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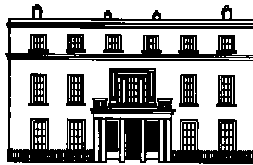
Department of Education and Skills

**Transition Year Programme Evaluation
REPORT**

**Coláiste Chraobh Abhann,
Creowen, Kilcoole, County Wicklow**

Roll Number 76076M

Date of inspection: 22 and 23 February 2010



**A N R O I N N | D E P A R T M E N T O F
O I D E A C H A I S | E D U C A T I O N
A G U S S C I L E A N N A | A N D S K I L L S**

EVALUATION OF THE TRANSITION YEAR PROGRAMME

INTRODUCTION

This report has been written following an evaluation of the Transition Year (TY) programme in Coláiste Chraobh Abhann, Kilcoole, Co. Wicklow. 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 deputy principal, 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 deputy principal and the TY programme co-ordinator at the end of the evaluation period.

Coláiste Chraobh Abhann was established in 2003 and introduced TY to its programme provision in 2006. Participation in TY is optional and there are currently two class groups following the programme. The school's mission of pursuit of educational excellence in a community where mutual respect prevails is lived out through many aspects of the TY programme, including student participation in the Young Social Innovators (YSI) programme, the Gaisce Award and recent initiatives involving working with the elderly in the local community. The board of management was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the report, and the response of the board will be found in the appendix of this report.

1 QUALITY OF PROGRAMME ORGANISATION

1.1 Whole school support

Senior management displays effective leadership regarding the TY programme and its implementation. 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.

The whole school community is kept fully informed regarding the TY programme. The co-ordinator meets the TY team of teachers at the outset of the academic year and the co-ordinator is afforded the opportunity to address the whole staff on issues relating to TY at staff meetings. In this way, staff can contribute to the effective planning and review of the programme. Information is disseminated to students and 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.

It is praiseworthy that student achievement in TY is affirmed and celebrated by the school community. Upon completion of TY, an exhibition evening is convened for TY students and parents to celebrate the work completed and students present projects, portfolios and achievements gained throughout the year. Awards, such as TY student of the year, are presented at this event. The school also hosts a prize day for senior students, including TY students. TY certificates are awarded to each student as an acknowledgement of students' participation and completion of TY. The school certifies each student's commitment, progress, enthusiasm and participation throughout the year. This is very good practice. Many students also achieve external certification

in areas such as the European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL), the Gaisce Award and First Aid.

1.2 Resources

Staff is appropriately assigned by senior management to teach the programme. Teachers' skills are well utilised in designing and implementing the TY programme. The school also availed of the TY support services at the inception of TY in the school and there is ongoing support for staff to pursue continuing professional development (CPD). For example, teachers of TY have participated in in-service programmes which have enhanced the delivery of TY modules, including the ECDL. The current co-ordinator has participated in extensive in-service courses and the sharing of best practice between staff is facilitated and encouraged. TY 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.

The various elements of the programme are appropriately timetabled. There are twenty-eight students in each TY class group in the current year. The timetable is designed so that there is a three-way or four-way split of the TY cohort of students for some practical modules. This is very good practice. However, in the interests of best practice, the school should consider reducing the number of students in the TY base class groups in future years.

On enrolment to the programme, parents agree to the payment of a contribution to cover expenses for most activities. Some optional courses are offered to students after school which may incur an additional contribution. While acknowledging that participation in TY is optional, demand for TY places may increase in future years. In this context, the board of management should consider meeting student needs within the resources of the school.

1.3 Student selection and support

Students who would benefit from participation in the programme are targeted and avail of the programme. Third-year parents and students are invited to a TY programme information evening at which senior management, many teaching staff and senior students outline the benefits of opting for TY to students and their parents. Applications to the programme are invited and these applications are assessed by the school. Criteria for suitability and subsequent acceptance to TY have been developed by the school in an open and transparent way and successful TY applicants and parents are required to sign a contract of learning. This is very good practice. It is suggested that a TY admissions policy be developed, where the criteria for the allocation of places to TY are clearly laid out. The introduction of a student interview for TY placement could form part of this policy. The optional nature of TY should be stated in the school's admission's policy.

