An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

**Programme Evaluation
Leaving Certificate Applied
REPORT**

**Coláiste Choilm
Ballincollig, County Cork
Roll Number: 71103K**

Date of inspection: 12 November 2010

EVALUATION OF THE LEAVING CERTIFICATE APPLIED PROGRAMME

INTRODUCTION

This report has been written following an evaluation of the Leaving Certificate Applied programme (LCA) in Coláiste Choilm, Ballincollig, County Cork. 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, the co-ordinator, 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 the 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, the programme co-ordinator and a member of the core team following the evaluation. The board of management was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the report; a response was not received from the board.

In order to meet the needs of its student cohort, Coláiste Choilm offers the Junior Certificate, the Transition Year (TY) programme, the established Leaving Certificate and the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme. The LCA was offered for the first time as a Leaving Certificate option to senior cycle students in 2001 and is now well established in the school

1   QUALITY OF PROGRAMME ORGANISATION

1.1   Whole school support

The principal has an excellent understanding of the programme and displays effective leadership regarding its implementation. The LCA has a very high profile in the school. This is assisted by the high level of exposure that activities pertaining to the programme receive. The electronic noticeboard, the LCA student and staff noticeboards and the weekly staff memo are some of the approaches that are used to ensure that LCA activities are publicised within the school community. In addition, a good level of information regarding the LCA is available on the school website. The inclusion of LCA students in the open night for prospective students, the organisation of task events such as the ethnic food fair and the salon day, and the myriad of photographs of LCA events that are displayed, have a significant role in highlighting the programme and the work of these students in the school.

A structured induction process has been put in place for teachers who are new to teaching the programme. The co-ordinator meets these teachers and they are also encouraged to liaise with teachers who are experienced in teaching the LCA. Each new teacher has a link teacher and this facilitates a good level of collaboration. This is very good practice.

LCA students form an integral part of the fifth-year and sixth-year student cohorts. Student care and discipline are undertaken by the appropriate year head and each group has a class tutor. This is very positive. The integration of the LCA students into the year group is further facilitated by the participation of all fifth-year and sixth-year students in the LCA Leisure and Recreation modules. This is very good.

1.2   Resources

A good level of deliberation is taken in assigning staff to teach the LCA. Factors that are taken into account include teacher commitment to the programme. Teachers are committed to the further development of their teaching skills, and management is very supportive of teacher participation in appropriate continuing professional development. This includes events organised by the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST) and the LCA Co-ordinators' Association. The enhancement of the skills of the teaching team is further facilitated through involvement in LCA examination work with the State Examinations Commission.

Information and communication technology (ICT) is used effectively in both organising and implementing the programme. Appropriate facilities are available to support the effective co-ordination and implementation of the LCA.

1.3   Student selection and support

The guidance provided to students is appropriate to their needs. Students are furnished with extensive information and advice in advance of selecting their senior cycle programme. The information night for third-year and TY students, and their parents, assists in this regard. In addition, the LCA co-ordinator is available to meet parents at the third-year parent-teacher meeting and also visits all third-year and TY classes. This is very good practice.

Management has a strong belief in the programme's ability to meet the educational needs of a specific student cohort. The school has clear criteria which are used to select students for participation in the LCA. Students who would benefit from undertaking the programme are identified using a range of strategies, including consultation with the third-year year head and subject teachers. Parents are also consulted. The requirement of prospective students to attend an interview prior to final decisions being made is positive. Students for whom it is determined that participation in LCA is appropriate are strongly encouraged to avail of the programme. This is very good practice.

A very comprehensive student induction programme operates in Coláiste Choilm. The co-ordinator and subject teachers explain the structure of the LCA, the terminology and the assessment organisational details during the first week of fifth year. A student and parent induction night takes place during the students' first week of participation in LCA. Matters pertaining to the programme, including the importance of student attendance for the accrual of credits, are clarified during this session. Students also participate in a team-building day in an outdoor-education centre and a retreat day.

Very good links have been developed with the special educational needs department. These are enhanced by the integral role that members of the department have in planning for the effective delivery of the LCA programme. In addition, there is an effective communication system between the subject teachers and the teachers who provide additional support to the students. Currently, additional support is provided to students with special educational needs in the form of withdrawal from regular lessons. This support is enhanced by the nomination of a specific resource teacher for each individual student. The school is now well placed to expand its models of provision and is considering the use of team teaching. It is recommended that this model be used in conjunction with the other forms of provision that are currently in place. The special needs assistants (SNAs) have a key role in supporting students' learning.

