An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna
Department of Education and Skills

Programme Evaluation
Transition Year
REPORT

Presentation Secondary School
Thurles, County Tipperary
Roll Number: 65460C

Date of inspection: 5 May 2011
EVALUATION OF THE TRANSITION YEAR PROGRAMME

INTRODUCTION

This report has been written following an evaluation of the Transition Year (TY) programme in Presentation Secondary School. 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 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 deputy principal, the programme co-ordinator and assistant co-ordinator at the end of the evaluation period. The board of management of the school was given an opportunity to comment on the findings and recommendations of the report; the board chose to accept the report without response.

Presentation Secondary School provides second-level education to 600 girls. The majority attend as day students while 100 students attend the boarding school. The school is one of four post-primary schools in the town of Thurles and has offered the TY programme to students since 1996.

1 QUALITY OF PROGRAMME ORGANISATION

1.1 Whole school support

The programme has a high profile in the school. Leadership of the programme is very effective and it receives significant support from school management. The principal and deputy principal both value the programme and its reflection of the school’s mission to nurture and encourage the students’ personal development. Demand for the programme is increasing. This is also indicative of the value placed on the programme by senior management, as every effort is being made to accommodate all students who apply for entry to TY.

A very large teaching team is deployed to teach and present the programme to the students. Teachers are given the choice of being timetabled for TY and are given ample advance notice to plan for their engagement with the programme. This is very good practice. Similar flexibility is evident if teachers would like to change modules or not teach within the programme. The teachers engaged with TY display considerable loyalty and commitment to the programme due to its very positive impact on students. It is clear that the programme has recently experienced periods of both stability and change in its co-ordination. However, the complementary skills of all involved have contributed to its overall effectiveness.

1.2 Resources

The resources required for the programme are appropriately allocated by school management. Teachers are timetabled to deliver a range of subjects and modules. Timetabling is fair and equitable and demonstrates an appropriate balance between core areas of study, subject sampling, new experiences and activities grounded in the local community.
Students make a set financial contribution to defray the cost of programme activities. Extra complementary activities are also offered and these attract additional costs. School management was very clear that finance should not be a barrier to entry for any student and were acutely aware of the potential difficulties that these costs might cause for some students and their parents. There is also considerable flexibility in the timing and methods of payment. The awareness and flexibility demonstrated by school management concerning costs to students and their parents is very positive. It is essential that costs be limited and value for money achieved in all school activities.

Information and communications technology (ICT) is significantly integrated into the programme through classroom activities and particularly in the presentation of students’ reports and projects for assessment. Certification in ICT is optional and is offered to students through the European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL) course.

Base rooms are allocated to each of the three mixed-ability TY class groups. A notice board, photographic displays, the school’s website and very good quality printed materials provide a significant visual profile for the programme. Currently, the TY co-ordinator does not have an office. Given the scale of TY in the school, the provision of such an office, to assist in the co-coordination and expansion of the programme, should be considered, when space becomes available.

1.3 Student selection and support

Processes and procedures to guide students’ transition to senior cycle are open, transparent and inclusive. Students are offered access to the established Leaving Certificate, the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme or the TY programme. Very good quality information, advice and guidance are provided to students and their parents. The expected growth in numbers taking TY in the current year and the school’s enthusiasm to accept these numbers is testament to the open access that exists. While students are expected to apply in writing, and are interviewed in advance of entry, academic ability is not used as a selection criterion. School management’s recent decision to formalise and then publicise the entry criteria will add further transparency to this policy and procedure.

1.4 Home-school links

Regular and very good quality communication between school and home characterises the organisation of the programme. Following the circulation of literature about the TY programme and an information evening to inform programme choice, letters home, the student’s journals, and specific information relating to the particular events, are used to communicate with parents. A very high quality TY information brochure provides a detailed perspective on the range of programme activities. The achievements of TY students also feature prominently as news items on whole-school literature and on the school’s website.