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 experience a simulation of adult life and adult work through the 'Be Real Game'. In collaboration with the world of work programme, students are afforded the opportunity to explore their work experience and to make decisions on possibilities for the future. It is very good that career guidance and world of work modules are timetabled for one lesson period each week for TY. It is recommended that students be further supported at this stage of their development by having the opportunity of undergoing differential aptitude testing (DATs). This will help direct their future careers and act as a pointer to choosing appropriate subjects for Leaving Certificate.

There are appropriate supports in place for students on the programme with additional needs and resource hours are appropriately utilised. Advice, including teaching strategies, is given to all TY teachers regarding necessary additional supports for students. This is very good practice. Differentiation practices were evident in the classroom, the benefit of which was evident in the successes of the TY students.

At the outset of the academic year, students partake in a very good induction programme. Students are required to identify the five most important goals they want to achieve during TY and to focus on skills they would wish to have developed on completion of TY. Students are taken on an induction trip in September to consolidate the induction and bonding process. Students relayed this trip as one of the highlights of their TY experience. The weekly timetabled lesson period assigned for the co-ordinator to meet with the TY group facilitates enhanced support to students throughout the year. Also praiseworthy is the support that TY students provide for first-year students through the peer mentoring programme.

1.4 Home-school links

The TY programme in the school has received very good parental support. Many parents play an active part in TY, for example, parents give invaluable support to the school's annual musical production through their organisational and fund-raising activities. Contact with parents is ongoing throughout the year and letters reviewed during the evaluation show the extent and quality of this communication. The school's group texting system ensures that all parents are kept fully informed of developments. Initially, parents are made aware of the purpose and nature of the TY programme at the information evening and parents play an active part in helping their children make an informed choice of subjects for senior cycle. Parents are invited to the school's exhibition and prize-giving nights. In addition, all parents are afforded the opportunity to join the parents' association which actively supports the TY programme.

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 utilised and kept up-to-date. Parents receive meaningful feedback on their child's progress during TY by means of customised school reports, sent home on four occasions throughout the year following student assessment, and through the well-organised parent-teacher-student meeting, as observed in the course of the evaluation. This is very good practice. Parents are also requested to complete and return an evaluation questionnaire for TY. This is commended.

2 QUALITY OF PROGRAMME PLANNING AND COORDINATION

2.1 Planning

The school has an appropriate current written plan in place for the TY programme. It is comprehensive, broadly in line with Department guidelines and outlines the many aspects of TY programme provision. The plan also outlines educational research depicting the many benefits of student participation in TY and how the school achieves its mission through TY programme provision.

The subject plans follow the common template outlined in Department guidelines. Some subjects offered by the school in TY are not included in the current plan, and other subject plans are in need of updating to reflect current practice. Therefore, it is recommended that the TY plan be updated to include the full TY provision. 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. It is suggested that the organisational details outlined in the plan should also include the names of TY students and the current TY class timetables.

A TY core team, consisting of the TY co-ordinator, the TY class tutors, the guidance counsellor and two TY teachers, assists and advises the co-ordinator in the organisation and implementation of the programme. Core-team meetings take place on an informal basis approximately once per term.

The TY programme is collaboratively evaluated and programme evaluation and review have had a positive effect on the delivery and implementation of the TY programme in the school. For example, in the current year new subjects have been introduced including History, and all three senior science subjects are now offered as part of the TY student experience. This will lead to a more informed choice for senior cycle. Modes of assessment have been modified as a result of school evaluation, for example, student self assessment has been introduced and students now take part in the parent-teacher-student meeting. Students maintain a reflective diary of TY events whereby they can evaluate their personal TY experiences. This is very good practice. Teachers, students, parents and work-experience employers all play a vital role in TY evaluation in the school.

