



# Looking at Guidance

Teaching and Learning in Post-Primary Schools



PROMOTING THE QUALITY OF LEARNING



AN ROINN OIDEACHAIS | DEPARTMENT OF  
AGUS EOLAÍOCHTA | EDUCATION  
AND SCIENCE  
INSPECTORATE

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## Foreword

The importance of Guidance within educational systems is widely acknowledged. In recent years, international bodies such as the OECD and the European Union have pointed to the role that Guidance should play in ensuring that individuals' educational and career decisions are informed by up-to-date information and in assisting them to become effective managers of their learning and career paths. Here in Ireland, the aim of Guidance in schools is to enable students to develop vital self-management skills that lead to effective choices and decisions about their lives.

*Looking at Guidance* examines the effectiveness of this important aspect of educational provision in post-primary schools. It draws on the findings of fifty-five reports on inspections of Guidance carried out from September 2006 to May 2007. In addition, the writers draw on evidence from an analysis of more than 1,100 questionnaires administered to students in the schools where inspections took place. These rich sources of information are used to comment on the quality of provision and whole-school support for Guidance, the quality of planning and preparation, the quality of teaching and learning, and the quality of assessment. The report discusses the features of good practice and concerns identified by the inspectors. It highlights areas for future development and provides valuable insights into students' experiences and their perceptions of Guidance.

This report shows that schools provide learning experiences that assist students to develop as responsible citizens and that they support and guide students in their personal, educational and career decisions. It is heartening to note too that whole-school guidance planning has been well supported by school managements and by guidance counsellors, and that it is being extended to ensure that planning for student guidance and support is included as an element of all subject planning.

I am happy to welcome the publication of *Looking at Guidance*. I am confident that the report will be useful in encouraging thought and discussion, not only among guidance counsellors, teachers generally and personnel involved in the management of schools but also among parents and others interested in the guidance, support and care of students.



**Eamon Stack**  
Chief Inspector





# Chapter 1

## Introduction



## 1.1 Background to this report

*Looking at Guidance* is based on fifty-five inspection reports carried out from September 2006 to May 2007. The report presents findings on the quality of Guidance provided to students in post-primary schools based on observations of practice, discussions with managements, staff members and students, examination of documents by the inspectors, and students' responses to a questionnaire.

## 1.2 Categories and type of schools

The inspections upon which this report is based took place in all types of recognised post-primary schools in Ireland. The total student enrolment in the schools inspected was 25,067, of which 11,972 were girls and 13,095 were boys. A breakdown of the schools inspected by type, gender composition and size is given in the table below.

**Table 1.1 The schools inspected by type, gender composition, and size**

Schools by type	Number	Percentage of total
Voluntary secondary schools	29	53%
VEC schools	14	25%
Community and comprehensive schools	12	22%
Totals	55	100%

Schools by gender	Number	Percentage of total
Co-educational schools	38	69%
Girls' schools	7	13%
Boys' schools	10	18%
Totals	55	100%

Schools by size	Number	Percentage of total
More than 400 students (large)	32	58%
From 300 to 400 students (medium)	9	16%
Fewer than 300 students (small)	14	26%
Totals	55	100%

## 1.3 Structure of this report

This report follows the outline of the four sections of a subject inspection report, which are reflected in the process of a guidance inspection. The main areas considered are: the quality of provision and whole-school support for Guidance; the quality of planning and preparation; the quality of teaching and learning; and the quality of assessment. The inspection process was aided by the inclusion in each of the fifty-five inspections of a questionnaire that was administered to senior cycle students to gather information on their experiences and perceptions of Guidance throughout their second-level schooling. An analysis of the 1,129 questionnaires, which were completed by almost equal numbers of female students and male students, forms part of the evidence used for this report and will be referred to as the student survey.

## 1.4 Guidance in the post-primary school

This report deals with guidance provision as a whole-school concern and the day-to-day work of those most directly responsible for its delivery. The Inspectorate of the Department of Education and Science has published guidelines for schools, which offer the following definition of Guidance:

Guidance in schools refers to a range of learning experiences provided in a developmental sequence that assists students to develop self-management skills which will lead to effective choices and decisions about their lives. It encompasses the three separate, but interlinked, areas of personal and social development, educational guidance and career guidance. (Inspectorate, 2005, p. 4)

The Department provides an allocation of ex-quota hours to almost all post-primary schools for the provision of Guidance. The allocation is based on student enrolment, but other criteria, as outlined in Circular PPT12/05, also apply. From the beginning of the 2006/2007 school year, schools participating in the Delivering Equality of Opportunity (DEIS) action plan received an additional allocation. Among other issues, this report examines how schools were managing this resource to comply with the requirement in section 9(c) of the Education Act (1998) that a school shall use its available resources to “ensure that students have access to appropriate guidance to

assist them in their educational and career choices.” The role of the guidance counsellor is clearly of central importance, and several of the comments in the report relate to the work done by these important members of the staff.

## 1.5 The purpose of this report

This report outlines features of good practice and concerns identified in the inspections of Guidance. It highlights areas for future development and provides insights into students’ experiences and their perceptions of Guidance. The report will inform and encourage professional dialogue concerning Guidance among guidance counsellors, school managements, other educational professionals, parents, and students. In this way it is hoped that *Looking at Guidance* will encourage and support whole-school collaboration in the design, implementation and self-evaluation of the whole-school guidance programme and will facilitate continuous improvement in the provision of Guidance to post-primary students.





# Chapter 2

The quality of provision and whole-school support

## 2.1 Personnel delivering Guidance

Guidance counsellors are qualified second-level teachers who hold a qualification in Guidance recognised by the Department of Education and Science (see Circular Letter PPT12/05). While the responsibility for the deployment of resources to support the school's guidance programme rests with the management, the guidance counsellor should have primary responsibility for the design and delivery of the programme. The inspectors found this to be the case in most schools. Good practice in this regard, such as clear delegation of responsibility to the guidance counsellor as co-ordinator of a planning team, was often combined with good planning processes, which included structured meetings and the involvement of management.

Other members of the staff can make important and worthwhile contributions to the planning and delivery of a school's guidance programme. For example, teachers of Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE), Religious Education (RE), Home Economics, and Physical Education (PE), as well as co-ordinators of the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme, the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) and Transition Year (TY), are often involved in the guidance planning process. Special education co-ordinators, chaplains and home-school-community liaison (HSCL) co-ordinators can also contribute to the development

of the guidance programme. Collaboration between guidance counsellors and subject or programme co-ordinators was recorded and commended in many reports. This collaboration included situations where staff teams had planned and implemented initiatives and actions to support students in times of stress, such as bereavement, crisis events, and examinations. Good practice was observed and commented on as follows:

... provision of Guidance is fully integrated within the school's student-support system. This integration is reflected in the school's guidance plan which takes full account of the other staff members who also contribute to the provision of educational and personal supports for students. These include the school chaplain, year heads, tutors, subject teachers, learning-support staff and senior management.

The guidance counsellor works closely with the Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) co-ordinator and has taught SPHE. This co-operation is commended, as it ensures that where there is an overlap between aspects of the SPHE and guidance programmes that they are delivered in a co-ordinated manner.

In nine of the fifty-five schools inspected, members of the teaching staff without qualifications in Guidance were found to be delivering significant elements of the guidance programme in the absence of a qualified guidance counsellor. Valid explanations were given for almost all these situations. In one school the staff member concerned was engaged in

initial guidance training, and in another the person was to commence training. In two schools there was an interim arrangement following the appointment of the guidance counsellor as principal or deputy principal. In a small number of the remaining schools staff members had assumed some guidance functions in the absence of an available guidance counsellor. In almost all these instances the inspectors were satisfied that a clear distinction was made between the functions being performed and those for which specialised training in Guidance is required. Best practice involves the appointment of qualified guidance counsellors in accordance with Circular PPT12/05.

### Findings of good practice

- Guidance personnel are fully qualified in the majority of schools
- There is a whole-school approach to the planning and delivery of the guidance programme in the majority of schools

### Concerns

- The hours allocated to Guidance are assigned to unqualified staff members in a small number of schools
- Some students do not have access to the services of a qualified guidance counsellor

## 2.2 Use of the allocation of resources for Guidance

All post-primary schools in the Free Education Scheme, along with those in the Block Grant Scheme, were receiving a minimum of eight ex-quota hours per week for Guidance allocated by the Department at the time of the inspections. Circular PPT12/05 shows the schedules for the allocation of hours for the provision of Guidance in all categories of post-primary schools. Since September 2006, schools included in Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS), the Department's action plan for educational inclusion, receive an additional allocation of ex-quota hours per week for Guidance. Allocations in all instances are based on the numbers of recognised students enrolled. Schools offering the Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP), the LCA programme and the LCVP receive additional teaching allocations to support the programmes. Individual schools have discretion in using some of these additional allocations to deliver their guidance programmes.

