



**An Roinn Oideachais agus Eolaíochta
Department of Education and Science**

**Whole-School Evaluation
REPORT**

**Blackrock College
Blackrock, County Dublin
Roll number: 60030V**

Date of inspection: 27 March 2009

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WHOLE-SCHOOL EVALUATION

A whole-school evaluation of Blackrock College was undertaken in March 2009. 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, French, English, Mathematics, Physical Education and Technical Graphics and Design and Communication Graphics (DCG) were 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 on the findings and recommendations of the report; the board chose to accept the report without response.

INTRODUCTION

Blackrock College was established in 1860 by the Holy Ghost Fathers in Ireland. The college is one of five schools under the Trusteeship of the Des Places Educational Association (DEA) established ten years ago. The DEA has been appointed by the Congregation of the Holy Spirit in Ireland to act as patron of its schools.

The college is located in Blackrock, County Dublin on a campus, which comprises Blackrock College, Willow Park First Year school and Willow Park Preparatory school. A

boarding school forms part of the provision and Williamstown Castle on the campus houses the one hundred students of the boarding school. Blackrock College shares its admissions policy with Willow Park First Year school. Blackrock College has an enrolment of 979 male students.

A significant infra-structural investment has been invested in the Blackrock College campus and future investment is planned for the refurbishment of the Willow Park buildings and the building of a sports hall for the senior college.

1. QUALITY OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT

1.1 Characteristic spirit of the school

Blackrock College is very effective in upholding the objectives of its founders. Both academic excellence and excellence in a broad spectrum of sports, the arts and music are encouraged and achieved. As in all Spiritan schools, students in the college are encouraged to become involved in projects devoted to community service, missionary initiatives and charitable organisations. An active St Vincent de Paul society, participation in Diocesan Lourdes trips, missionary fund-raising and trips to Holy Ghost missionary countries are some examples of the way in which this dimension of the college ethos is brought to life. Through their involvement in such activities, students develop an awareness and concern for the less privileged in society.

The college's school plan starts with a very comprehensive document which elaborates each of the aims of its mission statement. This document was produced by the Education Committee, a college policy-making and advisory structure established in 1972, which continues to serve the college today as a consultative, advisory body to senior management. The code of practice for Blackrock College aims to promote a safe working, learning, study and recreational environment enabling students to gain from positive interactions with staff. Parental collaboration is promoted and encouraged. The atmosphere as experienced at the time of the evaluation and the evidence from observations both within and outside the classroom confirms the achievement of the aims and objectives of the mission statement.

At the time of the evaluation, the college was preparing to celebrate the 150th anniversary of its foundation. The sesquicentenary committee has brought all members of the community of Blackrock College, both past and present, together to prepare for this great celebration of history and exemplifies the sense of community spirit in the college. A characteristic feature of the college's organisation is the house structure which provides students with opportunities for leadership, peer support and collegiality. This structure also creates a link with the long history of the college in that the six houses are called after former students and members of the congregation who are renowned for political, literary, pastoral, charitable or sporting endeavours. The college's active past-pupils union also fosters links with the past and serves as an invaluable resource for the college.

In Blackrock College it was clear how a sense of community was being promoted between management, staff, parents and students, creating a family spirit in line with the tradition and ethos of the Holy Ghost Fathers. Occasions for celebration and for liturgies are exploited fully in the college's calendar. Family masses are a feature and parents articulated their confidence in entrusting the education, the faith development and care of their sons to the school. The pursuit of excellence, "to be the best you can be", underpins all the college's academic, cultural, sporting and pastoral activities.

1.2 School ownership and management

The primary responsibility for promoting the Spiritan ethos in the college rests with the board of management. The DEA appoints the board of management and looks for commitment to their ethos in potential board members. As the board of management system is new in the college, the trustees have encouraged continuity, for example, in an overlap of membership between the first and second board of management. The board is encouraged to contact the DEA office if it needs help or advice. Members of the staff of Blackrock College have attended seminars organised by the DEA that have brought different teams of teachers from the Spiritan schools together, such as management teams, chaplaincy and religion teams, new teachers as well as members of the board of management.

The change from a unitary management structure to a board of management has been a significant development in the college. The first board of management was appointed to Blackrock College four

years ago and the current board, only the second board of management for the college, is working very well. Board members have received training from their constituent bodies and were fully aware of their role and responsibilities. The board has a complementary and useful range of skills and demonstrated considerable commitment to the college and to its role in the management of the college. The frequency of meetings, the exemplary preparation for the work of the board, the thorough recording and reporting of board proceedings examined at the time of the evaluation are testament to this. The board's mechanisms for communication and documentation were both transparent and action-oriented.

It was evident from examination of board minutes that policies are regularly reviewed and updated, and policies required by legislation are in place. The college's policies folder had the required policies, newly reviewed and updated. The board should ensure that, as a matter of course, the date of policy ratification is clearly recorded or stamped on the actual policy document. Confirmation was provided that, in compliance with Post-primary Circulars M45/05 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.

While the board members articulated their understanding of their role as supportive to senior management, evidence from the evaluation indicates the extent to which the board has developed its executive role. The board takes a proactive approach to planning and several examples of effective action planning and consultation were reviewed in the course of the evaluation. The board has a finance sub-committee which report directly to them at each meeting. When required, the board sets up a sub-committee to examine a range of matters which come before the board for attention. For example, the board has just established a teaching and learning sub-committee, to examine more closely educational and curricular matters which require further research or advice. It was the board's clearly articulated view that prior to making decisions in relation to curriculum or matters of a pedagogical nature, such a committee could better inform and present the issues clearly to them. The board was conscious of their own particular duty in relation to curricular decisions and the need to have a clear understanding of the educational principles which underpin such decisions. The board is commended for this. The awareness on the part of board members of the contribution the board can make to the effective management of the college will help to ensure that it becomes firmly embedded as a management structure.

