Programme Evaluation
Leaving Certificate Applied
REPORT

Bush Post Primary School
Riverstown, County Louth
Roll Number: 71750U

Date of inspection: 2 March 2010
EVALUATION OF THE LEAVING CERTIFICATE APPLIED.

INTRODUCTION

This report has been written following an evaluation of the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) in Bush Post Primary 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 and the programme co-ordinator at the end of the evaluation period. 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.

Bush Post Primary School is a co-educational school under the patronage of County Louth Vocational Education Committee (VEC). Currently there is an enrolment of 243 males and 201 females. The school participates in Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS), the Department’s action plan for educational inclusion and it offers the full range of curricular programmes. The LCA has been in existence in the school since 2002. Currently, there are sixteen students in year one of the LCA (LCA 1) and fifteen students in year two (LCA 2).

1 QUALITY OF PROGRAMME ORGANISATION

1.1 Whole-school support

The programme is well supported in the school and there is good collaboration between management and the LCA team around all aspects of the programme. The current co-ordinator was appointed in 2005. It is good practice that the co-ordinator meets both LCA 1 and LCA 2 classes on four days per week for fifteen minutes each morning. This is important in developing and maintaining a good working relationship with students.

The teachers of LCA who met with the inspector at the time of the evaluation spoke enthusiastically of their involvement in the programme and, in particular, of its educational benefits to the students. Members of the teaching team are to be commended for their genuine commitment to the LCA programme in the school. Some teachers have been on the team for a number of years while others are new to the programme. Induction for teachers who are new to LCA is carried out by the LCA co-ordinator. As part of this induction programme, the co-ordinator provides essential information on the programme and resources and information on inservice training. Teachers new to LCA are also mentored by a teacher who is experienced in teaching the programme.

LCA teachers are encouraged and facilitated by school management to avail of appropriate continuing professional development (CPD). The co-ordinator has attended role-specific CPD and the majority of teachers of LCA have attended CPD on both subject-specific and task-based topics.
The programme is discussed at whole-staff meetings as necessary. In instances where students taking the LCA have special educational needs, these needs are communicated to the relevant teachers by members of the special educational needs team.

A core planning team has been established for LCA. This team consists of the principal, deputy principal and the LCA co-ordinator. It is recommended that the school reviews the constitution of this core team so that, as well as the co-ordinator, it includes a representative from each of the following areas: Social Education, one of the vocational specialisms, Vocational Preparation and Guidance (VPG) and learning support. The co-ordinator could then report back to senior management and provide them with the minutes of the meetings. If necessary, a member of the senior management team could attend the meetings. At the end of each year, the current planning team discusses the students who have applied for the programme and surveys their aspirations and interests. Based on this information, the electives and specialisms are decided and this determines which teachers will be involved in the programme. This is good practice.

1.2 Resources

The programme is suitably timetabled in the school.

Students have good access to information and communications technology (ICT) and they are encouraged to use ICT in the presentation of their work. The school has three computer rooms for which ICT classes are timetabled and other subjects can access them through a booking system. Consideration should be given to timetabling the LCA 1 class in the computer room for VPG. Teachers should be mindful that the incorporation of ICT into lessons should be fully documented in the planning for lessons.

LCA students are involved in a number of activities around the school and this generates interest in the programme and promotes it. It is very positive that one student from LCA 2 is currently a member of the prefect system in the school. The students who are studying Hotel, Catering and Tourism (HCT) have invited parents to attend a buffet lunch in the school as part of a task for this subject. LCA students also act as demonstrators for some of the practical subjects at the open night for incoming first years and their parents.

1.3 Student selection and support

Good structures are in place to aid the selection of students and to support them throughout the year. The LCA co-ordinator visits all third year classes and explains the programme to all students. This process is sometimes preceded by a classroom presentation from the guidance counsellor who outlines all the subject choices and programmes for senior cycle, including the LCA. There is scope to co-ordinate these classroom visits to avoid overlap between the co-ordinator and the guidance counsellor.

An information night is organised in April for all parents of third-year students where the range of programmes and subjects available to them is presented. The guidance counsellor, deputy principal, principal and the LCA co-ordinator attend the meeting and they are available to answer any questions that parents may have in relation to the LCA. A student from the current LCA class is also involved in this presentation and this is good practice. Parents present at the meeting are given a leaflet on the programme which is prepared by the co-ordinator and a brochure on LCA from the Second Level Support Service. Information on the LCA programme could also be made available on the school website.
When students have made their application to join the LCA programme, the list of applicants is discussed by the special educational needs co-ordinator and the year head of third year. It is recommended that all teachers of third-year students be involved in this discussion. Applicants are then interviewed by the LCA co-ordinator and the principal. Students and parents are invited to make an appointment with the guidance counsellor or the LCA co-ordinator in advance of the interview if needed. Successful applicants are notified of their place on the programme in May of the preceding school year.