In all fifty-five reports the inspectors commented on whether schools were using the full allocation of ex-quota hours for Guidance. Good practice in this regard prompted comments such as the following:

The school prides itself on being a caring school and on providing students with a wide range of educational, career and personal opportunities and supports. The full-time ex-quota post for Guidance is augmented this year by an additional two hours. Two guidance counsellors share this allocation for Guidance of twenty-four hours and make up the school's guidance team.

This allocation is being fully used to provide a range of guidance and counselling supports for students throughout the school.

The recommendation that the full ex-quota allocation be used for Guidance was made in seventeen of the fifty-five reports (31%). In another four reports (7%) the need to clarify how the allocation was being used was recommended. It follows from this that while a majority of schools were assigning their full ex-quota allocation of hours to Guidance in a clear and transparent way, more than a third were not doing so when inspected. With regard to the frequency with which recommendations were made in reports, those relating to the allocation of the ex-quota hours for Guidance were the second most frequent.

### Findings of good practice

- The ex-quota hours allocated by the Department for Guidance are fully used in a transparent and accountable way in the majority of schools

### Concerns

- In almost a third of schools the ex-quota hours for Guidance are not all allocated to Guidance
- There is a lack of clarity regarding how the ex-quota allocation for Guidance is being used in a few schools

## 2.3 Timetable provision

Guidance was found to be timetabled for students in the majority of schools, although not for all classes. In the student survey approximately 66% of students reported that Guidance was timetabled for them in the senior cycle, with 50% of students reporting that it was timetabled once per week. Although a similar proportion of male and female students had Guidance timetabled for them, lower proportions of students from small schools and of students from all-boys' schools had Guidance timetabled. These proportions were 35% and 50%, respectively.

In schools in which the guidance allocation was less than 22 hours per week almost all guidance counsellors were involved in subject teaching in addition to their work in Guidance. Some guidance counsellors who held posts as assistant principals were allocated hours for the performance of the duties assigned to this post. Most schools formally timetabled only the guidance counsellor's class contact hours, leaving the distribution of the remaining hours between work with individual students, meetings, visits and other external activities to the discretion of the guidance counsellor.

In some schools, timetables provided to the inspectors lacked clarity regarding how the non-class contact hours allocated to the delivery of Guidance were being used. It was

recommended in a small number of reports that this issue be addressed. Good practice tended to be when the guidance counsellor's individual plan included a comprehensive description of the guidance programme and outlined the links and contributions of other staff members and agencies. As guidance counsellors in small schools often have to engage in other unrelated duties, the need for clarity regarding the use of guidance hours is as relevant in those schools as it is in the larger schools.

In the majority of schools, guidance counsellors were timetabled for class contact in Guidance with senior cycle classes only. Where no timetabled classes were provided, guidance counsellors had contact with senior cycle groups through arrangements with subject teachers who facilitated occasional classes in Guidance. In a small number of schools, Guidance tended to be timetabled on a modular basis, whereby a series of guidance classes was arranged on a rolling basis with concomitant modules in other subjects. Guidance counsellors' contact with junior cycle students was mostly through classes taken following arrangements with subject teachers, although a few schools provided guidance lessons in the junior cycle on either a modular or a timetabled basis. These arrangements showed that the discretion given to schools in planning guidance programmes was being used creatively and effectively in the majority of schools to tailor



the resources in accordance with their unique circumstances. Reports included comments such as:

Every junior cycle class has a guidance class every two weeks and every senior cycle class has a guidance class each week. This provision is to be commended.

Second-year, third-year, fifth-year and sixth-year classes are timetabled for one period of Guidance per week. This is good practice and, combined with an induction programme for incoming first-year students, all of whom are placed in classes of mixed ability, provides a balanced input in junior cycle and senior cycle classes. An additional forty-minute period has been allocated for one-to-one career sessions with students.

Notwithstanding the good practices identified in relation to the provision of Guidance in the junior cycle, the inspectors in twenty-six of the schools reported upon (47%) recommended increased provision for junior cycle students. In some instances, for example, the inspectors recommended that schools review their guidance plan to ensure a greater balance of provision between the junior and senior cycles. The inspectors' findings in relation to junior cycle provision were consistent with those in recent publications, such as *Review of Guidance in Second-Level Schools* (Inspectorate, 2006) and *Guidance for All? Guidance Provision in Second-Level Schools* (ESRI, 2006).

### Findings of good practice

- Guidance classes are timetabled for senior cycle students in the majority of schools
- Guidance provision is organised for junior cycle classes on either a modular or timetabled basis in some schools

### Concerns

- There is a lack of clarity in some schools regarding how the non-timetabled allocated hours for Guidance are being used
- Students in small schools and in boys' schools receive fewer timetabled classes in Guidance compared with students in other schools
- In slightly less than half the schools there is a need to provide more Guidance for junior cycle students

## 2.4 Target groups

Guidance programmes observed in the majority of schools were aimed at first-year students, third-year students and senior cycle students, including those in TY. A little over half of the reports recommended some enhancement of guidance provision to students in the junior cycle. As a means of achieving this, a significant number of reports recommended that collaborative practice be adopted in all schools to support the development of guidance provision. For example, elements of the guidance programme, of the SPHE curriculum and of the RE syllabus share a number of common objectives, such as the development of decision-making skills, communication skills, and the enhancement of self-esteem. Collaboration between the guidance counsellor and other members of the teaching staff and co-ordinators is an essential feature of a streamlined and efficient guidance programme. It is also one way of ensuring that all students have maximum access to Guidance throughout their post-primary schooling.

The reports suggested ways in which cross-curricular planning and delivery could facilitate the full integration of guidance functions with other areas, such as SPHE. Reports contained recommendations such as the following:

It is also recommended that first-year students have some formal lessons in Guidance in the course of the year. The content of such lessons can be developed in collaboration with the SPHE teachers as many elements of the SPHE curriculum overlap with Guidance. It is important that students develop self-management skills as early as possible in their post-primary education. Such skills include: self-confidence; decision making; study skills; awareness of abilities and interests; understanding the value of learning; and time management.

### Findings of good practice

- Guidance programmes are aimed at first-year, third-year and senior cycle students in the majority of schools

### Concerns

- There is a lack of balance in guidance provision between the junior cycle and senior cycle in a significant number of schools
- There is scope for greater collaboration between the guidance counsellor and teachers of SPHE and RE in planning and delivering the guidance programme for the junior cycle in most schools

## 2.5 Facilities for Guidance

A certain level of facilities, such as a specialist office with information and communications technology (ICT), is essential for the effective provision of Guidance. In most schools the facilities that were provided for Guidance were found to be satisfactory or better. The inspectors found that almost all schools were conscious of the importance of providing a guidance service to students that allowed for confidentiality and accessibility. This was achieved, for example, by providing an office that was accessible to students yet private and by ensuring secure storage for student-related records. The majority of schools provided at least minimal resources for the guidance service. Examples of generous provision included schools in which a data projector and extra computers had been installed in the guidance classroom; those where guidance counsellors had been provided with laptop computers; a guidance section in the school library and well-placed display boards for guidance-related notices; and instances where a photocopier had been installed in the guidance office. One report noted:

Facilities for Guidance are excellent; the guidance counsellor has a well-equipped office with access to the internet, secure filing systems and adequate space for materials. There are two computer rooms in the school and there are three computers and a printer in the library. Students have access to all of these facilities for guidance purposes.

On the other hand, less than optimal provision was seen in a few schools. This occurred where an office was shared with another guidance counsellor or with a principal or deputy principal, where the office lacked privacy, where it was too small for the comfortable conduct of a counselling session, or where it lacked a telephone or broadband internet access.

All schools have been provided by the Department with computers for use by guidance counsellors. Training in the use of ICT in Guidance as well as in generic ICT skills was provided under the *Schools IT2000* initiative. Many schools had internal networks of computers, and a few had set up intranets, with access to individual teachers' web pages. Individual students had access to ICT facilities for guidance purposes during non-class time in the majority of schools. The inspectors acknowledged these advancements where they observed them and praised the efforts of schools in keeping abreast of technology. One report commented:

Good use is made of ICT. Students have access to broadband internet during one-to-one sessions with the guidance counsellor and group access is readily arranged in the ICT room in co-operation with the ICT co-ordinator. Similarly, computers are extensively used in programme planning, the arrangement and recording of meetings and in drawing up the guidance plan.

