An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Transition Year Programme Evaluation
REPORT

St Laurence College,
Loughlinstown, Dublin 18.

Roll Number: 60262T

Date of inspection: 8 and 12 March 2010
EVALUATION OF THE TRANSITION YEAR PROGRAMME

INTRODUCTION

This report has been written following an evaluation of the Transition Year (TY) programme in St Laurence College, Loughlinstown, Dublin 18. It presents the findings of the evaluation and makes recommendations for the further development of the programme in the college. During the evaluation, the inspector held meetings with the school principal, the co-ordinator, a core group of teachers and with a small group of students. The evaluation was conducted over two days during which the inspector liaised with the 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 school principal and the programme co-ordinator at the end of the evaluation period.

St Laurence College has offered TY as part of its curricular provision for the past fifteen years. Initially the programme was compulsory for all students. Following an internal review, participation in TY is now optional and this is outlined in the school’s admission’s policy. There are currently three class groups following the programme. The school’s mission of enabling students to reach their full potential in the most holistic sense is achieved through many aspects of the TY programme. The board of management was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the report; a response was not received from the board.

1 QUALITY OF PROGRAMME ORGANISATION

1.1 Whole school support

The whole school community is kept fully informed regarding the TY programme in many ways. TY is on the agenda of many staff meetings 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. Minutes of staff meetings provide evidence of the wide extent of whole-staff consultation regarding TY. Information is disseminated to students and staff through the dedicated 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 good practice. Upon completion of TY, a dedicated TY exhibition and awards event is organised. This important event includes a formal presentation of TY certificates and also affords students with the opportunity to display samples of the work they have completed throughout the year. Students receive awards in many categories including subject awards, attendance awards and the co-ordinator’s award.

1.2 Resources

Teachers’ skills are well utilised in designing and implementing the TY programme and senior management deploys the majority of teachers on the staff in the delivery of TY. The various elements of the programme are appropriately timetabled. Records examined in the course of the
evaluation indicate that staff has not availed of continuing professional development (CPD) pertaining to TY in recent years. It is therefore recommended that whole-staff CPD be convened by senior management with a view to improving the TY planning and implementation process in line with Department guidelines.

Information and communication technology (ICT) was used effectively in the delivery of some aspects of the TY programme. However, ICT should be further utilised in the TY planning process. For example, all subject plans should be drawn up electronically so that changes to each programme can be easily updated following evaluation or review by the subject department. A comprehensive list of TY resources should also be made available on the school’s computer network. This would help to promote cross-curricular approaches to TY programme implementation and to increase staff awareness of the bank of TY resources available in the school. On enrolment to the programme, parents agree to the payment of a contribution to cover expenses for most activities. Some voluntary or non-core activities are offered which may incur an additional contribution.

1.3 Student selection and support

Parents of third-year students are invited to a TY programme information evening. Applications to the programme are invited following which students are requested to present for interview to ensure student suitability to the school’s TY programme. On enrolment to TY, students are required to sign a contract of learning with the college. Such application and selection procedures are good practice. To further strengthen the TY student selection process, it is recommended that a TY enrolment policy be formulated outlining the criteria for selection to TY. Such a policy will inform the entire school community in an open and transparent way.

The guidance plan for TY has appropriate aims. These aims include assisting students in choosing appropriate subjects for senior cycle, increasing awareness of the relationship between subject choice and future careers and promoting decision-making skills. The TY guidance plan and TY provision should be developed and expanded to include aptitude testing, interview skills, study skills and work experience. There is currently no timetabled guidance provision in TY. To enhance guidance provision, it is recommended that guidance is timetabled for all TY class groups.

TY students with additional needs are well supported. Good links have been developed with the learning support department and teachers are regularly informed regarding best practice in facilitation and integration of students with additional needs.

At the outset of the academic year, students partake in a good induction programme and a TY induction trip is organised to consolidate the induction process and as a means of enabling students to settle into TY. This is very good practice. The TY co-ordinator has no class contact time with students in the current year. To enhance support to students throughout the year, it is recommended that the TY co-ordinator be assigned timetabled contact, such as the teaching of a TY module, with TY class groups in future years.

The school has a number of attendance strategies in place to tackle poor attendance of students and has achieved significant progress in this regard. In the course of the evaluation, one class group had a significant number of students absent and evidence was provided by teachers to show a correlation between student achievement and absenteeism for some students. It is recommended that the college should strengthen its monitoring of attendance for TY students.
The school currently operates a strategy of releasing TY students in advance of the summer closure following their graduation ceremony in May. This practice must cease. Circular M1/00 states 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 school.

1.4 Home-school links

The TY programme in St Laurence College has received good parental support. Contact with parents is on-going throughout the year and documentation reviewed during the evaluation show the good extent of this communication. Initially, parents are made aware of the purpose and nature of the TY programme at the TY information evening. TY parents are invited to the school’s TY talent show and the TY graduation night. Parents are well informed regarding subject and programme choice for Leaving Certificate.