2 QUALITY OF PROGRAMME PLANNING AND COORDINATION

2.1 Planning

The TY programme is informed by very good quality planning. A comprehensive programme plan that informs the operation of the programme for each year is in place. The plan outlines programme specific procedures including assessment, support for students with additional needs.
and a homework policy. It also includes some procedures for programme evaluation by parents, students and teachers. School self-evaluation of the programme can be highly effective in refining the programme and in tailoring it to meet the needs of particular cohorts of students. This process should be further developed by the current co-ordinating team.

The programme plan links directly to the school plan and the whole-school planning process. A curriculum review committee is in place and this group includes the TY co-ordinator. This group, in combination with school management, is working to review and evaluate curriculum provision with a focus on developing both teaching and learning. The positioning of TY in this review process ensures that the programme is viewed as a significant link between junior cycle and senior cycle within the school’s curriculum provision.

Planning for subjects and modules within TY is also of a high standard. The individual subject plans viewed during the evaluation reflect both TY guidelines and the philosophy that underpins the programme. These plans reflect an experience for students that is significantly different and yet complementary to that of Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate. The very good quality outcomes for students arising from these plans were clearly evident in the lessons observed during the evaluation.

### 2.2 Coordination

The TY programme is very well coordinated. The current coordination team exhibits very good leadership of the programme that is underpinned by very good planning, effective communication and a clear vision for development. The work of the current team represents both continuity and change in the development of the programme as it expands and develops both in content, uptake and organisation.

Both the co-ordinator and assistant co-ordinator, while engaging as a team, have specific roles. The role of co-ordinator forms part of a special-duties teacher post. The assistant co-ordinator takes specific responsibility for the organisation of work experience. The overview of all aspects of the programme falls within the remit of the co-ordinator. This includes the management and support for students within the programme. A core team of teachers, class tutors and the deputy principal also support the work of the co-ordination team. This core team meets formally during the year and ongoing informal collaboration also informs its work in relation to the programme.

### 2.3 Curriculum

A wide-ranging and fully appropriate TY curriculum is offered to students. This includes a core curriculum of English, Irish, Mathematics, Religion, Physical Education (PE), French or German, and Guidance. Subject-sampling opportunities are offered in Sciences, Business, Geography, History, Music, Art, Home Economics, Technical Graphics and Spanish. Complementary modules are offered in subject areas including Chinese, Drama, Communication, Computers, ECDL and Life-Skills.

The programme places a specific focus on language learning by providing a choice between French and German as core subjects, with Spanish as a third option for study. A module of Chinese has been introduced recently and plans are currently in place to allow students study both French and German in TY. This will further enhance subject choice for Leaving Certificate. Both subjects are further supported by the provision of language exchange projects with European schools and a French language assistant to work with the French department.
The subject-based curriculum is also complemented by an extensive range of experiences that enhance the social and community, and the personal development elements of the programme. PE has been expanded to include exposure for students to aerobics, yoga and horse riding. Students work with a local special school, are engaged with local enterprise projects and are facilitated to become involved in an extensive range of other projects and activities at both national and local level. Key aspects of the programme also include an outdoor-pursuits residential experience, the school musical and work experience.

Two one-week sessions of work experience are offered to students. This activity is very well organised and significant attention is paid to the detail involved in ensuring that the experience is meaningful for students. The guidance provision within TY links with, and appropriately supports, the students’ work experience. The organisation of work experience also includes an important evaluation element that allows all of those involved to review its effectiveness. The students interviewed during the evaluation were very positive and insightful about their work experience and also about all aspects of the TY curriculum. A number stated that the programme experience had now fully prepared them to meet the new challenge of the Leaving Certificate.