Each class group has a base room. This is very positive as it facilitates the celebration of student achievement through display of their work. Posters that support teaching and learning are also displayed. Teachers are encouraged to make greater use of the base rooms in this regard.

1.4 Home-school links

Good communication mechanisms are in place between the school and the parents. Parents receive meaningful feedback on student progress by means of the twice-yearly reports, the annual parent-teacher meeting and the awarding of the certificates from the State Examinations Commission which outline students' accrual of credits for a specific session.

Good links have been developed with the community through a range of activities. These include visits to the local nursing home. This is good practice. Appropriate contacts are fostered and maintained with outside agencies and employers.

2 QUALITY OF PROGRAMME PLANNING AND CO-ORDINATION

2.1 Planning

Very comprehensive planning folders have been developed and these contribute significantly to the successful implementation of the LCA. The folders include documentation on policies and procedures, subject plans, induction practices, minutes of meetings and internal review and evaluation procedures. Appropriate written plans have been devised for each module, using a common template. This is good practice. Of particular note is the inclusion of learning outcomes in these plans.

There is a core team in place which meets regularly to plan, monitor and evaluate the programme. This is good practice. There is evidence that evaluation and review of the LCA has had a positive effect on the planning and delivery of the LCA.

Cross-curricular planning takes place and student work in this regards is achieved mainly through the completion of tasks.

2.2 Co- ordination

The co-ordination of the LCA programme is excellent. It is clear that a significant amount of energy and enthusiasm contributes to the successful running of the LCA. Information folders and students' key assignments and tasks, which are centrally stored, provide evidence of the very good level of organisation that supports the effective implementation of the programme.

The core planning team, comprising representatives from senior management, the senior cycle year heads, the LCA class tutors, guidance personnel, the LCA co-ordinator and other teachers, supports the effective operation of the programme.

The LCA co-ordinator maintains very good communication with school management, staff and students. The co-ordinator has timetabled contact with each LCA class group. This is very positive because regular contact throughout the week assists in the development of a rapport with the students that is conducive to enhancing student achievement and assists in the monitoring of any issues that may arise.

2.3 Curriculum

All elements of the programme are appropriately timetabled. The school fully complies with Department of Education and Skills' guidelines and circulars regarding the LCA. Management is aware of the timetabling requirements for various modules and takes cognisance of teachers' requests. For example, Hotel Catering and Tourism is timetabled before lunch once each week to facilitate the completion of some of the key assignments and the student task that is anchored in this subject. This is good practice because it allows the use of the lunchtime for the out-of-class aspect of the key assignments or tasks, as appropriate.

The LCA curriculum is broad and balanced. The needs, interests and abilities of the students are prioritised in the design and implementation of the curriculum. In one instance, students are given a choice between two different vocational specialisms, which are concurrently timetabled. This is good practice and provides further evidence of the school's endeavours to meet the needs of the students. The number of students in sixth year who opted for Hair and Beauty as one of their vocational specialisms is small. Therefore, to provide the subject, the school has combined the sixth-year group with some TY students for the delivery of this subject. This strategy provides further evidence of the commitment of the school to meet the students' needs in the design of the curriculum.

The inclusion of Science as elective modules is very good as, in addition to providing a broad education and to further develop students' understanding of science, these modules are required for entry into a number of Post-Leaving Certificate beauty courses. School management reported that the school had examined the possibility of extending the range of elective modules that would be offered on the curriculum. The school is encouraged to proceed with the introduction of other modules that they deem appropriate. For example, the timetabling of drama should be considered, given the facilities that are available in the school and the opportunities that would transpire to enhance the personal and social development of the students.

The inclusion of a personal reflection period in the curriculum each week is very good as it assists in the development of students' social and interpersonal skills.

3 QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

3.1 Planning and preparation

Planning for lessons was very good. This included the prior preparation of student worksheets, acetates and a PowerPoint presentation. Advance planning facilitated the good lesson structure that was apparent in all lessons.

3.2 Learning and teaching

The quality of teaching was good and in many instances very good. A very good student-teacher rapport was evident in all lessons in an atmosphere that was positive and conducive to student learning. Students' contributions were encouraged and affirmed. Students participated well and were fully engaged throughout the lesson in almost all instances. Students were supported by their teachers and the SNAs as they worked independently.

