An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna
Department of Education and Skills

Transition Year Programme Evaluation

REPORT

Clonkeen College,
Clonkeen Road, Blackrock,
County Dublin.

Roll Number: 60092U

Date of inspection: 13 and 14 April 2010
EVALUATION OF THE TRANSITION YEAR PROGRAMME

INTRODUCTION

This report has been written following an evaluation of the Transition Year (TY) programme in Clonkeen College, Blackrock, Co. Dublin. 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 and deputy principal and with a small group of students. The evaluation was conducted over two days during which the inspector 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 and deputy principal at the end of the evaluation period.

Clonkeen College introduced TY to its programme provision in 1986. Participation in TY is compulsory and there are currently three class groups following the programme. The school’s mission statement supports the development of the diverse talents of individuals and the school offers a range of subjects and programmes, including TY, to achieve this objective. 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.

1 QUALITY OF PROGRAMME ORGANISATION

1.1 Whole school support

In accordance with Transition Year Programmes, Guidelines for Schools, a whole-school approach to the planning, development, and promotion of TY is fostered by senior management. The principal displays effective leadership regarding the programme and its implementation. TY is on the agenda of every staff meeting and the co-ordinator may avail of the opportunity to address the whole staff on issues relating to TY. In this way, staff can contribute to the effective planning and review of the programme. In addition, whole-staff TY planning meetings are convened on three occasions throughout the year. Minutes of meetings examined provide evidence of the wide extent of whole-staff consultation regarding TY. This is commendable practice.

The whole school community is kept fully informed regarding the TY programme in many ways. Information is disseminated to staff and students through the TY notice boards. TY events, activities and student successes are highlighted in articles published in the school’s newsletter and on the college website. It is praiseworthy that student participation and achievement in TY is affirmed and celebrated by the school community. Senior management affirms student commitment to important activities with letters of commendation sent to parents throughout the year. Upon completion of TY, a dedicated TY awards event is organised, where TY certificates are formally presented.

1.2 Resources

Senior management effectively deploys teachers across the programme with the majority of teachers on the staff involved in the delivery of TY. Teachers’ skills are well utilised in designing and implementing the TY programme. When necessary, the school employs personnel with particular expertise from outside the school so that a varied and effective curriculum can be
offered to TY students. This is a good strategy. There is ongoing support for staff to pursue continuing professional development (CPD). For example, teachers of TY have participated in in-service programmes, including the European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL), which have enhanced the delivery of TY modules.

TY classrooms and subject specialist rooms are commendably utilised for the delivery of the programme. Information and communication technology (ICT) was used effectively in both organising and implementing the programme. In this context, consideration should be given to enhancing ICT facilities in the TY base classrooms, so that ICT can be further integrated into TY students’ learning experiences. A comprehensive list of TY resources should also be made available on the school’s computer network in an effort to promote cross-curricular approaches to TY programme implementation.

On enrolment to the programme, parents agree to the payment of a contribution to cover expenses for most activities including transport, entrance fees, outdoor activities and computer facilities pertaining to TY provision. Any financial shortfall is normally met by the board of management. Some optional activities are offered to students after school which may incur an additional contribution.

1.3 Student selection and support

Clonkeen College has a policy on admission to TY in place, which is published in the student journal. This is very good practice. The policy clearly outlines the compulsory nature of TY and the school’s selection procedure should the college be unable to form TY classes for all students in the future. It is recommended that an interview with the student should also form part of this selection process. It is also recommended, in the interests of consistency, that the compulsory nature of TY be also stated in the school’s admissions policy.

There are currently three TY class groups, one group of 27 students and two groups of 28 students. The numbers of students in these base class groups may erode some aspects of activity-based learning and self-directed learning which are essential to TY. Therefore, senior management should consider measures to moderate class size in TY with a view to enhancing the student learning experience.

Guidance is provided to TY students for one timetabled lesson each week. This is in line with best practice. The guidance plan for TY has appropriate aims, such as assisting students in choosing appropriate subjects for senior cycle and increasing students’ awareness of their interests, abilities and personal attributes.