As previously stated, Blackrock College shares its admission's policy with Willow Park First Year school. Students from Willow Park Preparatory school make up sixty percent of the total cohort of students enrolling in Willow Park First Year school. Therefore, it is the only feeder primary school that is mentioned in the enrolment policy. Most of the remaining fifty percent of students enrolling belong to the categories of sons of past-students and brothers of existing Blackrock students. Every applicant to the college is invited to an open morning where the policy is explained. The chairperson of the board of Blackrock College is also the unitary manager of Willow Park First Year. This provides an ideal opportunity for the board of Blackrock College to ensure that the necessary communication and collaboration between the two schools in relation to matters of enrolment are to their satisfaction.

Minutes of Student Council meetings are brought to the attention of the board and it was suggested that the board might afford the students the opportunity to address them annually.

1.3 In-school management

Blackrock College has a dynamic leader in its principal. As a former student and teacher in the college, the principal has thorough knowledge of the traditions and history of the college, articulates a deep commitment and a vision for the future of the college. Backed by excellent administrative, organisational skills and practices, the principal provides decisive leadership and clarity of direction for the college into the future. The principal was appointed nine years ago and the first board of management was established for the college four years ago. The previous principal, a member of the Spiritan congregation and former unitary manager of the college, now fulfils the role of president of the college. The president of the college forms a link with past traditions, has a non-executive role and addresses the school community annually in the president's letter. The transition from unitary

management to the present management structure have been executed effectively and the complementarities of the roles as observed in the college of today are acknowledged.

Under the current principal's direction, the college management structures have incrementally undergone further change. This change involved distributing leadership to the deputy-principal for the first time as part of the senior management team and has contributed positively to the development of distributed middle management structures. The senior management team of the principal and deputy-principal work very closely together and have clearly defined roles and responsibilities. The board has just made a college-paid appointment of an academic administrator. This role has proven to be very effective in easing the burden of organising the day-to-day administration of the school. The college is run efficiently and effectively. Systems both long established and newly introduced are in place and are implemented consistently by school staff. The support of school staff in affecting this change is also recognised.

Senior management's way of working is characterised by commitment, drive, decisiveness and professionalism. The senior management team has at least twice daily meetings to go through what is happening in the school, what different meetings are scheduled and what is needed in terms of supervision and substitution for that day. They also meet regularly to review the calendar for the coming week or weeks and months and to attend to longer-term planning matters. The creation of the position of academic administrator has enabled crucial quality thinking time for senior management.

The senior management team has a complementary range of skills and qualities. The principal is the strategic planner and retains an overview of the medium- and long-term developmental priorities for the college, driving the infrastructural, curricular and educational developments forward. Currently, these include the development of the ICT infrastructure and training; the promotion of Science in the college; planning for the development of the Willow Park schools; fundraising for the new college sports hall; and membership of the sesquicentenary committee.

In terms of educational priorities, the focus of the principal is at all times on maintaining the standards of excellence and striving for excellence in all aspects of the college's provision. Promoting high quality teaching in the college has always been and continues to be a priority for senior management. Senior management has been proactive in facilitating teachers' professional development, in providing a high-quality induction programme for new teachers, in promoting rigorous procedures for the recruitment and promotion of teachers. These are all factors which contribute to sustaining the high quality of teaching and learning in Blackrock College.

The principal and deputy-principal manage the staff with great energy and very clear dynamic leadership from both of members of the management team was observed at the time of the evaluation. The deputy-principal oversees the smooth day-to-day running of the school, the organisation of what is happening in the college on a particular day, supervision and substitution, as well as managing the forty-nine non-academic staff employed in administration, finance and secretarial support. Effective and efficient administration systems is the result of the hard work of all involved in administration. The deputy-principal has considerable responsibilities in the management of people; most staff issues come directly to him and therefore, he mediates with the teaching staff in many ways; he chairs the meetings of key groupings central to effective college administration, such as the health and safety committee, the education committee and the heads of department meetings. The contribution of the caretaking team on the health and safety committee is praised and demonstrates the collective responsibility of all concerned with safe maintenance of the buildings.

In supporting the work of the senior management team, the academic administrator is responsible for seeing what needs to be done in terms of administration in relation to students, maintenance, event management, organisation of housekeeping, musical productions, advertising, payment of substitution and other additional staffing needs. The administrator also liaises with the assistant principals (APs) and special duties teachers (SDTs) in the execution of their duties. One such example was the organisation of the in-house examinations for the whole school which required considerable coordination and organisation observed at the time of the evaluation.

There are many examples of effective distributed leadership in the college in the areas of management of students, of pastoral and spiritual care, of subject departments and of administration and planning. There are roles through which leaders have evolved in the school, such as the heads of

department, the deans, sports' coaches and the counsellors. The middle management structures developed by school management over the years have been instrumental in refining organisational systems and were very effective in providing staff with possibilities for recognition and progression. Up until recently, the system of posts assigned to assistant principals (APs) and special duties teachers (SDTs) has not been utilised to the same extent.

AP and SDT posts are now regularly reviewed and the areas of delegated responsibility span a wide range of administrative and organisational duties which contribute to the effectiveness of the college's provision in many areas. These developments are encouraged and welcomed. A review recently took place which involved one-to-one meetings between senior management and postholders and examined the extent to which posts were optimally meeting the needs of the school. The outcome of this consultation is an openness to new roles being developed. Senior management has recognised that further follow-through is required to achieve full delegated fulfilment of duties.

