EVALUATION OF THE JUNIOR CERTIFICATE SCHOOL PROGRAMME

INTRODUCTION

This report has been written following an evaluation of the Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP) in Cobh Community College. It presents the findings of the evaluation and makes recommendations for the further development of the programme in the school. During the evaluation, the inspector held meetings with the school principal, a core group of teachers and with a small group of students. The evaluation was conducted over two days during which the inspector liaised extensively with the programme co-ordinator and visited classrooms to observe teaching and learning. The inspector provided oral feedback to teachers on lessons observed. The inspector also examined students’ work and reviewed relevant documentation pertaining to the programme, as well as teachers’ written preparation. The outcomes of the evaluation were discussed with the school principal and the programme co-ordinator at the end of the evaluation period. The board of management of the school was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the report, and the response of the board will be found in the appendix of this report.

Cobh Community College is in the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) programme and has JCSP in its curriculum since 2003. The school also participates in the School Completion Programme (SCP). In the current year there are thirty-six students following the JCSP programme; fifteen in first year, ten in second year and eleven in third year. There is one JCSP class group in each year of the junior cycle. The school has a significant number of students with special educational needs and from disadvantaged backgrounds. A key aim of the school management and staff is to cater effectively for the educational needs of all students in the school. High expectations and high standards in teaching and learning are central to that aim.

1 QUALITY OF PROGRAMME ORGANISATION

1.1 Whole school support

The JCSP is well established in the school and enjoys significant support from management, staff and students alike. It was clear during the evaluation that the principal had a high regard for the programme and has a vision for how it should be implemented and developed within the school. All staff encountered during the evaluation expressed their support for the programme. Students are benefiting from participating in the JCSP in the school.

Teachers who are new to the programme are inducted into the JCSP by the co-ordinator and by attending relevant continuing professional development (CPD) courses. Management encourages and supports teachers to avail of appropriate CPD. The level of staff engagement with relevant courses is good. This is particularly so in the case of the co-ordinator. The JCSP support service has provided in-service support to all teaching staff regarding the programme.

There is a whole-school approach to implementing and publicising the JCSP in the school. There is good awareness of the programme among staff as it is occasionally discussed at staff meetings, thereby keeping staff informed as appropriate.
1.2 Resources

The supports available to schools participating in DEIS contribute to the resources available to cater for the needs of the JCSP student cohort in Cobh Community College. The school is also involved in its local SCP which offers students support to complete their education. This programme is effective in providing interventions which enhance the schooling experience of the students following the JCSP. The school also has a home-school-community-liaison (HSCL) co-ordinator who works regularly with the JCSP students and their parents. The 0.25 of a wholetime-equivalent (wte) teacher allocation received by the school in respect of the JCSP is used to provide co-ordination and meeting time.

The school is well equipped with information and communication technology (ICT) resources. The school has begun a laptop initiative whereby, for the last three years, each student entering the school in first year is provided with a laptop computer. Thus, all JCSP students can have access to a laptop computer for any lessons which require the use of ICT.

Although the school is not part of the JCSP Library Project and do not have the services of a dedicated librarian, the high quality and well-equipped library plays a significant role in the delivery of the JCSP. The library is having a positive impact on the educational experience of the students and on their social development. All involved are applauded for the quality of the environment and resources provided by the use of this space within the school.

The JCSP co-ordinator is provided with opportunities to contribute to the development of the JCSP timetable each year. This is good practice. The structure of the JCSP is reviewed annually and has been adjusted to best meet the needs of the students following the programme.

1.3 Student selection and support

The school engages in positive practices in relation to assessing which students would benefit most from participation in the JCSP programme. This is done following assessments and contacts with the local primary schools. The selection of students is undertaken by the school principal and a number of other staff members. The selection process, involving a range of criteria, helps to ensure that target students are availing of the programme. The JCSP student profiling system, assessments and teacher observation are used on an ongoing basis as a means of identifying those who would benefit from continued participation in the programme, as well as those who might no longer require its supports. Other students, who were not initially identified as possible participants, can join the programme if it becomes apparent during the year that they might benefit from inclusion.

The transfer of students from primary school is well managed. In line with good practice school management and personnel have contact with students’ primary schools before students enter Cobh Community College. Prospective students and parents are invited to the school for an open day. Students’ abilities are assessed both pre entry and post entry. Parents are informed of the aims and ongoing operation of the JCSP. There is a transfer programme for all incoming first-year students which is organised in co-operation with the local SCP. This helps to ensure that students are appropriately inducted into the JCSP. The transfer programme could be further developed by the introduction of a peer-mentoring system that would see senior cycle students act as mentors for first-year students. Such a system could also play a role in enhancing the quality of relations among the student body generally.
JCSP students benefit from a wide range of supports both within and outside the school. Student care at a school level and at a JCSP level is supported through a weekly meeting of the school care team. Concerns about individual students can be raised and an agreed response, involving some or all of the SCP, guidance and HSCL personnel, and management, is put in place.