Clonkeen College adopts a whole-school approach to special needs provision and has developed a comprehensive special-needs booklet. Dedicated time is provided for discussion of additional educational needs at staff meetings, as the need arises. Students with additional needs are well supported and resource hours for TY students are well utilised. There is occasional withdrawal from Irish for additional support to students with exemptions from the study of Irish. Differentiation practices were used by teachers, the benefit of which was evident to the student learning experience in the classroom.

At the outset of the academic year, students partake in an induction programme. Students are guided through the timetable for the year and are informed of rules and expectations pertaining to the TY programme in the college. The college has a number of attendance strategies in place to

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tackle poor attendance of students. In the course of the evaluation, one TY class group had a significant number of students absent. It is recommended that the college should strengthen its monitoring of attendance, especially for TY students.

The college currently operates a strategy of releasing TY students in advance of the summer school closure. This practice must cease. Circular M1/00 states explicitly that the integrity of the school year should not be compromised for TY students. TY students are required to attend school for a minimum of 167 days similar to all other students in the college.

The student voice is an important part of any TY programme and students in Clonkeen College are consulted on various aspects of TY provision. To further enhance and to formalise this process, it is recommended that TY students should form part of the student council. This initiative would also provide valuable experience and responsibility for TY students.

1.4 Home-school links

The TY programme has received very good parental support. Third-year parents are invited to a TY programme information evening in March, where the purpose and nature of the TY programme are outlined. The school’s parents association has supported many TY events including the careers night and the healthy eating and nutrition initiative which benefits TY students. Many parents play an active part in TY, for example, parents are invited to present information on their own careers at the careers’ evening and are approached to help regarding work experience placements. Parents are invited to the school’s awards ceremonies and to the TY graduation event.

There is ongoing communication between home and school through the student journal. The school newsletter and school website keep parents well informed of school activities, including TY activities. Parents receive meaningful feedback on student progress by means of school reports following examinations on three occasions throughout the year. The format of the student report template for TY has been adapted and customised for TY. This is very good practice, as it supports the unique nature of TY. To gather further evaluative comments from parents on the programme, it is recommended that a parent-teacher meeting be introduced for TY, and it is suggested that the student may be present at this meeting. This initiative would also help to support student self-assessment, whereby students would be required to carry out a self-assessment for all subject areas in advance of this meeting.

2 QUALITY OF PROGRAMME PLANNING AND CO-ORDINATION

2.1 Planning

The college has a good level of planning in place. The three-member TY core team consists of the TY co-ordinator, who is also TY year head, the guidance counsellor and the school principal.

The school has in place a TY handbook and a TY plan consisting of individual subject programmes. However, there is not a coherent TY written plan in place as required by the Department of Education and Skills and as set out in Circular M1/00. Individual TY subject plans were made available in the course of the evaluation. However, many of these plans require restructuring and redevelopment in line with Department guidelines on writing the TY programme. A more cohesive approach to TY planning is required with teaching and learning
strategies clearly outlined, with a focus on cross-curricular approaches and with self-evaluation built into each subject plan. Therefore, it is recommended that each subject department should meet to review its TY planning and should develop an appropriate subject plan using the common template outlined in the Department guidelines. The overall TY plan should be developed 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 Second Level Support Service (SLSS) www.slss.ie. The school is encouraged to provide for the training of all staff in writing the TY programme.

Students indicated a good level of satisfaction with the school’s TY programme in the course of the evaluation and outlined some valuable insights into the future development of TY. The school outlined some self-evaluation measures for TY, which include a dedicated staff meeting for this purpose. This is highly commended and demonstrates the commitment of the school to maintaining a vibrant TY programme. Self-evaluation measures in place have had a positive effect on the delivery and implementation of the TY programme in the college. For example, Architectural Studies has been introduced to the programme in the current year and time allocation to various subject and modules is kept under review. It is recommended that students should be required to maintain a logbook diary as part of their portfolio, where they can record and evaluate their personal TY experiences on a weekly basis.

2.2 Co-ordination

As year head, it is very good that the TY co-ordinator has regular class contact with TY students. The co-ordinator currently holds a post of responsibility at assistant principal (AP) level. Duties allocated to this post are clearly defined and agreed with school management. Pastoral and discipline duties are included, as are the following tasks pertaining to TY: planning and coordinating the TY programme, organisation of TY finances and regular school self-evaluation of the TY programme.