Senior management has recently established an APs forum to initiate a process of consultation, whereby the advice of the APs would be sought in relation to matters which may have arisen at board level or at education committee meetings, or matters which come up for discussion at full staff meetings. This forum has already met and it is the intention that the AP forum should meet five times a year. Through the forum APs and senior management have engaged in meaningful consultation. Items for discussion included issues such as work experience in fifth year, the timing of the TY parent-teacher meeting, the review of the minority subjects at senior cycle. The establishment of the APs' forum is an encouraging development which should progress the role of post holders and facilitate their effective contribution in the management of the college.

The sixteen SDTs do not come together as a group, except at the start of the year to confirm their respective duties and functions. However, they expressed their satisfaction in being consulted and their posts were viewed as very valuable preparation for management and as a mechanism of career development and progression.

The role of the dean, developed by the college over the years, is pivotal to the management of the students and is a very effective system. The dean is the first point of contact between the college and the parent. In each year group, the dean has responsibility for the students in his or her care and the pastoral care of each student is central to that role. Registration each morning is conducted by the deans where they have an opportunity to engage with and monitor each student's progress and well-being. Assemblies for the full year group are also held. A weekly deans meeting with senior management takes place and the deans have one-to-one meetings with senior management directly in relation to discipline issues. Academic progress is monitored through weekly application cards and monthly progress cards. The very good behaviour, attitude and participation of the students of Blackrock College as experienced at the time of the evaluation are testament to the efficient and effective management and organisational structures of the college.

Senior management works very hard to meet the challenge of effective communication in a complex organisation. Channels of communication are well established and the college has a range of systems in place. The systems of email and text messaging have opened up the communicative processes enormously. These help to communicate with the parent body in relation to meetings, lectures, events and activities. Communication with parents on student progress is constant, systematic and immediate. The report card system ensures that parents are contacted every week in relation to how their sons are doing. Every student and his parents must sign the school contract every year. The size and complexity of the college's organisation requires such structures to be established and adhered to. The sophisticated structure whereby a Parents' Committee for each year group in the college is established who then reports back to the full Parents' Council of Blackrock College is effective. The sustained efforts on the part of school management and parents' representatives to strive to reach and represent each individual parent layer within that structure are commended.

There is a culture of review and evaluation in the college. School management decisions are informed through consultation and the college's long-established committee system. There was considerable evidence during the evaluation of surveys being conducted: surveys of parents, of students, of boarders, of teachers in relation to strategic planning. Staff has been consulted on organisational and educational reviews such as teacher-based class rooms, a nine-period day or subject choices, to give

some examples. Each individual staff member has a consultation and development form or template to complete and an interview with senior management every second year. Developmental aspects to their professional role within the college are addressed in such reviews. Teachers as a result demonstrate a capacity for reflection and self-evaluation.

The Student Council is an active representative body and is proactive in contributing to the life of the school. Meetings of the Student Council take place fortnightly and are attended by the senior management team. Two students from each year group from sixth to second year represent their year group and the representatives from each year group report at each meeting on matters which are of concern to their particular year. This ensures that the views of both junior and senior cycle students are represented in an equitable and fair manner. Boarders are also represented in order to bring matters relating to boarding, an integral part of the school organisation, to the attention of the council. The Student Council conducts its business in an efficient way and its effective operation is facilitated by senior management. The work of the Student Council enhances the communication between students, management, teachers and parents and supports management and staff in the development of the school.

1.4 Management of resources

The organisation of the school day reflects the centrality of the teaching and learning and facilitation of the holistic development of the student. Current timetabling arrangements ensure that all students have access to twenty-eight hours instruction time and the organisation of the school day and class periods ensures concentrated time for the completion of curriculum content. The education committee has reviewed the length of the school day, the timetabling of subjects and the question of teacher-based rather than student-based classrooms. Staff was consulted, the results of surveys were analysed and brought back to the staff and to senior management. In this way, decisions relating to curriculum underpin the organisation of the school day and year.

A number of lessons takes place prior to the commencement of the school day and at the conclusion of regulation class time at the end of the day, in an effort to provide as a broad a range of option subjects to students as possible. This is commendable. Timetabling classes concurrently within each year group is very good practice as it facilitates movement of students between levels and enables students to follow the highest level possible for as long as possible. It also allows for movement of students if they are deemed to be inappropriately placed within class groupings.

The teachers are assigned to classes and levels by the senior management. It is policy that teachers retain the same class group from second to third year and from fifth to sixth year. This is very good practice as it ensures continuity of approach and facilitates long-term planning. Senior management does not deploy teachers on a rotational basis to each ability group, but rather bases decisions on the individual teacher's strengths and abilities. In some subject areas, a large number of teachers teach higher-level in their subject in senior cycle, however, this is not the case in all subjects. Rotation of teachers across all levels and abilities should be given further consideration by senior management. This rotation of teachers promotes the development of skills and abilities and could also provide a framework within which young teachers could gain experience and confidence.

The resources available to support effective teaching and learning in the college are excellent. The school has highly sophisticated information and communication technology (ICT) equipment in all classrooms. School management has been proactive in investing in ICT infrastructure and the teachers have access to interactive whiteboards, data projectors and laptops. All of the classrooms are networked and have access to the school's intranet. School management has provided training for staff in the use of ICT. An innovative example of continuing professional development (CPD) was a recent school-based in-service where teachers and students provided workshops and training in ICT. This could be an exemplar for the future, and in this context, an advisory committee has been set up by senior management involving some of the sixth year students who have particular expertise in the area of ICT, to get their ideas on where the new technologies fit into the future of the school. This is exemplary practice.

