



An Roinn Oideachais  
Department of Education

# Whole School Evaluation: Management, Leadership and Learning Report

## REPORT

Ainm na scoile/School name	Blackwater Community School
Seoladh na scoile/School address	Ballyanchor Road Lismore Co Waterford
Uimhir rolla/Roll number	91509E
Dáta na cigireachta/ Date of evaluation	16-11-2023
Dáta eisiúna na tuairisce/ Date of issue of report	04/03/2024

---

# What is a whole-school evaluation – management, leadership and learning?

Whole-School Evaluation – Management, Leadership and Learning reports on the quality of teaching and learning and on the quality of management and leadership in a school. It affirms good practice and makes recommendations, where appropriate, to aid the further development of educational provision in the school.

## How to read this report

During this inspection, the inspectors evaluated and reported under the following headings or areas of enquiry:

1. Quality of school leadership and management
2. Quality of teaching and learning
3. Quality of support for students' wellbeing

Inspectors describe the quality of each of these areas using the Inspectorate's quality continuum which is shown on the final page of this report. The quality continuum provides examples of the language used by inspectors when evaluating and describing the quality of the school's provision in each area.

The board of management of the school was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the report, and the response of the board will be found in the appendix of this report.

## Actions of the school to safeguard children and prevent and tackle bullying

During the inspection visit, the following checks in relation to the school's child protection and anti-bullying procedures were conducted:	
<i>Child Protection</i>	<i>Anti-bullying</i>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. The name of the DLP and the Child Safeguarding Statement are prominently displayed near the main entrance to the school.</li><li>2. The Child Safeguarding Statement has been ratified by the board and includes an annual review and a risk assessment.</li><li>3. All teachers visited reported that they have read the Child Safeguarding Statement and that they are aware of their responsibilities as mandated persons.</li><li>4. The Child Safeguarding Statement meets the requirements of the Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools (revised 2023).</li><li>5. The records of the last three board of management meetings record a child protection oversight report that meet the requirements of the Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary schools (revised 2023).</li><li>6. The board of management has ensured that arrangements are in place to provide information to all school personnel on the</li></ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. The school has developed an anti-bullying policy that meets the requirements of the <i>Anti-Bullying Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools (2013)</i> and this policy is reviewed annually.</li><li>2. The board of management minutes record that the principal provides a report to the board at least once a term on the overall number of bullying cases reported (by means of the bullying recording template provided in the <i>Procedures</i>) since the previous report to the board.</li><li>3. The school's anti-bullying policy is published on its website and/or is readily accessible to board of management members, teachers, parents and pupils.</li><li>4. The school has appropriate initiatives in place to promote a positive and inclusive school culture and environment.</li><li>5. All teachers visited report that they have read the school's policy on anti-bullying and that they are aware of their roles and responsibilities in preventing and tackling bullying.</li></ol>

<p>Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools (revised 2023).</p> <p>7. School planning documentation indicates that the school is making full provision for the relevant aspects of the curriculum (SPHE, Stay Safe, RSE).</p> <p>8. Child protection records are maintained in a secure location.</p>	
---	--

The school met the requirements in relation to each of the checks above.

---

# Whole-school evaluation – management, leadership and learning

<b>Date of inspection</b>	16-11-2023
<b>Inspection activities undertaken</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Meeting with Board of Management</li><li>• Meetings with principal and deputy principals</li><li>• Meetings with key staff</li><li>• Review of relevant documents</li><li>• Student focus group meetings</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Meeting with parents</li><li>• Analysis of parent, student and teacher questionnaires</li><li>• Observation of teaching and learning</li><li>• Examination of students' work</li><li>• Interaction with students</li><li>• Feedback to senior management team, board of management and teachers</li></ul>

## School context

Blackwater Community School is a co-educational, multi-denominational school founded in 2003 following the amalgamation of the local Christian Brothers', Mercy, and Presentation schools. It operates under the joint patronage of Catholic Education, an Irish Schools Trust (CEIST), Christian Brothers' Schools (CBS), and Waterford and Wexford Education and Training Board (WWETB). At the time of the evaluation, the school had an enrolment of 951 students drawn from fourteen feeder schools, an increase in enrolment from 441 in 2003. A new building was almost complete, with capacity for 1,000 students. The school curriculum included Junior Cycle, Level Two Learning Programmes (L2LPs), an optional Transition Year programme (TY), the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) and the Leaving Certificate (Established) (LCE). The Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) was also offered for students depending on uptake, but was not running at the time of the evaluation. The school had three special classes for students with autism and was awaiting approval for a fourth class.

