

Principal's Report 2023/2023 to the Board of Management and Parents/Guardians

This school year began in August as many other years have – all busy, full of plans, great energy and buzz around the place, delight to be back in a non-lockdown school year, and most obvious of all, positivity. By June 2nd, we looked back and realised it was our most successful year yet, across every aspect of school life.

We held our annual Open Night in October, the first real one since 2019. Two weeks later, we celebrated the founding of St Mary's CBS in its original Tower Hill address in Portlaoise in 1847, 175 years ago. This was marked by a week-long celebration of students, staff, past pupils, football teams, teachers, visual displays of photographs and more. It was a wonderful week of memories and activities. It attracted great attention from our local community and we enjoyed every minute of it.

It was also a year of several 'firsts' for the CBS.

- Our first group of Leaving Cert Applied students begin 5th year in September.
- Through an Athlone company, Shannon Academy, we accepted 4 Spanish students, some for a term, some for a full year. They were excellent students and we will be continuing our relationship with Shannon Academy in the coming school year.
- We also, with the support of Shannon Academy who sponsored 2 sets of jerseys, began a volleyball, (with both junior and senior teams), who had great success and finished off their year by winning silver in the All Ireland!
- We added a 3rd ASD class to our Solas Centre, offering 6 new students the facilities and support which our special class offers.
- This June, for the first time, we ran the new Summer Programme. Twelve students enrolled and Mr Chris Carroll planned an action packed ten days for them. Trips, swimming, learning skills, sports day, etc. were all part of their programme.
- We are able to offer two new sports Scholarships to our Incoming First Year Entrants in September. Both Portlaoise Rugby Club and Portlaoise Panthers Basketball Clubs are providing a total of 3 generous scholarships to the existing two scholarships which we offer as a school. We are delighted to be closely associated with these very progressive and successful clubs, and take it as a vote of confidence in our ability to continue to produce great students and sportsmen.
- Leinster Rugby awarded our school with the *Development School of the Year 2023 Award* for the huge strides which have been made in rugby since it was introduced in 2018.

As both our 3rd years and our 6th years sat their State Exams last June for the first time since 2019, we awaited their results in September and, eventually for the Junior Certs, in December! And they were worth the wait. We were very proud of all our students who had survived lockdown online lessons. Also, for the 6th years, it was their first State Exam. They maintained the same excellent record of previous year groups. For those who achieved 600+ points and those who achieved enough to attain the college course or trade they had applied for we congratulate them. Our school motto asks every student to give of his best, that is all and once again they did. Everyone will find their way, at their own pace.

As always, reading and literacy are basic to embedding 'self-directed learning' and 'learning for life' in our students. Since lockdown, there has been a renewed emphasis on improving literacy.

- Our school has been named a *Wellread School 2023-26* after the hard work which Ms M Lalor and her Team put into this programme over the last two to three years. This involves linking with the community, the town library, parents, staff, and students to encourage all to read more.
- We are continuing with *Accelerated Reader*, a programme in which we focus on 1st & 2nd years, allowing students to choose books to read from either our own school library or from the online library which is part of the programme. They progress through the levels of comprehension by taking an online test at the end of each book. Challenges are run between classes and prizes given for the most words read. It encourages students to read more while giving them thousands of books to read from any genre or topic they wish.

We also had some fantastic academic achievements this year.

- Our Senior Debating Team reached the Griffith Law Schools Debating Competition Finals where only eight schools in Ireland were selected. Unfortunately, our students did not reach the final on the day but they really enjoyed the experience. Again, we are so proud of them for reaching this stage of the competition.
- Our Transition Year students won their Mini Company achievements at the Student Enterprise Programme Competition. *Tony's Timber* picked up the marketing award. *Scentsational* were 3rd in the overall competition and 'Budget Bro App' were 2nd in the overall competition.
- We also received a *Prodigy Learning Centre of Excellence Award* for our outstanding work in delivering the Microsoft Office Specialist Programme from Microsoft Ireland.

The *From Each His Best* Scholarship was awarded to two incoming 1st years and they were presented with their awards in May. Ethan O'Connor from The Heath NC and Eoin Fitzpatrick from Portlaoise Educate Together NS were the successful candidates. This scholarship is based on the best combination of the Scholarship Exam results and their own sporting achievements.

Our students excelled across 7 sports:

- Our U17 Soccer team were the Leinster A League Champions.
- Our Senior, Junior and First Year Football teams, all claimed Leinster B League titles.
- Our 2nd Year Hurling team, again Leinster B League champions.
- Our 1st and 2nd Year Basketball teams who won their Midlands A Regional Finals.
- A special mention to our 1st Year Basketball team who reached the All Ireland A Final in UL but unfortunately were defeated.

- In Athletics, Daniel Downey received Double Gold in the High Jump. He is the South Leinster Champion in the High Jump and 800m. Daniel went on to win the All Ireland Final on the June Bank Holiday. David Wajrak finished an impressive 25th in the Junior Boys All Ireland Schools cross country after winning the South Leinsters.
- Our Junior and Senior Rugby teams were Cup champions.
- Finally, our Junior Volleyball Team won Silver after reaching their All Ireland!

None of these achievements could have taken place without the hard work and dedication of their teachers and coaches, before and after school each week.

Although it was a successful school year in so many ways, we saw sad days too. As a school community, along with our local community, we supported those who lost loved ones as best as one can. Our students came through the easy and the not so easy weeks by coming together and being there for each other and we are very proud of them all.

I want to thank all parents/guardians for your support in the last few years, not just this year. It is a pleasure to watch your sons come in as young quiet 1st years (not always!) and find their strengths and weakness while learning how to cope with life in general. So much more than subject curriculum is learned every day in school, and when they are leaving in 6th year, they are young men. This is what makes teaching and managing a school such a worthwhile profession. Thank you for sending your sons to us.

Have a lovely, safe summer all.