3 QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

3.1 Planning and preparation

Planning and preparation for learning and teaching in TY was of a very high standard and was reflected in engaging and participative classroom experiences for students. All the lessons observed had been very well planned. Teachers had prepared stimulus materials, interactive tasks and engaging activities that provided an appropriate TY experience for students in individual lessons. The well-planned integration of ICT was evident in a number of lessons.

In all cases, the planned lessons were reflected in the TY plan for individual subjects and had been integrated into the subject plan for each of the subject departments. Teachers had a clear vision and understanding of how the TY experience of their subject could enhance the students’ progress as they advance towards Leaving Certificate. Their experience and expertise in teaching TY was evident in their willingness to review, evaluate and develop their individual TY subject plan.

3.2 Learning and teaching

Very good quality teaching and learning was observed in TY lessons. The students were actively engaged in their own learning and participated fully and appropriately in these lessons. There was a marked absence of teacher dominated approaches as students were engaged by the planned activities. Methodologies included discussion, brainstorming, stimulus response, group work and the completion of practical tasks. All lessons were defined by established routines, inclusive practices and a clear focus on learning. It was clear from the enthusiastic responses, from the quality of work in their folders and from the displays of completed projects that students are appropriately challenged in very secure and well-organised classroom environments. Equally clear were the positive rapport between students and their teachers and the very good relationships that were observed in lessons.

Lesson activities varied. In Mathematics, a class group was actively engaged in measuring activities and calculations that reflected an appropriate focus on Project Maths methodologies and the development of students’ numeracy skills. In both a Drama and in a Communications lesson
the students were engaged in performance. The students presented a short play in drama class while in Communications they were formally engaged in a public-speaking class event. A Business class was engaged in group discussions relating to the national economy and was also tracking the stock markets based on the notional purchase of stocks and shares by individual students. In both an English lesson and a French lesson, students were engaged in the use of the language skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking. This was based on an unseen poem in English while an authentic text was used in French. The language assistant provided an added dimension to the French lesson by emphasising correct pronunciation. In a guidance lesson, ICT was very effectively integrated as students engaged in individual on-line project investigations.

These lessons were very effective and were clearly focused on intended learning outcomes. All of these activities were student-centred and involved teaching methodologies appropriate to a TY programme. Key skills and competencies were integrated and the students were both confident and assertive in their responses. These TY lessons represent very good practice.

### 3.3 Assessment

Assessment strategies were clearly evident in lessons and arose from the planned learning. Students’ learning emerged through questioning in the classroom, through the completion of tasks, through oral presentations and the display of completed projects. It was also clear from students’ folders that the tasks and projects set in lessons were significantly challenging. An examination of students’ homework journals however, showed that these did not reflect the volume of projects and tasks completed and contained in their individual folders. It is therefore recommended that teachers ensure that students record all work in their homework journal to more fully reflect the quality, volume and challenge of the tasks assigned.

Formal assessments for students are well organised, follow normal procedures and reflect the whole-school assessment and homework policies. Students are assessed on an ongoing basis within their subject areas and reports are sent home on three occasions during the programme. Certificates are presented at an awards evening that also celebrates the involvement and achievement of all participants. The recent and very positive development of a continuous assessment card ensures that assessment continues to reflect TY good practice. To build on this good practice, it is recommended that students produce a portfolio of their best work and achievements during the year as a further assessment component. This should include individual items selected by the students and written reflections associated with each item. This, in combination with the assessment card, will further enhance assessment procedures within the programme.

### 4 SUMMARY OF STRENGTHS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- A very effective TY programme is offered to students.
- Leadership and whole-school support for the programme is very good.
- Very good quality co-ordination characterises the delivery of the programme.
- The curriculum is wide-ranging, interesting, engaging and appropriate.
- Programme planning and planning for individual subjects and lessons are very good.
• Very good quality learning and teaching was observed in lessons.
• Current assessment strategies in the programme are appropriate and well organised.

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

• Teachers should ensure that students record all work in their homework journals.
• A student portfolio should be developed as a further assessment component.

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