## Summary of main findings and recommendations:

### Findings

- The quality of teaching and learning was very good; teachers were highly committed, regularly availed of professional learning opportunities, and frequently shared their expertise with their peers.
- The quality of school leadership was highly effective, and ensured the smooth running of the school.
- The facilities in the school, the breadth of the curriculum on offer, and the subject choices available to students were very good.
- The school provided an excellent range of leadership opportunities for staff and students.
- The quality of supports for students and their wellbeing was very good.
- Very positive relationships were evident, and care for individual students and staff members was a priority.

### Recommendations

- In some lessons, students were not suitably challenged by the tasks set. Where this occurred, in order to extend learning opportunities for students, teachers should plan extension activities and include an element of choice in homework tasks.
- While the support provided to students in the special classes was flexible and responsive to their needs, some students would benefit from autism-specific interventions. The teachers assigned to the special classes should access training in evidence-based, autism-specific interventions to better support student learning; the school should support them in this endeavour.

# Detailed findings and recommendations

## 1. The quality of teaching and learning

The overall quality of teaching and learning was very good.

### Learner outcomes and experiences

Lessons were underpinned by very respectful interactions, which led to co-operative and productive learning environments. Students' contributions were affirmed and valued and, as a result, they were comfortable offering their opinions and ideas during lessons. The teachers' enthusiasm for their subjects had a positive impact on students' motivation and it was evident that students were interested in their work and were eager to learn.

Classroom structures and routines were very well established. Lessons began with a recap of prior learning, which enabled teachers to assess student understanding. Teachers also linked new concepts to prior learning and students' own lives and interests where possible. This greatly enhanced the learning experience. Learning intentions were routinely shared with students at the outset of lessons and revisited at the end, facilitating student self-assessment. These were most effective when they were written in student-friendly language and when their meaning was discussed to ensure a common understanding of the purpose of the lesson.

The use of a very good variety of tasks ensured continued student motivation and engagement. Students had opportunities to actively participate in their learning through well-organised individual and small-group activities. During these activities, teachers provided good one-to-one support for students. In most lessons, the focus on active learning created dialogic classrooms where student discussion was facilitated and encouraged. Where teacher talk predominated, students were more passive and there were fewer opportunities for the teacher to circulate to assess the level of student understanding. Where this occurred, teachers should ensure a balance of teacher input and student activity.

Students' subject-specific skill development was very well supported. In the most effective lessons, students also had opportunities to develop their creativity and problem-solving skills. Similar opportunities for the development of these skills could be extended to all lessons.

Teachers used digital technologies very well to support student learning. Students also had some opportunities to use digital technologies to enhance their own learning through activities such as online revision games and surveys.

### Teachers individual and collective practice

An excellent level of lesson preparation resulted in very high-quality resource materials and well-sequenced activities. The school had recently changed from forty-minute to fifty-eight-minute lessons and effective planning ensured that lesson time was used efficiently to optimise student learning and productivity.

Teachers used questioning very successfully to elicit and scaffold learning and students displayed very good knowledge and understanding during classroom discussions. Students' answers to homework activities were discussed, oral feedback was provided and, commendably, students were expected to act on teachers' feedback, thereby taking responsibility for progressing their own learning.

Many student-centred activities were utilised, such as think-pair-share, brainstorming, graphic organisers, and self-assessment checklists. In the most effective lessons, these activities were designed to include an element of choice and to challenge students of all abilities to extend their learning. In lessons where students were not suitably challenged by the tasks set, teachers should plan extension activities and include an element of choice in homework tasks.

Teachers collaborated very effectively through the formal subject department structures, while all staff members were involved in school self-evaluation (SSE) committees. Positive, respectful relationships between staff supported a very good level of informal collaboration. Substantial work had been done on subject planning and teachers were encouraged to reflect on their individual and collective classroom practice. They also engaged regularly in professional

learning opportunities with the full support of school management and frequently shared their expertise at staff meetings and through engagement in some co-teaching and peer observation.

## **2. Quality of school leadership and management**

The overall quality of leadership and management was very good.

### **Leading learning and teaching**

The school offered a broad, balanced curriculum where students had a wide variety of subjects to choose from. During focus group interviews with students, they praised the range of subjects available and indicated that the subject options process was student centred. Some examples of successful supports that enabled students to make informed subject choices included the language sampling programme offered to first-year students and the opportunities afforded to transition-year students to sample each senior cycle subject. Students in TY also had the option to study a new language, while the varied modules offered as part of the TY programme supported the development of transferrable skills.

