



SAPERE AUDE

DUNDALK GRAMMAR SCHOOL

Dundalk Grammar School

Dundalk, Co. Louth

63920A

School Self-Evaluation Report

Evaluation period: September 2014 to August 2015

Report issue date: November 2015

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 School Context

Dundalk Grammar School is a co-educational boarding and day school under Protestant management with a secondary school population of c550 students. Students come from a very wide catchment area throughout north east Leinster with many feeder schools contributing to the intake including Dundalk Grammar School's own purpose built Junior School (enrolment c50 students). Students are prepared for Junior and Leaving Certificate State examination with twenty two subjects on offer at Leaving Certificate level. The Transition Year programme is well established and a compulsory element of the senior cycle.

All subject departments analyse results from the Leaving and Junior Certificate examinations annually. The majority of subjects compare very favourably to national norms. These findings are recorded in the respective subject department plans. Over 95% of Leaving Certificate students annually progress to third level courses.

All subjects are organized on a departmental basis headed by a subject co-ordinator. Management is supported in the planning and implementation of school development by Year Heads, Pastoral and Care Teams and relevant staff. There are 73 students on the SEN (Special Educational Needs) register, 28 of whom qualify for funded resource hours. All of these receive tailored support with specific focus on Mathematics, English and Science. There are 21 EAL (English as Additional Language) students and 78 students with a DES sanctioned exemption from Irish (this figure includes some non-national students).

1.2 Evaluation Framework

A whole-school evaluation (WSE-MLL) carried out by the DES Inspectorate was published in October 2014. During the evaluation, the inspection team met with the school's board of management, in-school management, and groups of teachers, parents and students. Inspectors also reviewed a range of school documentation and responses to questionnaires and examined other data in relation to the operation of the school. As part of the evaluation, a range of lessons across a number of subject areas was inspected.

During the 2013/14 academic year, the school commissioned a survey of students, parents and staff from an independent research company specialising in the education sector. Initial survey findings (provided by Kirkland Rowell Marketing) were followed in October 2014 with the delivery of further analysis which framed the survey outcomes in the context of comparative data from surveys in other Irish schools.

School staff devoted significant time during the 2014/15 academic year to identify areas of priority for development in 2015/16 and beyond. Support for this strategic planning process was sought from the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST) and subsequently input was provided by a PDST Advisor at two staff meetings during 2015.

2. EVALUATION FINDINGS

2.1 DES Inspection Findings from Whole School Evaluation

The WSE-MLL report (available at <http://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Inspection-Reports-Publications/>) includes the following findings.

- Student behaviour observed in classes was exemplary and the atmosphere in all lessons observed was positive and respectful. The commitment to the care and support of students in the school is clearly in evidence. A well-organised student support structure is in place. The care of students is a significant strength in the school.
- There are many motivated and highly dedicated teachers on the staff. Preparation for lessons was of a

high standard. The quality of teaching and learning ranged from good to very good in most lessons. The senior management team is highly dedicated to the school and displays a collegial and collaborative approach to school leadership.

- The dedication of staff to the provision of a wide range of co-curricular and extracurricular activities is most praiseworthy. The boarding tradition is recognised in the school and staff make a significant additional commitment to the welfare and supervision of activities in the boarding school. Students' achievement is acknowledged and celebrated by the school community, on the school website, in the school magazine, at assemblies and in displays in key areas of the school.
- The board of management is well supported by the joint patrons, who show a high level of commitment to the school. The majority of recommendations from previous evaluations have been implemented. School management demonstrates good commitment to school self-evaluation and a capacity for school improvement.
- The parent teacher association (PTA) is actively engaged in school activities and members who met with the evaluation team showed great loyalty to the school and expressed appreciation of the leadership of the senior management team and the approachability of staff.
- A recent refurbishment and extension project has resulted in a school infrastructure and facilities of a very high standard. All areas of the school and grounds are very well maintained. The administration, ancillary and catering staff make a very valuable contribution to the smooth running of the school.

