

An Roinn Oideachais agus Eolaíochta

Department of Education and Science

Whole-School Evaluation

REPORT

Drumshanbo Vocational School

Drumshanbo, County Leitrim

Roll number: 71570S

Date of inspection: 27 September 2007

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WHOLE-SCHOOL EVALUATION

A whole-school evaluation of Drumshanbo Vocational School was undertaken in September 2007. This report presents the findings of the evaluation and makes recommendations for improvement. During the evaluation, the quality of teaching and learning in four subjects was evaluated in detail, and separate reports are available on these subjects. (See section 7 for details). The board of management was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the report, and the response of the board will be found in the appendix of this report.

INTRODUCTION

Drumshanbo Vocational School is a co-educational school under the patronage of Co. Leitrim Vocational Education Committee (VEC). The original school building was constructed in 1964 with a further building added in 1986. The main school campus also includes two prefabricated classrooms. The school uses a hall beside the school grounds and a number of off-campus sites for the delivery of Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) courses and for extra-curricular activities.

The school, which is the only post-primary school in Drumshanbo, serves the educational needs of the local community through the provision of second-level education, PLC courses and short evening courses for adults. The Drumshanbo region experienced significant economic difficulties with the closure of the Arigna coalmine in 1990 and since then has sought to develop food-based and electronic industries. The school is conscious of its role in supporting such initiatives through its educational programmes. The school applied for and approval has been granted to construct three new classrooms and a smaller room under the Permanent Accommodation Scheme (PAS) of the Department of Education and Science (DES).

The school draws its students mainly from nine feeder primary schools. Enrolment in the mainstream school has increased slightly in the last year and is currently 230 students. In addition to this, fifty students are enrolled in the PLC courses and forty-one students are enrolled in adult and continuing education classes under the Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS). Enrolment was underway for evening classes during the evaluation visit.

1. QUALITY OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT

1.1 Characteristic spirit of the school

The school's characteristic spirit is very much informed by its mission statement and the aims of the school, which seek to provide for the intellectual/curricular, physical, social and personal education of the student. The school aims to establish, develop and nurture attitudes, values and behaviour which will enable the whole-school community to reach its full potential. All students are encouraged to find their own strengths in order to become self-confident and responsible citizens. All of this is to be achieved within a firmly-established programme of pastoral care that seeks to enhance the spiritual aspect of students' lives. The mission statement and the aims of school are displayed in the school foyer, in the students' journal and as a preface to policy documents. This good practice of publicising the mission statement is commended. It was reported that the mission statement was arrived at following an extensive process of consultation and was ratified by the board of management.

During the evaluation, various members of the school community referred to the benefits accruing to a school of this size, with relatively small enrolment numbers, where students are known by their teachers at a personal level and where a relaxed yet focused atmosphere prevails. There was a sense of pride in achievements both in the academic and non-academic areas. The school was described as a friendly place where everyone knows everyone else and where students feel valued and this brings out the best in them. During meetings with the board, members of staff, representatives of the parents' association and the student council, appreciation was expressed for the supportive and open atmosphere in the school.

The pastoral structures established within the school and the procedures and practices in place to support students with special educational needs provide evidence of the implementation of the mission statement. In addition, the code of behaviour and the anti-bullying policy provide further support for students. The involvement of students in the development of these policies further ensures the promotion of the school's ethos. The willingness of students to return to the school to undertake PLC courses was cited as evidence of their satisfaction with the school in its many facets.

1.2 School ownership and management

The board of management is properly constituted under the *Instruments and Articles of Management for Vocational Schools*. The current board was established in the autumn of 2005 and it was reported that the board usually meets once per term and more often as needed. Board members are provided with an agenda prior to meetings, and they consider that issues are discussed in an open and frank manner and decisions are arrived at by consensus. The good practice of issuing an agreed written report following each board meeting should be instituted as a means of ensuring all sections of the school community are kept informed of school developments.

The board expressed its confidence in the school principal, acknowledged his role in guiding the school and were satisfied with the reports on school matters presented to the board. To date the

board has been involved in the development of several policies and has ratified a number of these policies including: the code of behaviour, anti-bullying policy, internet safety/acceptable use policy. Other policies are currently in draft form, for example the plan to deal with a critical incident. The board is aware of the need to keep policies under review and this is commended. With the support of Co. Leitrim VEC the board and the school's senior management team, facilitate and encourage staff to participate in appropriate continuing professional development (CPD) courses. The board also expressed satisfaction that the range of programmes and subjects on offer caters for the needs of all students. Board members are aware of and greatly appreciate the range of extra-curricular and co-curricular activities provided by members of staff and the local community. A number of members of the board have served on previous boards and use their experience in supporting the work of the current board. It was reported that the members of the board have not received any formal training. It is recommended that training be provided by Co. Leitrim VEC for members of the board. This will help them to define and understand their respective roles and will enable them more effectively to fulfil their responsibilities.

A key area for development identified by the board was the delivery of the extra accommodation approved under the Permanent Accommodation Scheme and concern was expressed at the delay in the delivery of this accommodation. It is recommended, as a priority, that the board of management and Co. Leitrim VEC take measures to ensure that the extra accommodation agreed under the PAS be delivered within the specified time frame.