Students with special educational needs received highly effective support. Mainstream teachers were informed about the most suitable strategies to support each individual student's learning. During learning support lessons, students were grouped in terms of similar needs, clear learning targets were shared with teachers, and the impact of teaching strategies was regularly monitored by senior leadership, the special educational needs team, and the students themselves. After the removal of Covid-19 restrictions, team teaching was reintroduced to support student learning in mainstream lessons, while the board of management was proactive in seeking a further special class to support students with autism.

Teachers of Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) and Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) had received training in suitable pedagogies for the subjects and were following a specific RSE programme to ensure consistency. Students also learned about the school's anti-bullying policy during these lessons.

Excellent structures were in place to support development of teaching and learning. There was a culture of sharing pedagogies among the staff, and teachers involved in trialling team-based learning shared the outcomes of their research with their colleagues. Senior leadership supported teachers new to the school to further develop their teaching by observing their lessons and providing constructive feedback, while newly qualified teachers received further supports through the Droichead process.

Teachers were very committed to engaging in professional learning to support the needs of the school and this was encouraged and facilitated by management. Membership of subject associations was paid by the school, while several teachers were attending distributed leadership courses which had a focus on teaching and learning. Regular teacher professional reflection was also promoted, while subject department planning time had been increased to encourage more conversations about teaching and learning.

Considerable progress had been made in upskilling teachers in the use of the school's online learning platform to support teaching, learning and assessment, while digital devices had been provided to teachers. Students had access to two class sets of devices and two computer rooms. Further sets of devices were available for use by the students following the LCA programme and for those who did not have access to devices at home.

Very comprehensive SSE processes were in place. All staff, students, and parents were surveyed at the end of each year, and the survey results informed the priorities identified in the school improvement plan. However, a specific teaching and learning focus had not been identified. To further develop the improvement plan, the school should select a specific teaching and learning focus which can help it realise its identified priorities. Individual departments could adapt this whole-school teaching and learning focus to reflect the specific pedagogies of their subject.

The school had moved towards more detailed, formative reporting to parents in order to provide a clear picture of the quality of student learning and the steps required to progress. This development was further supported by student attendance at parent-teacher meetings, which

allowed them to take ownership of their learning. In the parent surveys conducted during the evaluation, most parents indicated that school reports gave them a good picture of how their child was doing in school and that they were satisfied with the arrangements for parent-teacher meetings.

### **Managing the organisation**

The school's board of management functioned very effectively. Board members demonstrated a keen awareness of their responsibilities and provided a valuable and dedicated service to the school. Meetings were held regularly and were informed by comprehensive reports from the principal, year heads, and members of various committees in the school.

A wide range of policies had been developed and excellent structures were in place to ensure timely review of these policies. At the time of the evaluation, the substance abuse policy was being reviewed, while a review of the homework and the special educational needs policies had just been completed in consultation with teachers, students and parents. The board also demonstrated its commitment to the changing needs of the school through the introduction of anti-racism and mobile phone policies.

At the time of the evaluation, students in the special classes were based in a temporary room while awaiting the completion of a bespoke area with classrooms, a sensory garden and two sensory rooms. The core team assigned to these classes and the senior leadership team collaborated very well with the students' parents to ensure the provision of an appropriate level of care. Students could avail of summer provision prior to joining the school, which helped to familiarise them with the environment and to support their transition into the school. The support provided to students was flexible and responsive to their needs, and staff were working towards greater inclusion of the students in mainstream lessons. Some students in the special classes with a high level of need would benefit from autism-specific interventions. Whilst the teachers had availed of professional learning opportunities relating to inclusive practices and special educational needs provision, they should access training in evidence-based, autism-specific interventions to better support student learning. A large number of mainstream teachers were providing support in the special classes. While it is commendable that the students attended mainstream classes where possible, when based in the special class, they should be supported by teachers trained in evidence-based, autism-specific interventions.

The senior leadership team was highly effective, and each team member was very committed to their role. An excellent level of collaboration ensured the smooth day-to-day running of the school, and was supported by regular formal and informal meetings. Half the senior leadership team was involved in actively supporting the professional learning of their peers through their involvement in delivering workshops to leaders in other schools. The recent appointment of a third deputy principal had led to a review of roles and the team had utilised *Looking at our School 2022: A Quality Framework for Post-Primary Schools* to allocate roles linked to each individual's skills and interests. All members of the leadership team were very visible on the school corridors at break times and the strategic location of their offices ensured they were accessible to all members of the school community.