There has been considerable investment in the college's accommodation and buildings. Each year group is situated in a particular area which has a circulation and socialisation area with lockers. There are also notice boards with information from the principal, the dean, the games co-ordinator and subject-specific notice boards. Classrooms are student based. The cleanliness and orderliness of the

rooms and corridors were notable. There are some very well equipped and attractive specialist rooms and students move to specialist subject rooms and laboratories for relevant subjects.

However, there was very little evidence of print rich environment in the student-based classrooms visited. It would be useful if the classrooms themselves were used as a teaching resource and as a source of stimulation for students. One of the compelling reasons for retaining the current system of student-based classrooms articulated by the school is the size of the campus and the number of students. Consideration should be given to using student-based classrooms to display posters, charts, visual displays and student work in different subjects. Senior management should explore the possibility of identifying one or two classrooms in each area which could be dedicated to a particular subject or to provide further teacher-based rooms as accommodation allows.

Charters, recording commitments to the objectives of the mission statement, to anti-bullying statements, to the environment, to the code of practice for classrooms and study halls, were in evidence in classrooms and corridors. These provide further evidence of the college's praiseworthy efforts to fulfil the objectives of its ethos and mission statement. Throughout the buildings, trophies representing sporting and cultural achievements and photographs both recent and archival are on display and celebrate achievement and excellence in all spheres of school life. The Chapel which is situated between the newly completed senior block for fifth and sixth years and the older building is appropriately at a central axis between old and new in the college. The corridor walls are decorated with many attractive examples of stain-glass windows and art work. This is the visual manifestation of the sense of history, pride and loyalty which permeates the work of Blackrock College.

A significant level of resources is committed by the college to the provision and maintenance of the extensive sporting facilities, which provide the infrastructure to support the various Physical Education, sport and physical activity programmes. The cleanliness and maintenance of the school buildings and grounds are highly commended. The attention to health and safety throughout is very thorough with very clear signage.

There is a spacious library in the college and management funds the payment of a librarian to run this resource. The library is under-utilised at present. A sub-committee was established to explore the future development of the library and has submitted its report to the board. The development of the library facilities has been identified as a development priority by the board of management and this should be acted upon in the context of both infrastructural and educational developments.

Environmental responsibility is being promoted through the Green Schools' committee. Blackrock College received its first green flag early in 2008 for its efforts in waste management and recycling. The college's focus on recycling was in evidence throughout the buildings. The college's Green School committee is now focussing on energy and a survey in relation to heating and energy was conducted by students and analysed. The work of the students is highly praised. As part of the one hundred and fiftieth celebrations, a heritage trail in the college grounds is being designed, with the help of external expertise and which will provide stimulus and opportunities to students to get involved in projects relating to history, sport, birdlife and trees all accessible within the college grounds. The project proposals are both innovative and investigative and are highly commended. The work of the Green School committee is led by an assistant principal.

2. QUALITY OF SCHOOL PLANNING

2.1 The school plan

Review and consultation are features of the planning process in Blackrock College. The college's committee structure has contributed to the development of a culture of review and evaluation over the years. In the school documentation examined, there were many examples of committees appointed by school management to review very specific aspects of the college's provision. The remit of such committees included consultation with key stakeholders, sometimes through the conduct of a survey, through research and through an examination of practice in other schools. In this way, members of school community, including staff, parents and students, systematically gathered and analysed evidence and used it to assess and evaluate aspects of the college's performance and provision. This is in line with best practice. The process engaged with by the college had an appropriate focus on outcomes and most importantly on student outcomes and made suggestions for follow through with

action planning towards improvement which is highly commended. The work of committees was set out to be completed within specific timeframes and targets, based on which management decisions have been made. The hallmarks of an effective planning process were clearly in place.

There are layers of planning within the college; the level of strategic planning essential for infrastructural expansion and development: the level of curricular planning necessary to ensure that college provision continues to meet the changing needs of its cohort of students and the changing demands of society, life and work; the subject specific planning needs and the demands created by technology, new methodologies and the learning styles of today's learners. The legacy of the Holy Ghost Fathers has made its contribution to the spirit of enquiry, of reflection and of learning which permeates the planning processes outlined above. Many staff members have had the opportunity of sitting on a committee to draft a policy or a discussion document which then goes to staff and management for discussion and decision.

The education committee is instrumental in bringing together the existing elements of planning. In recent years, the college has been involved with the School Development Planning Initiative (SDPI), building on the college's experience through the work of the education committee and the many pioneering years in driving subject planning through the well established and successful heads of department structure in the college. Responsibility for the upkeep of the policies folder has been allocated to a special duties post and this has helped to ensure the collation of all the policies and that a schedule of policies for review each year is brought to the board of management. The college's policies folder has the required policies in place, many of which had been newly reviewed and updated. There are now electronic versions of all policies; policies which were out-of-date were brought to the attention of the board of management and amendment approved. The inclusion of an aspect of development planning in the schedule of posts is indicative of the level of importance afforded to the area by senior management and will develop capacity within middle management to progress full implementation of development planning processes. Senior management should now prepare the School Plan for dissemination to the school community.

The heads of department structure has contributed greatly to the development of subject planning. Time has been given to department meetings, underpinning the importance of this element of teaching and learning. School management provides termly meetings for subject planning. Detailed subject planning is crucial prior to and after transfer from Willow Park First Year school. While the content of the first-year programme is agreed between the subject teachers in both schools during meetings assigned for that purpose, ongoing exchange of essential information on syllabus content and delivery are necessary. Ongoing planning meetings are held during the year to monitor progress and to allow the subject departments in Blackrock College to liaise with the relevant teachers in Willow Park First Year. Senior management needs to be vigilant to ensure that planned communication and collaboration happens consistently in all subjects.