Duties assigned to the post of programme co-ordinator also include some relating to TY. However, this post is less clearly defined and includes such duties as the organisation and sourcing of student work placements and the ordering and stocktaking of TY materials. The programme co-ordinator post is allocated three hours per week in lieu of duties undertaken. The duties allocated to the post are in need of review and should be developed in line with circular letter PPT 17/02 which outlines the appropriate grade and level of responsibility pertaining to the post.

2.3 Curriculum

The TY curriculum offers students a variety of subjects, modules and activities and is broadly in line with Department guidelines. The curriculum is designed to meet students’ needs and to support each student in the development of their personal talents and aptitudes. Students are enabled to build on their academic achievements and to gain confidence and maturity through participation in the numerous activities offered.

Core subjects offer continuity from junior cycle and some optional Leaving Certificate subjects are sampled. This is very good, as it supports students in making a more informed choice for senior cycle. Needs and interests of students are prioritised. For example, students develop new knowledge and skills though their participation in modules such as Legal Studies and Drama. Short modules are organised in subjects such as Science, Business Studies, Cookery,
Environmental Studies and Drama. Some new subjects are introduced including German, Music, Technical Drawing and Infinity Mathematics. Thursday afternoons is dedicated to Outdoor Pursuits including Sailing, Rock Climbing, Orienteering and Self-Defence. The inclusion of the above activities helps to ensure that there is a balance between academic material and innovative TY material on the curriculum. In relation to the optional subjects, it is recommended that, in the interests of balance in the curriculum, that consideration be given to including subjects such as Music and Technical Drawing on a modular basis for all students. New subjects such as Art and History should also be considered. In addition, trips are organised for TY students to historical places such as St Patrick’s Cathedral, Trinity College, Glendalough and the Boyne Valley.

The success rate of students in ECDL is very high and the skills developed substantially support students across the wider curriculum. In addition, students are encouraged to develop their skills in graphics and animation. It is recommended that the content of the TY Business Studies course be re-evaluated, to ensure that there is a suitable balance between core academic material and innovative TY material. Subjects within TY are not meant to be part of a Leaving Certificate course and subject departments should ensure that Department guidelines and circulars are followed in this regard. Other modules such as the Nutrition module is a worthy part of any TY programme. However, because this activity is not timetabled, students can lose out on valuable tuition in other subjects. It is recommended that the school endeavours to timetable such activities in an effort to ensure other courses can complete their planned activities.

Activities outside the classroom are encouraged and supported by the school and these activities are a vital element of the TY programme. The school’s debating society has been particularly active, as has the school’s third world support group in its fund-raising activities. Confidence building is promoted through these activities.

Students’ experiential learning is developed through work experience. This provides a vocational element to the programme. Work experience is organised in two blocks in November and February, each of two week’s duration, with students encouraged to sample different work placements for each block. An evaluation form is sent to employers and contact is made with the employer during the work placement. This is very good practice. Students expressed satisfaction with their work experience at the time of the evaluation.

Students are provided with opportunities to learn to be responsible and participative citizens and actively participate in their local community through involvement in the Gaisce programme and through fund-raising activities. It is suggested that this aspect of TY be expanded to a full week working in the local community in lieu of one week of work experience. This will build on students’ social awareness and strengthen this aspect of TY provision.

3 QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

3.1 Planning and preparation

A written current plan was available for all subjects evaluated in the course of the inspection and the taught programme reflected the school’s plan for the programme. Handouts, materials and practical equipment were ready in advance of lessons and this good level of advance planning for lessons led to effective student learning. In addition, well-thought-out strategies contributed to enhanced student learning.
3.2 Learning and teaching

Classroom management was effective for the vast majority of lessons and teacher inputs were generally short, clear and concise. 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. Relationships in the classroom were very good and student learning was enhanced as a result.

The pace of lessons was suitable to students’ abilities. Most lessons were well structured. Where appropriate, the practice of sharing learning objectives with students and concluding each lesson with a plenary review observed in some lessons should be extended to other subjects and modules. Clear lesson goals should be set out for all lessons with classroom management strategies ensuring that these goals are met.