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. Parents receive meaningful feedback on the educational progress of their child during TY following examinations on three occasions throughout the year. To augment the reporting on academic progress in TY and to gather further evaluative comments from parents on the programme, it is recommended that the TY student be present at the TY parent-teacher meeting.

2 Quality of Programme Planning and Co-ordination

2.1 Planning

The college has a good level of planning in place. The four-member TY core team supports the TY co-ordinator and consists of the TY year head, the TY work experience co-ordinator, the school principal and the TY co-ordinator. Members of the core team meet approximately once per month to review matters relating to the planning, implementation and evaluation of the programme. This is good practice. Minutes of meetings are maintained.

The school does not have a coherent TY written plan 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. Many of the individual subject plans examined are inconsistent in their adherence to the subject plan template for TY as outlined in the Department guidelines on writing the TY programme. Many of these subject plans require considerable development and review. Each subject department should meet to review its TY planning and should develop an appropriate subject plan using the common template outlined in the guidelines. A more cohesive approach to planning is required with self-evaluation built into each subject plan. Therefore, it is recommended that a whole-staff approach to writing the TY programme is adopted. The use of ICT in this process will enable each plan to be readily updated. 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. The school outlined some self-evaluation measures for TY which include
comments gathered from students and teachers by means of questionnaires. Self-evaluation measures in place have had a positive effect on the delivery and implementation of the TY programme in the school. For example, following the internal review undertaken, TY is now an optional programme. In addition some curricular and timetabling changes take place each year following school self review.

2.2 Co-ordination

TY co-ordination duties are extensive and are carried out very effectively. Formal co-ordinating structures are in place and are operating effectively. The TY co-ordinator holds the post of programme co-ordinator and also carries out some duties pertaining to the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP). Specific duties include liaising with subject teachers, the core team and senior management, conducting student interviews, organising and implementing the programme. Currently, duties are not documented. Therefore, it is recommended that the duties and responsibilities for the post of programme co-ordinator be clearly documented and agreed as outlined in circular PPT 17/02.

Communication with parents, senior management, teaching staff, students and the whole school community is good. The TY co-ordinator is ably assisted by the TY year head and the TY work experience co-ordinator. TY class tutors are timetabled for a tutor class each week. This is a good support measure for students. There is good liaison between class tutors, year head and co-ordinator.

2.3 Curriculum

The TY curriculum in St Laurence College endeavours to enable students to build on their academic achievements, to prepare for senior cycle and for their future role in society. The curriculum offers a variety of subjects, modules and activities and is broad and balanced in line with Department guidelines. Good cross-curricular links have been established between some subjects, as evidenced in the examples observed in the course of the evaluation between Art, Woodwork and Music. Some core subjects offer continuity from junior cycle and some optional Leaving Certificate subjects are sampled. In addition, some new subjects are introduced, for example, Technical Graphics is offered to all students with a view to increasing the uptake of this subject in fifth year. Classical Studies are also offered to all TY students. Such subjects introduce TY students to different experiences outside the school curriculum.

The majority of subjects and modules are taken by all students. There is some scope for further balancing of curricular areas within some subjects. In Science, for example, the content of the curriculum should include equal emphasis on aspects of Physics, Chemistry and Biology, irrespective of the qualifications and interests of the teachers delivering the programme. Diverse activities form an important element of the programme. These include: a day in a film-making studio; a Garda Traffic Corps road safety day; Football Association of Ireland (FAI) coaching; and a talk on the economics of staying in school. This is commended. The TY co-ordinator acknowledged that there was scope for the timetable to be adapted and suggested the inclusion of some further modules. The introduction of Transition Units to the programme is suggested. School management should make reference to the website of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) www.ncca.ie/transitionunits.
Active learning, 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 college and these activities are a vital element of the TY programme. Confidence building is promoted through these activities. The creation of a block of lesson periods in the timetable for activities is very good practice, as it ensures that other subjects can continue with their normal programmes as scheduled and that valuable tuition time is not lost.

Students are provided with opportunities to learn to be responsible and participative citizens and actively participate in their local community. Student involvement in the community care programme has the aim of affording students the opportunity to volunteer in their local community. In the current year, students complete two days in community placement. It is suggested that this aspect of TY be expanded to a full week working in the local community. This will build on students’ social awareness and strengthen this aspect of TY provision in the school.

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 work experience co-ordinator, the TY co-ordinator and senior management. Work experience is organised in a one-week block in April with students afforded the opportunity of finding their own placement, if possible. The length of the work placement is short. However the expansion of the community placement to one week as outlined above will address this issue somewhat. The planned introduction of a student self-reflection journal in the next academic year will further enhance and support this process.

3 QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

3.1 Planning and preparation

Teachers were well prepared for lessons. The taught programme reflected, in the main, the school’s plan for the programme. A written yearly current plan was available for all subjects evaluated in the course of the inspection. Some teachers also produced schemes of work which contained more detailed short-term planning material. The level of advance planning for lessons was good. Lesson resources, such as worksheets and handouts, were ready in advance of lessons. The level of advance preparation led to effective delivery of lessons and supported the student learning experience.