2.2 Independent Research Findings

The response rates to the teacher, parent and student surveys were high.

284 questionnaires were completed and returned by parents, a response rate in excess of 50%.

- Most parents rated the overall performance of the school as good (38%) or very good (53%) with only 2% indicating a poor performance.
- A majority of parents believed the school's performance had improved from the previous year (with only 2% stating that its performance had disimproved).
- While satisfaction ratings were high for all year groups (in excess of 80%), the highest scores (90%) were recorded from parents of 1st year and 6th year pupils. The scores from 2nd year and 5th year parents were lower (82%).
- Over 95% of parents said they would recommend the school to other parents. (For parents of Transition Year students the recommendation rate was 100%).
- Parents considered the following areas to be "outstanding": (i) school facilities (ii) promoting racial harmony (iii) treating all pupils fairly and equally (iv) developing confidence (v) happiness of child (vi) pupil participation in lessons (vii) developing moral values (viii) developing potential (ix) caring teachers (x) developing communication skills (xi) school security (xii) numeracy across the curriculum (xiii) developing thinking skills (xiv) tailoring work to child's needs and ability (xv) literacy across the curriculum (xvi) pupil's attitudes towards learning (xvii) teaching quality and (xviii) control of bullying.
- Areas identified by parents as priorities for attention were: (i) computer access (ii) school communications (iii) teaching quality (iv) library facilities (v) levels of homework.¹

511 questionnaires were completed and returned by pupils, a response rate in excess of 93%.

- Students' academic aspirations are high. A very large majority (97%) agreed that "one day I would like to attend university".
- Most students rate the school's overall performance as good (55%) or very good (27%). Only small

¹ Significant changes have taken place since this survey data was collected. A new library facility is now open to students at lunchtimes and after-school. The schools ICT infrastructure has also been considerably enhanced.

percentages rate as poor (3%) or very poor (1%). A large percentage (86%) stated that “I would recommend this school to another pupil”.

- Student priorities also show a variation with time in school. For example, while “Teaching Quality” and “Choice of Subjects” are ranked as Top 5 priorities for both 1st Year and 6th Year students, the other three Top 5 priorities are different for the two age groups².
- The students identify school facilities, teaching for special needs, choice of subjects, careers advice and suitable class sizes as relative strengths of the school.
- “Treating all pupils fairly and equally” is identified as a priority area by students. This can be linked with another priority identified by students “Encouraging and listening to pupil views”.
- Student views were divided 50:50 as to whether “the school encourages a healthy lifestyle through exercise”. Only a minority of students (1:3) agreed that “the school encourages a healthy lifestyle through diet”.³
- Students responses indicated that they spent an average of 9.4 hours weekly on homework. As might be expected, significant variations were recorded within year groups and also by gender, with girls investing more time on average (10.4) than boys (8.7).⁴ Transition Year students reported the lowest average hours spent weekly (3.4) – with hardly any gender variation.⁵
- Patterns within year groups are also revealing. For example while first years average 8.8 hours weekly, some students were doing in excess of 20 hours weekly.
- A significant percentage (10.8%) of TY students reported that they were doing no weekly homework and over 40% indicated 2 or fewer hours of homework weekly. However within the same year group there are some students reporting significant weekly hours, for example, in excess of 20 hours.

2.3 Outcome of the School Self-Evaluation Process

An action framework covering 5 areas was agreed in January 2015. The five action areas (with indicative topics) were as follows:

- i. Teaching and Learning (...pedagogy, curriculum, subject planning, homework, feedback...)
- ii. Organisation and Management (... organisation of timetable and curriculum, staff time and meetings, duties and posts, communicating with parents, engagement with boards...)
- iii. Extra-curricular & Boarding (...after-school activities, sport & PE, boarding, organisation of prep...)
- iv. School Staff (...staff development, social dimension, staff morale, workload...)
- v. Using Technology (...supporting T & L, school reports, student engagement, wireless devices, ICT management / safety / control / technical support).