A parents' association was established in 2003 and new representatives are due to be elected by the parent body in the near future. The parents' association could be invited to contribute to the school newsletters as a means of effectively communicating with the whole-school community. It is commendable that the parents' association has been involved in the development of school policies, notably the code of behaviour, and collaborated in the introduction of healthy eating options to the school's tuck shop. The parents' association is not affiliated to a national parents' body. It is suggested that the parents' association affiliate to one of the national bodies representing parents at post-primary level. This could be used as a vehicle for the delivery of training for the officers of the association.

Members of the parents' association expressed their appreciation for the open and welcoming attitude of senior management and staff in Drumshanbo Vocational School and the pastoral concern for students. They also expressed their satisfaction with the range of programmes and subjects on offer in the school and the academic record to date. Representatives expressed concern at the delay in providing the extra accommodation approved under the PAS.

1.3 In-school management

The principal and deputy principal, as the senior management team, were both appointed to their posts in 2006. The principal, who was an external appointment, expressed his appreciation for the support and local knowledge provided by the deputy principal, who was an internal appointment, as he assumed his new office. The principal provides very effective leadership for the school community and has identified priorities for the further development of both the physical infrastructure of the school and the human resource needs. Other areas for development outlined include the ongoing review of curricular provision, especially in the PLC area, the continuation of school development planning and provision for students with additional educational needs. The principal and deputy principal work closely together, appreciate each other's mutual support and operate as an efficient

and effective team. They share a common commitment to the future development of the school and to the care of all students. During the evaluation visit their daily presence on corridors and in the staff room was obvious. They describe the school as a school of the local community and are aware of the need for the school to provide for the educational needs of that community. The senior management team meets informally every morning and evening to plan for and to review daily progress. The allocation of some formal meeting time would facilitate planning for the medium and long-term development of the school. Areas of responsibility for the two team members have evolved over the past year and in the light of experience, defined duties should be agreed for each role. Both hold post-graduate qualifications in educational management. All sections of the school community expressed their appreciation for the effective lines of communication established by the principal and deputy principal.

The senior management team is supported in its work by a middle management team of five assistant principals and six special duties teachers. A programme co-ordinator and a director for adult education have also been appointed. Members of the school's middle management team are involved in a range of duties that support school administration, curriculum development and pastoral care. During the evaluation process the teaching staff was engaged in a review of the schedule of posts of responsibility, keeping in mind the needs of the school and the talents and aspirations of the teachers. This good practice is very highly commended and it is suggested that in the current review of the schedule of posts of responsibility consideration might be given to creating posts in the following areas:

a co-ordinator for information and communication technology (ICT), co-ordinator of audio-visual resources and a teacher responsible for fire evacuation procedures. When duties have been agreed it is suggested that, where appropriate, holders of posts of responsibility should consider the production of 'a development plan' for their individual areas of responsibility.

Regular staff meetings are held, usually at the beginning of each term. The staff is given prior notice of meetings and is provided with an opportunity to have items placed on the agenda or discussed under any other business. The meetings are chaired by the principal and minutes for recent meetings were provided to the evaluation team. It was reported that special duties teachers also meet regularly and these meetings are informal in nature. The opportunity to contribute items to the agenda is further evidence of the open communications between management and staff. A positive and collaborative working relationship between members of staff was also observed as teachers discussed their work and shared resources during informal meetings and exchanges and this is commended.

A culture of engaging in continuous professional development has been encouraged by the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) and the senior management in the school. Teachers have obtained post-graduate qualifications in educational management, special needs education, ICT and are encouraged to attend all in-service courses provided by the Department. This good practice is highly commended as it improves the skills base and knowledge level of the teaching staff. Support is provided for new members of staff by the senior management team and by other members of staff. This is good practice. As a means of further supporting new teachers it is suggested that consideration be given to the production of a teachers' handbook, which could be updated on an annual basis. This should contain factual information about the school, school policies, and in the light of experiences gained in the current school year a clear statement of the roles of year head and class tutor.

The school communicates with the general parent body using a variety of appropriate methods: the school journal, school newsletters, an open day for prospective parents and students, letters providing

information on upcoming events, parent-teacher meetings, reports on student progress, the school website, telephone calls and personal contacts made by individual teachers. The school is commended for the production of a high-quality prospectus which is provided to parents. It was reported that year heads are assuming a more proactive role in initiating contact with home when concerns are expressed in relation to individual students and this is commended. Close links are maintained with the local community through the provision of PLCs and short evening classes, VTOS courses, the range of co-curricular and extra-curricular activities, the work-experience programme and sponsorship for school equipment or events. The school acknowledged this contribution of the local community and in particular, the support provided by Leitrim Partnership. Good communication is also maintained with the feeder primary schools which are visited on an annual basis by the principal and which provide information to assist the transfer of pupils to Drumshanbo Vocational School.

A year head system has been in operation for a number of years. Year heads manage behavioural issues as they arise and they keep teachers informed about the pastoral needs of individual students. This system is being further refined with the introduction of class tutors who work with the year heads. The year heads clearly see themselves as having a major role in the pastoral care of students and the introduction of class tutors is an important and highly commended development. Class tutors are generally holders of posts of responsibility but it deserves to be acknowledged and highly commended that in a number of cases teachers have volunteered to assume the role of class tutor. A letter to parents outlining the roles of year head and class tutor was provided to the evaluation team. The good practice of communicating such information to parents is very highly commended. Senior management's suggestion of providing regular opportunities for year heads or class tutors to meet with their class groups is a worthwhile development and is encouraged.