2.2 Co-ordination

Formal programme co-ordinating structures are in place and are operating effectively. TY co-ordination duties are clearly defined, are extensive and are comprehensive to include all aspects of programme provision, implementation, communication and delivery. The TY co-ordinator has a thorough knowledge of the programme and all duties are carried out very effectively. In addition, the TY co-ordinator also undertakes TY year head duties and meets other year heads on a weekly basis. In this capacity, the TY 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, teaching staff, students and the whole school community is very effective.

The TY co-ordinator holds an assistant principal post of responsibility with a four-hour allocation for TY duties. The programme co-ordinator post has been assigned to the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme and to achieving work experience placements for TY, LCA and Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) students.

2.3 Curriculum

The TY curriculum in the school endeavours to be innovative and creative, enabling students to build on their interests, learn new skills, consolidate academic achievements and prepare for senior cycle and for their future role in society. The curriculum is gender proofed with girls and boys required to take subjects not studied previously. The curriculum offers a variety of subjects,

modules and activities and is broad and balanced in line with Department guidelines. Some core subjects offer continuity from junior cycle and many optional Leaving Certificate subjects are sampled. Students are provided with a half-yearly rotation of many subjects. The inclusion of modules such as Road Safety and Traffic Management, Water Safety, Environment Studies and Film Studies provides diversity within the TY curriculum.

The entitlement of each student to a minimum of twenty-eight hours of instruction time each week is highlighted in circular M29/95. The school timetabled allocation to TY classes falls somewhat short of this requirement. Therefore, it is recommended that the school should restructure its timetable to ensure that each student receives their minimum entitlement as set in the above circular.

Active learning, group and team work have been successfully integrated into many key aspects of the programme. Participation by the TY students in the Log on Learn initiative is very praiseworthy. Students are required to teach a computer module to older members of the local community who come into the school each week. In addition, the Life and Times biography module, whereby students carry out a project on the life of an elderly person is a good initiative and worthy of inclusion in any TY programme. The links fostered are very beneficial to all involved.

Activities outside the classroom are encouraged and supported by the school and these activities are a vital element of the TY programme. The school is currently part of a European Union Comenius project entitled 'Life in Harmony with Nature'. TY students have the opportunity to exchange experiences with other European schools. The student exchange programme and the accommodation of students on placement from other European countries all enhance and broaden students' overall experiences. Participation in the annual school musical is a highlight of the year for many students. Confidence building is promoted through these activities.

Students are provided with opportunities to learn to be responsible and participative citizens and actively participate in their local community. Some students achieve placements in a local school for students with special educational needs. Through participation in YSI activities, the Gaisce Award 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, perhaps in lieu of part of work experience.

Work experience provides a vocational element to the programme and tasks undertaken in an adult working environment play an important part in the development of students' experiential learning. Students are well prepared for work experience with support from the programme co-ordinator, the TY co-ordinator, the school guidance service and senior management. There is an allocation of one class period each week to the preparation for work. Work experience is organised in such a way that there is a two-week placement in October followed by a one-week placement before Easter, with students encouraged to find their own placements and to achieve different work placements for each period. These placements require school approval. Students are encouraged to reflect on their work experiences in their diary while employers are requested to evaluate student's work. The school follows up on students, where possible, during the weeks of work placement. This is very good practice.

3 QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

3.1 Planning and preparation

A written yearly current plan was made available for all subjects evaluated in the course of the inspection. The taught programme reflected, in the main, the school's plan for the programme and is in keeping with the stated objectives. However as outlined earlier in the report, in some instances, the individual TY subject plans are in need of review and updating. Preparation for lessons included effective planning for resources and this 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. Handouts, materials and practical and ICT equipment were ready in advance of lessons.

