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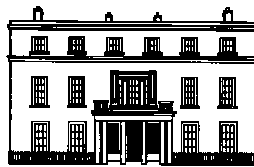
Department of Education and Skills

**Transition Year Programme Evaluation
REPORT**

**St Patrick's Cathedral Grammar School
St Patrick's Close, Dublin 8**

Roll Number 60660I

Date of inspection: 23 and 24 March 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 St Patrick's Cathedral Grammar School, Dublin 8, conducted as part of a whole-school evaluation. 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, the 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 some 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.

St Patrick's Cathedral Grammar School currently offers TY as an optional programme with one class group of twenty-one students following the programme. The school's mission of encouraging students to strive for excellence is lived out through many aspects of the TY programme.

1 QUALITY OF PROGRAMME ORGANISATION

1.1 Whole school support

Senior management fosters a whole-school approach to TY and plays an active part in the planning, development, and promotion of TY in the school. The principal displays effective leadership regarding the programme and its implementation. The school community is kept informed regarding the TY programme in many ways. A review of minutes of staff meetings reveals the good extent of whole-staff consultation regarding TY. In this way, staff can contribute to the effective planning and review of the programme. Relevant information is disseminated to staff through staffroom notice boards and to students by means of the special TY notice board on the school corridor. TY events, activities, and student successes are highlighted in articles published in the school's TY newsletter and on the well-designed school website. To strengthen the whole-school support to TY, it is recommended that continuing professional development (CPD) pertaining to TY be initiated for the whole staff with a focus on Department guidelines on planning, designing, implementing, assessing and evaluating the TY programme in the school.

Student achievement in TY is affirmed and celebrated by the school community at the annual prize-giving day in December. However, there is no specific TY graduation ceremony at the end of the academic year. Such an event would help to raise the profile of TY and of the school itself, while also giving parents the opportunity to visit the school to celebrate the successful completion of TY. It is therefore recommended that a specific TY awards ceremony be initiated when students are presented with certificates and prizes. Students could be given the opportunity to showcase and present some of their best project work completed in the course of the year. In the current year, all students receive a certificate of completion of TY. Only those students who fulfil particular standards of attendance, punctuality, participation and discipline receive a school TY certificate. It is suggested that graded school certificates be awarded to all students who complete TY; for example, certificates could be differentiated into the categories of pass, merit or distinction.

1.2 Resources

Staff are appropriately deployed to teach the TY programme by senior management, and teachers' skills are well utilised in designing and implementing the TY programme. The majority of teachers

on the staff are involved in the delivery of TY. The school timetable plays a vital part in students' everyday experiences of subject delivery. It is recommended that the school's TY timetable be modified so that a more balanced and varied curriculum can be experienced by students. More time should be allocated to Mathematics. ECDL should be allocated a similar number of class contact periods for each TY sub-group. In addition, there is an over-generous time allocation to many subjects. This should be reviewed to facilitate more variety in the school's TY curriculum. Some teachers of TY have participated in in-service programmes which have enhanced the delivery of TY modules, including the European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL). However, further opportunities to develop TY planning, organisation and implementation should be availed of by teachers in future years.

TY classrooms and specialist subject rooms are commendably utilised for the delivery of the programme. Many classrooms were enhanced with subject-relevant materials. This is commended. It is praiseworthy that information and communication technology (ICT) facilities have been progressively expanded over recent years. It is recommended that ICT be further integrated into TY students' learning experiences. A comprehensive list of TY resources should be made available on the school's computer network in an effort to promote cross-curricular approaches to TY programme implementation.

There is no fee in addition to normal school fees, on student enrolment to the TY programme. Parents agree to pay for trips and activities that form part of mainstream TY provision including the annual induction trip to Killary Adventure Centre and other activities associated with the TY curriculum. It is praiseworthy that the school has put a limit on the maximum amount of this expenditure.