A number of students with additional educational needs are currently following the programme in the school. These students obtain learning support by withdrawal from ICT or Gaeilge. It is noteworthy that team teaching has also been used as a strategy in delivering the relationships and sexuality education module in the LCA.

1.4 Home-school links

Good links are maintained with students’ parents or guardians through parent-teacher meetings, an annual open night, phone calls, written feedback in students’ diaries and letters sent home regarding tasks, orals, interviews, practicals, examinations and attendance. These links are also supported by the home-school-community liaison (HSCL) co-ordinator and parents are encouraged to contact the school throughout the year, if desired.

The programme also has a number of links with the local community. For example, students have attended Carlingford Adventure Centre and local musicians have been interviewed by LCA students for one of the key assignments.

2 QUALITY OF PROGRAMME PLANNING AND COORDINATION

2.1 Planning

The principles that underlie the LCA programme permeate the planning and implementation of the programme in the school. The entire LCA teaching team meets at the start of the school year to plan for the delivery of the programme in the school. Cross-curricular planning also takes place at this meeting. The areas in which tasks are to be anchored are decided and it is good practice that this is rotated among the course areas. The core planning team for LCA also meets three times per year. It is good to note that minutes are recorded for these meetings.

A comprehensive planning folder was made available during the evaluation. This included an LCA statement policy, the timetables for LCA 1 and LCA 2, the aims of the LCA, information on induction, credit records, templates of letters to parents and information on work experience. Further information such as a calendar of events, criteria for selection of students and individual student profiles were also provided.

Planning documentation also contained programmes of work for each subject area. Best practice was observed where these contained syllabus-based learning objectives linked to appropriate methodologies and methods of assessment. Some programmes of work also included an appropriate timeframe which is good practice. It is recommended that the co-ordinator, in collaboration with the core team, should review the current planning templates. Following discussion, an agreed, common template for the programmes of work could be adapted as necessary and adopted by all teachers of LCA.
A range of abilities was noted in the lessons observed and a number of teachers used good strategies of differentiation. In order to promote the use of differentiation strategies in teaching and learning in all lessons, it is recommended that the LCA teaching team should discuss best practices in this area and incorporate them into their planning documentation.

2.2 Co-ordination

The LCA co-ordinator has a good knowledge and understanding of the programme. The duties of the co-ordinator include collaborating with members of the teaching team, liaising with students, parents and outside agencies as well as co-ordinating the ongoing planning and review of the LCA programme.

The co-ordinator maintains regular communication with school management, teachers and students through formal and informal means. These include announcements in the staff room, input at staff meetings and addressing assemblies of LCA students.

2.3 Curriculum

The LCA curriculum provided is broad and balanced. The vocational specialisms provided for students in LCA 1 and LCA 2 are Hotel, Catering and Tourism (HCT) and Engineering. The elective modules taken in LCA 1 are Information and Communications Technology (ICT) and Agriculture Horticulture while those in LCA 2 are ICT and Graphics and Construction Studies. Students study French as the modern foreign language and this is provided in LCA 2.

It is good practice that the vocational specialisms and the electives are reviewed annually to take account of students’ interests, the availability of teachers and feedback from students. It is recommended that a staff audit be carried out to reveal teachers’ interests and expertise which could be incorporated into the LCA programme in the future.

The co-ordinator organises an induction programme for students at the beginning of the first year of the programme. This includes information on the programme, bonding and icebreaker activities as well as an introduction to their new subjects.

Work experience is an integral part of the curriculum. Both LCA 1 and LCA 2 students carry out work experience in two blocks of one week duration. It is noteworthy that preparation for work occurs through subjects such as English and Communications, Social Education and Vocational Preparation and Guidance. In almost all instances, students obtain their own work placements. This shows a commendable level of autonomy. Contact with employers during the work experience is maintained by telephone and by visiting the work place. This contact is organised by the LCA co-ordinator and all LCA teachers undertake a number of visits.

3 QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

3.1 Planning and preparation

Planning for the lessons observed was in line with the overall programmes of work for various subjects. A good range of teacher-generated resources was observed in many of the subject areas visited. These included worksheets, word banks, self-evaluation sheets and word searches. Where employed, ICT was used effectively in the preparation of teaching and learning materials.
3.2 Learning and teaching

There was good short-term planning and preparation for the lessons observed and this preparation facilitated effective student learning. Some very good practice was evident in instances where the design of the worksheets and visual aids used in lessons was carefully planned to accommodate a range of students’ learning styles. There was evidence, in one lesson, to suggest that this good practice in planning for students’ learning styles should be employed in order to provide clear direction for students and to enhance and clarify the instruction provided. It is noteworthy that one teacher made good use of a notice board as a visual aid and effective use was made of this resource during the lesson. A range of posters and student-generated resources were visible in the majority of lessons observed. These serve to enhance the learning environment and to promote literacy as well as affirming and celebrating students’ work. It is recommended that all teachers strive to create such a visually stimulating environment in their classrooms.