However, fewer than half (33%) of the guidance counsellors used the technology as an integral part of their class-based work. Some difficulties were experienced by a number of guidance counsellors in arranging group access to the internet. Issues raised were the timetabling of guidance lessons at times when the ICT facilities had been timetabled for other subjects, time-consuming procedures for the arrangement of lessons in an ICT room, and computer systems incapable of coping with multiple internet use. In eleven schools (20%), recommendations by the inspectors related to the need to improve access to ICT. These recommendations included:

Means of enhancing access to ICT facilities for Guidance should be explored.

It is recommended that students be provided with more access to ICT for guidance purposes and that they be introduced to it earlier.

ICT is a core tool in guidance provision. Schools should plan for the use of available ICT resources in the context of class, small-group and individual guidance.

Broadband had been installed in most schools, but the technology was only slowly filtering into the guidance classroom. Difficulties were experienced in accessing information through ICT because of cumbersome procedures and practices in some schools, and recommendations were made that these difficulties be resolved in the course of school

planning. In one school, very good practice was seen where a wireless system had been installed throughout the building. This, combined with the use of laptop computers and data projectors, enabled broadband internet access in every room and facilitated the use of prepared presentations in lessons. One report noted:

the school has invested heavily in providing information and communication technology (ICT) throughout the school, has installed computers in classrooms, has provided a number of data projectors and in particular has developed an excellent suite of two ICT rooms. Many of the senior-cycle guidance lessons are currently timetabled for these rooms. This is an example of excellent practice in the use of ICT to support learning.

### Findings of good practice

- The guidance counsellor has access to a specialist office in most schools
- The majority of guidance offices are equipped with a range of ICT equipment and appropriate storage facilities
- Individual students can access ICT facilities for guidance purposes during non-class time in the majority of schools

### Concerns

- Access to ICT for guidance purposes is limited in a small number of schools
- Guidance counsellors experience procedural difficulties in accessing ICT rooms for Guidance in some schools

## 2.6 Links with other student supports

The majority of schools expressed in their mission statement a strong commitment to the care of their students and to providing them with a holistic education. Student-support teams, generally referred to as pastoral care teams, tended to have been established to realise this commitment. In larger schools the teams typically consisted of year heads and class teachers, and their focus was mainly on student management issues. A second, smaller team was sometimes established also. Generally, this comprised the guidance counsellor, special education co-ordinator and, where present, the chaplain. This group often operated as an informally constituted group.

Most schools were observed to have some elements of the structures described above, although no single approach predominated. In small schools, support systems tended to be informal but were based on high levels of local knowledge and on strong links with parents and the community. One large school was inspected in which student support was mainly the responsibility of an effective chaplain, without a formal team, and it was found to be very good. In other instances where individual staff members showed particular interest and skills in, for example, counselling, bereavement-

support programmes or the management of responses to crises, strong support structures were found to have been successfully built around these areas.

While the informal support structures encountered were considered by the inspectors to be effective in nearly all schools, optimal practice in relation to the provision of student support is characterised by planning and integration. This necessitates the introduction of some formality, such as the establishment of a student-support team that includes the guidance counsellor. This particular recommendation was made in twenty-one (38%) of the schools inspected. One report recommended:

The school should consider the formalising of meetings of the student-support team in order to provide a structure to facilitate optimum attendance, the transfer of information regarding students and the early identification of those in need of extra support.

Good practice was observed in almost half the schools inspected where a dual system of middle management and student support operated as an integrated whole. In these schools a middle management team, typically consisting of year heads, met formally and regularly, often weekly, with the senior management. Guidance counsellors attended the meetings in almost 50% of the schools in which these

arrangements occurred. In a few schools, programme co-ordinators of, for example, SPHE, TY or LCA also attended. These practices were most evident in schools that were participating in the Guidance Enhancement Initiative (GEI) and in the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) action plan.

There was much evidence in the inspectors' reports of participation by students in the delivery of the guidance programme. Members of the student council were reported to have received training in youth leadership in a significant number of schools in which an active council existed. In many instances training had been given by agencies external to the school. The guidance counsellor co-ordinated these activities in a few instances. Trained senior students often participated in the school's induction procedures for incoming first-year students and acted as mentors to the younger students. All of this was cited as good practice.

### Findings of good practice

- The majority of schools have a student-support team generally called a pastoral care team
- A dual system of middle management and student support operates as an integrated whole in almost half the schools inspected
- Students participate in the guidance programme by, for example, acting as mentors to younger students

### Concerns

- Collaborative practices for student support need to be put on a more formal basis in more than a third of the schools

## 2.7 Links with management

The inspectors found that most guidance counsellors felt well supported by principals and other staff members. Reports included comments such as:

The size of the school and the collaborative style of senior management allow free exchange of information with, and between, those in support roles. Good working relationships have been established.

Early intervention in support of students at risk is also made possible by the ongoing communication among staff. Students at risk are identified and quickly brought to the attention of management and the guidance team.

In addition to formal meetings mentioned in the previous section and attended by some guidance counsellors, links with the school management tended to be informal and continuous in most schools. The need for more structure or formality was suggested in only nine reports (16%). In a few instances, guidance counsellors attended meetings of boards of management, usually to contribute to the process of whole-school guidance planning or to inform the board of policy developments in such areas as the management of critical incidents, substance use, and positive discipline. Given their training and expertise, guidance counsellors can play a central role in assisting the management and student-support teams when dealing with such areas as inclusion, access and equity in the development of school policies, and curricular

planning. It is therefore good practice for schools to involve guidance counsellors when addressing these issues.

The leadership exercised by principals was deemed a positive contributory factor by the inspectors in those schools in which Guidance and other supports operated on an integrated, whole-school basis. Principals acknowledged the work of guidance counsellors and the value of the guidance service in most schools. One report among many commented:

The established planning structures lend the desired level of formality to communication both within groups and among them. The involvement of the principal as leader and as the hub of communication within the school is commended. In the context of future development, the existing planning structures will enable smooth transitions and the potential for more formal channels of communication in accordance with the needs of the school.

### Findings of good practice

- There are informal and continuous links between the guidance counsellor (or counsellors) and the school management in the majority of schools
- Most guidance counsellors feel well supported by their principals

### Concerns

- Only a few boards of management avail of the expertise of the guidance counsellor when dealing with such issues as inclusion, access, and equity

## 2.8 Referral systems

Referrals to guidance personnel when students' needs became apparent were managed in most schools by a combination of formal and informal methods. Formal systems through the class tutors or year heads, for example, were observed in the majority of schools. Flexibility for students' self-referral was observed in all cases. Almost all guidance counsellors dealt with such situations by personal contact with those closely involved, including teachers and parents, and with due consideration for confidentiality. Of particular note in this regard is the fact that when students were asked in the student survey to identify who they would go to for help or advice if they had a personal problem the majority stated that they would go to a friend or friends (75%) or family (67%). Eighteen percent (18%) stated that they would go to the guidance counsellor, 16% stated that they would go to a year head or class tutor, and 15% stated that they would go to a subject teacher. Female students were more likely to seek help or advice from a friend (84%) than their male counterparts (66%). The finding that fewer than one in five students said they would seek support from the guidance counsellor if they had a personal problem is in accord with other research, such as that carried out by the ESRI and reported by McCoy, Smyth, Darmody and Dunne in *Guidance for All?* (2006).

The inspectors found that provision for students experiencing a personal crisis tended to be managed at a whole-school level, and their reports encouraged this collaborative practice. Examples of good practice included guidelines that had been developed by schools to assist teachers in identifying students who may be experiencing personal difficulties. Such guidelines included the steps to be taken in referring students to a guidance counsellor and how to become involved in helping them through any difficulty. One such report stated:

Referral systems in the school are effective. Constant informal contact between the guidance counsellor, senior management and staff ensures that students at risk are quickly identified and dealt with. Contact with students confirms this. Students presenting issues felt that they came quickly to the attention of teachers. They also felt that teachers were effective in dealing with issues and that most issues could be dealt with at the subject-teacher level.

Referrals to external agencies, such as the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS), the Health Service Executive (HSE) and local counselling services, were managed in the majority of schools through the collaboration of the senior management and those involved in student support. In smaller schools the principal tended to be the main contact person. In some schools this function was delegated to the guidance counsellor or special education co-ordinator, depending on the nature of the contact. It was suggested in a few inspection reports that it was good practice when the



guidance counsellor was informed of referrals even in instances where direct guidance involvement was not warranted. Lack of access to services was reported to be an issue for a small number of schools, particularly where a designated psychologist had yet to be appointed by NEPS. Geographical location appeared not to be a major factor in determining the availability of external support. Schools in some rural areas reported very good support from a range of external agencies, particularly those that offered counselling services. Examples of good practice included the following:

Good contacts have been established with the designated National Educational Psychological Service psychologist and local counselling and social services. The system operates to the satisfaction of staff members who are confident that student needs are being catered for.