Effective formal communication systems were in place. The school published an academic year summary which contained the board's annual report and accounts from all post holders and subject co-ordinators. The board also received regular written reports from the student council. Some examples of the very good structures in place to communicate with parents included regular newsletters, the school app and website, and meetings between senior leadership and parents of students with English as an additional language (EAL).

### **Leading school development**

A key focus of the board, senior management and staff was to create a welcoming atmosphere for students and their parents. New staff were also warmly welcomed and bonding events were organised to help them settle into the school.

There was a very clear focus on improving the school for students through the completion of the new building. The board, senior leadership team, teaching, and administrative staff had responded very positively to the short-term challenges caused by the ongoing building work, as had the local community. During interviews held with students, they commented favourably on

the extensive facilities available, including large classrooms, comprehensive sporting amenities, and well-equipped specialist rooms.

The board and senior management demonstrated a keen understanding of the importance of the school to the locality and had forged very positive relationships with the local community and the neighbouring primary schools. Senior leadership and the special educational needs team regularly visited the feeder schools, local businesses facilitated student work experience, and the school used community facilities for physical education (PE) lessons when the grounds were unavailable due to construction work. Students also engaged with the community through their involvement with the local Church, while local residents who had made positive contributions to the school were honoured with a community award at the school's awards night.

### **Developing leadership capacity**

The board and the senior leadership team actively encouraged staff engagement with leadership courses. In the surveys completed during the evaluation, all teachers indicated that they were encouraged to avail of professional development opportunities. The teaching staff were also facilitated to take on leadership roles and responsibilities for various projects in the school. There was a high level of volunteerism among the staff and many teachers organised co-curricular and extra-curricular activities. All teachers were involved in formal networks and committees and they were given full responsibility for running these networks. Teachers interviewed during the evaluation indicated that they felt empowered, and that whenever they approached senior management with a proposal, they were given the opportunity to explore and develop it.

The board recognised students' capacity for leadership and promoted this by supporting various student-led initiatives. Examples of the many leadership opportunities available to students included the roles held by the head boy and head girls, students' involvement in coaching sports, and various student-led committees. Fifth-year students had the opportunity to join 'Cairde', the school's student mentoring system, which not only provided support for first-year students during their transition to the school, but also helped the leaders themselves to develop new skills.

The student council represented the voice of the student body by providing regular written reports to management, and leading initiatives such as the introduction of a homework club, the provision of a diversity lounge for students, and the development of a new PE top. Student voice was also evident in the comprehensive consultation that had informed the content of the school's anti-racism policy, diversity code, and mobile phone policy, while the students had designed the cairde and student council badges.

The parents' council was very active and was valued by school management. Members were kept informed of the work of the board and were involved in the development and review of policies. All parents were consulted during the development of the mobile phone policy.

## **3. Quality of support for students' wellbeing**

The quality of support for students' wellbeing was very good and was an important part of the school culture.

A very high level of care and the warm atmosphere in the school were mentioned by parents, teachers and students in their engagement with inspectors. The teaching staff also stressed that maintaining this welcoming atmosphere was of particular importance as the school expanded in size. Very positive relationships among students and respectful student-teacher interactions were a feature of all lessons observed. The introduction of an award for students who demonstrated a caring attitude towards others highlighted the importance attached to positive interpersonal relationships. Staff wellbeing was also highly valued and was supported through extra-curricular activities for staff and the autonomy afforded to teachers in their leadership roles.

The school had recently moved to a phone-free environment to increase student socialisation at break times. All students and teachers interviewed during the evaluation mentioned that, as a result, students were engaging with each other more, thereby supporting their sense of belonging.



The school's care team was highly effective. It met weekly to discuss how to support student needs and had good mechanisms in place to share information where necessary. The team was ably supported by the work of the year heads, the special educational needs team, the class tutors, the chaplains, and the senior leadership team. The guidance structures were very effective and suitable supports were provided to students at each stage of their journey within the school. The board also employed two external counsellors to support students' wellbeing. The school had received an amber flag to represent its commitment to supporting students' mental health, which was also reflected in the uplifting quotes on the student-designed wellbeing stairs.