The school’s provision of a guidance programme is a valuable support for JCSP students. While Guidance is not timetabled for junior cycle classes, the guidance counselor has access to the classes at key times during the year. A counseling service is available as part of the support for all students. All students also have access to a homework club.

The school has put in place an effective range of initiatives for JCSP students directed towards counteracting early school leaving. The JCSP co-ordinator, HSCL co-ordinator, SCP and learning-support personnel along with the school chaplain invest significant effort and energy in getting to know the learners on an individual basis. This person-centred approach, along with knowledge of families and the community, is a key support for students.

JCSP students’ attendance is closely monitored, and after school and outdoor activities are regular features of the programme. The school’s strategies to increase self esteem and enhance social skills, along with the Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) provision in the JCSP, act as further supports for students. The JCSP also places an emphasis on improving students’ motivation and self-confidence.

The school deems the JCSP to be suitable for students with special educational needs. In keeping with good practice a range of supports were in place at the time of the evaluation to support these students. These included ensuring that JCSP class sizes are small thereby providing a low student-to-teacher ratio in classrooms. The school’s resource teacher and learning support team work with individuals and small groups of JCSP students to improve attainment in curricular areas. This is done predominantly through the withdrawal of students from non-examination subject lessons. Team teaching is used, on a limited basis, as a means of providing extra support in some subject areas. In addition, special-needs assistants (SNAs) are deployed across JCSP classes.

1.4 Home-school links

The parents of prospective JCSP students, and the students themselves, are adequately informed about the JCSP prior to their enrolment on the programme. Students have a positive attitude towards their schooling and the JCSP. In light of this, consideration should be given to providing the more senior JCSP students with the opportunity to address parents and prospective students on JCSP information nights.

The JCSP and HSCL co-ordinators and chaplain initiate, or involve themselves, in many of the contacts between the school and the homes of JCSP students. Communication is maintained through formal and informal parent-teacher meetings and through twice-yearly assessment reports home and telephone calls. An examination of a sample of students’ homework journals revealed that the journal is also used as a home-school communication tool. In many instances it is used as a means of providing feedback to parents on students’ progress. Results in non-examination subjects are communicated through the journal. Parents could be encouraged to make greater use of the journal as a means of communicating directly with teachers. It is recommended that JCSP postcards be used more regularly by teachers as a means of communicating positively with parents.
The school works diligently to overcome the reluctance of some parents to engage with the school. JCSP statement calibrations, word millionaire and a meal for first-year parents are examples of events which encourage parents to interact with the school in a positive way. The school also runs courses and activities for parents.

2 QUALITY OF PROGRAMME PLANNING AND CO-ORDINATION

2.1 Planning

There is a short formal written plan in place for the JCSP. This document contains information on the aims of the programme, criteria for the selection of students, details of the JCSP curriculum in the school, initiatives, assessment and profiling. This document should now be developed into a three-year JCSP plan and integrated into the school’s DEIS plan. The plan should be extended to include clear measurable goals for the JCSP in relation to improvements in literacy and numeracy by students. It should also document learning and teaching approaches along with arrangements for programme review and evaluation. The plan should also provide for a whole-school approach to addressing students’ personal and social development needs.

The profiling of students is mainly the responsibility of the co-ordinator. Currently teachers are able to contribute to the profiling of students through the JCSP co-ordinator. All profiling of students, therefore, contributes to a student’s final JCSP profile. This is good practice. Statements including cross-curricular statements are collected from teachers at various times during the year. It is recommended that the profiling system be fully implemented in all JCSP subjects.

It is positive to note that a JCSP planning team is in place in the school. The planning team meets on an informal basis as the need arises. A record of each of the meetings of this team should be taken and school management should be kept informed of decisions made. To expand the current practice school management should ensure that the expertise currently available in the school is maintained and that other staff members experience the issues that arise in organising the programme and the profiling of students. It is therefore recommended that this group with responsibility for the planning of JCSP and profiling of students would meet regularly to oversee important aspects of the running of JCSP in the school.

While it is accepted that the whole-school care group and staff meetings are used to discuss the academic and other progress of JCSP students and other students, there is a need for a greater emphasis at a programme level on teaching and learning. Whole-school initiatives to develop teaching and learning, decided upon following whole-school CPD, should be implemented in the classroom through subject-department planning. Where subject departments are very small, related departments should collaborate.