Visionary leadership has set a clear and ambitious schedule for improvement and development for the sesquicentenary year and beyond. At the time of the evaluation, the college was developing its strategic plan for the next three years. The development of the infrastructure was to the fore, which has as its underlying objective educational development and improvement. While the principal, through the board, leads the strategic planning, a development officer had been granted a contract for six months to drive and implement the infrastructural planning and fund-raising on the ground.

3. QUALITY OF CURRICULUM PROVISION

3.1 Curriculum planning and organisation

Blackrock College offers a broad curriculum to students, in terms of subjects, levels and programmes. The college operates an eight period day with classes starting at 8.45 on four days of the week, with six periods on Wednesdays. A nine period day is in operation for some selected subjects which starts at 8.00. Lesson periods are of forty-five or forty minutes in duration. The college operates a fixed timetable. Therefore, lessons for subjects are timetabled at the same time of the day for each day of four days of the week. There are two timetables for Wednesday which alternate each fortnight. If students have to be in the same place at the same time every day, senior management has found this to be an effective means of managing almost one thousand students in blocks of interconnected buildings. The allocation of a particular block of classrooms to year groups on a cluster basis also

helps to minimise time lost between class periods. The efficiency of this system was observed in practice at the time of the evaluation.

The sample of subjects inspected as part of the whole-school evaluation serves to illustrate some very good aspects of the subject provision. The sample also illustrates the anomalies which can occur through such fixed timetabling. These are detailed in the subject inspection reports appended. Senior management is encouraged to examine the timetabling arrangements for subjects in light of some of the issues that have arisen in looking at a sample of subjects.

A unique and innovative feature of the curriculum organisation at senior cycle is the concept of split subjects. This arrangement offers students the opportunity of pursuing a further higher level subject or subjects or indeed to pursue the study of an additional subject at either level. Split subjects occur on the timetable every second day and include examples of subjects for which the syllabus requires research to be conducted independently and where much of the work can be completed by the student independently on the intervening days. These subjects include subjects such as Art, Applied Mathematics, Design and Communication Graphics, Music, History, Geography and Home Economics. This is an illustration of how the college tries to maximise the range of subjects available to students, it also illustrates the considerable flexibility and commitment required on the part of both students and teachers. This feature also underlines the complexity of the organisation of such a broad curriculum to such a large number of students.

Students enter Blackrock College having completed their first-year programme in Willow Park First Year school where class groups are of mixed ability. Assignment to class setting for subjects in Blackrock College is conducted on the basis of assessment and performance in Willow Park First Year examinations. Parents of incoming first years and subsequently incoming second years into Blackrock are made aware of this. Class formation for base class groups in Blackrock College, such as Religion and Physical Education, remains on the principle of mixed ability. Procedures for identifying the capabilities of incoming students are very thorough and regular testing of students takes place to ensure that they are in the appropriate class group.

As the majority of students in the school take higher-level examinations up to Junior Certificate, the college should explore the possibility of mixed-ability as a basis for class formation across a broader range of subjects. This would prevent the necessity for the movement of students down from one class group to the next, which could have a negative or demoralising effect on students. The possibility of the creation of smaller class groupings to support student learning would still be possible.

3.2 Arrangements for students' choice of subjects and programmes

Students are ably supported in their decision-making in relation to subjects and choices at key stages in their education. The guidance team meets with parents at parents' evenings and by appointment. There is also a very well-developed school website that provides up-to-date information about the school, its policies and the curriculum offered. To further promote awareness about Guidance to the whole-school community, it is suggested that more information about guidance programmes and a calendar of career events should be included on this website and updated regularly.

Subject choices are offered to students and are made prior to entry into Blackrock College from Willow Park First Year school. Decisions regarding which subjects are included on the curriculum of Willow Park First Year school are determined by the availability of teachers and by senior management in both schools. The inclusion of the principal of Willow Park First Year school on the education committee of Blackrock College facilitates ongoing liaison and communication between two schools and is useful and commendable. The teachers of Blackrock College offer lessons to interested Willow Park first year students in some subjects which are offered as optional subjects in junior cycle of Blackrock College, such as Technical Graphics (TG) and German. These lessons take place prior to or at the end of school day and provide the students with an experience of the subject prior to making their choice. This is a very useful intervention which can encourage uptake of these subjects when students transfer to Blackrock College in second year. Whereas the arrangement outlined above provides an interim measure to ensure viable student numbers for a given subject, senior management is encouraged to examine the impact of access to optional subjects as it pertains at present.

The transition year (TY) programme in the college is compulsory and an information meeting is organised for third year parents in May to inform them about TY. Currently, students make a preliminary choice in relation to the subjects they wish to continue with onto Leaving Certificate at the end of third year. During TY, students have a timetabled three-week module in guidance and ongoing small group guidance. This ensures that by the end of TY students are in a position to choose the appropriate subjects for their desired education and career paths.

In line with department guidelines, the TY programme has four different strands; core subjects, subject sampling, modules and activities and events. TY class groups complete seven modules which complement the content and skills development within subjects and provide students with additional skills and competencies which is commendable. TY students are also involved in the production and broadcasting of Blackrock College Radio (BCR) which goes out on air for a week each year and which was rated by students as one of the highlights of the year. Students apply for and participate in a pastoral placement as part of their programme in TY. Students attend at least two workshops as part of the Arts, Music and Drama (MAD) week. The St Patrick's Day badges' project is a tremendous undertaking during which TY students raise funds for the charity Goal.

The TY programme is very ably coordinated in the college and the fact that the coordinator is also the dean for fourth year ensures ongoing monitoring of student application and participation. Programme coordination involves engagement in an extensive number of activities. These include a range of administrative, educational and organisational duties. Coordinators have been facilitated in attending relevant continuing professional development (CPD) courses designed to support programmes, the benefit of which was in evidence in programme implementation.