3.2 Learning and teaching

Lessons were in the main well structured and the pace was appropriate to students' abilities and their capacity for challenge. Relationships and student-teacher rapport in the classroom were very good and student learning was enhanced as a result. Classroom management was effective. Teacher inputs were generally short, clear and concise and teachers in the main demonstrated an awareness of TY aims while delivering classroom lessons. Students demonstrated enjoyment of the variety of learning experiences encountered. Teachers had high expectations of students and students responded positively to these expectations. Teachers were knowledgeable, enthusiastic and innovative. Concepts were explained with clarity and students demonstrated positive attitudes to learning. A good atmosphere prevailed in all lessons visited.

Methodologies were effective and teachers varied their methodology at opportune times in lessons to maintain student interest and motivation. On occasion, the assignment of a student research task in advance of the introduction of a topic would enhance participation at the outset and would help give students more ownership of the learning process. 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 be introduced to address this issue.

ICT infrastructure is very good and the technology was used very effectively in many lessons. However, opportunities presented themselves to use ICT as an aid to student learning in some lessons and this opportunity was not always grasped. Therefore, it is recommended that in some lessons ICT be used more widely as an aid to student learning. During practical work, students worked collaboratively on the completion of assigned tasks. Worksheets and other teaching aids were used to reinforce learning and to engage students as active learners.

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 and to discuss and draw conclusions. In one lesson visited, TY mathematics students worked in small groups with a first-year class group to help them with their numeracy skills through mathematics games designed by TY students. This arrangement worked well.

Good use was made of various questioning strategies in lessons visited. Individual questions elicited specific responses while higher-order questions encouraged students to hypothesise and to explain their reasoning. Evidence was provided in the course of the evaluation to indicate that students' understanding of material was of a high quality.

Practical activities were the focus of some lessons evaluated. Activities were carried out in a safe environment with student tasks being well monitored and supervised. Notices in laboratories and specialist rooms acted as a constant reminder to students to wear eye protection, to handle materials carefully and to check with the teacher on all health and safety matters, as necessary. Differentiated teaching practices were in evidence with individual and group help and support as needed. A very good investigative approach to learning was promoted.

3.3 Assessment

An important feature of assessment at Coláiste Chraobh Abhann is student self-assessment in advance of meeting parents. The levels chosen by students are then compared to teacher grades as a focus for the discussion between parents, teachers and students. This is very good practice.

Homework is a regular feature of assessment, with homework consisting of 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 throughout the year, including through the student profile report. This is very good practice.

TY students are formally assessed on four occasions during the year following which reports are sent to parents. Assessment at the end of the academic year includes an exhibition of students' work. Together with academic achievement, emphasis is placed on many important aspects of student formation including teamwork skills, maturity, leadership, participation, attitude, discipline and attendance. This approach is commended. Students maintain a box of excellence which they display on exhibition night. Students choose some pieces of their best work from this box before presenting for the end-of-year interview.

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 by means of customised school reports sent home throughout the year following student assessment and through the well-organised parent-teacher-student meeting.
- The school has an appropriate current written plan in place for the TY programme.
- TY co-ordination duties are clearly defined, are extensive and are comprehensive to include all aspects of programme provision, implementation, communication and delivery. The TY co-ordinator has a thorough knowledge of the programme and all duties are carried out very effectively.
- The curriculum offers a variety of subjects, modules and activities and is broad and balanced in line with Department guidelines.
- Relationships and student-teacher rapport in the classroom were very good and student learning was enhanced as a result.
- Together with academic achievement, emphasis is placed on many important aspects of student formation including teamwork skills, maturity, leadership, participation, attitude, discipline and attendance.

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

- The school should consider reducing the number of students in the TY base class groups in future years in the interests of best practice.
- A TY admissions policy should be developed and introduction of a student interview for TY placement should form part of this policy. The optional nature of TY should be stated in the school's admission's policy.
- The TY plan should be updated to include full TY provision and to reflect current practice.
- It is recommended that the school should restructure its timetable to ensure that each TY student receives their minimum entitlement to twenty-eight hours of instruction time.
- The school should explore the possibility of all students gaining community service experience.
- It is recommended that ICT be used more widely as an aid to student learning in some lessons.
- Group work should be introduced to some lessons to enhance student participation.

