Programme Evaluation Transition Year

REPORT

Dunmore Community School,
Dunmore, Co Galway.
Roll Number: 91414Q

Date of inspection: 17 May 2010
EVALUATION OF THE TRANSITION YEAR PROGRAMME

INTRODUCTION

This report has been written following an evaluation of the Transition Year (TY) in Dunmore Community School. It presents the findings of the evaluation and makes recommendations for the further development of the programme. 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 coordinator 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 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.

Dunmore Community School has an enrolment of 399 students. The TY programme was introduced into the school in 1995. It is one of three optional programmes offered at senior cycle level. There are 12 students following the programme.

1 QUALITY OF PROGRAMME ORGANISATION

1.1 Whole school support

A whole-school approach to TY is fostered by senior management, which takes an active part in its planning, implementation, and promotion. The principal is a strong advocate for the TY programme and its development. The whole school community is kept fully informed regarding the TY programme in many ways. TY is frequently included on the agenda of staff meetings and the outcomes of reviews of the TY programme are shared at a whole-staff level. All staff members received an input from a representative of the Second Level Support Service (SLSS) in 2009. TY teachers and other members of staff assist with and are supportive of many TY activities and the supervision and substitution required to carry out such activities. Core team meetings are well attended by senior management and TY teachers. Information is disseminated to students and staff through the special TY notice boards. A TY calendar of events and activities is posted in the staff room, and student successes are highlighted in a dedicated TY newsletter and in photographic displays. In order to raise awareness of the TY programme, at a whole-school level, it is recommended that the school newsletter also contains pertinent information on TY activities. In line with best practice there are representatives from the TY cohort on the students’ council.

1.2 Resources

There are nineteen teachers teaching on the current TY programme and other teachers have had experience of teaching on the programme in the past. Staff members are appropriately deployed to teach all areas of study in the programme, according to their qualifications, skills and interests. In general, good provision is made in the timetable for the delivery of the programme and to facilitate cross-curricular initiatives. This provision is commended.
There is no designated office space for the TY co-ordinator and there is no dedicated storage area for TY-specific resources. As school resources allow, it is recommended that provision be made for such facilities. A comprehensive up-to-date inventory of resources to support learning and teaching in TY has been compiled based on information available on www.transitionyear.ie. This is commended as good practice. This list of resources is included in the organisational section of the TY plan and should be made available to all areas of study in the programme. In this way, each subject department will be equipped to carry out a review of subject plans in the context of the most recent support materials available. The increased awareness of the available TY-specific resources among teachers should also promote cross-curricular approaches to support the implementation of the programme.

The TY programme benefits from a very good level of resource provision in terms of the provision of specialist rooms, access to audio-visual equipment and information and communication technology (ICT). TY students complete the seven modular components of the ECDL which are timetabled for three-and-a half hours in one of the two designated computer room. Students expressed a high level of satisfaction with the integration of ICT in a number of modules and subjects. However it was evident that scope exists for the increased use of ICT in both the planning for and the delivery of subjects across the programme.

The payment of an annual contribution does not apply. Instead students fundraise to defray expenses incurred for certain activities included in the TY calendar and they pay for some activities themselves. Students are made aware of these expenses in advance in a coordinated manner. This practice is commended. Sample monthly costs are included in the written plan. It is recommended that parents be provided with a sample annual costing at the TY information evening prior to the commencement of the programme.

1.3 Student selection and support

All junior cycle students are encouraged to consider the option of TY. Students are given comprehensive and timely support on the nature and benefits of the TY programme. An information night regarding TY is arranged for parents or guardians and students in March of the junior-certificate year. Students apply to be considered for the TY programme at this time and a change of mind period elapses in mid April. In the interest of bringing greater clarity to the process of student selection, it is recommended that the criteria for suitability for participation in TY be formally documented. Very good quality information is provided to parents in relation to TY, including the positive research findings of the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI).

There is an effective induction programme, based on Student Induction in Transition Year: A Guide for Co-ordinators, in place for TY students at the start of the year. This is commended as good practice. A two-day induction trip to an adventure centre is arranged in September to consolidate the induction process. The daily availability of the TY co-ordinator, the TY year head and other core team members play a key role in supporting the care of this cohort within the context of a whole-school student-support system.