Students are provided with a journal which plays an important role in helping them to manage their learning. It was reported that this is used as a most effective means of communication between the school and home. Significantly this journal is referred to as a '*Journal for Learning*', thus reinforcing the school's mission statement and providing a clear indication of the central role of the school in supporting student learning. The code of behaviour encourages students to take personal responsibility for their behaviour so that a friendly environment can be maintained where all can work, study and relate in a positive way. At a meeting with members of the student council, the successful operation of the code of behaviour was acknowledged and students regard the school as a friendly place for both students and staff. Commendably the code of behaviour also sets out expectations for the school, parents and students so that members of the school community are aware of their respective rights and responsibilities. Where a student is frequently in breach of the school's code of behaviour consideration might be given to providing that student with a teacher who would provide a personalised support and become an advocate for that student. The school also has in place an anti-bullying policy which has been ratified by the board. The extensive consultation process engaged in prior to the ratification of this policy was confirmed by the provision of documentary evidence. As a means of providing support for first year students the school might consider the introduction of a mentoring system. Mentors could be chosen from amongst senior cycle students and should be provided with some training prior to assuming their duties.

The school has in place an effective means of monitoring student attendance both morning and afternoon. Returns made to the National Education Welfare Board (NEWB) were provided to the evaluation team and these indicate that attendance by students compares very favourably with national figures. Punctuality is also monitored by year heads and class tutors. Figures provided to the evaluation team indicate that student retention has improved in recent years and this is commended. The school is committed to providing an open enrolment system and has in place a policy on enrolment and admissions. It is recommended that those aspects of the enrolment and admissions policy referring to applicants with special needs and to the transfer of students from other schools should be reviewed, so as to ensure that all current legislation has been taken fully into account and to avoid any ambiguous interpretation of the policy.

A fully representative students' council has been established since 2004 and receives guidance and support from a designated liaison teacher who holds a post of responsibility for this role. The members of the council have made a positive contribution to the life of the school since the council's establishment. As a means of further increasing the profile of the students' council in the school the following recommendations are made: agendas and reports in relation to council meetings should be displayed on the council's notice board; students should be invited to submit items for inclusion on agendas; photographs of council members could be displayed on the council notice board and members could be provided with badges. A calendar of events should be planned. These measures will help to make the presence of council members more visible to the school community.

1.4 Management of resources

On approaching Drumshanbo Vocational School one of the most striking features is the high standard to which the school buildings and school grounds are maintained. The absence of graffiti, the cleanliness of rooms, corridors, furniture and student lockers, and the well-maintained school grounds with attractive floral displays are impressive and reflect the school's desire to create a high-quality environment in which teaching and learning can take place. The school also proudly displays its Green Flag awarded by An Taisce and has entered the Floral Pride Competition. This reflects a commitment by the school to promote environmental awareness amongst its students and is very highly commended. The role of the school's caretaker and cleaning staff is acknowledged in this regard. The principal expressed appreciation for the positive and supportive role played by the caretaker, attendant and secretarial staff in the operation of the school. It is acknowledged that the school is already involved in the good practice of recycling waste.

In discussions with the senior management team the improvement of the physical infrastructure of the school was identified as a priority for future development. In this regard it is important to acknowledge the many improvements that have occurred recently. These include an upgrade of the metalwork workshop, the technical graphics room, including the provision of an interactive white board, the school's ICT facilities and the acquisition of extra resources to support the teaching of pottery. The provision of a teachers' office for the secure storage of records and resources is also noted and commended.

A policy statement on safety, health and welfare at work, dated March 2007, was provided to the evaluation team. This policy was informed by the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act 2005. During the evaluation visit a number of health and safety issues were identified and it is recommended that these issues be addressed as a matter of urgency. A dust extraction unit should be installed in the materials technology (wood) room in conjunction with funding already provided by the Department following the issue of Circular Letter M45/01 Wood Dust Extraction Systems in Second Level Schools. The fire alarm system in the school should be re-activated and regular fire evacuation drills should be introduced. Concerns expressed in the subject inspection reports in Art (September 2007) and Home Economics (February 2006) should also be addressed.

Drumshanbo Vocational School has a teacher allocation of 25.01 whole-time teacher equivalents (WTE) provided by both DES and County Leitrim VEC. This includes an ex-quota principal and allowances for guidance, learning support and curricular programmes. The school also benefits from the presence of special-needs assistants (three full time and two part time) and the support of a

member of the local clergy who provides liturgical services for the school, particularly the celebration of a Mass to mark the beginning and end of the school year. Parents commented on how appropriate the end-of-year Mass was and acknowledged the preparation for this event that had taken place in the school. In assigning teachers to particular classes, the wishes of teachers and the need to build capacity within the school are considered by the school principal. The principal is also aware of the human resource needs in a number of subject areas. The teacher allocation is used effectively to address the needs of all students.

2. QUALITY OF SCHOOL PLANNING

2.1 The school plan

School development planning operates on a formal basis in Drumshanbo Vocational School, and is facilitated and encouraged by the board and the senior management team. The planning process began in 2003 and the staff has received, on an on-going basis, in-service under the School Development Planning Initiative (SDPI). The inclusive and co-operative style of management adopted by the senior management team has facilitated the engagement of all sections of the school community in the development of whole-school policies. Members of the parents' association and the student council expressed their appreciation for their inclusion in policy development.