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Appendix

School response to the report

Submitted by the Board of Management

Area 1: Observations on the content of the inspection report

The Board of Management at Coláiste Chraobh Abhann is very satisfied with the report on the Evaluation of the Transition Year Programme at the school issued by the Department of Education and Skills Inspectorate as a result of an inspection held on the 22nd and 23rd February 2010.

In particular, the Board acknowledges the very positive comments in the report and the identification of strengths by the Inspector in relation to the Transition Year Programme at Coláiste Chraobh Abhann. The co-ordinator, Core Team and individual subject/module teachers also feel encouraged and valued by the very definite strengths which were identified and either commended or highly commended by the Inspector throughout the report. The strengths identified in the evaluation conducted by the Inspector would concur with the very positive feedback received by the school through its own evaluation completed by parents, staff and students involved in TY at the conclusion of the programme.

All relevant partners have had an opportunity to discuss and evaluate this inspection report. A full and comprehensive review of the recommendations has taken place and an action plan has commenced. The TY Core Team will be central to the implementation of this plan.

Having completed the consultation process, the Board of management would like the following observations and comments noted:

- The school management acknowledges the recommendation to reduce the number in the TY base classes in future years. However, when consideration is taken of the very generous ‘splitting’ of these base classes into option blocks, it must be noted that the overall TY teacher allocation use is in excess of that which is received by the Department of Education and Skills.
- The Board of Management notes the Inspector’s request to allow for additional places on the TY Programme should the demand arise. The school will endeavour to accommodate all requests for placements in TY but can only offer an optional TY Programme due to the current capacity of the school building.

It was recommended that the TY Handbook be updated to reflect current practice and provision. However, the Board requests it be noted that the Handbook for any given academic year is published 6 months in advance of the programme commencement. This practice is adopted so as to fully inform parents and students of the provision at the Senior Cycle Information Night in February. Each year, there will be a small number of changes in the provision as a result of

teacher changes, student subject preferences, TY evaluation feedback from parents and students and feedback from teachers regarding their subject or module content. These changes will not be reflected in the handbook publication until the subsequent year.

Area 2: Follow-up actions planned or undertaken since the completion of the inspection activity to implement the findings and recommendations of the inspection

The school has reviewed the recommendations for development and will act to progress and further improve the Transition Year Programme. Some actions have already been planned or undertaken and these are outlined below:

- The TY Core Team will devise a set of criteria in consultation with the Principal, Deputy Principal, Student Council and Parent Council. These criteria will be published in the Senior Cycle Options Information Pack and will be outlined to parents and prospective TY students at the Information Evening.
- The Board of Management will amend the Admissions policy at its next meeting to include information to parents and students regarding the Transition Year Programme and its selection criteria.
- A review has taken place of the Aptitude Tests currently being administered at the school. The Differential Aptitude Tests (DATs) have been replaced by a combination of:
 - ‘The Eirquest Careers Brief’ - a careers selection programme which matches students’ interests and academic abilities with suitable and worthwhile careers
 - ‘The Cambridge Profile Aptitude Tests’

The results of these tests will allow students to become aware of their academic potential and their own ‘stronger skills’ areas. The results will also guide the student towards careers and occupations where their strengths lie.

- The school acknowledges that its provision for TY students is 10 minutes short of the expected 28 hours minimum contact time. This matter has been noted as an emerging need under School Development Planning and the school timetable will be amended to meet the requirement using the planning process.

Finally the school would like to thank the visiting Inspector for his positive feedback during the inspection process. The Co-ordinator, Core Team members and teachers found the inspection process and resulting report to be an acknowledgement of their enthusiasm and a commitment to providing a high quality Transition Year Programme at Coláiste Chraobh Abhann.