Students are given a presentation in fourth year on Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP). Students participating in the programme have regular access to the expertise and knowledge relating to the areas of Guidance, ICT, Business and languages and acquire enhanced ICT, communication and presentation skills. LCVP students carry out a range of enterprise activities as part of their programme of study, with visits-out to enterprises organised and visits-in from speakers. The coordination team is encouraged to strengthen this aspect of the programme, as enterprise activity allows students to create cross-curricular links between their vocational subject grouping (VSG) subjects and the skills they are developing.

All students of the fifth year group participate in a week of work experience at the beginning of fifth year. The work experience element of the both programmes is accommodated in this way. This is a commendable initiative which enriches the learning experiences of all senior students. It has formed part of the college's calendar over the years and pre-dates both the TY and LCVP programmes. The college draws on its network of the past-pupils union members for work experience placements and opportunities. The success of the learning outcomes was in evidence in the quality of the work experience diary presented in student portfolios.

3.3 Co-curricular and extra-curricular provision

Blackrock College is renowned both nationally and internationally for its sporting endeavour and success, particularly in rugby. A broad range of sports is available to students and the college is justifiably proud of the achievements of its teams and individual students in many sports. Each student is encouraged to take part in some form of physical pursuit. The coordination of the extra-curricular sporting programme is exemplary and there is detailed planning for the provision of the various sports. The appointment of a games administrator ensures efficient and effective organisation necessary for the management of the sporting fixtures on a daily, weekly and yearly basis. A fixtures book is printed each year and monitoring transport arrangements for teams and managing the associated budget requires ongoing attention. The games administrator attends all the deans meetings to keep them up to date on fixtures and liaises with all the team and sport coaches, both internal and external to the school. Each year group has its own games notice board in their respective area which is updated constantly. The work in this area is very effective.

The programme of performing arts, music and singing in the college is extensive. The college has three choirs which perform at concerts and celebrations through out the year. The choirs regularly enter competitions, for example, the boarders' choir was highly commended recently in the Wesley festival. Individual singers, soloists and instrumentalists from each year group provide music for the celebrations and liturgies in the college chapel. The opportunity to hear two of the choirs performing in

the course of the evaluation in the college grounds served to highlight the all-rounded nature of the education provision. The college orchestra has forty members from across all year groups and provides accompaniment to soloists in the college. The college stages a senior and junior musical each year which involves a number of students, teachers, musicians and singers, in conjunction with neighbouring girls' schools. The Music Art and Drama (MAD) week is a TY project which offers a week long programme of workshops in a variety of disciplines, such as song-writing, samba drumming, creative writing. The range of learning opportunities provided for students are extensive and enjoyable and highly commended.

There is also a long tradition of encouraging the arts in Blackrock College. The Art department presents exhibitions throughout the year and directs individual portfolio development. There is an Art club and at the time of the evaluation, the Art department was in the process of judging the competition for a new design of the college crest for the duration of the sesquicentenary year. The range of extra-curricular activities shows the fulfilment of a number of the objectives, as articulated by the college, in particular in relation to the holistic development of the student. These include attention to individual needs and talents, to the assignment of specific responsibilities to students themselves, and to the importance of team effort.

4. QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN SUBJECTS

4.1 Planning and preparation

Planning for all subject areas evaluated during the WSE is well advanced and is very good. Senior management facilitates and encourages monthly or termly meetings for subject areas, depending on the number of teachers involved in the subject area. Minutes are recorded of these meetings which is good practice. The role of the heads of departments, positions paid for by the school and for which each incumbent has applied and is granted a three year contract by school management, are long established and are examples of effective distributed leadership. This has had the effect of nurturing best practice and promotes discussion on methodology, sharing of notes, ideas and resources. In the larger subject areas, the position of head of department is supported by an assistant head of department.

Both of these roles are well defined and include duties such as subject co-ordination, mentoring of new teachers, promoting collegiality, reporting to senior management and liaising with other heads of department. Heads of department also issue an annual report on the subject area which identifies areas of good practice and issues to be addressed during the following year. This annual report is commended as it is a good basis for self review among teachers in a department and it also identifies strengths and areas for development. It is suggested that the school examine the possibilities around some areas of responsibility, in relation to subject co-ordination, being assigned on a rotational basis. This would afford wider opportunities for teachers to develop subject-specific expertise and to take some ownership of the subject planning process.

Subject department plans have been developed for all subject areas and inspectors reported good practice in relation to the formation of these plans. Plans include details of topics, methodologies and resources to be used with the different year groups and levels and also departmental policies in relation to homework and assessment. Elements of good practice were identified in subject plans, for example, one subject plan was specifically commended for its broad aims in relation to enabling students "to be better, wiser and more sensitive adults" as a result of having studied the subject. Another subject plan referred to specific targets to improve teaching and learning through specified tasks, timeframes and success criteria. One subject plan described very well organised planning for the inclusion of students with additional or special educational needs (SEN). It is recommended in some subject areas that schemes of work be assimilated collaboratively into a common agreed format and also that learning outcomes be included for each section of the course or for each year group.

Commendable TY programmes were included in all subject area plans. These programmes were wide ranging over the different subject areas and were praised in some cases for their well designed and worthwhile modules. It is recommended however, that subject departments should identify a broader range of teaching methodologies in line with the Departmental guidelines in relation to TY. The introduction of elements of learner autonomy, individual and group presentations and extra co-

curricular activities should be considered. As a general principle, the use of a Leaving Certificate textbook should be avoided with TY students.

There was considerable evidence of careful planning and preparation for lessons observed including advance preparation for use of technical equipment and supplementary resource materials. In some cases detailed lesson plans were also provided.