2.2 Co-ordination

Since its introduction the programme has benefited from the work, commitment and dedication of a co-ordinator who, at this point, has accumulated significant knowledge of and expertise in the programme. A high level of resources is made available so that co-ordination duties can be carried out effectively. The co-ordinator has access to an office, to ICT facilities, to a phone and a photocopier. The co-ordinator also has access to the school’s administrative support.
The programme co-ordinator and school principal have a good level of communication in relation to JCSP in the school. Currently, in line with best practice, the co-ordinator has timetabled contact time with each of the JCSP classes in the school.

2.3 Curriculum

Parents, of identified students, are informed of the curriculum to be followed by JCSP students, in the school, and have the option of including their child in the programme. This is good practice. In first year and second year JCSP students study nine examination subjects. These are English, Mathematics, Irish, Science, Art, Civic, Social and Political Education (CSPE), Home Economics, Metalwork and Materials Technology Wood. All JCSP students also study History, Geography, French, Religion, Social Personal and Health Education (SPHE), Physical Education and ICT. These latter subjects are not taken as examination subjects in the Junior Certificate. The third-year grouping has a number of optional subjects which are timetabled concurrently with the mainstream Junior Certificate classes. JCSP students therefore study these subjects in a mixed-ability setting. This arrangement was changed following a review of the JCSP a number of years ago. While the specific needs of the students in any particular year group may outweigh the benefits of learning in a mixed-ability setting, it is important that this decision be reviewed each year based on the particular cohort of students in that year group.

Currently, a number of JCSP students have an exemption from Irish. Withdrawal for small-group or one-to-one tuition is from the non-examination subjects or from Irish for those who have an exemption. In some instances team teaching is also used to provide extra help within the classroom. It is good practice to have a range of supports in place.

Dedicated JCSP initiatives are important features of the programme provided in the school. These include Word Millionaire, Reading Challenge, make-a-book initiative, paired reading and Maths Games. These initiatives place an emphasis on the development of students’ literacy and numeracy skills and help develop a culture of reading among students. Students also have access to many co-curricular and out-of-school activities including Sailing and Drama. SCP also organise activities during and after school and during school holidays. JCSP initiatives are selected with a further aim of promoting the development of students’ social and personal skills. These events and activities that take place in JCSP are highly valued by the students.

3 QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

3.1 Planning and preparation

Planning and preparation for those lessons observed during the evaluation was of a good standard. However, there is scope for the subject department planning process to focus more on teaching and learning in the JCSP. Such planning should place a greater emphasis on learning outcomes for students and differentiated teaching methods. Other areas to be addressed are planning for students’ active learning and the use of a range of teaching methodologies in lessons.

There was very high quality in the range of and planning for resources in the JCSP lessons observed. In many instances, teachers either adapted existing teaching materials or created their own sets of material, thereby reducing dependence on textbooks. This good practice was replicated across most lessons. The creation and use of such materials provides an ideal opportunity for teachers to share methodologies and materials. It is also important to ensure that textbooks, where used, are appropriate to the needs, abilities and interests of students.
The school follows good practice in that JCSP profiling statements are used in all subjects and cross-curricular statements are also used. It is suggested that opportunities for students to be involved more in the profiling process should be explored. There was evidence of the effective use of statements and learning targets in the majority of the subjects and lessons observed. In line with good practice, individual student folders are maintained. However, there were opportunities for teachers and students to have more access to the folders used for tracking students’ progress. Increased use of folders would facilitate more frequent referrals to statements and targets by teachers and students. The folders could also be used to store examples of student work which is of a high standard, thus motivating students to produce work of higher quality. This would lead to a greater sense of ownership by students of their work and learning.

The folders that are used for tracking students’ progress are stored in a central location. These folders are utilised in the classroom by teachers and students at periodic intervals. A small number of teachers keep their own folders in their classrooms. While this system appears to be operating well, consideration should be given to progressing to a situation where all teachers store records of students’ statements and learning targets in their own classrooms. This would facilitate more frequent referrals to statements and targets by teachers and students, and would ultimately lead to students becoming more familiar with the JCSP profiling system.

3.2 Learning and teaching

The quality of teaching and learning observed was very good in almost all cases. The pace of teaching was matched to students’ ability levels. Lesson content was appropriate providing a suitable challenge for the learners. In all lessons the learning objectives were made clear to students at the outset of the lesson. Good practice was also seen in those lessons where the teacher checked at the end of the lesson to evaluate whether these targets had been achieved.

Lessons were generally characterised by the deployment of a variety of teaching approaches in order to accommodate students’ different learning styles. This approach made learning more accessible, and made students’ learning experiences more interesting and manageable. A broad range of teaching methods was employed across the different lessons visited. These included whole-class teaching, drill and practice, project work, small group and pair work, use of the whiteboard and overhead projector, role play, question and answer sessions, discussion, debate, brainstorming, use of ICT and practical work. In one instance students had to critically analyse a video that they had made themselves as part of a class project. Teachers moved around their classrooms during lessons keeping students on task. This also provided opportunities to appropriately provide students with individual tuition or support. The monitoring of students’ attendance and punctuality was noted in each of the lessons visited.