The board of management has been involved in developing and ratifying a number key policy documents. These include the enrolment and admissions policy, the code of behaviour (revised September to November 2006), anti-bullying policy and ICT and internet usage policy. The extensive preparatory work done by the staff and the inclusive nature of the development of the anti-bullying policy is highly commended. The inclusion of some of these policies in the student journal and in the school's prospectus is an effective way of communicating school policies to the student body and parents and is commended. Draft policies are discussed by the board, the staff as a whole, the parents' association and where appropriate the student council. After the final drafts have been presented to the staff and parents' association they are ratified by the board. Those policies already ratified by the board have been referred to earlier in this report and those policies currently in draft form include an attendance policy and a policy for students with special educational needs. The board is also aware of the necessity to review policies on systematic basis. The school community has been involved in a review of the code of behaviour and documents provided indicate the very comprehensive and collaborative nature of this review. This is a further example of good practice in Drumshanbo Vocational School. This planning process has been very effective for the school community and the level of engagement, consultation and open discussion around these developments is highly commended. This reflects the open and inclusive ethos outlined in the mission statement of the school. Substantial progress has been made in the area of general school planning as is evidenced by the number of school policies already in place or in draft form. Following further work on school planning it is suggested that all this work be assembled in a School Plan and assigned to the permanent section and development section as appropriate.

Significant progress has also been made in the planning for programmes and within individual subject areas. This planning process, both formal and informal, has resulted in the production of subject department plans and plans for programmes, including the PLC area, all of which were made available during the evaluation process. It is recommended that the comprehensive approach to

school planning adopted in some subject areas be developed further by all subject teachers working collaboratively, where possible, on their specific subject plans. Consideration should be given to statements of learning outcomes as well as curricular content and to plans and procedures for the inclusion of ICT into teaching and learning.

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

3. QUALITY OF CURRICULUM PROVISION

3.1 Curriculum planning and organisation

Drumshanbo Vocational School, for a school of its size, is highly commended for the range of programmes and subjects it offers to all its students. There are, at present, three second level curricular programmes on offer in the school: the Junior Certificate, the Established Leaving Certificate (ELC), and the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP). Where it was deemed to be appropriate to cater for the needs of students the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) has also been provided by the school and the provision of this programme is kept under review. Consideration has been given by the school to the introduction of the Transition Year (TY) programme. This is not deemed to be appropriate at present but it was reported that the introduction of this programme will be kept under review. There is a very broad range of subjects on offer to students across each of the programmes.

The school in conjunction with Co. Leitrim VEC also provides a number of PLC courses. The co-ordination of these courses is carried out by a teacher with a special duties post of responsibility. Some students enrolling in the courses have completed the Leaving Certificate in the school. PLCs on offer include: Business Secretarial and Call Centre Operations, Performing Arts-Traditional Irish Music, Media Engineering, Art & Design and a course on Organic Production and Enterprise which is being introduced in the current school year. The development of such courses reflects the school's commitment to play an active part in the social and economic development of the local community and is very highly commended. The school facilitates PLC students who wish to repeat a subject in the Leaving Certificate. An integral part of the PLC courses is the personal development of students and this is a further reflection of the implementation of the school's mission statement which seeks to encourage all students to find their own strengths in order to grow into self-confident and responsible adults. The social activities provided for the students in the Business IT class are examples of very good practice. PLC students have access to an adult guidance counsellor and are also supported by the school's guidance counsellor. During visits to some of the PLC groups and in discussions with students the range of interests was obvious; some students were developing appropriate skills in preparation for the world of work while others were planning to continue to study at third level, having deferred a place in a variety of institutions. Contacts established with local employers and cultural

groups are to be commended. All PLC courses are certified by the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC). The support of school management in the provision of resources in this area and in the organisation of an awards ceremony at the end of the school year was acknowledged during the evaluation process. Commendably, the on-going evaluation of PLC and VTOS courses takes place and this was evident in documentation provided to inspectors.

Evening classes are also provided by the school to cater for the interests of the local community. At the time of the evaluation, enrolment for the evening classes was in progress and numbers had not been finalised. Classes due to proceed were: Spanish and French for beginners, Computers for beginners, Computerised Accounts and Lawnmower and Strimmer Maintenance. The organisation of these classes is the responsibility of the Director of Adult Education.

An examination of the school's timetable indicated that Drumshanbo Vocational School is fully compliant with the requirements of the Circular Letter *Time in School*, M29/95. The suggested holding of a daily assembly by year heads and class tutors will be possible, within the existing timetable arrangements, without compromising the requirements of the circular and is encouraged.

In the junior cycle, students study a list of core subjects comprising: Gaeilge, English, Mathematics, Science, Business Studies, Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE), Civic, Social and Political Education (CSPE), and after reflection by the teaching staff it was decided in the interests of the students to offer Religious Education as a non-examination subject. French and Music are provided to all first-year students and these become optional subjects in later years. Classes in ICT are provided to first-year students.

Following discussions with staff, parents and students, school management has made a number of curricular changes in the last year to provide for the educational needs of its students. Geography and History, which had been optional subjects, have been added to the list of core subjects in the junior cycle. This will provide for a broader educational experience for students and is commended. The employment of a qualified teacher of Physical Education (PE) has enabled all students to be timetabled for this subject. Students also study a range of optional subjects including: Art, Home Economics, Materials Technology (Wood), Metalwork and Technical Graphics.