² To some extent this is to be expected. For example “Careers Advice” is identified as the number one priority for 6th Year students but is ranked 19th in terms of importance by 1st years.

³ A number of initiatives have been implemented since this survey data was collected. For example a new catering facility is now operational for day pupils providing much more extensive food choices including a hot lunch option. A new gymnasium incorporating a full range of exercise equipment and machines is also now available to students.

⁴ Parental estimates of homework showed similar trends for gender and year group but were higher in terms of hours spent (e.g. average of 11.3 hours weekly). The suggestion might be that either parents believe more homework is being done than is the reality or the 50% of parents who actually responded to the survey had children who were more diligent.

⁵ It is possible that some of this low homework response in Transition Year may be due to students underreporting time spent i.e. not counting time spent on “non-traditional” modes of homework.

3. SUMMARY OF SCHOOL SELF-EVALUATION FINDINGS

3.1 Our school has strengths in the following areas

- Students are highly motivated and committed to the school, as evidenced by an active Student Council.
- Academic attainment is high. Student progression to third level study is well above the national norms. Each year a significant number of students are awarded entrance scholarships to Irish universities.
- Students with specific learning difficulties receive significant resource hours. The school caters for a broad range of academic abilities amongst its student body. There is no control on academic attainment at point of entry to the school.
- The care of students is a significant strength in the school. There are good pastoral care systems in place involving Form teachers, Year Heads, Special Needs Co-ordinator, Guidance Counsellor and Chaplain.
- Staff are dedicated to the provision of a wide range of co-curricular and extracurricular activities. The boarding tradition is recognised in the school and staff make a significant additional commitment to the welfare and supervision of activities in the boarding school.
- Students' achievement is acknowledged and celebrated by the school community, on the school website, in the school magazine, at assemblies and in displays in key areas of the school.
- The school's physical environment is excellent following on a decade of sustained investment in buildings and facilities. This includes very extensive ICT networking with wireless connectivity and high speed broadband.
- School stakeholders through its Boards (of Management and Governors) and parents (as evidenced by a very active Parent Teacher Association) are highly committed to school support and development.
- Parental and student satisfaction with the school performance is high. This is supported by good feedback systems to highlight concerns to school management and staff where these arise.

3.2 Priorities for improvement

Areas identified for potential action are summarised below.

Teaching and Learning: (i) Homework (ii) Feedback (providing to students to improve learning) (iii) Assessment for Learning – AfL (developing a bank of strategies for teachers) (iv) Pedagogy (promoting good practice in teaching and learning) (v) VSWare (using pupil database to improve communications on teaching and learning issues) (vi) Subject Departments e.g. review subject guidelines for best practice from DES/NCCA; development of success criteria within subject departments.

Organisation and Management: (i) continued review of timetable including planning for new Junior Cert; (ii) review of school procedures e.g. house examination timetable, assembly, PoR responsibilities, publication of S&S records (iii) review of school communications e.g. school journal, extending usage of VSWARE (e.g. SMS text with parents, increasing staff access to information, student photos), digital noticeboards, communications with BoM (iv) school procedures review (e.g. mobile phone usage by students).

School Staff: (i) social dimension to school life (ii) professional development (iii) employment issues (iv) minimising impact of work demands.

Extra-curricular & Boarding: (i) review of after-school activities (range of activities on offer, participation from all) (ii) boarding supervision and leave organisation (iii) study and prep arrangements (e.g. quality of study, use of ICT, room usage) (iv) boarding students as a community (integrating students, boarding uniform, feedback to parents re new students) (v) student consultation e.g. through student council.

Using Technology: (i) evaluate tablet use to support T&L (ii) enhancing ICT support in school (e.g. staff support groups, ICT technical support) (iii) staff ICT awareness, training and development (iv) ICT to improve administration tasks (e.g. school roll including boarders roll, school reports) (v) tablet devices for staff to pilot use in T&L Department.