The variation in methodologies ensured that students’ interest and motivation were maintained and that opportunities for learning were maximised. The board was used to highlight key ideas in many lessons and as an aid to focus students’ attention on important aspects of the lesson. Group work, where deployed, ensured greater levels of participation from a wider cohort of students in some lessons observed. The use of group work should be extended to other lessons. ICT was used appropriately in some lessons and it is recommended that its use be extended and its benefits maximised across the curriculum. The use of a photograph or a short video clip would have enhanced some lessons and would have helped to link lesson content to students’ everyday experiences. Where possible in TY, classroom discussion should form part of lessons. In addition, while health and safety concerns were paramount in the vast majority of lessons, classroom hazards were not identified to students in advance of all practical lessons observed. It is therefore recommended that these hazards be pointed out in order to minimise any risk to students.

Good use was made of various questioning strategies in lessons visited. Individual questions elicited specific responses, while higher-order questions encouraged students to explain their reasoning, which is good practice. Evidence was provided in the course of the evaluation to indicate that students’ understanding of material was of a high quality. For example, in one lesson visited, students were invited and encouraged to ask questions and in all cases their queries were answered expertly by the teacher. The supportive classroom atmosphere ensured that this strategy worked very well. Worksheets and other teaching aids were used to reinforce learning and to engage students as active learners. It is recommended that this practice be extended to other lessons.

Students’ confidence was developed and reinforced in line with TY guidelines through many active-learning experiences. Students developed important skills in data collection and analysis, in oral language development, in comprehension and in understanding aspects of the legal system. The skills developed are in line with TY aims. Practical activities and development of research skills was the focus of some lessons evaluated. Differentiated teaching practices were in evidence with individual and group support provided by the teacher as needed. When a task was assigned, students’ needs were best met when the teacher circulated the room with individual help and support. This practice should be extended to all lessons.

Teachers were knowledgeable, enthusiastic and innovative. Concepts were explained with clarity and students demonstrated positive attitudes to learning. In the case of some subjects evaluated, it is recommended that innovative materials, ideas and methodologies be introduced into the subject,
in line with TY guidelines, to make it a more stimulating experience for students. Linking the learning experience to students’ everyday lives will aid this process.

3.3 Assessment

TY students sit examinations after each module is completed and reports are sent to parents following examinations. Some subject departments produce specialised reports for their subject areas. One good example is the ECDL report which clearly outlines student achievement in the various module examinations. There is ongoing formative assessment through class work and project work. Employers assess students’ work experience. There is systematic recording of students’ attendance and progress. While appropriate homework was assigned is some lessons, all teachers need to be vigilant in relation to student work ethic and application throughout TY.

To strengthen the assessment process and to introduce a balance to the examination process, it is recommended that students be required to maintain a portfolio and that a portfolio interview forms part of students’ overall end-of-year assessment. For example, students may be allowed choose what they consider to be some of their best work for this interview and interview criteria and marking should be clearly set out. In addition, consideration should be given to students of maintaining an electronic portfolio with, for example, photographic evidence of activities undertaken during TY presented.

5 SUMMARY OF STRENGTHS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- In accordance with Transition Year Programmes, Guidelines for Schools, a whole-school approach to the planning, development, and promotion of TY is fostered by senior management.
- Clonkeen College has a policy on admission to TY in place, which is published in the student journal.
- The school outlined some self-evaluation measures for TY which include a dedicated staff meeting for this purpose.
- The curriculum is designed to meet students’ needs and to support each student in the development of their personal talents and aptitudes.
- Students’ confidence was developed and reinforced in line with TY guidelines through many active learning experiences.
- Teachers had high expectations of students and students responded positively to these expectations.
- Relationships 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:

- ICT should be further integrated into TY students’ learning experiences and in this context, consideration should be given to enhancing ICT facilities in the TY base classrooms.
- The practice of releasing TY students in advance of the summer school closure must cease as outlined in circular M1/00.
- It is recommended that a parent-teacher meeting be introduced for TY, and it is suggested that the student may be present at this meeting.
• It is recommended that each subject department should meet to review its TY planning and should develop an appropriate subject plan using the common template outlined in the Department guidelines. The overall TY plan should be developed as a single cohesive and current document with all of the areas in the guidelines addressed including organisational details and self-evaluation measures.

• The duties allocated to the post of programme co-ordinator are in need of review and should be developed in line with circular letter PPT 17/02 which outlines the appropriate grade and level of responsibility pertaining to the post.

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