of teaching and learning in the lessons evaluated was generally very good with some exceptional practice observed.

- Concern for student well-being is reflected in the quality of support provided to students in the school.

As a means of building on these strengths and to address areas for development, the following key recommendations are made:

- The banding arrangement which pertains in second and third year should be examined for any possible impact and should be kept under review.
- Annual school priorities for departmental planning should be more specifically reflected in individual subject plans.
- Common collaborative departmental planning should be strengthened by the use of common assessments within bands at junior cycle.
- Sharing of good practice should be prioritised as a means of supporting the ongoing improvement of practice internally.

Post-evaluation meetings were held with the staff and board of management when the draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation were presented and discussed.

7. RELATED SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORTS

The following related Subject Inspection reports are available:

- Subject Inspection of English – 9 December 2011
- Subject Inspection of Geography – 8 December 2011
- Subject Inspection of Science – 6 December 2011
- Subject Inspection of Social, Personal and Health Education – 6 May 2011
- Special Educational Needs – 6 December 2011

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 Mercy Secondary School, Mounthawk was pleased to receive this report on the WSE of the school. We are particularly happy that the inspectors acknowledged that the core values of the school's Mission Statement are a lived reality though:

- the very broad range of subjects and a wide range of programmes
- the very good quality of teaching and learning
- the very extensive extracurricular programme and the selflessness and commitment of all involved
- the importance given to personal well-being
- the concern for standards
- the excellent pastoral care structure
- the striking level of parental involvement
- very thorough formal communications
- excellent structures, systems, processes and procedures

This profile is, as we understand it, an expression of the Catholic ethos which shapes education in the school. As a Catholic school we have worked to establish a 'community' which has been recognised by the inspectors in the committed engagement of staff, retired staff, students, parents and many local organisations in the life of the school. Such a community with shared values such as 'tuisint', 'treoir' and 'trócaire' is the ground out of which a Catholic school grows.

The Board agrees with the recommendation that the development of the potential of students could be a guiding principle in school planning as central to our school's ethos is the belief that, in supporting the development of their God given potential, we lead students on the path to wholeness, happiness and fulfilment.

In this regard the Board is pleased that the inspectors acknowledged that 'self evaluation is inherent to the work of development planning in the school'. The board is committed to growing this good practice in its efforts to implement the recommendations outlined below and in realising the completion of an extension as a priority.

The Board wishes to thank the inspectors involved in the evaluation for their professionalism and especially for their dedication to acquiring an insightful perspective on the quality of the educational provision in the school. Overall the school community found the experience to be very supportive, affirming and beneficial in pointing out further avenues for development.

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. School management will continue to monitor success rates at Junior Cycle and the banding arrangements will be evaluated as part of the review of the Junior Cycle programme within NCCA guidelines.
2. The current round of subject department planning for September 2012 has taken on board the recommendations made in reflection more evidently the central themes of the school plan namely (1) a focus on literacy and numeracy strategies across subject teaching, (2) an emphasis on Leading for Learning in the classroom and (3) the continued integration of ICT into classroom teaching.

3. Common assessments are being advocated within bands in subjects, both at Junior and senior cycle, where possible and in addition to their current use in 1st year.
4. As part of expansion of the sharing of good practice within and across subject departments, we will utilise our involvement in DES supported initiatives such as LSP 3 (phase 2/2012), the literacy and numeracy initiative with the PDST and our involvement in the JC pilot programme with the NCCA to structure and support such sharing in the coming academic year.
5. The school will explore the development of team teaching in its structuring of SEN provision and timetabling. Arrangements have been made to engage with the inspectorate for staff in-service in September 2012 on this initiative.
6. The Board is happy to engage with Students' Council and Programme Co-ordinators in the provision of an annual report to the Board. School management will provide for meetings with special duties teachers.