An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna
Department of Education and Skills

Transition Year Programme Evaluation
REPORT

Stella Maris Secondary School
Pond Road, Tramore, Co. Waterford

Roll Number 64922J

Date of inspection: 9 February 2011
EVALUATION OF THE TRANSITION YEAR PROGRAMME

INTRODUCTION

This report has been written following an evaluation of the Transition Year (TY) programme in Stella Maris Secondary School, Tramore. 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 principal, the TY core team, the TY co-ordinator, and with a small group of students. The evaluation was conducted over two days during which the inspector liaised extensively with the TY 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 principal and the TY programme co-ordinator at the end of the evaluation period.

Participation in TY at Stella Maris Secondary School is optional and there are currently two class groups following the programme. The school ethos of commitment to the development of each student’s maturity and full potential is lived out through many aspects of the TY programme including student participation in the Meals on Wheels programme, the Irish Heart Foundation and the Gaisce Award. The board of management of the school was given an opportunity to comment on the findings and recommendations of the evaluation; the board chose to accept the report without response.

1 QUALITY OF PROGRAMME ORGANISATION

1.1 Whole school support

A whole-school approach to TY in accordance with Transition Year Programmes, Guidelines for Schools is fostered by senior management, who take an active part in the planning, development, and promotion of TY in the school. Senior management displays effective leadership regarding the TY programme and its implementation.

The school community is kept fully informed regarding the TY programme. The co-ordinator is afforded the opportunity to address the whole teaching staff on issues relating to TY at staff meetings. In this way, teaching staff can contribute to the effective planning and review of the programme. Information is disseminated to students and teaching staff through the TY notice boards. TY events, activities, and student successes are highlighted in articles published in the school’s newsletter and on the well-designed school website.

Student achievement in TY is affirmed and celebrated by the school community. This is very praiseworthy. Upon completion of TY, a graduation evening is organised to celebrate the students’ successful completion of the programme at which TY students and their parents mark the students’ graduation and accomplishments. TY certificates are awarded to each student as an acknowledgement of students’ participation and completion of TY. Many students also achieve external certification in areas such as the European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL) and the Gaisce Award.
1.2 Resources

Teachers’ skills are well utilised by senior management in designing and implementing the TY programme. Staff is appropriately assigned by senior management to teach the programme. There is ongoing support for staff to pursue continuing professional development (CPD). The sharing of best practice between staff is facilitated and encouraged. To ensure consistency in the planning and delivery of the TY programme in the school it is recommended that senior management gives consideration to convening whole staff professional development in TY at which best practice regarding TY is shared.

The two TY base classrooms and subject specialist rooms are well utilised for the delivery of the programme. Information and communication technology (ICT) is used effectively in both organising and implementing the programme. However, the lack of ICT facilities in the TY rooms is a cause for concern and should be addressed by senior management.

1.3 Student selection and support

Third-year students and their parents are invited to a TY programme information evening at which senior management, many teaching staff and senior students outline the benefits to students of opting for TY. Applicants to the programme are interviewed and their applications are assessed. Criteria for suitability and subsequent acceptance to TY have been developed in an open and transparent way. In the current year the school can accommodate all suitable applicants to TY. It is however, recommended that a TY admissions policy be developed, in which the criteria for the allocation of places to TY are clearly laid out.

It is very good practice that TY students receive a timetabled guidance lesson each week. The guidance plan for TY has the aim of assisting students in choosing appropriate subjects for senior cycle and informing them of the benefits and significance of continuing education. Students are afforded the opportunity to discuss their work experience and to make decisions on possibilities for the future. Interest inventories are completed by students; guest speakers are invited from local businesses and students are given the opportunity to visit Waterford Institute of Technology during its annual open day.

There are appropriate supports in place for students with additional needs on the programme. TY teachers are given advice regarding necessary additional supports for students including those with English as additional language (EAL) requirements. This is very good practice.

At the outset of the academic year students partake in a very good induction programme. Students are taken on an induction trip in September to consolidate the induction and bonding process. Student support is enhanced through the weekly timetabled lesson period with the co-ordinator.

1.4 Home-school links

Contact with parents is ongoing throughout the year. Initially, parents are made aware of the purpose and nature of the TY programme at the information evening. Selection of subjects for senior cycle takes place at the end of TY and parents play an active part in helping their children make an informed choice of subjects. Parents are invited to the school’s TY graduation ceremony and attend school events in which there is TY student involvement including the talent competition, the fashion show and the school musical.
The school newsletter and school website keep parents informed of school activities, including TY activities. There is ongoing communication between home and school through the student journal and it was evident in the course of the evaluation that the journals were well maintained. Parents receive meaningful feedback on their child’s progress during TY by means of school reports and the annual parent-teacher meeting for TY students. It is suggested that students also be present at this meeting so that student self-assessment can be part of the process.