Each TY group is provided with one class of timetabled guidance per week. The guidance plan reviewed as part of the evaluation is inadequate as the scheme does not include an appropriate balance between the areas of personal and social development, educational guidance and career guidance, as outlined in Circular PPT 12/05. The plan does not detail what diagnostic testing is carried out or when such is conducted. It is recommended that some diagnostic testing in relation
to career preferences be conducted early in the year to allow the outcomes of such testing to inform student choices during work experience. There is no timetabled class for the preparation of students for work placements or to facilitate the necessary debriefing after the work experience period. It is recommended that an additional weekly period of guidance be provided for TY students to improve the current guidance provision and to ensure that students derive the maximum benefits from work experience.

Students felt that the TY programme had provided them with opportunities to become more mature, confident, responsible, helpful and respectful individuals. Students commented on their increased understanding of their community and life outside school in general. Other positive benefits articulated by students included being in a better position to make subject choices from experiences gained during work placements and subjects sampled. Students also felt that they had developed better relationships with teachers as a result of their participation in TY.

1.3 Home-school links

The school is commended for its effective and successful communication with the parent body. There is frequent contact maintained with parents through school reports, an annual parent-teacher meeting, invitations to school-based events and the TY newsletter. It is recommended that the TY calendar of events should be furnished to parents on a termly basis so that they are fully informed of planned activities for students. In the case of students’ non-attendance at planned activities, a note to homes to inform parents or guardians of such absences should be explored. In order to further increase the awareness of the importance of full attendance and participation amongst all school partners, it is recommended that an attendance award be included in the honours at the end of the school year.

Strong links have been developed with local industries and businesses as part of the work experience programme and these are further strengthened through liaison by the TY co-ordinator and other members of staff prior to, during and post work placements. This practice is commended. The TY students engage in voluntary community projects which include fundraising activities, visits to nursing homes and the school’s engagement with the ‘Log on Learn’ initiative. The inclusion of voluntary work as part of TY each year is commended and this greatly assists in living out the TY philosophy. Many links have been fostered between the school and the community. TY students undertake one week of voluntary work in the community each October as part of the TY programme. Students take up work placements in hospitals, charity shops and care centres. It is commendable that students produced an enlarged printed version of songs and carols for the local senior citizens as well as a guide to internet use for the elderly. In the current year a Christmas trade fair is planned by the TY mini-company to serve the needs of the local company where an array of festive produce will be available for sale. Staff and students are commended for their many efforts to establish and develop links with the local community.

2 QUALITY OF PROGRAMME PLANNING AND COORDINATION

2.1 Planning

A core team is in place which comprises the TY co-ordinator, the programme co-coordinator who also acts as TY year head, the guidance counsellor and a TY teacher. Meetings are held at least once per term. Also in attendance at these meetings on a regular basis is one member of the senior management team, pertinent staff members and the previous co-ordinator who now acts as Home
School Community Liaison Officer (HSCLO). The priority given to planning for the TY programme is commended.

Increasing the numbers of students opting for the TY programme is an articulated aim of the principal. A comprehensive evaluation of the TY programme was carried in August 2009 and parents and students not opting for the programme were surveyed as part of this review. The core team has commendably addressed some of areas for development identified in this evaluation. It is recommended that the core team formulate an action plan based on the remaining challenges facing the programme and the main recommendations of this report.

The school has an up-to-date TY plan collated according to the three sections set out in the document *Writing the Transition Year Programme*. The general introduction is of a very good standard and includes the school’s aims for TY in line with the TY guidelines, the school’s ethos and mission statement. This introductory section also commendably contains the school policy on assessment. The section comprising the organizational details is very comprehensive and it includes evaluation instruments for all stakeholders. It is recommended that the outcomes and analysis of this inclusive evaluation be included in this section of the plan.

Long-term programmes for individual subjects and modules have been developed and a common six-point format has been developed and is employed across the majority of curricular areas. It is recommended that this format be used by all areas of study across the TY programme. The work to date is commended and to further this planning, detailed timeframes should be included in all curricular plans.

### 2.2 Coordination

TY coordination duties are clearly defined, are extensive and include the following duties: administration and planning of the programme; liaising with the whole school community, supporting and promoting the programme and maintaining records and reports. These duties are carried out very effectively. A time allocation of two class periods is assigned to the co-ordination of TY each week. In addition, the TY coordinator also teaches four periods of the ECDL programme which further facilitates communication with the TY group and allows the co-ordinator to foresee and address issues and difficulties as they develop. The TY co-ordinator is also supported by the co-ordinator of programmes who is responsible for overseeing work experience across all programmes offered. The provision of these co-ordinating structures by school management is highly commended.