1.3 Student selection and support

Third-year parents are invited to a TY programme information evening following which applications to the programme are invited. All students are encouraged to take TY and the benefits of choosing TY are disseminated to students and parents. This is commended. To strengthen this process, it is recommended that a TY admissions policy be developed, where the criteria for the allocation of places to TY are clearly laid out. All TY applicants and parents should be required to sign a contract of learning. This would further strengthen the commitment of students and parents to a successful TY programme.

The guidance plan for TY has the aim of assisting students with their work experience, curriculum vitae preparation and in choosing appropriate subjects for senior cycle. It is very praiseworthy that students undergo differential aptitude testing (DATs) to help direct them to appropriate subjects for Leaving Certificate. However, the testing should be scheduled for an earlier period in the school year so that students can maximise its benefit to appropriate subject choice for senior cycle. Guidance is not formally timetabled in TY. It is therefore recommended that consideration be given to the provision of a timetabled module of guidance in TY. Counselling is provided to students as required.

Appropriate supports are in place for TY students with additional needs. Students are well supported and resource hours are well utilised. Differentiation practices were evident in the classroom, the benefits of which were evident in the successes of the TY students.

1.4 Home-school links

Parents are made aware of the nature and purpose of TY. Good links are maintained with parents by senior management throughout the year. The TY programme has received the support of the

majority of parents. The school has taken the views of parents on board when planning TY for the next academic year. Parents are invited and are encouraged to participate in TY programme events, including the annual school musical and the school's award event in December. Parents can avail of the opportunity to interact with teachers to discuss their child's progress during the annual parent-teacher meeting. However, in the interests of best practice, it is recommended that a parent-teacher meeting be convened with the TY student also present at the meeting. In this way, parents can receive useful information on their child's progress and teachers can receive useful evaluative feedback on the student's TY experiences. This provision will further support the school's communication process with parents. In addition, it is recommended that a subject information evening be convened to further support students and parents in making appropriate choices for senior cycle.

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 student progress by means of school reports sent home following examinations in November and May. The format of the student report template for TY should be adapted to indicate attendance, punctuality and general behaviour in addition to the grade and comment.

2 QUALITY OF PROGRAMME PLANNING AND COORDINATION

2.1 Planning

The school has a small TY core team in place consisting of the TY form teacher, and three TY subject teachers. Evidence gathered in the course of the evaluation indicates that the core team does not currently play an active part in the development of TY in the school. It is suggested that the status of the core team be raised and that this team should become more actively involved in planning, monitoring and evaluating the TY programme in the school. This approach would help to further TY aims across the whole school community. The current core-team chose not to participate in a formal meeting with the inspector during the TY evaluation.

The school does not have a current TY plan of the form required by the Department of Education and Skills. Therefore, a TY plan should be developed as outlined in Department guidelines on writing the TY programme and as summarised in circular M1/00. Individual subject plans examined are inconsistent in their adherence to the subject plan template for TY. Some TY subjects are not included in the current plan while some others lack sufficient detail. Therefore, it is recommended that a whole-staff approach to writing the TY programme be adopted. 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 the guidelines. Areas in need of attention include teaching and learning strategies, cross-curricular planning, inbuilt evaluation and modes of assessment. 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 Professional Development Service for teachers (PDST) for further assistance (www.slss.ie). The school is encouraged to provide for the training of all staff in writing the TY programme as outlined earlier in this report. To further develop the TY planning process and to enhance cross-curricular provision in the future it is suggested that the school consider 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 (www.ncca.ie/transitionunits).

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, activities that have been deemed unsuccessful have been modified or replaced. This is commended. There are fewer visits to museums following feedback from students. It is recommended that school evaluative practices be further developed, thus ensuring a relevant vibrant TY programme in the school.

2.2 Co-ordination

The school does not currently have a TY co-ordinator in place. Following the promotion of the previous TY co-ordinator to the position of deputy principal, senior management was unable to fill the position of programme co-ordinator due to the moratorium on appointments to posts. Many important TY duties including organisation of work experience, planning and implementation of *Gaisce*, and facilitating the production of the TY newsletter are carried out by the TY form teacher. A two-hour time allowance is given in lieu of TY duties. It is very good that the TY form teacher has regular class contact with all TY students.