3.2 Learning and teaching

The structure of lessons was good and classroom management was effective. There was a clear focus on skills development in many lessons and teachers demonstrated an awareness of TY aims while delivering classroom lessons. 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, where appropriate. The pace of lessons was suitable to students’ abilities. In many lessons, teacher inputs were appropriately short, clear and concise. High expectations of teachers ensured that students were sufficiently challenged to maximise their potential. Relationships in the classroom were very good, and student learning was enhanced as a result.
The varied methodologies observed in lessons worked very well as a result of well thought-out strategies. The board was used effectively to highlight key ideas in many lessons. ICT was used as an aid to student learning in some lessons. It is recommended that well thought-out ICT strategies be used more widely as an aid to student learning and to consolidate the learning process. In addition, it is suggested that when group work is used in lessons, that groups are formed in such a way to enable all students to fully engage in the assigned task.

Participation by students was very good in the vast majority of lessons. However, this was not the case in all lessons observed. It is recommended that strategies to improve meaningful participation and inclusion of all students in lessons be implemented. For example, targeted questioning strategies and the assignment of short tasks to students may help to improve whole-class participation and interest in lessons. It is suggested that the computer room should only be used, if ICT forms part of the lesson, as computers may prove a distraction for some students when important aspects of lesson are delivered. Best practice was observed where 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.

Many lessons were presented with energy and enthusiasm by teachers. Most material chosen for the lessons was in line with TY guidelines. Students responded positively with good motivation and interest. Students’ confidence was developed and reinforced. Some core subjects inspected were taught in an innovative way with very good references to applications of the subject in everyday life and to the historical development of the subject. This is highly commended. In other lessons however, students were not focused and were not sufficiently challenged to achieve their potential. It is recommended that this situation be addressed through careful prior planning and through well thought-out lesson delivery strategies.

Good use was made of a range of 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 for some subjects, students’ understanding of material was of a high quality.

Teachers were knowledgeable, enthusiastic and innovative. Concepts were explained with clarity and most students demonstrated positive attitudes to learning. A good atmosphere prevailed and relationships in the classroom were very good. Student learning was enhanced as a result. Practical activities and development of research skills was the focus of some lessons evaluated. Differentiated teaching practices were in evidence with teachers providing individual and group support as needed.

3.3 Assessment

There is ongoing formative assessment through class work and project work. Employers assess students’ work experience and return an evaluative report to the school. Students receive homework assignments on a regular basis in the form of worksheets, project work and research assignments. Parents receive meaningful feedback on student progress by means of school reports sent home on three occasions throughout the year following formal examinations. Reports reflect students’ academic performance, effort in class, participation, attendance and punctuality. This is very good practice and is commended. To strengthen the assessment process, it is recommended that an end-of-year portfolio assessment be introduced and that an interview with set criteria should form part of the assessment process. For example, students may be required to 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 maintaining an electronic portfolio with, for example, photographs of activities undertaken during TY. Reference should be made to the website of the SLSS www.slss.ie.

There is good emphasis on homework in the overall TY programme. Nevertheless, homework was not assigned in all lessons evaluated. Teachers need to be vigilant in relation to students’ work ethic and continued application to learning especially regarding research and project work. Students receive annotated feedback and affirmative comments on some of their work in some subjects and this is very good practice as it supports formative assessment. This practice should be extended to all subjects. The opportunity may present itself to introduce student self-assessment in advance of parent-teacher meetings. In addition, the planned introduction of a student reflection journal will aid the assessment process.

5  SUMMARY OF STRENGTHS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Student achievement in TY is affirmed and celebrated by the school community.
- TY co-ordination duties are extensive and are carried out very effectively.
- The TY curriculum offers a variety of subjects, modules and activities and is broad and balanced in line with Department guidelines.
- Active learning, group and team work have been successfully integrated into many key aspects of the programme. There was a clear focus on skills development in many lessons and teachers demonstrated an awareness of TY aims while delivering classroom lessons.
- Many lessons were presented with energy and enthusiasm by teachers. Teachers were knowledgeable, enthusiastic and innovative and concepts were explained with clarity.
- TY school reports reflect students’ academic performance, effort in class, participation, attendance and punctuality.

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

- It is recommended that whole-staff CPD be convened by senior management with a view to improving the TY planning. The overall TY plan should be developed as a single cohesive and current document.
- ICT should be further utilised in the TY planning process and used more extensively in lesson delivery as resources permit.
- It is recommended that a TY enrolment policy be formulated, outlining the criteria for selection to TY.
- The practice of releasing TY students in advance of the summer closure must cease in accordance with Circular M1/00.
- It is recommended that the duties and responsibilities for the post of programme co-ordinator be clearly documented and agreed as outlined in circular PPT 17/02.

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