The co-ordinator is commended for the amount of up-to-date resources across all areas of the programme that have been downloaded from the TY support service website and that are available to all staff members in the TY plan. ICT is used effectively in the co-ordination of the programme. Communication with parents, senior management, teaching staff, students and the whole school community is very effective.

### 2.3 Curriculum

The programme offered includes the four layers of the TY programme, core subjects, subject sampling, specific TY modules and calendar events. However, there are issues which need to be addressed in relation to timetabling in the core and modular layer of the programme. First, a single period for the delivery of French and guidance is inadequate. Secondly, two periods of Spanish and a single period of Drama comprise the timetabled modular layer. Other modules are offered as part of the programme, but there is no dedicated timeslot for the delivery of such modules on the
timetable. This necessitates the borrowing of classes and progression through timetabled activities in different areas of study is interrupted and consequently compromised. In the interest of continuity for students and certainty of access to students for teachers, it is recommended that this fragmentation of the timetable be addressed. The increased provision in the modular layer of the programme will also allow for the development of more meaningful cross-curricular links in line with the TY guidelines. The increase in the modular layer should also provide a curriculum less governed by traditional subjects in terms of the learning experience and in the manner they appear in the student timetable. It is praiseworthy that some students opt for subjects not studied at junior-certificate level as a result of the subject sampling offered during TY. Thirdly, it was evident from an analysis of the timetable for TY that the length of the school week needs to be reviewed in the context of *Time at School*, Circular M29/95.

The programme offers students opportunities through the calendar of events to participate in a good range of social and personal development programmes and modules through out the year. These activities are commended as they promote important character development skills and contribute significantly to the fulfilment of the national aims of the TY programme.

Currently students engage in three blocks of work experience, each for a one week period, in November, December and February. School management reported difficulties in acquiring meaningful work experience due to the demand on work placements in the surrounding hinterland from other schools. Whilst acknowledging these difficulties and the concerted efforts of all involved to find meaningful career placements, the timing of work experience is not in keeping with Circular M1/00 and should be discontinued. Good preparatory work is carried out with students in preparation for work experience and opportunities are provided for students to reflect on their experiences and discuss their learning. Despite this good work, a review of difficulties encountered during work experience among students and contained in the TY plan. It is recommended that student diaries from work experience are kept on file as a point of reference for prospective students’ sampling work experience in the same or similar areas of career placements. Over time a valuable catalogue of career sampling will be collected and will assist new students in the preparation for work experience. Such an initiative would also assist employers as there will be an increased awareness among students of their job briefs in different work situations.

3 QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

3.1 Planning and preparation

There was evidence of very good preparation and advance planning for the lessons observed. Where teacher-generated materials were used they were of a high standard and supported the learning tasks being undertaken. Materials and equipment to support learning and teaching were available and were effectively deployed, including PowerPoint presentations. This short-term planning and preparation positively impacted on the structure and pace of lessons. Learning outcomes were clearly communicated in all lessons and achieved during the lesson time. Differentiated learning targets were a feature of one lesson and it is recommended that this practice be extended to all subjects to cater for the range of abilities in the mixed-ability setting.

3.2 Learning and teaching

The quality of teaching and learning was very good in all lessons evaluated and exemplary practice was in evidence in one lesson. All lessons were characterised by very clear whole-class instruction. This was consolidated and extended through activity-based learning in groups or
individual tasks. In these lessons teachers circulated and attended to the learning needs of the students. Best practice was observed where the teacher set up the learning activity so that students completed tasks at different ability levels. Such differentiated approaches are highly commended. In one lesson whole-class teaching was interspersed with very good questioning techniques eliciting student knowledge and facilitating learning. In order to build on this good practice, it is recommended that teachers facilitate a debriefing session at the end of lessons so as to allow students to identify their own learning outcomes.

Very good and meaningful cross-curricular links were in evidence in two lessons evaluated and the extended use of this approach is encouraged in line with the aims of TY as set out in *Transition Year Programme, Guidelines for Schools*. Good attention was provided in relation to subject terminology when this was necessary.