In first year all classes are taught in a mixed-ability setting. Concurrent-timetabling in second and third year for Gaeilge, English and Mathematics facilitates the introduction of a setting arrangement. It was reported that decisions regarding the choice of level for the certificate examinations is usually taken in the light of results from the pre-examinations and with reference to student preference and to parental approval.

The SPHE programme, based on the approved curriculum framework, is clearly documented for each of the three years of the junior cycle. Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) should be provided for all students in the school and the development and ratification of an RSE policy that includes details of the organisation and management of RSE in the school should be prioritised. *Rules and Programmes for Secondary Schools* (Section IV, Rule 20).

In the senior cycle the range of subjects on offer to students includes: Gaeilge, English, Mathematics, French, Home Economics, Physics and Chemistry, Biology, Agricultural Science, History, Geography, Business, Construction Studies, Engineering, Technical Drawing (Leaving Certificate 2 group), this subject will be replaced by Design and Communication Graphics (Leaving Certificate 1 group), Music and Art. Gaeilge, English and Mathematics are timetabled concurrently thereby facilitating the creation of classes studying these subjects at different levels. The school reported that the creation of smaller class groups for some subjects, for example Mathematics and English, was introduced as a means of supporting literacy and numeracy development amongst students and this is commended. Other subject groupings are taught in mixed-ability classes. Optional subjects are timetabled to provide the maximum accessibility for students within the available teaching resources. The school timetable allocates time appropriately to all subjects.

All students in the senior cycle follow the LCVP, but only those with the appropriate subject combination take the examination in the link modules. The link modules are delivered by the programme co-ordinator and another teacher. Students and parents are informed appropriately about the programme, further information is provided to students during induction classes at the start of the school year and commendably students wishing to make changes in their subject choices are facilitated. The timetable provides for the delivery of the link modules and LCVP students have access to ICT for the completion of their tasks. A course in Communicative French is provided for students not taking French as part of the Leaving Certificate. The guidance counsellor works closely with the programme co-ordinator particularly in the area of the career investigation. A *Safe Pass* course is organised for students prior to the work-experience module. Work experience is undertaken by students in the first year of the Leaving Certificate cycle, while students in year two sit the pre-examinations thus minimising the loss of tuition time. Procedures relating to the work-experience module are clearly set out in the LCVP plan, a copy of which was provided during the evaluation process. Regular communication is maintained between the programme co-ordinator and the other members of the team thus ensuring the effective running of the programme and this is commended. The school expressed its appreciation for the level of support and co-operation provided by the local business community in the delivery of the work-experience programme.

3.2 Arrangements for students' choice of subjects and programmes

Students and parents are informed, in a timely fashion of the programmes and subjects on offer in the school. First-year students and their parents receive a copy of the school prospectus and attend an enrolment night in the spring before admission to the school. The school operates a 'taster programme' for first-year students which enables them to experience the broad range of optional subjects on offer in the school. Detailed timetabling arrangements for the delivery of the 'taster programme' were discussed with the evaluation team. Some subjects are studied for half of the year and some for one third of the year. Commendably those subjects studied in the early part of the year are re-visited towards the end of the school year so as to ensure that students are familiarised with the subject before they make choices for second year. Students are given an open choice of subjects and the school makes every effort to cater for the requests of all its students. This good practice is highly commended. An examination of the school timetable revealed that the option bands vary from year to year thus reflecting the interests of students and, where student choice required it, an extra class group has been created in an option band.

Third-year students and their parents receive guidance and support to inform their choice of programmes and subjects for senior cycle. This is provided by the guidance counsellor, the subject teachers, the principal and deputy principal. Parents are involved in the choice of programme and subjects and are welcome to visit the school to discuss any concerns they may have. Parents sign off

on subject choices. It is suggested that as a means of providing further support to parents and students in relation to programme and subject choice the school re-introduces the practice of holding information evenings for first and third-year parents.

3.3 Co-curricular and extra-curricular provision

Co-curricular and extra-curricular activities include a sporting, artistic and cultural dimension and provide further evidence of the commitment of the teachers to their students. School management facilitates and promotes these activities and the role of Co. Leitrim VEC in renting a hall beside the school for the activities deserves to be acknowledged.

During the evaluation visit, it was evident that the school community is justifiably proud of its achievements in extra-curricular activities. In addition to timetabled classes for PE, students also have access to a Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) appointed trainer and training sessions in volleyball and basketball at lunchtime. The voluntary contribution of teachers in this regard reflects their personal commitment to their students and deserves to be acknowledged. Staff and students are particularly proud of the successes achieved at national level in volleyball and the prominent position of the school's basketball team in the North West. Gaelic football is provided for both girls and boys and the school participates in cross country and track and field events. Students are encouraged to participate in these activities to the extent that they can derive benefit from them. The provision of a wide range of activities for students with special educational needs deserves to be acknowledged. These include horse riding and swimming.

The school has participated in a Mental Health Public Speaking competition, the Green-Schools award, the Cross Border Horizon Project, Safe Pass programme, Gaisce and Young Enterprise awards. In 2007 students were awarded the junior level winner in the Student Enterprise Awards sponsored by Leitrim County Enterprise Board. Students and teachers have been involved in organising musical events to raise funds for charitable organisations. A fun quiz is held for the whole school at Christmas and all students in the school partake in set dancing lessons during Seachtain na Gaeilge. At meetings with the board of management, representatives of the parents' association and the student council, the generosity and commitment of teachers was deservedly acknowledged. Parents and members of the local community are involved in the co-curricular and extra-curricular programme and this is appreciated by the school staff.

4. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN SUBJECTS

4.1 Planning and preparation

Subject department planning is established in Drumshanbo Vocational School and has resulted in planning documentation for all of the departments visited. Generally, good progress has been made on the subject plans viewed and they showed a high level of attention to detail. Where planning was

most successful, long term and short-term plans were addressed with accompanying objectives for each programme and year group. It is suggested that all subject departments should include long term and short-term teaching and learning objectives in their department plans. This will ensure that the learning objectives of any given topic are focussed and explicit.

In cases where it is appropriate, policies have been developed to aid the teaching and learning of certain subjects in the school. This is good practice. It is recommended that development of all plans and policies should take cognisance of the relevant syllabuses and support documentation provided by the Department.

Planning for resource provision was also evident in the subjects evaluated. This included support materials, educational packs, videos and hardware equipment such as the recent addition of a kiln for use by students in Art.

In some cases cross-curricular planning activity has begun. This planning has been largely informal to date, yet has resulted in some positive activity especially around the area of student transition from primary to post-primary school. It is suggested that the collaborative approach found in many of the subject departments be co-ordinated to maximise benefit to the students.

4.2 Learning and teaching

In general, the lessons observed were well structured and paced, and there was some very good evidence of careful preparation for teaching and learning. Classroom management was effective and commendably, lessons generally began with the roll call followed by the correction of homework and/or a review of material from the previous lesson. The good practice of sharing the planned learning outcomes with the students at the outset was evident in some lessons. Communicating the learning outcomes or objectives of the lesson to the students provides a structure for the lesson and a framework for learning for students. The wider use of this good practice is recommended.

In the subjects evaluated a variety of teaching and learning methodologies was used. These included questioning, individual work, use of the whiteboard, observation of the surrounding environment and the linking of learning to everyday life. Teaching and learning were particularly effective when accompanied by well-planned and appropriately used resources and active learning methodologies that stimulated and motivated students and caused them to engage with the content of the lessons, thus enhancing understanding. These included the use of practical work, pair work, time for reflection on learning and the effective integration of subject-specific resources.

There were good examples of helping students focus on the language of particular subjects where new terms were introduced and clearly explained and often supported by the display of key terms in the classroom or on the board. The display of subject-specific materials in the classroom is commended as it serves to enhance a stimulating learning environment and provides opportunities to celebrate student work.

Commendably teaching and learning took place in a positive and supportive environment, characterised by appropriate affirmation of students' efforts, mutual respect and a good rapport between students and their teachers. This resulted in a comfortable and secure atmosphere that was conducive to learning. Students were well behaved. There was a high level of engagement in the tasks and focus on their work on the part of students.

4.3 Assessment

Assessment forms a core element of teachers' work in support of teaching and learning in the subjects observed. Students' first introduction to assessment at the school is in the diagnostic testing of first-year students during their first term in the school. It was reported that the focus on these tests is on providing students with an indication of their strengths.

It is recommended that the necessity for these tests should be reviewed in light of the commendable practice of forming mixed-ability classes in first year.

The use of a variety of formative and summative methods of assessment of students' work was noted along with the creation of student profiles to inform teaching and learning. The collaboration and appropriate sharing of information on assessment of students with special needs was commended, as was the tracking of Leaving Certificate students and the detailed analysis of student destinations.

Assessment of learning practices were well established and a recommendation was made that *assessment for learning (AfL)* strategies be explored and introduced so as to permit more reflection by both students and teachers on ways to enhance learning, beyond the terminal assessment of what had been achieved in learning to date.

Appropriate work in copies, folders and portfolios was noted by inspectors evaluating individual subjects along with evidence of teacher recognition and comment on students' work. The good preparation of students for the challenges of the certificate examinations was noted along with commendation for teachers' efforts in encouraging higher numbers of students to study a subject area at a more challenging level. Teachers keep records on attendance, homework and student progress.

5. QUALITY OF SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS

5.1 Inclusion of students with additional educational needs

Through its mission statement and its policies and procedures Drumshanbo Vocational School cares effectively for its student population and shows particular concern for students with additional educational needs. The school uses its allocation for resource teaching and for learning support to support students. A draft policy for students with additional educational needs is being developed and a copy of the policy was provided to the evaluation team. The educational support team, working out of an ex-quota allocation of 2.59 WTE from Co. Leitrim VEC includes resource and learning-support teachers supported by the equivalent of four special-needs assistants (SNAs). The resource team operates under the effective and committed leadership of one of the assistant principals who acts as co-ordinator. The learning support provision is effectively co-ordinated by another teacher who is an assistant principal. Meetings of the team take place on a regular basis to review progress. The school has a number of teachers who hold post-graduate qualifications in this area and who share their expertise with other members of staff.

On enrolment when a student presents with additional educational needs the student's needs are discussed with the parents in the light of the psychological report and contact is made with the student's previous school. The school makes every effort to cater for the needs of all its students and makes curricular adjustments to enable students to pursue their studies at a level appropriate to their abilities. This has resulted in the establishment of two small class groups and commendably students from these groups have access to mainstream classes, for example, in CSPE, RE and PE, where they can participate in and benefit from such inclusion. This provides students with a mainstream school experience that is peer appropriate. Documentation provided by the school outlined the curricular programme and support provided for students in these two class groups, and commendably this includes a module on *Education for Living*. Students in these classes sit a number of subjects in the Junior Certificate examination and are also provided with opportunities to participate in co-curricular experiences such as swimming and horse riding. During a visit to one of these classes inspectors were impressed by the effective supports provided by the teacher and by the SNAs. The school has welcomed a multi-disciplinary approach to supporting students and has received advice and guidance from speech and language therapists and occupational therapists. The provision of the LCA, when deemed to be appropriate is another example of the school catering for the needs of all its students. The LCA was last provided during the school year 2006-2007.