2.3 Curriculum

Needs, interests and abilities of students are prioritised and active learning, group-work and team-work have been successfully integrated into the school's TY programme in many subjects. Students prepare for senior cycle while building on their academic achievements. The curriculum offers a variety of subjects and activities, some core subjects offer continuity from junior cycle and some optional Leaving Certificate subjects are sampled. The curriculum offered is quite traditional in structure. There is scope for further diversity of subjects and modules within the TY programme. For example, the inclusion of ten-week or half-yearly modules would help to introduce new subjects to the TY timetable and would further enrich students' learning experiences.

Diversity within the TY curriculum is promoted through many activities, including a time period devoted to visiting speakers. During the evaluation, students experienced a lesson on success skills from Junior Achievement Ireland. On Friday afternoons, students are timetabled for Environment and Social Studies trips, whereby they visit museums, galleries and libraries and are required to maintain a log of their experiences. This is highly commended. Log books examined in the course of the evaluation provided evidence of the value of such experiences to students. It is recommended that the school endeavours to include other activities in this time slot 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. It is very praiseworthy that confidence-building is promoted through many of these activities, including participation in the annual school musical, the *Gaisce* challenge and the induction trip to Killary outdoor adventure centre. The introduction of the Green School's programme strengthens the school's commitment to environmental awareness of students and provides an opportunity for TY students to lead the school in this regard. Student involvement in the Fairtrade project and the initiation of the Fairtrade shop in the school are other very praiseworthy initiatives which strengthen the social awareness aspects of TY provision in the school.

Opportunities to learn to be responsible and participative citizens and to actively participate in the local community are a commendable part of any TY programme. Some students from St Patrick's Cathedral Grammar School partake in community service on Tuesday afternoons and at other

times outside of school hours as part of the *Gaisce* challenge. However, the organisation of this activity should be re-evaluated by the school in light of proposed changes to the TY timetable. It is important that the integrity of the school day be maintained by TY students throughout the year.

Students are well prepared for work experience which provides them with a vocational element to the programme. Tasks undertaken in an adult working environment play an important part in the development of students' experiential learning. Work experience is organised in a one-week block in November and a two-week block during the pre-certificate examinations in February. Students are encouraged to achieve different work placements for each week and to consider their personal career interests when choosing a work placement. This is commended. An evaluation form is sent to employers and feedback has been positive. Currently, there is no contact between the school and the employer during the student work placement. It is recommended that some contact be made during each session of work experience as an additional and valuable support for students.

3 QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

3.1 Planning and preparation

The good level of advance planning for lessons led to effective student learning. Handouts, materials and practical and ICT equipment were ready in advance of lessons. The varied methodologies observed in many lessons worked well as a result of good planning strategies. A written yearly current plan was available for some subjects evaluated in the course of the inspection. All subjects and modules should be documented as part of subject department planning. In addition, better advance planning is necessary to ensure that all students achieve valuable learning experiences when guest speakers facilitate lessons which are overseen by the subject teacher. The taught programme reflected, in the main, the school's plan for the programme.

3.2 Learning and teaching

The structure and pace of lessons were good. Relationships 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, for the most part, high expectations of students and students responded positively to these expectations. Students enjoyed the variety of learning experiences encountered both within and outside the classroom. Concepts were explained with clarity and students demonstrated positive attitudes to learning. Differentiated teaching practices were in evidence with individual and group help and support as needed. A very good investigative approach to learning and active learning were promoted in line with TY aims.

Classroom management was effective in the vast majority of lessons. However, further teacher input to lessons facilitated by an outside convenor would help to ensure learning targets are achieved by all students. Areas for development include the formation of smaller student groups and better organisation of the physical environment to ensure that student participation is maximised. It was evident during the evaluation that in such circumstances, not all students were focused on the task in hand. Reference should be made to Circular 0023/2010 for guidelines on visitors to post-primary schools.

