

## *Welcoming Schools Report*



**St Marys HS Newry**



St Mary's High  
School  
Newry

## WELCOMING SCHOOLS ASSESSMENT REPORT

Date:

School	St Mary's High School, Newry
Principal	Mrs Margo Cosgrove
Vice Principal	Miss Denise Crawley
WS Coordinator	Miss Sile Bartlett
Local Authority	SELB
Assessors	Mrs Jayne Simms, Miss Ruth Finlay and Mrs Jayne Fitzgerald
Date	

Thank you to Mrs Margo Cosgrove (Principal), Miss Denise Crawley (Vice Principal) and Miss Sile Barlett (Welcoming Schools Coordinator) for welcoming us to St Mary's High School and for organising an insightful and thoroughly enjoyable visit. Many thanks to the St. Mary's pupils for

greeting us on arrival to the school and for their valuable participation throughout the day. Thank you for the invitation to your presentation and for the opportunity to speak to a number of pupils and teachers about their experiences. Prior to our visit a detailed school’s evaluation pro-forma was completed and a very comprehensive evidence portfolio was prepared. During our visit St. Mary’s exuded a welcoming ethos and the importance placed on being a welcoming school was evident throughout the day.

The Welcoming Schools team recognises commitment in all five areas – people, place, policies, processes and programmes.

## THE ASSESSMENT IN DETAIL

School’s Evaluation Pro-Forma completed	Yes
Attendees at Evaluation	Mrs Margo Cosgrove, Miss Denise Crawley and Miss Sile Bartlett
Number of children interviewed	9 pupils
A/N Other interviews	Informal discussions with teachers
Evidence provided	Learning Walk Portfolio of Evidence Evaluation Pro-Forma

## **POLICIES – CHILD-CENTRED PROVISION**

The planning and construction of the School Development Plan ensures that the Welcoming Schools project is embedded in practice and delivery. Key priorities for development for 2013/2014 include the continued work on the aims and objectives of Welcoming Schools.

Throughout the evidence folder there are many examples of initiatives and activities that have a child-centred approach and, on visiting the school, it is very evident that children's needs and wellbeing are at the centre of every aspect of school life.

St Mary's teaching and non-teaching staff embarked on the Welcoming Schools training programme and brought a high level of enthusiasm and professionalism to all training days. Individual staff members attended a variety of training events including 'Community Relations in Practice', CRED/History Focus Day and the Principal Master Class. All members of staff were made aware of the aims and objectives of Welcoming Schools and of the positive implications of pursuing the Welcoming Schools Award through a whole staff development day entitled 'From Good to Great'. Teaching and non-teaching staff attended the day in the Canal Court Hotel in June 2013. This whole-school approach ensured that the project was embraced and driven forward to its full

potential. Feedback from both of these days was extremely positive. Participants commented that it was “...an enjoyable day with plenty of informative ideas to take back. Very positive and motivational.”

The St Mary’s prospectus highlights inclusivity and the importance of a safe and welcoming environment which invites children to reach their full potential. There is a strong emphasis on valuing the whole child by supporting educational attainment as well as physical, moral and spiritual wellbeing. The role of Pupil Voice is given priority in the prospectus, as it is in the school. The role of Pastoral Care is also prevalent throughout. Photographs are inclusive and a wide range of academic and extra-curricular activities are presented.

There is evidence of a Welcoming Schools Assembly in the Welcoming Schools portfolio. The assembly was presented by Nicola O’Gorman and Aimee-Marie McGovern from year 14 and Yukthi Sivakumaar from year 8 who led the assembly explaining St Mary’s role in the Welcoming Schools project. The high level of planning and preparation carried out by both pupils and teachers was very evident and the atmosphere created through the school was one of inclusivity, embracing difference and mutual respect for each other.

St Mary’s mission statement of ‘Optimum Semper Facere’ (‘always to do one’s best’) is at the heart of St Mary’s. The Mission Statement is very visible around the school and is a

constant reminder to staff and pupils of what the school and pupils aspire to.

St Mary's places a strong emphasis on Pupil Voice and the Student Council plays a significant role in whole school life. During this visit pupils spoke very highly of their experience as school council members and enthusiastically explained to the visitors how much of a difference it had made to their self-confidence and communication skills. Pupils in the focus group commented on the process of becoming a council member in St Mary's, stating that although it was challenging, it was an invaluable experience and helped to prepare them for university and job interviews. A significant event for the school is the 'hand-over' assembly when girls are given their new responsibilities. This is a very pupil-centred event and gives a great sense of worth and value to the achievements of the girls. It was evident to the assessors that members of the council welcomed the opportunity to have their opinions and ideas listened to and they felt very strongly that they were making a difference to the school. The School Council has seen a number of its ideas and plans come to fruition which has instilled a sense of pride in the council members.