4.2 Learning and teaching

Teaching and learning was observed to be of a very high standard in Blackrock College. The vast majority of lessons observed began with the learning intention being shared with the students which ensured that the students were partners in the learning process from the outset. This is very good practice. Most lessons observed were very well structured with a good balance between teacher instruction and student activity. While significant emphasis on the teacher's voice was understandable in some instances given that students were just about to embark on examinations, it is recommended that due care is given to an equal balance between students and teachers engagement in the classroom.

A wide range of teaching methodologies were observed in the subjects evaluated. Reference was made to the fact that students were actively engaged in classes as a result and there was excellent use of strategies such as pair work, group work and team-based activities. This is very good practice as it ensures students' continued interest and engagement with the lessons. It is also good practice as it encourages students to use a range of skills across all the subject areas. The practice of actively engaging the students in student centred activities and problem solving should be expanded across all classes and subject areas.

A wide variety of resources was effectively and innovatively used across the subject areas. The use of supplementary materials from magazines and film, as well as effective power point presentations and geometric and parametric models in the various subject areas evaluated was also highlighted and commended. Inspectors referred to the effective use of ICT as a useful tool in teaching and learning in many lessons observed. Teachers of the subjects evaluated indicated a willingness and capacity to use ICT as a tool for teaching and learning. There was ample evidence of ICT being used in the preparation and delivery of lessons. Subject teachers have developed a very large number of resources themselves. These and other ICT resources are stored on the intranet and can be freely accessed by all the subject teachers, when required. In addition, students have access to subject-related work and revision notes through the college's website.

Questioning was used to good effect in classes and students showed a good level of knowledge of the various courses being undertaken as well as a marked enthusiasm in many cases for their subjects. Student asked and sought clarifications on many questions during the lessons observed. Higher order learning was observed in the majority of classes and teachers had high expectations of their students. Students were both motivated and challenged during the lessons observed and this is highly commended. Many lessons included good use of subject specific terminology and use of the target language.

Classes were very well managed and a positive learning environment existed in all classes observed. Teachers have established a supportive and affirmative rapport with their students. Mutual respect for each other was observed in many classes between teachers and students and students were challenged to give their own views on questions when appropriate.

The high quality and maintenance of copybooks and portfolios, showing the scope and the breadth of work covered by students, was commented upon positively by inspectors in some subject areas. The detailed correction of homework and inclusion of comments, in some classes observed was also commented on and it is recommended that this practice be extended to all classes.

4.3 Assessment

The assessment procedures in Blackrock College are very good. Frequency of reporting to parents on their son's progress is excellent. Weekly application cards are sent home to parents detailing their son's participation in all subject areas including Physical Education. Students are also continually assessed and monthly progress reports are also issued to parents with academic marks and

comments on students' progress. Good oral feedback was given to students during classes observed and students were continually affirmed for their efforts and achievements.

All students sit formal in-house examinations at Christmas and Easter. Common examination papers are set for appropriate classes and levels. This is very good practice. TY students are assessed on a series of assignments and on portfolio work and do not sit formal examinations in some subject areas. An oral component for language examinations is included for some classes. It is recommended that this be extended to all classes and levels. Teachers correct their own students' mock examination papers which is very good practice.

Analysis of state examinations show a consistently high uptake of higher level at Junior and Leaving Certificate in the subject areas evaluated. Very high standards are achieved in the students' chosen levels. Both subject departments and senior management carry out an analysis of state examinations results on a yearly basis. This is very good practice as it informs subject planning and review.

5. QUALITY OF SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS

5.1 Inclusion of students with additional educational needs

At the time of the evaluation, Blackrock College had an allocation of 4.59 whole-time teacher equivalents (WTEs) for special educational needs. Co-ordination for the organisation of the provision for students with additional educational needs has been assigned to a permanent member of staff indicating the commitment of senior management to continuity in a very important area. Together with the coordinator there are five teachers involved in the delivery of learning support, which accounts for most of their teaching hours. There has been considerable achievement in the organisation and coordination of the SEN provision in Blackrock in recent years.

The provision of support is mainly on a withdrawal basis and is delivered to small groups or on a one-to-one basis, if appropriate. Individual education plans (IEPs) are drawn up by the assistant co-ordinator and are evaluated at the end of the year. Meetings are held with the parents and the students, where their priority needs and strengths are identified. The planning documentation and records in relation to meeting the students' individual learning needs was thorough, clearly presented and transparent. A SEN policy is in place and this policy has been adopted by the board of management.

Communication with parents of students is prioritised at all times. Both the co-ordinator and assistant co-ordinator use two non-class contact periods to respond to parents' phone calls or to make contact with parents, when necessary. Regular meetings both formal and informal take place with the team and with senior management. As the resource classrooms are distributed around the buildings, a weekly informal get-together over lunch allows for the time and the opportunity for the teachers involved to exchange views, to update on progress of individual students and in this way feed into annual review and evaluation. Liaison with outside agencies, including National Education Psychological Service (NEPS) and the National Educational Welfare Board (NEWB), is ongoing.

The learning support team has been facilitated by senior management in attending relevant in-service and in disseminating the information to their colleagues. Teachers are made aware of the students with special educational needs, and teachers are required to differentiate in their subject planning for the successful integration of the SEN student into the learning in their subject. A SEN folder has been compiled on the teachers' portal on the college's website which teachers can access. In this way, subject teachers can look for appropriate methods to use with students and can become more familiar with coping strategies and teaching methodologies. These procedures as outlined and implemented in practice are very good.