Lessons were in the main innovative and creative in line with TY aims. Key skills were developed through the assignment of well-thought-out tasks to students. Students exhibited positive attitudes to learning in the vast majority of lessons. Some tasks assigned could have been more challenging and it is recommended that strategies be enacted to ensure that students are enabled to reach their

potential in line with the school's mission. In some lessons, students should have been afforded the opportunity for enhanced participation both initially and throughout the lessons.

A wide variety of activities, interactions and teaching methodologies consolidated student learning. The board was used effectively to highlight key words and ideas. ICT was used effectively in many lessons; however, it is recommended that ICT be used more widely as an aid to student learning and to consolidate the learning process. For example, the inclusion of a short relevant video clip in some lessons would help to link lesson content to students' everyday experience and increase the relevance of the material presented. Worksheets and other teaching aids were used to reinforce learning and to engage students as active learners. The skills developed are in line with TY aims. Students' confidence was developed and reinforced in line with TY guidelines. In addition, the attention to students' social and personal education was very good as evidenced during visits to lessons.

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 various questioning strategies in lessons visited. Individual questions elicited specific responses while higher-order questions encouraged students to explain their reasoning.

3.3 Assessment

There is ongoing assessment through class work and project work. TY students sit examinations in November and May and reports are sent to parents following these examinations as mentioned earlier in this report. Employers assess students' work experience. There is systematic recording of students' attendance and progress and good quality records are maintained. Students maintain a portfolio of work completed. To strengthen the assessment process and to introduce another form of assessment beyond examination, it is recommended 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 maintaining an electronic portfolio with, for example, photographs of activities undertaken during TY. Guidelines on portfolio assessment may be referenced on www.slss.ie.

Homework is a regular feature of assessment, with homework consisting of a variety of formats appropriate to the associated subject, module or activity. There is good emphasis on homework in the TY programme with homework tasks being assigned during many lessons evaluated. Students receive annotated feedback and affirmative comments on their work in some subjects and this is very good practice as it supports formative assessment.

SUMMARY OF STRENGTHS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Senior management fosters a whole-school approach to TY and plays an active part in the planning, development, and promotion of TY in the school.
- Staff are appropriately deployed to teach the TY programme by senior management and teachers' skills are well utilised in designing and implementing the TY programme.
- All students are encouraged to take TY and the benefits of choosing TY are disseminated to students and parents.

- Parents receive meaningful feedback on student progress by means of school reports sent home following examinations. Good links are maintained with parents by senior management throughout the year.
- Needs, interests and abilities of students are prioritised and active learning, group-work and team-work have been successfully integrated into the school's TY programme.
- Activities outside the classroom are encouraged and supported by the school and these activities are a vital element of the TY programme. It is very praiseworthy that confidence building is promoted through many of these activities
- Relationships 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.
- Lessons were in the main innovative and creative in line with TY aims. Key skills were developed through the assignment of well-thought-out tasks to students.
- Students exhibited positive attitudes to learning in the vast majority of lessons.

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

- It is recommended that CPD pertaining to TY be initiated for the whole staff with a focus on Department guidelines on planning, designing, implementing, assessing and evaluating the TY programme in the school.
- It is recommended that the school's TY timetable be modified so that a more balanced and varied curriculum can be experienced by students.
- A TY admissions policy should be developed, where the criteria for the allocation of places to TY are clearly laid.
- A whole-staff approach should be adopted to writing the TY programme. In particular, each subject department should meet to review its TY planning and should develop an appropriate subject plan using the common template.
- Consideration should be given to the provision of a timetabled module of guidance in TY.
- It is vitally important that the integrity of the school day be maintained by TY students throughout the year.
- Further teacher input to lessons facilitated by an outside convenor would help to ensure learning targets are achieved by all students.
- It is recommended that a portfolio interview forms part of students' overall end-of-year assessment.

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