Notwithstanding the comments above, some schools in urban areas were experiencing difficulties in this regard. In one such school it was reported that although reasonable support was available from outside agencies, such as local clinics, general practitioners and the HSE social services, there could be long waiting lists for such services. The same school had been well supported in the past by NEPS, but at the time of the inspection no NEPS psychologist was assigned to the school.

### Findings of good practice

- In the majority of schools systems for the referral of students to guidance personnel are well structured
- The referral of students to external agencies is managed collaboratively in most schools

### Concerns

- Some schools experience difficulties, such as long waiting lists, when they attempt to refer students to external agencies



# Chapter 3

The quality of planning and preparation

### 3.1 The Guidance plan

More than half the recommendations made by the inspectors in their reports related to whole-school guidance planning. Slightly less than two-fifths (40%) of these had implications for guidance planning in a whole-school context, and a further one-sixth (16%) of the recommendations made direct reference to the development of the whole-school guidance plan.

Many schools that had commenced whole-school planning had not included guidance planning in the process. In thirty-eight schools (69%) the inspectors recommended that schools either commence formal whole-school guidance planning or that existing guidance planning be incorporated in the whole-school planning process. Recommendations varied according to the progress of schools in planning and reflected the degree of planning already achieved.

Recommendations such as the following were made:

It is recommended that guidance planning be formalised as part of whole-school planning to ensure continuity in the context of changing school circumstances.

Guidance planning should commence in the context of school planning. A team should be established to commence this work and the planning aids available should be used in the planning process.

For a number of years the provision of Guidance has been planned informally through direct consultation with

management. Guidance provision in the school is reviewed regularly. However, a whole-school guidance plan to direct guidance provision in the school has not yet been completed.

Most of the inspectors' recommendations urged schools to complete the process, to form a team, or to include students, parents and the community in the planning activity. Schools were commended where responsibility for the development of the whole-school guidance plan had been delegated to a small task group or committee led by the guidance counsellor and where membership of the group included individuals with core student-support functions. However, a guidance planning task group or committee to direct the process of whole-school guidance planning was found to have been established in only a quarter of the schools.

Written policies relating to the planning process and to consequent procedures were particularly good in a small number of the larger schools. In smaller schools, processes and procedures tended to be less formal and relied on good relations and communications between the staff and the management. Good practice entails some structure and formality while retaining the positive features of informal communication. All schools are encouraged to formalise their planning processes and procedures while retaining the essential elements of continuous, supportive informal communication. One example of good practice was described by the inspector as follows:

Excellent work has been done in the preparation of the guidance plan. The work has been carried out in accordance with the guidelines of the School Development Planning Initiative (SDPI). A task group with responsibility for development of the guidance plan was formed and the group has performed its functions to an impressive standard. Clear documentation was kept of the process of meetings and decision making. Regular consultation took place with interested staff members. The definition of Guidance was commendably broad and included educational, social and personal, and career guidance. The resulting documentation is clear, embraces the whole school and is at an advanced stage in the process of ratification by the board of management.

In twenty-one reports the inspectors recommended the use of the guidance planning documents published by the Department and available on its web site. One report, for example, stated:

Information to support planning is readily available in publications such as *Planning the School Guidance Programme*, issued by the National Centre for Guidance in Education (NCGE), and *Guidelines for Second Level Schools on the Implications of Section 9(c) of the Education Act 1998, relating to students' access to appropriate guidance*, published by the Department. A template for guidance planning prepared by the Department is available at [www.education.ie](http://www.education.ie).

Almost all guidance counsellors showed evidence of planning of their own work, even in instances where no whole-school guidance planning had been initiated. Reports encouraged the extension of guidance department planning to the level

of whole-school planning in a small number of instances. The following is typical of how reports acknowledged good practice leading to full-scale guidance planning:

The guidance department has devised a well-balanced and documented plan. The impressive attention to detail, as demonstrated by the documentation of meetings, the survey of staff needs and the recent formation of a small, cohesive planning and student-support group places the department in a strong position in relation to whole-school guidance planning.

### Findings of good practice

- Guidance planning is in progress and is an integral part of whole-school planning in a small number of schools
- Written records relating to the planning process and to consequent procedures are particularly good in some larger schools
- Most guidance counsellors engage in planning their own work

### Concerns

- Many schools have not included guidance planning in their whole-school planning process
- A guidance planning task group or committee has been established to direct the process of whole-school guidance planning in only a quarter of the schools

## 3.2 The Guidance programme

The majority of guidance counsellors were involved in a wide variety of guidance-related activities. Almost all schools faced challenges, such as timetabling guidance provision and balancing work between junior cycle students and senior cycle students and between class, small-group and one-to-one work. In the majority of schools, guidance counsellors co-ordinated or participated in

- induction and assessment programmes for incoming students
- career events for senior students
- support programmes for students who experienced distress, loss, or grief
- programmes that dealt with decision making, developing social skills, or making educational and career choices.

Most guidance counsellors were also involved in the process leading to subject and programme choices in the junior cycle and senior cycle, sometimes in an administrative capacity as part of a post of responsibility. In a similar capacity, some guidance counsellors co-ordinated the LCVP, TY or LCA programmes. In smaller schools that had an allocation of less than twenty-two hours, most guidance counsellors also taught another subject, as would be expected. In a small number of schools they provided guidance services to students on Post-Leaving Certificate (PLC) courses. The majority of guidance counsellors attended parent-teacher

meetings and planned and arranged information sessions for parents and students; these good practices were encouraged in the inspectors' reports.

Nearly half the reports recommended the enhancement of guidance provision in the junior cycle. The inspectors stressed that, since students make decisions early in their post-primary education that can have long-term implications for later life choices, information concerning the possible consequences of their decisions should be made available to students when they are choosing subjects and levels. Concern was expressed in a small number of reports that students were not provided with adequate opportunities to make informed subject choices. Recommendations were made by the inspectors encouraging collaboration with the teachers of SPHE in the planning and delivery of guidance programmes for junior cycle students. The following are examples of these recommendations:

To encourage students' earlier consideration of possible career options, it is recommended that some inputs on career topics be provided for second-year and third-year classes in conjunction with the SPHE programme.

Students in first year should have a module in Guidance to assist them in developing self-management skills and to understand the value of learning. Collaboration with the Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) teachers in planning and delivering the module is recommended as many of the objectives of both areas are shared.

The student survey lends support to the recommendations calling for the whole-school guidance programme to include inputs to the junior cycle. When asked to identify those who had helped them choose their subjects for the Junior Certificate, 7% of students stated that guidance counsellors had helped them, and 19% listed subject teachers as sources of help. These figures contrast with the considerably higher frequency of the other main answers, parents and friends, as shown in table 3.1. When asked a similar question regarding their Leaving Certificate subjects, 34% said that their guidance counsellor had helped them, and the same proportion gave subject teachers as a response. These differences between Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate response rates are noteworthy.

**Table 3.1 Sources of help for students in choosing Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate subjects (n = 1,129)**

Level	Junior Certificate	Leaving Certificate
<i>Helped by</i>		
Parents	79%	67%
Friends	31%	28%
Subject teachers	19%	34%
Guidance counsellor (or counsellors)	7%	34%

In the survey, students were also asked to identify who had helped them most in choosing their subjects for the Leaving Certificate. For 14% of students this was the guidance counsellor. It was found that those who primarily consulted their guidance counsellor also expressed the highest level of satisfaction with their subject choices. In the ESRI study reported by McCoy, Smyth, Darmody and Dunne in *Guidance for All?* (2006) students were almost evenly divided between those who expressed satisfaction with existing guidance provision and those who were generally dissatisfied. Among the concerns expressed by those who were dissatisfied were the absence of advice on subject choice and the lack of Guidance before sixth year. Even among those students who were broadly satisfied with senior cycle provision there were some who expressed dissatisfaction with the advice they received about subject choice and some who stated that they would like to have received advice and information at an earlier stage. The findings from both the ESRI study and the student questionnaire demonstrate students' desire to have access to Guidance at an earlier stage in their post-primary schooling and the value of such access.

Students were asked in the survey if they had received information on a number of career-related items. Table 3.2 sets out the findings.