Student progress is monitored informally on a weekly basis, and at the conclusion of school terms, progress is evaluated involving class teachers and parents. Documents provided to the evaluation team indicated that student abilities are assessed using standardised tests, student profiles are developed from these tests and learning targets and success criteria are identified. The active involvement of the individual student and his or her parents is an integral part of this process. These procedures are very highly commended. Teachers reported adequate resource provision for students and expressed appreciation for the support of the principal in this area. The school has engaged with the Special Educational Needs Organiser (SENO) in discussing the possibility of establishing in the school a special unit for students with moderate general learning disabilities. The degree of personal commitment by teachers to supporting students with special educational needs deserves to be acknowledged and is a further example of the daily implementation of the school's mission statement. In reviewing the provision for special educational needs, reference should be made to the post-primary guidelines, *Inclusion of Students with Special Educational Needs 2007*, recently published by the Department of Education and Science.

Documentary evidence indicated that programmes of work are provided for individual students and that student progress is monitored and recorded. Student records are stored securely in the teachers' workroom separate from the general staff room. The co-ordinator for additional educational needs and the learning support co-ordinator link appropriately with the assigned SENO, the assigned National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) psychologist and the reasonable accommodation section of the State Examinations Commission (SEC).

The school's commitment to its students is also reflected in the provision of resources in the area of special educational needs. During the evaluation inspectors visited the learning support department which is located in a special classroom. This room has been provided with eight computers, two printers, a laminator and other resources including software, books and games that are used to support teaching and learning.

The school acknowledged the role of the local community in providing support for students. This includes the provision of placements for the work-experience programme, sponsorship for events and sports equipment, and funding from Leitrim Partnership to help in the delivery of additional support to students. It was reported that teachers also provide extra support for students, out of school hours, as certificate examinations approach.

The student population in the school is relatively homogenous. A *Book Rental Scheme* is in operation and is a financial support to students and their parents. This scheme is administered by a special duties teacher. Links have been established with local organisations to access specific support to help those students who may be disadvantaged. It was reported that sensitivity is exercised when fees and other costs, for school trips for example, are being collected and students have never been debarred from participating in school activities for financial reasons. Students for whom English is a second language do not form a significant cohort of the school population but where necessary the school does provide support in this area.

5.2 Guidance and student support in the whole-school context

The school has the services of a qualified guidance counsellor who delivers the guidance provision in the school. The guidance allocation for the school is 0.5 WTE. However, the full allocation is not used to deliver the guidance programme. It is recommended that this be addressed. The guidance counsellor meets each first year student individually as part of adjusting to the new school. Guidance provision is targeted primarily in the senior cycle. Guidance is delivered mainly through individual appointments and small group work. It is recommended that the school reviews the current arrangements in order to ensure the optimum use and the most equitable deployment of the guidance resources available across the total student cohort.

The school is facilitating the development of a guidance plan and is developing a critical incident response plan. In developing further the critical incident response plan the views of the school chaplain might be considered. The school expressed its appreciation for the contribution of the school chaplain, who operates in a voluntary capacity, in providing liturgical services for the school. It was reported that Co. Leitrim VEC has appointed a guidance officer to provide for the needs of adult students, including those in the school. This initiative funded by the Department has been sponsored by Co. Leitrim VEC since January 2007. The school is also developing a charter for adult students outlining expectations and responsibilities for both student and school. Both of these developments are commended.

The care role of the guidance counsellor is evident in the involvement of the guidance counsellor in the provision of appropriate educational, career and personal guidance to students mainly on an individual basis. It was reported that students are referred to the guidance counsellor by members of staff, particularly year heads, when the need arises. The guidance counsellor works closely with the programme co-ordinator particularly in the area of the career investigation for the LCVP. To support the delivery of Guidance the school provides office space with computer and internet access, phone, shelving and storage. This is commended.

Effective supports are provided for students transferring from primary school. Following a visit by the principal to the feed primary schools, an enrolment night is held where prospective students and their parents receive information on subject provision and the operation of the school in general. An assessment test is held towards the end of September to identify students in need of support and further testing takes place later in the first term. This process is organised by the guidance counsellor and the learning-support co-ordinator. The guidance and the special educational needs departments collaborate to identify students needing extra support. Support for students takes the form of withdrawing students from class or by creating an extra class group in Mathematics and English when students' needs have been identified. The introduction of team teaching should be considered as a further means of providing support to students. Commendably as part of the first year induction process the school organises a one-day trip away from the school to enable students to make new friends and to bond with each other as part of a distinct group. It is recommended that the many examples of very good practice evident in the care of students in the school be complemented by the development of a policy on student care. The school has in place a school care team, consisting of principal, deputy principal, year heads, guidance counsellor and learning-support co-ordinator, which meets on a weekly basis. This meeting is used to assess student progress and discuss any issues which may arise. Year heads are informed of students needs and this information is passed on to members of staff on a need-to-know basis.