There was very good rapport between teachers and students. Teachers’ classroom management skills were very good or excellent in all lessons observed. All teachers set appropriate expectations in relation to student behaviour and learning and in one lesson high expectations for behaviour and learning.

Very good learning environments had been developed in almost all classrooms through the display of subject-specific visuals and terminology. There is scope for the further development of the learning environment in some of the classrooms visited during the evaluation.

### 3.3 Assessment

The school has commendably developed an assessment policy for TY which details procedures in relation to summative, diagnostic and formative assessment modes as well as very good guidelines for portfolio assessment. It is recommended that this policy be included in the TY plans for all areas of study. A portfolio of excellence was used in the past as a means of indicating levels of student learning and progress across all areas of study. It is recommended that the benefits of such an assessment mode be examined again. Agreed criteria should be developed pertaining to the compilation of the folder of excellence across all areas of study. Once developed these criteria should be communicated to students over the year and that all students meet the coordinator in the course the year to discuss their progress in relation to the portfolio of excellence. The successful adherence to the criteria will also depend on the co-operation of teachers in the provision of three exemplars of best work from each subject area for the portfolio of excellence. In the case of languages taught as part of the programme, the *European Language Portfolio*, a log of language learning, is recommended as a common approach to the learning and teaching of the languages. Information in this regard is provided at [www.coe.int/portfolio](http://www.coe.int/portfolio).

A review of a sample of student homework journals indicated that homework was being assigned in the majority of subject areas. This practice should be extended to all areas of study and there should be variety in the type of homework tasks assigned, in line with the school’s TY assessment policy. In the case of two classes evaluated, very good practice was observed in relation to project work. This included a project layout and a marking scheme as well as an excellent guide to project writing from research to presentation. This work is highly commended and its further use is recommended across other areas of study to ensure that the skills attaching to project work are comprehensively developed during the TY programme. In the case of a random sample of student copybooks and folders reviewed substantial amount of developmental work had been covered, appropriate to the end of the school year. In a minority of subjects the planned programme for the year had not been achieved. In the interest of providing learning opportunities for students in a
developmental and sustained manner, it is recommended that the majority of the planned curricula be delivered within specified timeframes.

Summative examinations are conducted twice during the school year for TY students and reports issue to homes based on these examinations. Student attainment in the areas of participation, attitude and performance in activities is rated on a scale of one to five. Attendance is also included in this communication with parents or guardians. An annual parent-teacher meeting is organised for the TY group of students in line with best practice. It is suggested that students should also attend this meeting in the interest of promoting negotiated learning, a central tenet of the TY philosophy. Parents support TY events and attend the awards ceremony where student achievement is celebrated by the entire school community.

4 SUMMARY OF STRENGTHS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Educational provision is enhanced by provision of TY and a whole-staff approach to delivery and implementation of TY is fostered.
- A comprehensive up-to-date inventory of resources to support learning and teaching in TY has been compiled and there is a very good level of resource provision in terms of the provision of specialist rooms, access to audio-visual equipment and ICT.
- There is regular communication in place between the school and parents or guardians of TY students and myriad TY activities provide important conduits of communication between the school and the wider community.
- Good supports are in place for students during TY and students articulated great satisfaction with the many benefits TY had afforded them.
- Very good structures and practices have been developed to support planning for the TY programme.
- The TY programme is very well co-ordinated.
- There was evidence of very good preparation and advance planning for the lessons evaluated.
- The quality of teaching and learning was very good in all lessons evaluated and exemplary practice was in evidence in one lesson.

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

- In the interest of bringing greater clarity to the process of student selection to TY, it is recommended that the criteria for suitability for participation in TY be documented and included in the admissions policy and prospectus.
- It is recommended that the programme for guidance provision during TY be reviewed to ensure that there is greater balance across all areas of guidance, in particular in relation to supporting work experience placements.
- It is recommended that the core team formulate an action plan based on the outcomes of TY evaluations and include the main recommendations of this report.
- A review of the timetabled provision for the core and modular layer is recommended to address the number of periods allocated to each layer.
• It is recommended that the length of the school week be reviewed in the context of *Time at School*, Circular M29/95 and that the timing of work experience is in keeping with Circular M1/00.

• The assessment policy developed for TY should be used as a framework within which all areas of study can develop a variety of assessment modes to assess student learning.

*Published, June 2011*