**Table 3.2 Percentage of male and female students who received information in their schools about specific topics (n = 1,129)**

Type of information	Males	Females	Total
CAO	74%	84%	79%
Apprenticeships and training	57%	30%	43%
Employment opportunities	45%	37%	41%
PLC courses	36%	44%	40%
UCAS courses	25%	38%	31%

A closer analysis of students' responses shows that the students in small schools were more likely to report that they required more information about Central Applications Office (CAO) courses (59%) than those in medium-sized schools (32%) and in large schools (45%). In general, students in small schools appeared in greater need of more information of all types than those in larger schools, a finding that may be related to that referred to in section 2.3 regarding the lower availability of timetabled Guidance in schools with fewer than 300 students. It is also of interest to note that, in general, the proportion of students who had an interview with their guidance counsellor since beginning to study for the Leaving Certificate course increased with the size of school: that is, 47% of students from small schools, 52% of students from medium schools, and 66% of students from large schools. Although 59% of students stated that they had an interview with their guidance counsellor, and this was consistent

among fifth-year and sixth-year students, a higher proportion of female students (68%) than male students (49%) stated that they had such an interview. Only 22% of students from all-male schools stated that they had an interview with their guidance counsellor since beginning to study for the Leaving Certificate. The importance to students of some one-to-one contact with a guidance counsellor is supported by the ESRI research already cited. The emphasis in the inspectors' reports on the need for planning to ensure that the ex-quota guidance allocation is used to maximum effect reflects this.

### Findings of good practice

- The majority of guidance counsellors are involved in a wide variety of guidance-related activities
- The majority of guidance counsellors attend parent-teacher meetings and plan and arrange information sessions for parents and students
- The highest level of satisfaction with subject choice for the Leaving Certificate is experienced by students who primarily consulted their guidance counsellor

### Concerns

- Nearly half of all schools need to enhance their guidance provision in the junior cycle
- In a small number of schools, junior cycle students are not provided with adequate opportunities to make informed subject choices

- A smaller proportion of students in all-male schools have interviews with their guidance counsellor
- In small schools, the proportion of students who have interviews with their guidance counsellor is lower than in larger schools
- Students in small schools receive less career-related information than students in larger schools

### 3.3 Other relevant programmes

The following table shows the number of schools included in this report in which particular programmes with a significant guidance component were being implemented or that had an additional guidance allocation associated with a particular initiative.

**Table 3.3 Number of schools in this evaluation that were implementing programmes with a significant guidance component (n = 55)**

JCSP	LCA	LCVP	TY	Other (DEIS, GEI, etc.)
8	20	38	42	21

The inspection reports referred to these programmes where they were provided and described the role of other staff members involved in the provision of Guidance as well as the range of associated activities in which guidance counsellors were involved. In one report the inspector stated:

The guidance counsellor's programme includes interventions at all levels of the school and this is highly commended. The documentation related to the programme shows guidance activities for all year groups and programmes, including Transition Year (TY), the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) and Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA), with appropriate inputs in all cases.



In general, the reports show a high level of collaboration between guidance counsellors and other staff members with particular responsibility for these programmes. Schools in which this was the case were considered by the inspectors to be engaging in optimal practice. In a few reports the inspectors noted poor collaboration between guidance counsellors and programme or subject co-ordinators.

### Findings of good practice

- Where programmes with a significant guidance component are provided, there is a high level of collaboration between guidance counsellors and other staff members who have responsibility for these programmes in a majority of cases

### Concerns

- In a few schools there is poor collaboration between the guidance counsellor and the programme or subject co-ordinators

## 3.4 Access to and use of ICT in programme planning and the delivery of Guidance

Most guidance counsellors used ICT for word-processing and to aid students in accessing information, particularly through the internet. In a few instances the combined use of a laptop computer, data projector and presentation software enabled the display and analysis of current information in a manner that highlighted the information without obvious intrusion by the technology. Similarly, a small number of guidance counsellors were particularly adept at computer use and had established systems for programme planning and for recording and processing such information as test results, subject options, student tracking, and minute-keeping. This good practice was encouraged in the inspectors' reports.

Ninety per cent (90%) of students surveyed reported that they felt "competent" or "very competent" in the use of ICT to access information about courses, training, and careers. Only one in ten students did not feel competent in using computers and the internet for these purposes. Students' perceptions of their levels of competence were consistent between gender, year, and location. However, 17% of students from small schools reported that they were "not competent" in using ICT to access information, as opposed to

10% in total. This raises concerns, further to those noted in previous sections of this report, about the use of the allocation for Guidance in smaller schools.

In a small number of reports it was noted that access to ICT facilities for guidance class groups was limited. The inspectors emphasised the importance of students having access to the internet in particular.

### Findings of good practice

- Most guidance counsellors use ICT for word-processing and accessing information
- A small number of guidance counsellors have established computer systems for the administrative aspects of their guidance work
- Most students feel competent or very competent in the use of ICT to access information

### Concerns

- Access to ICT for group work is limited in a small number of schools
- A higher proportion of students in small schools than in larger schools report that they are not competent in the use of ICT to access information

## 3.5 Role of Guidance in curriculum planning

Guidance counsellors have an important contribution to make to curriculum planning and particularly in the promotion of equality and inclusion. Schools were advised in the inspectors' reports to use this expertise when making decisions in relation to curricular and programme provision. Some polarisation was observed in the analysis of the fifty-five reports in this regard. It was reported in thirty-five reports that the guidance counsellor was either consulted about or had made a significant contribution to curricular planning. Almost all schools that had made important curricular decisions, such as the continuation of the LCA programme, did so following consultations in which the guidance counsellor was involved. In the remaining schools the involvement of the guidance counsellor in decision making in such matters was considered to be less than optimal. It is considered to be good practice that the guidance counsellor attends meetings, such as middle-management meetings, at which curricular plans are discussed.

In relation to guidance programmes, the inspection reports frequently referred to the importance of students being able to make informed choices regarding subjects. In six reports the inspectors recommended changes to the schools'

provision of subjects in first year to enable choices based on experience of subjects.

The school should consider the extension of the induction programme for first-year students to include sampling of subjects to assist them in making an informed choice of subjects and levels for the Junior Certificate.

It is recommended that students be given taster modules in all optional subjects in first year so that they are in a position to make informed choices. Parents should also receive information about subject options.

In the student survey, 42% of male students and 54% of female students stated that they had chosen their Junior Certificate subjects before entry to post-primary school. Approximately 60% of all students declared that they did not get an opportunity to try out subjects before making their optional choices for the Junior Certificate. This figure rose to 64% in the case of female students. These figures confirmed the concerns expressed by the inspectors regarding the need for students to make their subject choices following a greater experience of the subjects on offer. The inspectors were also concerned that in the absence of personal experience of subjects, gender-stereotyped choices would be made. The inspectors recommended that subjects should be chosen by students after they had classroom experience of the subjects and in the context of a planned, collaborative programme of information-giving by teachers and guidance personnel.

### Findings of good practice

- Guidance counsellors are consulted about, or make a significant contribution to, curriculum planning in almost two-thirds of schools

### Concerns

- Some students are not provided with adequate opportunities to make informed choices in relation to optional subjects for the Junior Certificate
- Almost half the students surveyed reported that they had to choose their optional subjects before they entered first year

## 3.6 Mechanisms for involving parents

Parents are of prime importance in assisting students to make decisions. This was strongly supported by the student survey, where 79% of students reported that their parents helped them to make decisions about subject choices for the Junior Certificate and 67% reported that their parents helped them in choosing Leaving Certificate subjects. In both instances “parents” was by far the most common response given. (See table 3.1 above.) When students were asked to say who helped them most in choosing their Leaving Certificate subjects, 46% gave responses that were categorised as relatives and the next most frequent response was “myself” (30%).

Guidance counsellors have a central role in assisting parents to access information that is essential to them in supporting their children when they are making educational and career decisions. The inspectors found that guidance counsellors typically attended parent-teacher meetings and, at parents’ open nights and evenings, made presentations on such topics as the CAO procedures, the points system, and subject and programme options. In their reports the inspectors commended these good practices. Some interaction between parents and guidance personnel was found in all fifty-five schools. In commenting on this, one report stated:

The HSCL co-ordinator provides a strong link between parents and the guidance counsellor. The co-ordinator organises courses for parents and the guidance counsellor has an input into these. The guidance counsellor attends parent-teacher meetings and incoming first-year parents’ open nights and is available to meet parents by appointment.

In some schools, guidance counsellors invited parents to discuss test results and students’ progress on a one-to-one basis, and these very good practices were encouraged by the inspectors. Guidance counsellors contributed information to school newsletters and in a few instances published newsletters dealing specifically with Guidance. Some guidance counsellors had prepared information booklets for parents, which included information on study skills, subject choice, and application procedures for higher and further education and training. These were all identified as elements of good practice.

In schools with a student-support team, or with a home-school-community liaison (HSCL) co-ordinator, a collaborative approach in making contact with parents tended to be noted. The majority of schools encouraged frequent contact with parents, and some reported the existence of an “open-door” policy, whereby parents could contact the guidance counsellor directly to make an appointment for a meeting. The direction of communication tended to be from school to parents. In only one report was there mention of the participation of a parent in a student-support team. Parents,

as stakeholders, have much to contribute to guidance planning, and a number of reports recommended their involvement in the process. In a small number of reports the inspectors noted that links with parents were weaker than links with the wider community. Two reports, for example, expressed the view that although links to the wider community were excellent, parents' involvement in the guidance programme could have been more developed. This was achieved in one school by the inclusion of parents in the whole-school guidance planning team.