The school's focus on inclusion was very evident, with a wide range of supports available for students. The employment of a Ukrainian-speaking teacher helped to support a sense of belonging for students and their families arriving from Ukraine, while a 'diversity tree' represented the twenty-three different nationalities within the school. Students' culture was also supported by multi-lingual signs on the doors of the classrooms. Many of the extra-curricular clubs, such as the yellow flag committee, the diversity lounge, and the garage band, helped students to make social connections and to meet like-minded students, while the work of the green schools committee highlighted the importance of the local environment.

Transition of students into the school was very well managed and included a peer mentoring programme. Fifth-year students supported those in first year as they settled into the school by organising social activities. Students were very complimentary about this programme, and its success could be seen in the fact that sixth-year students had continued to mentor their students as they moved into second year.

Students in sixth year were assigned a teacher mentor to assist with goal setting and action planning. The students indicated that this support was very helpful as it enabled them to take responsibility for their learning. At the time of the evaluation, the school was focusing on student attendance and was monitoring this very closely to improve students' attainment and their connectedness to the school community.

The school's emphasis on academic achievement was complemented by a diverse range of co-curricular and extra-curricular activities, made possible by the commitment of numerous teachers. In the student survey conducted during the evaluation, a very high percentage of students indicated that they had the opportunity to take part in any school activity in which they were interested, reflecting the wide variety of opportunities available to them. The strong sense of community within the school was reinforced by activities such as a sports day to raise money for charities nominated by the students, and social events organised for sixth-year students and their families.

## The Inspectorate's Quality Continuum

Inspectors describe the quality of provision in the school using the Inspectorate's quality continuum which is shown below. The quality continuum provides examples of the language used by inspectors when evaluating and describing the quality of the school's provision of each area.

Level	Description	Example of descriptive terms
Very Good	<i>Very good</i> applies where the quality of the areas evaluated is of a very high standard. The very few areas for improvement that exist do not significantly impact on the overall quality of provision. For some schools in this category the quality of what is evaluated is <i>outstanding</i> and provides an example for other schools of exceptionally high standards of provision.	Very good; of a very high quality; very effective practice; highly commendable; very successful; few areas for improvement; notable; of a very high standard. Excellent; outstanding; exceptionally high standard, with very significant strengths; exemplary
Good	<i>Good</i> applies where the strengths in the areas evaluated clearly outweigh the areas in need of improvement. The areas requiring improvement impact on the quality of pupils' learning. The school needs to build on its strengths and take action to address the areas identified as requiring improvement in order to achieve a <i>very good</i> standard.	Good; good quality; valuable; effective practice; competent; useful; commendable; good standard; some areas for improvement
Satisfactory	<i>Satisfactory</i> applies where the quality of provision is adequate. The strengths in what is being evaluated just outweigh the shortcomings. While the shortcomings do not have a significant negative impact they constrain the quality of the learning experiences and should be addressed in order to achieve a better standard.	Satisfactory; adequate; appropriate provision although some possibilities for improvement exist; acceptable level of quality; improvement needed in some areas
Fair	<i>Fair</i> applies where, although there are some strengths in the areas evaluated, deficiencies or shortcomings that outweigh those strengths also exist. The school will have to address certain deficiencies without delay in order to ensure that provision is satisfactory or better.	Fair; evident weaknesses that are impacting on pupils' learning; less than satisfactory; experiencing difficulty; must improve in specified areas; action required to improve
Weak	<i>Weak</i> applies where there are serious deficiencies in the areas evaluated. Immediate and coordinated whole-school action is required to address the areas of concern. In some cases, the intervention of other agencies may be required to support improvements.	Weak; unsatisfactory; insufficient; ineffective; poor; requiring significant change, development or improvement; experiencing significant difficulties;

# **Appendix**

**SCHOOL RESPONSE TO THE REPORT**

**Submitted by the Board of Management**

## **Part A Observations on the content of the inspection report**

The board is very proud of the fact that we were categorised as being 'very good' in all three areas of our WSE-MLL inspection. (This is the top level of the Inspectorate's Quality Continuum) i.e.

1. "The quality of teaching and learning was very good"
2. "The overall quality of leadership and management was very good"
3. "The quality of support for students' wellbeing was very good and was an important part of the school culture"

## **Part B Follow-up actions planned or undertaken since the completion of the inspection activity to implement the findings and recommendations of the inspection.**

### **Recommendation 1**

Our next shared practice session is focused on differentiation with an emphasis on extension activities as recommended.

### **Recommendation 2**

Our next staff day will have a further autism support presentation and special class teachers will engage in further recommended training.'