Students were actively involved in their learning in almost all of the lessons visited. Students were encouraged in their efforts by high expectation and affirmation from their teachers. There was regular reinforcement of learning in lessons giving students confidence in what they had covered. Individual attention and affirmation given to students was a positive feature in all lessons. There was a good atmosphere, conducive to learning, in all of the lessons observed. Students were generally enthusiastic and willing participants in lessons, while the quality of interaction between teachers and students was positive and respectful. Appropriately in one language lesson, communication within the classroom was, as far as possible, conducted in the language of the lesson. The maximum use of the target language, by the teacher and students, in all such lessons is recommended.
The development of students’ literacy skills was a feature in the majority of the lessons observed. In their interview, students affirmed their enjoyment and regular use of the school library. In most classrooms a print-rich learning environment had been created and JCSP keyword posters were in use. Key skills of reading, writing and spelling were regularly referenced in lessons and keywords encountered were listed for and explained to students. Good use of worksheets and handouts regularly featured in lessons in preference to textbooks. The development of students’ literacy in lessons should be further supported by the drawing up of a whole-school literacy policy that would be a reference point for the work of subject departments.

The school’s commitment to numeracy was evident through the use of JCSP mathematics-related posters. The development of students’ numeracy skills was less evident in lessons other than Mathematics. This should be enhanced by the display of high-quality examples of students’ work and the development of cross-curricular projects involving a numeracy theme. It should be further supported by the drawing up of a whole-school numeracy policy. The resources section on the JCSP website, www.jcsp.ie, provides advice on the drawing up of school literacy and numeracy policies.

3.3 Assessment

JCSP students are assessed through the same forms of evaluation applied to other student cohorts in the school. These include, among others, written examinations, topic tests, oral assessment, teacher observation and completion of assignments and project work. The JCSP profiling system is a further assessment tool that is unique to the JCSP student cohort. Records of subject and cross-curricular statements completed are added to the students’ folder at intervals during the school year. There is scope for greater responsibility to be assigned to students for their individual folders. This could involve having a degree of student input such as including them in evaluating their own work and reaching agreements with teachers on the quality of work submitted.

Students were assigned homework in a number of the lessons. An examination of a sample of homework journals revealed that while homework is regularly given in a majority of subjects, in some instances, it was evident that homework was not being regularly assigned. Regular setting of homework is recommended for all subjects. In assigning homework teachers should explore allocating less-traditional types of activities, such as, recording observations, investigations and identifying or collecting samples of everyday materials for use as learning aids in lessons.

The school’s success in tracking students’ attendance is shown by the positive attitudes of students towards attendance and the fact that the JCSP has succeeded in increasing student retention. Students, in their interview, also conveyed their enjoyment of school, their attachment to the school and their aspirations for further study and careers.

Celebration events, end-of-year presentations of profiles to students and recognition for attendance at the homework club are used as ways of rewarding achievement. These events act as a stimulus and source of motivation for students. Students’ journals are used to provide feedback to parents on students’ progress. This is good practice.
4 SUMMARY OF STRENGTHS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The JCSP experience provided by the school impacts positively on students. It was evident that students are benefiting from their involvement in JCSP. The celebrations and other events and activities that take place are highly valued by students.
- A broad range of criteria is applied when selecting students for the programme.
- The school effectively implements a range of initiatives for JCSP students aimed at counteracting early school leaving.
- School management is supportive of the JCSP and the programme is well resourced.
- JCSP student achievement is appropriately acknowledged and rewarded.
- There was excellent planning for resources in most of the JCSP lessons observed.
- Students’ literacy skills were prioritised in the majority of observed lessons.
- Members of school staff have undertaken CPD relevant to JCSP with the support of school management.
- JCSP students are provided with a wide range of supports both within and outside the school.
- Co-ordination of JCSP is very good.
- Teachers are committed to the JCSP and to making use of JCSP profiling statements.

As a means of building on these strengths the following key recommendations are made:

- School management should ensure that the expertise currently available in the school is maintained and that other staff members experience the issues that arise in the running of the JCSP and the profiling of students.
- Existing JCSP planning documentation and student data should be collated with a view to developing a three-year JCSP plan. This plan should include a school literacy and numeracy strategy.
Appendix

SCHOOL RESPONSE TO THE REPORT

Submitted by the Board of Management
Area 1  Observations on the content of the inspection report

Area 2  Follow-up actions planned or undertaken since the completion of the inspection activity to implement the findings and recommendations of the inspection.

JCSP Information meetings for other staff members, not currently involved with the JCSP will be held to update them on student profiling.

Literacy and numeracy plan in progress.