The importance given to Pupil Voice has been further emphasised through the completion of Pupil questionnaires and the availability of suggestion boxes in the school. A further opportunity was given to Clodhna McCorry (School Council) and Laura Hillen (Deputy Head Girl) who were invited to attend the post-primary Sharing and Collaboration

day at Integrated College Dungannon where they entered into discussions with pupils, teachers and principals from other schools.

There is evidence provided that all school policies are consistent, fair and just. Several policies have been revised over the duration of the project and are written in a welcoming and invitational manner. A CRED policy was written in June 2012 and further updated in April 2013. Policies are easily accessed on the school website.

St Mary's makes optimum use of their website as a vehicle for communication with pupils, parents and the wider community. Aims of the Welcoming Schools project have been featured on the website, as have any related activities and initiatives. The website is updated regularly with up-to-date reports and photographs.

At St Mary's there is clear evidence of inclusive practices which reflect the needs of all children. An important example of such practices is their provision for their international students. St Mary's staff are very dedicated to the inclusion of newcomer children within their school community and incorporate several strategies to ensure that they feel welcomed, safe and happy at St Mary's. A study carried out by Fiona McAlinden (BSc, PGCE, Med) states that the '...overall quality of the provision to support newcomer pupils in St Mary's is excellent and I would recommend that they disseminate their good practice to other schools within the Newry and Mourne Area Learning Community.' St

Mary's work in conjunction with the IDS service and have produced a booklet for all newcomer pupils arriving at the school. The Newcomer Support Coordinator and her team dedicate a lot of time and effort to ensure that all newcomer pupils feel welcome and fully integrated into school life.

## **PROGRAMMES-HIGH QUALITY TEACHING AND LEARNING**

There is significant evidence of lessons throughout the school which promote the aims and objectives of Welcoming Schools and look closely at community relations. Further evidence of the importance given to the valuing of difference in classroom teaching can be seen in the scheme of learning and lesson tracking for Year 8 citizenship. Key concepts and developments in the scheme highlight similarities and differences, cultural identity, inclusion and exclusion and the valuing of difference in our school and local community. More specifically, a group of Year 9 girls participated in the LET programme (Learning and Educating Together) with schools from the integrated and controlled sectors. This residential programme promotes peace and reconciliation through tasks which develop entrepreneurial skills and outdoor activities which help improve social skills.

All lessons are monitored and evaluated through the Learning and Reflection Plans to support effective learning and teaching in St Mary's. Teachers are committed to help

underachieving students through a variety of support, partnering and mentoring schemes. All correspondence to parents with regards to these is presented positively and clearly.

The focus group of pupils were keen to highlight that there were many opportunities in St Mary's to be involved in councils and initiatives. A very enthusiastic young Eco-council member proudly told us about the changes which had been implemented in the school as a result of Eco-council discussions. 'Blackout Friday' encouraged pupils and teachers to switch all lights and equipment off before the end of school and lunchtime observers look out for teachers who have left lights on in their classrooms. The SNAGS group has been very effective in boosting health awareness. The group have not only focused on promoting better breaks and drinking more water, but have also addressed the topics of self-confidence and self-esteem through inviting a make-up artist and a personal shopper into the school to deliver workshops. The 'Learning Partnership' between Year 14 and Year 8 pupils is an excellent scheme with the senior pupils investing time to help Year 8 pupils who are struggling with key issues such as organisational skills or fitting into friendship groups. The Year 14 pupils benefit from specific training as well as child protection training.

St Mary's achievements through Right's Respecting Schools align very closely with the aims and objectives of the Welcoming Schools project. The pupils were proud to

explain how the class charter was drawn up and why it is important to include the responsibilities of adults as well as students in the charter.

The interviewed pupils all agreed that the extra-curricular provision and support were an enjoyable part of life at St Mary's. They talked animatedly about the wide range of activities available to them. A comprehensive list of extra-curricular activities and trips in the evidence portfolio emphasizes the diversity of provision which caters for all interests.

## **PEOPLE – EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP**

The Welcoming Schools initiative has been fully supported by the Principal, Vice Principal and Coordinator within St Mary's and this has been an influential factor in the success of the programme. Miss Sile Bartlett (coordinator) has shown commitment and enthusiasm in her approach to the project and Mrs Margo Cosgrove (Principal) has been visible throughout both within the school and at Sharing and Collaboration events. The Sharing and Collaboration days gave opportunities for Principal and members of Senior Leadership to communicate and liaise with the Senior Leadership from schools of the controlled and integrated sectors. The commitment shown by the Senior Leadership within the school highlighted the importance placed on the

project and instilled amongst the staff a sense of the significance of the work being done.

During the Welcoming Schools evaluation visit there was significant evidence of all staff being involved in the project and conversations with teachers confirmed that they were knowledgeable and well informed about the aims and objectives of the project. The Welcoming Schools Coordinator in St Mary's has been intentional in her involvement of staff in decision making and this process was reflected in the whole staff day where teaching and non-teaching staff had the opportunity to voice their opinions and give suggestions. The detailed audit and action planning process at the outset of the programme provided a platform from which to move forward as a whole school.