5.2 Guidance and student support in the whole-school context

Blackrock College has an allocation of one ex-quota post for guidance. There are three well qualified members of staff assigned to the delivery of the guidance service, which encompasses a combination of personal, educational and vocational guidance, and responsibilities are distributed across the three guidance counsellors. Guidance is provided as an integrated model with counselling. Each guidance counsellor is assigned a particular or particular year groups: third year and TY, second and sixth year, and fifth year. Guidance is provided by the team using a range of modes. These include, one-to-one

guidance and counselling interviews, timetabled guidance classes with senior-cycle groups, and sessions held with class groups by arrangement with subject teachers. While it is acknowledged that the guidance is delivered systematically and thoroughly, the provision of a weekly timetable or scheme of work to senior management is recommended. This would ensure that senior management is kept informed and it is on record as to how the time is being utilised.

The academic results and progress in fifth year at Christmas and Easter are reviewed in sixth year by the guidance counsellors. Students are given information about a whole range of options, colleges and choices within the qualifications' framework. Attendance at open days, careers' notice board and careers offices with ICT and libraries are commended. Each individual student develops an individual career plan for sixth year and can opt to attend a mock interview in sixth year. The idea of introducing the concept of career coaching is being considered which would involve the student more proactively in self-development. Fifth years are encouraged to conduct a career profile like the career investigation in LCVP. This is an encouraging innovative initiative. Such optional components encourage independent decision-making and self-reliance on the part of students and are praised.

Students may access counselling support or advice directly from the guidance team. A recently developed guidance plan is in place and outlines the curricular and service components of the department. The plan also makes provision for monitoring and review.

The quality of the pastoral role in Blackrock College is very good. All policies relating to student care are carefully recorded, adopted by the board and are in place. The necessary vigilance with regard to child protection was articulated during discussions with personnel working directly with students, in particular with boarders of different age groups. An acute awareness of the need for an anti-bullying policy and to reinforce the objective of the policy on bullying prevention days was also demonstrated. A system is in place whereby all students can access one-to-one counselling support directly through pastoral care. The college can also draw on additional counsellors from the congregation and retired teachers. A large number of staff members, but not exclusively, are former students who are very much committed to continuing the ethos of the school. The way in which the DEA has brought together the religion departments of its schools has gone a long way to forging the identity and fostering the ethos of its schools.

The chaplaincy, pastoral and RE departments facilitate family masses, the sacrament of reconciliation, class bereavement masses and prayer services for different occasions. The chaplain encourages the Christian community through the provision of liturgical celebrations. Days of reflection are organised for each year group external to the college. A recent initiative which places a renewed focus on prayer and for which a prayer area was identified and decorated illustrates the spirit and vibrancy of the pastoral programme. The head of the Religion department informs teachers and students of the range of liturgies and events and many staff members get involved during the year in liturgies and events. Care forms an integral part of year assemblies and is central to the role of year head. The college's code of practice enshrines rights of students and also promotes personal responsibilities of students.

6. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Blackrock College is very effective in upholding the objectives of its founders.
- The board of management has a complementary and useful range of skills and demonstrated considerable commitment to the college and to its role in the management of the college.
- It was evident from examination of board minutes that policies are regularly reviewed and updated, and policies required by legislation are in place.
- Blackrock College has a dynamic leader in its principal.
- The senior management team has a complementary range of skills and qualities and manages the college with great energy and clarity of direction and purpose.
- There are many examples of effective distributed leadership in the college in the areas of management of students, of pastoral and spiritual care, of subject departments and of administration and planning.

- The very good behaviour, attitude and participation of the students of Blackrock College as experienced at the time of the evaluation are testament to the efficient and effective management and organisational structures of the college.
- The Student Council is an active representative body and is proactive in contributing to the life of the school.
- The college has highly sophisticated information and communication technology (ICT) equipment in its classrooms and the effective use of ICT as a useful tool in teaching and learning was observed in many lessons.
- A significant level of resources is committed by the college to the provision and maintenance of the extensive sporting facilities,
- Review and consultation are features of the planning process in Blackrock College.
- Visionary leadership has set a clear and ambitious schedule for improvement and development for the college.
- The heads of department structure has contributed greatly to the development of subject planning. Planning for all subject areas evaluated during the WSE is very good.
- Blackrock College offers a broad curriculum to students, in terms of subjects, levels and programmes.
- The TY programme has different strands which complement the content and skills development within subjects and provide students with additional skills and competencies.
- The range of extra-curricular and co-curricular activities is very broad and illustrates the extent of the holistic development of the student.
- Teaching and learning was observed to be of a very high standard in Blackrock College
- Higher order learning was observed in the majority of classes and teachers had high expectations of their students and high standards are achieved in the students' chosen levels in state examinations.
- Frequency of reporting to parents on their son's progress is very good.
- There has been considerable commitment to and achievement in the organisation and coordination of the SEN provision in Blackrock College.
- An effective system is in place whereby all students can access one-to-one counselling support directly through pastoral care or guidance service.
- The quality of the pastoral role in Blackrock College is very good.

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

- The board should ensure that, as a matter of course, the date of policy ratification is clearly recorded or stamped on the actual policy document.
- Rotation of teachers across all levels and abilities should be given further consideration by senior management.
- Senior management should now prepare the School Plan for dissemination to the school community.
- Senior management is encouraged to examine the timetabling arrangements for subjects in light of some of the issues that have arisen in looking at a sample of subjects on the curriculum.
- It is recommended that school management should explore the possibility of mixed-ability as a basis for class formation across a broader range of subjects.
- It is recommended that subject departments should identify a broader range of teaching methodologies in line with the Departmental guidelines in relation to TY.

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 – 24 March 2009
- Subject Inspection of Mathematics– 20 April 2009

- Subject Inspection of Technical Graphics and Design and Communication Graphics – 20 March 2009
- Subject Inspection of Physical Education – 24 March 2009

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