In all the classrooms visited, the atmosphere was positive. Students were, for the most part, co-operative. Discipline was appropriately maintained and good strategies for classroom management were utilised in a number of instances. Where chorus answering occurred, teachers immediately took steps to discourage it.

Instruction was generally clear and concise and the aims of the lessons were outlined to students at the outset. Best practice was observed where the aims were referred to at intervals during the lesson and used in the summary at the end. In one instance, where a clear outline of the lesson was not provided, the lesson lacked clarity and the pacing was not appropriate. It is recommended that all teachers outline to students the proposed learning outcomes at the start of each lesson.

A range of active learning methodologies was observed. These included class discussion, writing, practical activities, pair work, oral work including spelling, reading aloud and the pronunciation of subject-specific terminology. The variation in the methodologies used served to engage students’ interest and keep them focused. In some of the lessons, pair work and group work were used effectively to promote engagement and this is good practice. In one instance, where the lesson was predominately teacher led, students were seen to be inattentive and less engaged with the learning. It is recommended that all teachers of LCA should incorporate active methodologies into their lessons in order to keep students alert and on task.

In discussion with the inspector, students reported that they considered active methodologies to be the most effective means of engaging their interest and promoting motivation.

The students, for the most part, showed good understanding of the topics and this was reflected in their ability to ask and answer questions. A range of abilities was present in the classes observed. Methodologies used to support and improve literacy included emphasis on subject-specific terminology, displays of key terminology in the classrooms, use of word banks, varying the teaching methodologies, incorporating written and oral tasks into the lesson on a regular basis and relating the lesson to students’ life experiences. There is scope to improve on the strategies used to improve numeracy. Good practices should be discussed at team meetings and the agreed practices should be incorporated into the programmes of work for various subjects.

3.3 Assessment

Students’ progress and achievement is assessed through the Christmas and summer in-house examinations, mock examinations, key assignments and tasks as well as a range of other in-class
assessments. Students’ progress is then relayed to parents via reports which are issued at the same time as those for the rest of the school.

A range of tasks, key assignments and students’ notebooks was observed during the evaluation. The majority of these notebooks were tidy and well maintained and they had been checked and monitored by the teachers. In many lessons, students were regularly challenged by the lesson content and by the nature of the tasks set. All teachers should be mindful of providing challenging and stimulating learning experiences for students. Teachers maintain good records of students’ achievement and attendance. There is systematic recording of attendance throughout the LCA programme. Teachers reported that students’ attendance is generally good and it is noteworthy that most students progress to take the final certificate examinations.

A review of the programme takes place at the final LCA team meeting at the end of each school year. The outcomes of the discussions at this meeting are noted and fed into the programme for the following year. This is good practice. It is recommended that this review be formalised and extended to include students and their parents. Materials to guide the review process are available on the website of the support service (http://lca.slss.ie).

4 SUMMARY OF STRENGTHS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The LCA programme is well supported in the school and there is effective collaboration between management and the LCA team around all aspects of the programme.
- The teachers of LCA spoke enthusiastically of their involvement in the programme and, in particular, of its educational benefits to the students.
- LCA teachers are encouraged and facilitated by school management to avail of appropriate continuing professional development (CPD).
- The LCA co-ordinator demonstrates a good knowledge and understanding of the programme.
- Good structures are in place to aid the selection of students for the programme and to support them throughout the year.
- The underlying principles of the LCA programme permeate the planning and implementation of the programme in the school.
- Students have good access to ICT and they are encouraged to use ICT in the presentation of their work.
- A range of active learning methodologies was observed and the varied methodologies served to engage students’ interest and keep them focused.
- Some very good practice was evident in instances where the design of the worksheets and visual aids used in lessons was carefully planned to accommodate a range of students’ learning styles.
- There is systematic recording of attendance throughout the LCA programme and it is noteworthy that most students progress to take the final certificate examinations.

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

- The school should review the constitution of the LCA core team so that, as well as the co-ordinator, it includes a representative from each of the following areas: Social Education,
one of the vocational specialisms, Vocational Preparation and Guidance (VPG) and learning support.

- The co-ordinator, in collaboration with the core team, should develop a common template for the programmes of work which should then be adapted as necessary and adopted by all teachers of LCA.

- In order to promote the use of differentiation strategies in teaching and learning in all lessons, the LCA teaching team should discuss best practices in this area and incorporate them into their planning documentation.

- All teachers should outline to students the desired learning outcomes at the start of the lesson.

- All teachers of LCA should incorporate active methodologies into their lessons in order to keep students alert and on task.

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