Learning outcomes were outlined clearly at the outset of almost all lessons. This is very good practice and should be used in all lessons. These learning outcomes would provide students with a useful framework to assess their own learning during the recapitulation phase of lesson. Therefore, the use of the intended learning outcomes to develop and to review student learning is recommended. The pace was appropriate in almost all instances. Where the pace was not suitable, it was recommended that time be factored in for recapitulation of student learning

A range of supports was used effectively to enhance teaching and learning. The whiteboard and a PowerPoint presentation were used to good effect to outline the main points of some lessons. In some instances, visual images were used to stimulate students' interest and to make the concept tangible. Props such as flashcards and photographs were utilised effectively in some lessons to support student learning. Student use of a *placemat* as a planning template in one lesson was very successful in developing the lesson content and facilitated co-operative learning among the students. This is excellent. Group work and pair work also facilitated student participation and engagement with the topic under consideration.

The development of student literacy was facilitated in many lessons and this is very good practice. Opportunities for the enhancement of students' oral and writing skills were exploited in some lessons. There was good emphasis on literacy development in one numeracy-based lesson. This is very beneficial. Students' independent use of the dictionary is recommended to enhance the further development of the students' literacy. Therefore, it is recommended that dictionaries are available for student use in all lessons. To support the development of literacy to a greater extent, it is further recommended that key words be identified during lessons and reviewed at the end. Very good use of the target language was observed in a language lesson and students were given oral writing frames to assist them in developing sentences. This is very positive

The practical approach to the enhancement of numeracy skills that was observed in one lesson was effective in engaging the students and enhancing their knowledge. Opportunities were also provided to students in many lessons to work independently and to develop their social skills. In another lesson, students were encouraged to focus on their personal goals in terms of skill development. This is very good.

Question-and-answer sessions were used to ascertain student understanding and to develop lesson content. This was particularly effective when the questions were probing and promoted higher-order thinking.

There was some evidence of differentiation of student learning by content. For example, students were encouraged to work on an additional software programme on completion of the core lesson task. This is very good practice and the use of differentiation strategies to support learning should be used in all lessons.

The quality of students' learning was reflected in their ability to answer, and in some instances ask, questions. Overall, students demonstrated a good level of understanding, appropriate to their abilities. Where observed, students demonstrated a good level of ICT skills. The open and frank manner in which the students discussed issues relating to LCA is indicative of their good level of confidence, interpersonal skills and personal development. Students performed very well in the certificate examinations.

3.3 Assessment

A range of assessment modes is regularly used to assess students' competence and progress. These include key assignments, student tasks, questioning in class and formal pre-examinations. The practice of holding pre-examinations is very good as it assists in developing students' examination skills in addition to assessing students' learning. The practice of conducting an analysis of the results of the certificate examinations in LCA each year is commended.

The progress and outcomes of students with additional needs is monitored through the normal processes used for all students in LCA. In addition, the Wide Range Achievement Test is administered to the fifth-year LCA students who have additional needs and the results are used to formulate individual learning plans. This is good practice.

Students' key assignments are of a good standard. There was evidence that students' written and practical activities were monitored. This monitoring and annotation of students' work should be employed to a greater extent. Students' key assignment folders were very well organised and these assignments provided evidence of cross-curricular work. Examples included the use of bar charts and pie charts to illustrate the findings of research activities. It is good to note that students receive constructive feedback as they work during lessons.

The mechanisms for monitoring student attendance are very effective. Systematic recording of student attendance assists in maintaining a good level of attendance among the LCA student cohort. Students and their parents are informed if the school has concerns regarding an individual student's attendance. The operation of such an early-warning system and the implementation of strategies that counter non-attendance are praiseworthy.

4 SUMMARY OF STRENGTHS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The principal displays very effective leadership regarding the implementation of LCA.
- The co-ordination of LCA is excellent.
- Effective induction and a good student-care system support the students who participate in the LCA programme.
- Very strong links are maintained with the special educational needs department.
- Very comprehensive planning folders have been developed and these contribute significantly to the successful implementation of the LCA.
- The curriculum is broad and balanced.
- Cognisance is taken of the needs and interests of the students when the curriculum is being planned.
- The quality of teaching was good and in many instances very good.
- Students were confident and displayed significant interpersonal skills and positive personal development.

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

- To support the development of literacy to a greater extent, it is recommended that key words be identified during lessons and reviewed at the end.
- Students' independent use of the dictionary is recommended to enhance the further development of the students' literacy and therefore dictionaries should be available in all lessons.
- The use of differentiated teaching and learning strategies should be used in all lessons.