### Findings of good practice

- Some interaction between guidance counsellors and parents is found in all schools
- Guidance counsellors provide a range of support and information aids for parents in a majority of schools
- Guidance counsellors attend events for parents in a majority of schools
- In some schools the guidance counsellor and other members of the support team adopt a collaborative approach in their liaison with parents

### Concerns

- In a majority of schools there is a lack of involvement by parents in the planning and delivery of the guidance programme
- The direction of communication is mainly from schools to parents

## 3.7 Links with the wider community outside the school

The inspectors reported that the majority of schools had engaged with a large number of outside agencies. This was cited as good practice, as such engagement ensures community participation and support for the guidance programme.

The provision of information regarding the opportunities available to students immediately after leaving school was a major part of the guidance programme in the senior cycle in all schools. The information included details about training, further education, higher education, and career opportunities. Visits by students to institutions and organisations that offered education and training, together with visiting speakers from such bodies, provided students with information regarding courses, applications, and funding. They also provided information about access programmes for students with special educational needs.

Local businesses and employers provided a variety of services to the majority of schools in the form of work experience, preparation for interviews, mini-company expertise, participation in career events, and the provision of information about their services and products. In the student

survey, 65% of students reported that they had participated in work experience. Similarly, community, voluntary and social organisations provided information and expertise to schools in the form of seminars, information sessions, and opportunities to engage in social service. The majority of schools had established links with local organisations, groups and individuals and had called on their services annually. The inspectors' reports also recognised that it was not possible for the guidance counsellor alone to engage with all organisations and individuals that would be relevant to the school's guidance programme. Reports frequently commented positively on the involvement of other staff members, parents and students who assisted in establishing links. One report among many that commented on these links stated:

Linkages have been established with many groups and institutions in the community and regionally. The school collaborates with many local businesses and individuals in the provision of work experience to students of the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme.

Altogether, 90% of all students in the survey reported that they attended at least one career event. The highest attendance at a career information event was for talks by guest speakers, with approximately 74% of all students attending such an event. This was followed by college open

days (69%) and career exhibitions (58%). When examined by gender, males generally attended fewer career information events, especially college open-days: 61% of males and 76% of females attended a college open day. There was one exception, industry visits, which 22% of males attended, compared with 15% of females. However, only 21% of all students reported that there was follow-up at the school level after they attended the events. Of those who reported that their school followed up on the events, the most popular method was through a class discussion with a teacher (44%). These findings suggest that the educational value of attending careers events should be maximised by some structured follow-up in school through sessions arranged by the guidance counsellor in collaboration with relevant subject teachers.

### Findings of good practice

- The majority of schools have established links with a wide range of external bodies, and these links support the guidance programme in those schools
- Most students attend at least one career event, and a majority attend more than one

### Concerns

- There is a need in the majority of schools for structured follow-up when students attend career events

### 3.8 Professional development

There appeared to be widespread recognition among schools' senior management of the benefits for guidance counsellors of engaging in continuing professional development (CPD). Most guidance counsellors were members of the Institute of Guidance Counsellors (IGC) and regularly attended branch meetings and CPD events organised by the institute. Similarly, most guidance counsellors participated in regular professional support for counselling organised by the IGC and funded by the Department of Education and Science. Interest in the National Centre for Guidance in Education (NCGE) guidance planning modules, offered through a virtual learning environment, was high. A large number of guidance counsellors had participated in recently provided CPD in psychometric testing theory and administration organised by the IGC. In most schools the guidance counsellor and other staff members had received some training in bereavement support for students, crisis management, counselling skills, and many other areas with direct relevance to Guidance. The inspectors commended this commitment to and investment in CPD in their reports. Schools with well-developed guidance and support programmes were found to be using this acquired expertise effectively. It is clear from the fifty-five reports that guidance counsellors maintain a high level of engagement with continuous development in all areas of Guidance.

#### Findings of good practice

- School managements recognise the need for guidance counsellors to engage in CPD
- Guidance counsellors maintain a high level of engagement with ongoing developments in Guidance by participating in regular CPD
- Schools are effectively using the expertise gained by guidance counsellors at CPD events



# Chapter 4

The quality of teaching and learning



## 4.1 Methodologies

The inspectors commented positively in the majority of reports on the variety of teaching and learning methods used in guidance lessons. Traditional methods, such as questioning and using the blackboard or whiteboard, were employed when appropriate to the lessons. In keeping with the personal and reflective nature of topics introduced in Guidance, these lessons often included the use of group work, relaxation exercises, brainstorming, and innovative approaches to ICT, such as the use of digital presentation software in students' presentations. The inspectors observed that in most schools the content of lessons was carefully chosen to suit the needs and interests of students. The stimulating materials and the variety of topics and approaches used were complemented, in many instances, by informative presentations, student worksheets, questionnaires, and students' access to web-based information. The inspectors commended these good practices in their reports. The inspectors' reports contained comments such as:

It was a notable feature of the lesson that, while a variety of teaching methods was used, these were used unobtrusively and to very good effect. The use of a digital presentation showed how well such technology can be used in classrooms. The material of the presentation was referred to throughout the lesson, such that the topic was enhanced by the illustrations and text displayed, rather than the technology becoming the focus.

Effective use was made throughout the lesson of brainstorming and of ways of encouraging students to communicate clearly. Active listening was in evidence. The ideas expressed by students were built upon and all were encouraged actively to take turns and contribute to the discussion.

In general, practice was considered to be very satisfactory with regard to the use of a range of effective teaching methods. Where areas for the development of teaching methods were identified, the inspectors tended to focus on the need to vary approaches and to ensure that the topics and materials chosen were appropriate to all groups of students in the class. For example, one report stated:

The pace of the class was fast but given the fact that it was a revision class interest was maintained. However, as there were students in the class who did not intend to go directly to third level education, the content of all of the lesson did not meet their needs. The lesson could have met all needs if there had been group work. Handouts were prepared in advance which dealt with PLC courses and other relevant information, so group work would have facilitated students in examining these and in clarifying issues. All needs would have been met using this methodology.

### Findings of good practice

- Student-centred teaching methods, such as role-playing and group work, are used during guidance lessons in most schools
- The content of lessons are carefully chosen in most schools to suit the needs and interests of students
- Some guidance counsellors use innovative approaches to ICT in their lessons

### Concerns

- In a very small number of schools the variety of teaching methodologies is limited
- The topics and materials chosen for lessons are not always appropriate to the needs of all groups of students in the class

## 4.2 Classroom atmosphere and classroom management

The inspectors reported that the atmosphere in most guidance lessons was calm and work-oriented. Optimal practice in this regard was highlighted in a few schools where a classroom dedicated to Guidance formed part of the guidance facilities. In such instances, the visual learning environment created by the use of displays, easy access to ICT and to reference materials was commended. The guidance counsellor's personal knowledge of students and of their interests was a noticeable advantage in many instances, especially during lessons in which choices of future courses and occupations were themes. In the majority of the lessons observed, evidence of positive relationships between guidance counsellors and their students was found. Typical comments in reports included:

There was good rapport between the guidance counsellor and students and the students demonstrated excellent social skills during interactions with the guidance counsellor.

Guidance lessons were well managed in almost all instances by the use of simple but effective techniques. Typically, roll calls were taken, summaries of lessons were given, students' names were used and rooms were arranged to facilitate easy

movement between desks or workstations. These are basic elements of well-planned and well-managed lessons and should be a feature of normal classroom routines. The flexibility allowed by good teacher-student relationships was a notable feature of a significant number of lessons. In these situations a good two-way process was observed between teacher and students in which questions could be put, responses given and further clarification pursued. Students were seated in a circle in a small number of instances and showed familiarity with that arrangement. Small groups were formed in a number of other lessons and the process of group formation and dispersal was carried out smoothly and without incident. Similarly, individual, pair and small group use of computer workstations was integrated without difficulty in all but a few instances. Comments such as the following were made in reports:

Following a roll call, clear instructions were given as to the form and aim of the lesson. Students were divided into pairs and assigned to computers. Familiarity with the use of the system was obvious in that students gained access to web sites, such as Career Directions, without the further intervention of the teacher.

It was clearly a mixed-ability class, but the level of independent learning displayed by many of the students enabled the guidance counsellor to provide individual assistance to those students who required it.

Practices such as those outlined above were not considered to be feasible in some schools. In these reports the inspectors suggested the use of rooms that were furnished in a more flexible manner or alternative methods of using the facilities and resources available.