2 QUALITY OF PROGRAMME PLANNING AND COORDINATION

2.1 Planning

The school has a written plan in place for the TY programme. The plan outlines key areas including the TY selection process, the formation of class groups, the TY calendar, student involvement in community work and some financial details pertaining to the programme. In addition, it is praiseworthy that the school’s TY targets for the year are set out in this document. The TY plan should be restructured and developed in line with Department guidelines and as a single cohesive and current document with all of the areas in the guidelines addressed, including organisational details and self-evaluation measures. Reference should be made to the website of the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST) www.pdst.ie for further assistance.

The content of the majority of TY subject plans is appropriate. However, the content of some TY subject programmes should be re-evaluated to ensure that there is a suitable balance between core academic material and innovative TY material. In particular, each subject department should meet to review its TY planning and should develop an appropriate subject plan using the common template outlined in Department guidelines. Areas in need of attention include teaching and learning strategies, cross-curricular planning, review and evaluation and modes of assessment. To further develop the TY planning process and to enhance cross-curricular provision in the future, it is suggested that the school considers developing some transition units. Details of transition units including a teachers’ handbook and sample units can be accessed on the website of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) www.ncca.ie/transitionunits.

A TY core team, consisting of the TY co-ordinator, the principal, the guidance counsellor and a language teacher assists and advises on the organisation, implementation and evaluation of the programme. Core-team meetings take place approximately once per month and minutes are maintained.

The TY programme is collaboratively evaluated and reviewed. The evaluation and review have had a positive effect on the delivery and implementation of the TY programme. For example, the curriculum is modified annually. The core team takes account of students’ needs and gives consideration to the costs of individual modules to ensure that access to a full curriculum is not prohibitive for students.

Students maintain a scrapbook where they record and reflect on their ongoing experiences throughout TY. They can also evaluate their personal TY experiences. This is very good practice. Teachers, students, parents and work-experience employers all play a vital role in evaluating the TY programme.
2.2 Co-ordination

TY co-ordination duties are clearly defined, extensive and comprehensive. The TY co-ordinator has a thorough knowledge of the programme and all duties are carried out very effectively. In addition, the co-ordinator undertakes TY year head duties. In this capacity, the co-ordinator looks after student discipline and pastoral issues. It is very good that the co-ordinator has regular class contact with all TY students. Communication with parents, senior management, TY form tutors, teaching staff, students and the whole school community is very effective. The TY co-ordinator holds an assistant principal post of responsibility with a two-hour allocation for TY duties.

2.3 Curriculum

TY students are encouraged to develop and consolidate their skills and abilities and to prepare for senior cycle and their future role in society. Efforts are made to provide students with a broad and varied curriculum and this was found to be the case in the course of the evaluation. However, consideration should be given to the provision of an additional language and to the introduction of a module in Technology for students. This would enhance the breadth of curricular provision.

Some core subjects offer continuity from junior cycle and many optional Leaving Certificate subjects are sampled. Specially designed subjects including Music Appreciation and Development Education provide diversity within the TY curriculum and enable students to be creative in line with TY aims. In addition, many innovative modules form part of the programme including Positive Living, Drug Awareness, Road Safety and Mini Business. It is recommended that further short modules be developed and that, as far as is feasible, all modules be formally timetabled. In addition, consideration should be given to the provision of a formal timetabled period when many activities can be scheduled. The formal timetabling of modules and activities would help ensure that timetabled lessons could continue as planned without interruption and that students are not required to leave a lesson to attend another subject or activity at the same time. In this way, teachers could complete planned subjects and modules with all students.

Active learning, project work, group and team work have been successfully integrated into many key aspects of the programme. Activities outside the classroom are encouraged and supported by the school. These activities are a vital element of the TY programme and play a major role in enhancing and broadening students’ overall experiences. Confidence-building is promoted through these activities and the needs, interests and abilities of students are prioritised. The support and encouragement given by teachers to students to participate in out-of-school activities and competitions has proven to be particularly effective.

Students are provided with opportunities to learn to be responsible and participative citizens and to actively participate in their local community. Through participation in the President’s Gaisce Award, the local parent and toddler group and many other activities students develop their social awareness. It is recommended that the school should give consideration to developing this aspect of TY provision further by exploring the possibility of all students gaining community service experience for a few days each year.

Work experience provides a vocational element to the programme and working in an adult environment plays an important part in the development of students’ experiential learning. Students are well prepared for work experience with support from the TY co-ordinator, the school guidance service and senior management. Work experience is organised in a two-week placement in the first term followed by a one-week placement in the second term. Students are encouraged to find their own placements and to achieve different work placements for each period. It is
praiseworthy that TY teachers visit students in their workplace as far as is practicable. Students are encouraged to reflect and provide feedback on their work experiences while employers are requested to evaluate student’s work.

3 QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

3.1 Planning and preparation

The good level of advance planning for lessons led to effective student learning. The varied methodologies observed in lessons worked very well as a result of well-thought-out strategies. Preparation for lessons included effective planning for resources. Handouts, materials and practical and ICT equipment were ready in advance of lessons. A written yearly current plan was made available for all subjects evaluated in the course of the inspection. Some teachers supplied individual lesson plans. The taught programme reflected, in the main, the school’s plan for the programme and is in keeping with the stated objectives. However, the individual subject plans in many instances are in need of review and updating. This review should include a restructuring in line with the guidelines and in some cases the content should be reviewed to ensure that there is not a profound focus on Leaving Certificate material.