The Welcoming Schools Coordinator and Principal showed evidence of using sub-cover effectively to further the aims of the project. Training provided by Welcoming Schools was availed of and provided rich professional development for staff. Regular liaison with Jayne Fitzgerald (Teacher Developer) ensured that progress was continuously monitored.

Minutes of Board of Governors meeting and staff meetings highlight the relevance placed on the project and the inclusion of Board of Governors and all staff as essential stakeholders in the project. Aims of the Welcoming Schools project have been clearly disseminated to all members of teaching and non-teaching staff as well as parents and pupils.

## **PLACES – A SCHOOL CONNECTED TO ITS LOCAL COMMUNITY**

There is significant evidence within the Welcoming Schools portfolio that communication with parents and the wider community is inviting. All letters are written in a positive and welcoming manner and St Mary's have had several documents, policies and letters translated into the language of the international students. Communications are relevant, informative, attractive and interesting. Parents and the wider community have the opportunity to visit the school on regular occasions throughout the year and the dedication of staff in organising events is exemplary.

St Mary's place great emphasis on collaboration with other schools. St Mary's collaborates with St Colman's College, St Mark's High School and the Southern Regional College in order to offer the best education and choices to all students. The school has produced a "Welcome Leaflet" for the collaboration students to help them feel comfortable and welcome during their classes at St Mary's.

St Mary's have attended the Sharing and Collaboration days hosted by the other post-primaries involved in the Welcoming Schools project. This was a great opportunity for further collaboration and sharing good practice. Mrs Cosgrove is also heavily involved in the Newry and Mourne ALC and is in

constant communication with Principals and teachers from other sectors. The staff at St Mary's, show a dedication to continual improvement and see collaboration with other schools as an important means to achieving this goal.

Involvement in the Welcoming Schools project has granted time to the coordinators in St Mary's to make a significant number of changes to the physical school environment. Small changes all work together to make significant impact and this has been the case with St Mary's with regards to the 'Place' element of the school. Changes and improvements have been made in the foyer by making the reception area more visible, thus fully appreciating the importance of the receptionist in school life and the greeting of visitors on arrival. Excellent art work is displayed both in the foyer and throughout the school, giving full credit to the talent and hard work of the pupils. The reception area is clean, spacious and tidy and provides a very inviting first impression of the school. Diversity is reflected in the display boards, flags and signs which have been translated into other languages. Throughout the school display boards are inviting, up-to-date and informative.

St Mary's have also created new meeting rooms for visitors which are comfortable and welcoming and have already been of great benefit to the school.

School grounds are also thoroughly well maintained and therefore provide a pleasant impression of the school before entering the building.

## PROCESSES

A pastoral and welcoming atmosphere permeates throughout the school and assessors were greeted in a friendly manner by all staff and pupils throughout the day. As a parent stated, “Your school’s pastoral care was evident from the minute we walked through the front door in the smiling, friendly faces from both the girls and the staff”. The dedication and committed work ethic of the staff at St Mary’s has been affirmed by positive comments from parents and the wider community such as, “I have seen my daughter grow in confidence and make great progress at your school. This is owed to the hard work and dedication to your staff.”

St Mary’s is a school which is very happy to open its doors to visitors on a daily basis, allowing them to see school life as it is and appreciating both positive feedback and ideas on how to improve school life. This is to be commended.

A very thorough and well thought out Audit and Action Plan gave a structure to the work carried out through Welcoming Schools and continues to be a working document within St Mary’s. All staff was involved in this process which provided an excellent foundation for whole school involvement.

## **OVERALL IMPRESSION**

St Mary's have approached the Welcoming Schools project as a means of school improvement and have invested a considerable amount of time on making significant changes in all 5 areas. The staff in St Mary's is extremely hard working and want the best for the pupils in their care and this has been evident throughout the duration of the project. The staff has been involved in the decision-making process and their ideas and input are recognised and valued by members of the school leadership team. The Welcoming Schools Coordinator and Principal have been active in keeping all stakeholders up to date with their progress and have therefore been on a journey together.

The pupils play a leading role in this child-centred school and act as ambassadors for the Welcoming Schools project. The focus group of pupils were extremely articulate and animated to talk about their school. Pupils were very evidently proud of their school and very grateful for the opportunities they have as students at St Mary's.

The Welcoming Schools Coordinator established links with colleagues in other schools and it is evident that they will play a pivotal role in fostering these links and building on the new alliances which the Welcoming Schools project afforded them.



This is an example of a school which is committed to the Welcoming Schools aims and objectives and the positive atmosphere around the school was evident. It is clear that this school will continue to strive to be a Welcoming School.