### Findings of good practice

- The atmosphere in most guidance classes is calm and work-oriented
- Positive relations exist between the guidance counsellor and students in a majority of guidance classes
- Most guidance lessons are well managed by the use of simple techniques, such as taking a roll call and arranging the room appropriately

### Concerns

- In some schools the rooms used for guidance classes do not facilitate the use of certain teaching approaches

### 4.3 Students' engagement and learning

The topics of lessons, particularly in senior cycle classes, were carefully considered in almost all instances. Often the topic selected was of relevance to most students, such as training in the use of course-selection web sites, such as Qualifax, or an exploration of the influence of others on personal preferences. In other instances the guidance counsellors used a variety of topics, each of which had relevance for some students but which were presented at a pace or in a manner that engaged the attention of all: for example, group work or ICT was used to cater for the different needs of students. The use of specialist guidance rooms in which materials and resources were to hand allowed greater flexibility in the conduct of lessons. Access to ICT, to the use of charts and other visual materials, often posted on walls, and the ready availability of class sets of information literature were commended in a number of reports. In general, the inspectors found much evidence of strong engagement by students with learning activities in guidance classes. One report that reflected this stated:

Students were encouraged and positively affirmed and there was excellent participation on the part of students who were very keen to complete the task and stayed on at the end of the lesson in order to do so.

In assessing the outcome of guidance education a distinction must be made between the learning that occurs in the course

of a lesson, or series of lessons, and those outcomes that may not be apparent until some time has elapsed. One of the objectives of a guidance programme is to provide opportunities for students to develop skills that can be used throughout life, for example the ability to make appropriate life choices. The homework done by students in the area of Guidance is frequently directed towards self-assessment and independent research. Such homework may require students to access the internet for particular information or to gain experience in the use of a particular web site, such as Qualifax. It may also be in the form of career investigation, with or without work experience, or may be in the context of the English and Communications or Vocational Preparation and Guidance modules of the LCA programme. The inspectors commended students' learning especially when they observed the use of prior learning to aid in decision making and research. One report that exemplified this stated:

The questions asked by students showed a real desire to use the lesson for the purposes of decision making. While students attended the lesson in the knowledge that teaching was the theme, it was obviously understood that much information of a more general nature could also be gleaned from it. Questions ranged from the nature of the work of the teacher to college life and to the teaching of a second subject. A very good grasp of the issues and possibilities was shown by the majority of students.

#### Findings of good practice

- There is strong engagement by students with learning activities in guidance classes





# Chapter 5

The quality of assessment

## 5.1 Use of achievement and aptitude tests in schools

Guidance counsellors in schools play a vital role in ensuring that good assessment and test information is available to inform decisions about students' learning and about the choices and decisions that they and others make about their lives. This aspect of the work of the guidance counsellor in schools ranges from the assessment and testing of incoming students to the diagnosis of learning difficulties and the aptitude testing that aids students in making educational and career choices.

The inspectors found that the purpose of testing was clear in the majority of schools. In most schools also there was evidence that tests were administered only by those qualified to use them. Tests of general ability were among the instruments used by the majority of schools as part of the assessment procedure for incoming students. However, some of the instruments used to test general ability were dated, and recommendations were made in a number of reports that more up-to-date and Irish norm-referenced tests be used in their place. In particular, reports cautioned against the use of psychometric tests that had been designed for use in other countries. One report stated:

The assessment instruments currently being administered need to be reviewed, as some are out of date and do not have norms suitable for Irish students.

It was pointed out in a number of reports that collaboration between primary schools and post-primary schools is a valuable element in the smooth transition of students from one to the other. The practice of visiting feeder primary schools as a public-relations and fact-finding exercise was common in more than half the schools inspected. More detailed, collaborative practice between guidance counsellors, special education co-ordinators and teachers of sixth-class pupils was seen in a small number of schools. In some instances the reports of assessments carried out while a child was in primary school were passed on, with parental consent, to the post-primary school. The outcome of such collaboration, in a small number of schools, was a reduction in the need for literacy and numeracy screening in the early stages of post-primary education and a consequent saving of time; this was cited as good practice and is recommended for consideration by all schools. One report stated:

Earlier this year the guidance counsellor and members of the learning-support department met with the NEPS psychologist to discuss testing procedures and instruments used. Consequently, tests used to assess incoming students were updated and changed. This proactive, consultative approach is commended as a model of good practice. There is ongoing

collaboration between the guidance and the special educational needs departments with regard to assessment of students.

General screening of students was seen to be valuable in the identification, diagnosis and monitoring of students in all categories of ability. The use of these instruments for streaming or banding was regarded less favourably by the inspectors. Early decisions regarding the class placement of young students based on tests of general ability need very careful consideration and justification. A number of the reports expressed an implicit caution against such early decisions and urged schools to become familiar with recent research regarding the negative effects of streaming.

Collaboration between the guidance counsellor and special education co-ordinator was widely found and was commended in the majority of schools. A two-phase approach to guidance provision for students with special needs was observed in most schools. Typically, the first phase involved a general screening of all incoming students for ability, including literacy and numeracy skills. Some contact with teachers in feeder primary schools and with parents was often part of this phase. The information gathered was used in identifying students needing more specialised attention. In the second phase, further diagnostic tests were administered

to specific students to assist in preparing individual education plans. Such commendable practice was noted in one report as follows:

A well-considered programme of testing is co-ordinated by the guidance counsellor and the co-ordinator of special education. Standardised tests are administered to incoming first-year students in order that subsequent progress may be monitored. Additional diagnostic assessment is carried out mainly by the co-ordinator of special education in the case of children identified as having specific needs during the induction process and contacts with primary schools. Results are used and stored according to best ethical practice.

Aptitude testing was carried out in most schools during third year, in TY, and early in the Leaving Certificate years, and this was reported upon as good practice. In the majority of schools in which these instruments were used the results were given to students by guidance counsellors on a one-to-one basis in accordance with ethical guidelines on the use of tests. This provided the foundation for a discussion of educational and career options and decisions. In some instances, parents were invited to participate in the feedback session. Such practice was also commended by the inspectors.



## 5.2 Interest inventories

A range of useful decision-making resources was used in almost all schools. Web-based resources, such as Qualifax and Career Directions, were used extensively both for their information pages and for their career interest and preference inventories. Some other, printed interest inventories were used in the majority of schools and were supplemented, where ICT access was available, by a selection of the many such inventories and questionnaires available on the internet.

## 5.3 Tracking of students' initial destinations

Almost all guidance counsellors recorded the initial destination of students who had left their schools. Where the number of leavers was small the information was usually obtained in a relatively informal way. The data gathered was used by schools to inform curricular and guidance planning and to identify contacts for students who were considering any of the career paths already chosen by past students. Similarly, maintaining contact with past students allowed freedom for their return as visitors or as speakers to groups of interested students. The involvement of other staff members in the process also facilitated the linking of subjects to students' choices and to subsequent career paths. Reports

that advised on tracking the progression of students after they left school contained such commentary as:

The guidance counsellor commenced the tracking of the first destination of past students last year. It is recommended that this activity continue for the future as it provides the school with valuable information about its students. It also offers an opportunity to engage past students in the guidance process by inviting them to speak to current students about their respective choices and careers.

## 5.4 Record keeping and storage of data and materials

Record keeping among guidance counsellors was almost universally good. Student profiles and records of meetings with students were kept by almost all and the majority kept records of meetings with other staff, using purpose-designed templates. The reports generally commended the high standards of record keeping and they contained comments such as:

Good record keeping has provided a firm foundation for the advancement of guidance planning.

Records are kept of all meetings with students and of subsequent actions. Meetings with staff on guidance issues are minuted. All records are filed and kept in secure storage. It

is reported by the guidance team that the keeping of such records and the formal reporting of the outcomes of the meetings has had positive effects on guidance planning, particularly in the promotion of collaborative practice and in the elimination of service overlaps.

The storage of data and materials is of central importance in Guidance. The ethical principle of confidentiality demands the secure storage of sensitive information and it is a condition of use of restricted materials, such as test instruments, that they are kept securely locked. The Department's Circular Letter 0099/2007 outlines the responsibilities of schools in this regard. In addition, guidance counsellors accumulate resources like prospectuses, information leaflets, charts and digital disks. Some of these materials are for personal professional use. Others are for the information of students. The inspectors found that adequate facilities were provided in most schools for their retention. Guidance offices were used in almost all schools for the safe storage of sensitive information and materials which could only be accessed by the guidance counsellor and if necessary by the principal. Guidance libraries which included college prospectuses, careers information and materials related to personal and social issues tended to be retained either in a section of a school's library or in one of the rooms used for Guidance.