3.2 Learning and teaching

Lessons were in the main well structured. Learning outcomes were shared with students in many lessons and this good practice should be extended. Classroom management was effective in the vast majority of lessons and the pace was appropriate to students’ abilities and their capacity for challenge. In one lesson the planned range of activities could not be fulfilled in the available time. Teachers should endeavour to ensure that desired learning outcomes are achieved in each lesson.

Students enjoyed the variety of learning experiences encountered. Relationships and student-teacher rapport in the classroom were very good and student learning was enhanced as a result. Teacher inputs were generally short, clear and concise and teachers in the main demonstrated an awareness of TY aims while delivering classroom lessons. Teachers had high expectations of students and students responded positively to these expectations. Concepts were clearly explained and students demonstrated positive attitudes to learning. A good atmosphere prevailed in all lessons visited.

Students actively engaged in learning in the majority of lessons and in many instances students were afforded the opportunity to lead learning and to present information to their peers. This is commendable practice. However, in a lesson led almost entirely by the teacher, the fast pace did not lend itself to appropriate participation by students. In that instance, the introduction of a slower pace with a focus on student skills’ development and active participation rather than content would have enhanced learning outcomes and student learning.

Overall methodologies were effective and teachers varied their methodology at opportune times in lessons to maintain student interest and motivation. The board was used effectively to highlight key ideas throughout many lessons and to sum up at the conclusion of some lessons. This good practice should be extended to all lessons. Group work was used very effectively in many lessons. In some lessons, where participation by some students in the lesson could have been better, group work rather than whole class teaching should have been introduced to address this issue. ICT was used effectively in many lessons. When the planned ICT infrastructural enhancement in the TY base classrooms is completed, ICT should be used more widely as an aid to student learning.
Worksheets and other teaching aids were used to reinforce learning and to actively engage students in learning. In one lesson visited, students were streamed into higher and ordinary level and used Leaving Certificate text books as a resource. It is recommended, therefore, that future planning in this area should take cognisance of TY guidelines.

Students’ confidence was developed in many lessons and reinforced in line with TY guidelines. Students learned many useful skills including the ability to communicate effectively, to investigate, to debate, to discuss and draw conclusions. Evidence was provided in the course of the evaluation to indicate that students’ understanding of material was of a high quality. Good use was made of student questioning strategies. In some lessons, the further use of targeted questions rather than global questions would have increased opportunities for enhancing student participation.

Differentiated teaching practices were in evidence. Teachers provided individual and group help and support as needed. A very good investigative approach to learning was promoted in many subjects evaluated. Activities were carried out in a safe environment with student tasks being well monitored and supervised.

3.3 Assessment

Homework is a regular feature of assessment and is set in a variety of formats depending on the subject, module or activity. Teachers adopt a formative assessment approach. Student progress and assessment results are reported to students and parents at Christmas and summer. It is recommended that the report template be customised to include areas such as student commitment, attitude and participation in TY and to reflect the various unique curricular aspects of TY.

TY students undergo continuous assessment through project work and assignments and sit formal examinations at the end of the academic year. It is praiseworthy that students maintain a scrapbook of activities and experiences encountered. These pieces of work are extremely well maintained. To strengthen the assessment process, it is recommended that portfolio assessment be introduced as part of students’ overall end-of-year assessment. For example, students could be required to choose what they consider to be some of their best work about which they could be questioned at interview. Interview criteria and marking would need to be clearly set out. In addition, consideration should be given to students maintaining an electronic portfolio with, for example, photographs of activities undertaken during TY.

Consideration should be given to the introduction of student self-assessment in advance of meeting parents. Students would rate their performance and the levels chosen by students would then be compared to teacher grades. This approach would help to provide a focus for the discussion between parents, teachers and students.

5 SUMMARY OF STRENGTHS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- A whole-school approach to TY is fostered by senior management, who take an active part in the planning, development, and promotion of TY in the school.
- The whole school community is kept fully informed regarding the TY programme.
- Parents receive meaningful feedback on student progress.
- The school has a written plan in place for the TY programme.
• TY co-ordination duties are clearly defined. The TY co-ordinator has a thorough knowledge of the programme and all duties are carried out very effectively.
• The TY curriculum offers a variety of subjects, modules and activities and is broad and varied.
• Relationships and student teacher rapport in the classroom were very good and student learning was enhanced as a result.

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

• A TY admissions policy should be developed.
• The TY plan should be restructured as a single cohesive document and developed in line with Department guidelines.
• Each subject department should meet to review its TY planning and should develop an appropriate subject plan using the common template outlined in Department guidelines.
• The content of some TY subject programmes should be re-evaluated to ensure that there is a suitable balance between core academic material and innovative TY material.
• Senior management should give consideration to convening whole staff professional development in TY where best TY practice is shared.
• It is recommended that further short modules be developed and that, as far as is feasible, the modules be formally timetabled.
• Portfolio assessment should be introduced as part of students’ overall end-of-year assessment.

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