Student effort and achievement both in relation to school and outside school activities are acknowledged and celebrated by an annual presentation function. This is supported by a prize fund provided by Co. Leitrim VEC and was supplemented by local sponsorship. A presentation of awards evening has also been introduced for PLC students. Student effort is acknowledged by the display of photographs and trophies in the school.

6. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The school's characteristic spirit is very much informed by its mission statement, which seeks to provide for the intellectual/curricular, physical, social and personal education for the student. The school aims to establish, develop and nurture attitudes, values and behaviour which will enable the whole-school community to reach its full potential.
- The mission statement and aims of school are displayed in the school foyer, in students' journal, school prospectus and as a preface to all policy documents.
- During the evaluation, various members of the school community referred to the benefits accruing to a school of this size, with relatively small enrolment numbers, where students are known by their teachers at a personal level, where a relaxed yet focused atmosphere

prevails. There was a sense of pride in achievements both in the academic and non-academic areas.

- The VEC provides support to the school, particularly in the area of CPD, and the CEO maintains regular contact with the school principal. He expressed confidence in the principal and the staff.
- The board of management which is properly constituted under the *Instruments and Articles of Management for Vocational Schools* expressed its confidence in the school principal and acknowledged his role in guiding the school.
- A parents' association established in 2003 expressed its appreciation for the 'open-door' policy of the school principal and members of the teaching staff, the quality of teaching and learning and the extra-curricular programme.
- The school principal provides very effective leadership for the school community and has identified priorities for the further development of both the physical infrastructure and the human resource needs of the school.
- The senior management team of principal and deputy principal work closely together, appreciate each others mutual support and operate as an efficient and effective team.
- The caring approach adopted to the implementation of the school's code of behaviour makes an important contribution to maintaining positive staff-student relationships.
- Year heads and the recently introduced class tutors, some of whom do not hold posts of responsibility, play a major role in the implementation of the school's code of behaviour and of providing support for students.
- In line with current legislative requirements the school has in place an effective means of monitoring student attendance.
- Well-maintained school buildings and grounds with striking floral displays are features of the school.
- A fully representative student council has been established since 2004 and has made a positive contribution to the life of the school since then.
- School development planning operates on a formal basis, and is facilitated and encouraged by the board and the senior management team.
- Substantial progress has been made in the area of school development planning. Significant progress has also been made in the planning for programmes and in some individual subject areas.
- There are three curricular programmes on offer in the school and there is a very broad range of subjects on offer to students across these programmes. The school also provides a number of PLC courses and evening classes.
- Co-curricular and extra-curricular activities are provided and include a sporting, artistic and cultural dimension.
- There is a very good level of whole-school support for the subjects evaluated. Subject department planning has taken place and short-term planning was also evident in many well planned and delivered lessons.
- In all lessons observed students were pleasant, respectful and engaged in their work.
- Teaching and learning were particularly effective when accompanied by well-planned and appropriately used resources and where active learning methodologies were used to engage students.

- In its mission statement and in its policies and procedures the school cares effectively for its student population and shows particular concern for students with special educational needs.
- The programme for students with special educational needs is co-ordinated by an assistant principal. The degree of personal commitment by teachers to supporting students with special needs deserves to be acknowledged and is a further example of the daily implementation of the school's mission statement.

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

- It is recommended that training be provided by Co. Leitrim VEC for members of the board of management. This will help them to define and understand their respective roles and will enable them more effectively to fulfil their responsibilities.
- It is recommended, as a priority, that the board and Co. Leitrim VEC take measures to ensure that the extra accommodation agreed under the PAS be delivered within the specified time frame.
- It is recommended that those aspects of the enrolment and admissions policy referring to applicants with special needs and to the transfer of students from other schools should be reviewed, so as to ensure that all current legislation has been taken fully into account and to avoid any ambiguous interpretation of the policy.
- A number of health and safety issues identified in this report should be addressed as a matter of urgency. These include: the installation of a dust extraction unit in the materials technology (wood) room, the reactivation of the fire alarm system in the school and the introduction of regular fire evacuation drills. The concerns expressed in the subject inspection reports in Art and Home Economics should also be addressed.
- It is recommended that the comprehensive approach to school planning adopted in some subject areas be developed further by all subject teachers working collaboratively, where possible, on their specific subject plans.
- Recommendations outlined in the subject inspection report on SPHE in relation to the provision of RSE for all students should be addressed as a matter of urgency.
- It is recommended that the full ex-quota allocation for Guidance be used to deliver the guidance provision.
- It is recommended that administration of diagnostic tests to first year students should be reviewed in light of the commendable practice of forming mixed-ability classes in first year.
- It is recommended that the many examples of very good practice evident in the care of students in the school be complemented by the development of a policy on student care.

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 Art – 25 September 2007
- Subject Inspection of Gaeilge – 27 September 2007
- Subject Inspection of Guidance – 26 September 2007
- Subject Inspection of Social, Personal and Health Education – 25 September 2007

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Appendix

8. 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 are pleased to accept the findings of this very positive report. We commend the staff, the students and the parents on the school's tradition of excellence as evidenced in this report. We wish to place on record our appreciation for the professionalism, courtesy and thoroughness of the Inspectorate. The evaluation process was a positive and enriching experience for the whole school community.

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 recommendation of the Whole School Evaluation Report are viewed by management as a means of building on our own strengths and addressing areas for further development as the school grows into the future.