### Findings of good practice

- The purpose of testing is clear in the majority of schools
- In most schools, tests are administered only by those qualified to use them
- Feedback is given to students on the tests taken in the majority of schools
- Collaborative practices between guidance counsellors, special-needs co-ordinators and teachers of sixth-class primary school pupils operate in some schools
- The initial destinations of students who have left school are tracked in the majority of schools
- Record keeping among guidance counsellors is almost universally good
- School records and sensitive materials are well managed and stored in a secure manner in most schools

### Concerns

- Some schools are using tests that are not up-to-date and appropriately standardised for the uses to which they are applied
- A few schools use tests for streaming and banding of students in first year





# Chapter 6

Summary of main findings and recommendations

## The quality of provision and whole-school support

### Main findings

Schools in which guidance provision was of a high standard were characterised by the commitment of senior and middle management to Guidance.

The majority of schools were using the full ex-quota allocation provided by the Department for the delivery of Guidance.

Most schools employed a qualified guidance counsellor.

Guidance was timetabled for senior cycle students in the majority of schools.

The provision of personal and social, educational and career guidance was well balanced in the majority of schools.

In approximately half of the schools, the guidance provision in the junior cycle was limited.

The facilities for the practice of Guidance were very satisfactory in most schools.

Most schools had some student-support structures in place.

A student-support team which included the guidance counsellor, special education co-ordinator and chaplain and other key staff, operated effectively in many schools.

Most principals set a high value on the guidance service.

### Recommendations

The ex-quota allocation for Guidance should be used fully for guidance purposes.

All students should have access to the services of a qualified guidance counsellor.

The guidance programme should be balanced, with guidance inputs into all year groups and programmes.

There should be balance between class, small-group and individual guidance.

Student-support teams should be structured and should include representatives of the core areas of student support and management.

## The quality of planning and preparation

### Main findings

The majority of schools had made some progress in guidance planning.

The development of the school guidance plan was delegated to the guidance counsellor in the majority of schools.

Some schools had established a task group or committee to develop the school guidance plan.

A minority of schools had guidance plans that were well-developed and were well-integrated elements of the school plan.

A structured approach to planning was observed in schools in which planning practice was judged good.

In the majority of schools, there was collaboration between the guidance counsellor and special educational needs co-ordinators and with chaplains and HSCL co-ordinators where present.

Some elements of schools' guidance programmes were delivered by staff involved in programmes such as SPHE, LCA, TY and LCVP.

Broadband internet access was available in the offices of the majority of guidance counsellors.

ICT was used by guidance counsellors as a tool in the administration associated with their work; there was evidence that its use as a tool in classroom guidance was growing.

Ninety percent of students in the survey indicated that they felt 'competent' or 'very competent' in the use of ICT.

Some interaction between guidance personnel and parents was found in all schools.

Junior cycle students in some schools were not provided with adequate opportunities to make informed subject choices. Almost half (48%) of the students in the survey stated that they chose their optional subjects before they came to post-primary school and 60% stated that they did not get an opportunity to try out subjects before choosing their subjects for the Junior Certificate.

Most schools liaised with NEPS, the HSE and other service and counselling providers.

Local businesses, employers and training and educational institutions provided a variety of services to schools.

Almost all guidance counsellors indicated they were participating in regular CPD by, for example, availing of the professional support for counselling funded by the Department.

### Recommendations

The guidance plan should be an integral part of the whole-school plan.

A guidance planning task group or committee should be established in accordance with the guidelines provided by the Department, NCGE and the School Development Planning Initiative (SDPI).

Mechanisms should be sought by schools to ensure greater involvement of parents in guidance programme planning and delivery.

Schools should provide more opportunities for students to make informed choices of optional subjects and levels of study in junior cycle.

Ways should be devised to ensure that parents are well informed about the long-term implications of the choices their children make in junior and senior cycles.

## The quality of teaching and learning

### Main findings

A good variety of teaching and learning methodologies was used in the majority of lessons.

The atmosphere in most classes was calm and work-oriented.

Lessons were managed unobtrusively and by the use of simple, but effective, techniques.

The content of guidance lessons was carefully chosen to meet the needs and interests of students in most schools.

### Recommendations

ICT should be considered a basic tool in the delivery of guidance lessons.

Provision should be made for access to the school's ICT room for guidance lessons as appropriate.

## The quality of assessment

### Main findings

Tests of general ability and aptitude tests were among the instruments used by the majority of schools as part of their assessment procedures.

Effective ongoing collaborative practices between guidance counsellors, special education co-ordinators and teachers of sixth-class pupils were seen in a small number of schools.

Collaboration between guidance counsellors and co-ordinators of special education was widely observed.

Web-based interest inventories were used in almost all schools.

Almost all guidance counsellors recorded the initial destinations of students who had left school.

Adequate facilities were provided in most schools for the retention and storage of data and materials.

### Recommendations

The psychometric tests used in schools should be up-to-date and based on appropriate norms.

The potential negative effects of streaming students in the junior cycle should be very seriously considered and, where streaming is practised, its use should be reviewed.

Standardised tests should be administered only by personnel qualified to administer them and in accordance with strict testing standards and ethical guidelines (see Circular Letter 0099/07).







# Appendix

## References

- Department of Education and Science (2005). *Circular PPT12/05 Guidance provision in second-level schools*. Retrieved from Department of Education and Science web site ([www.education.ie](http://www.education.ie)).
- Government of Ireland (1998). *Education Act 1998*. Dublin: Stationery Office.
- Inspectorate (2005). *Guidelines for Second-Level Schools on the Implications of Section 9(c) of the Education Act 1998, Relating to Students' Access to Appropriate Guidance*. Dublin: Department of Education and Science.
- Inspectorate (2006). *Review of Guidance in Second-Level Schools*. Retrieved from Department of Education and Science web site ([www.education.ie](http://www.education.ie)).
- McCoy, S., Smyth, E., Darmody, M. and Dunne, A. (2006). *Guidance for All? Guidance Provision in Second-Level Schools*. Dublin: Economic and Social Research Institute in association with Liffey Press.
- National Centre for Guidance in Education (2004). *Planning the School Guidance Programme*. Dublin: NCGE.
- National Centre for Guidance in Education (2007). *Report on the Evaluation of Module One: Reviewing Whole School Guidance. A Continuing Professional Development Programme for Guidance Counsellors in Post-Primary Schools*. Dublin: NCGE.
- National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (2007). *Draft Guidance Framework*. Dublin: NCCA.

## Useful web sites

[www.education.ie](http://www.education.ie)

[www.sdpi.ie](http://www.sdpi.ie)

[www.ncge.ie](http://www.ncge.ie)

[www.ncca.ie](http://www.ncca.ie)

[www.qualifax.ie](http://www.qualifax.ie)

[www.ncte.ie](http://www.ncte.ie)

[www.scoilnet.ie](http://www.scoilnet.ie)

[www.slss.ie](http://www.slss.ie)

Department of Education and Science  
School Development Planning Initiative  
National Centre for Guidance in Education  
National Council for Curriculum and Assessment  
Qualifax  
National Centre for Technology in Education  
Scoilnet (NCTE schools web site)  
Second Level Support Service

# Looking at Guidance

Guidance education in schools provides a range of learning experiences that assist students in developing self-management skills that lead to effective choices and decisions about their lives. Guidance encompasses the three separate but interlinked areas of personal and social development, educational guidance, and career guidance.

*Looking at Guidance* analyses and synthesises the findings of fifty-five reports on inspections of Guidance carried out from September 2006 to May 2007 in a range of post-primary schools. Like the subject inspection reports on which it is based, this report comments on the quality of provision and whole-school support for Guidance, the quality of planning and preparation, the quality of teaching and learning, and the quality of assessment. The report also draws on an analysis of more than 1,100 questionnaires administered to senior cycle students in the schools where inspections took place. The report discusses the features of good practice and concerns identified in the inspections of Guidance. It highlights areas for future development and provides insights into students' experiences and their perceptions of Guidance.

*Looking at Guidance* will be of interest to guidance counsellors and school managements and to teachers and others involved in the provision of effective support for students. It will also be useful in encouraging thought and discussion not only among staff members involved in reflective practice and review but also among parents and others interested in the guidance, support and care of students.

P R O M O T I N G   T H E   Q U A L I T Y   O F   L E A R N I N G



## Teaching and Learning in Post-primary Schools

The series, *Teaching and Learning in Post-primary Schools*, includes short reports on the quality of educational provision in second-level schools. The reports are based on the findings of inspections carried out by the Inspectorate, which has statutory responsibilities for the evaluation of schools at primary and second level in Ireland. The reports in the series focus on practice in schools and are intended particularly to assist schools and teachers as they engage in self-evaluation and review of their work.

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