

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

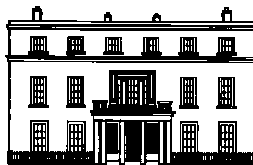
Department of Education and Skills

**Transition Year Programme Evaluation
REPORT**

**Castlecomer Community School,
Castlecomer,
County Kilkenny.**

Roll Number: 91360T

Date of inspection: 29 March 2011



**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 Castlecomer Community School, Co. Kilkenny. 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, deputy principal and TY co-ordinator at the end of the evaluation period. The board of management was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the evaluation; a response was not received from the board.

Castlecomer Community School introduced TY to its programme provision in 1995. Participation in TY is optional and there are currently three class groups following the programme. The aims of TY are fulfilled through the broad range of subjects, modules and activities offered by the school.

1 QUALITY OF PROGRAMME ORGANISATION

1.1 Whole school support

A whole-school approach to the planning, development, and promotion of TY is fostered by senior management. The principal displays effective leadership regarding TY and its implementation. The majority of staff are involved in the delivery of TY on a rota basis. This provides good capacity building in TY curricular development. The TY co-ordinator is afforded the opportunity to address the whole teaching 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 teaching staff and students through announcements on the school's intercom system and on the TY notice boards. A weekly calendar of TY events is also provided to staff each week. TY events, activities and student successes are highlighted in articles published in the school's newsletter and in the local media. The development of a school website with a section dedicated to TY would further support this process and it is recommended that the school proceeds with this development. It is praiseworthy that student participation and achievement in TY are affirmed and celebrated by the school community. Upon completion of TY, a graduation event is organised, where projects are displayed and TY certificates are formally presented.

1.2 Resources

Senior management effectively deploys teachers to teach the programme. There is ongoing support for staff to pursue continuing professional development (CPD).

Information and communication technology (ICT) is used effectively in both organising and implementing the programme. TY classrooms and subject specialist rooms are utilised well for the delivery of the programme. It is suggested that a list of TY resources in each subject department

be made available on the school's computer network. This may help to promote cross-curricular approaches to TY programme delivery and implementation.

The TY capitation grant and the voluntary contribution from parents adequately resource TY provision including the European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL), transport, entrance fees and outdoor activities. Some optional activities are offered to students after school which may incur an additional contribution.

1.3 Student selection and support

The school's admission policy describes the TY programme as a 'non-compulsory option' available to students who have completed their Junior Certificate. Together with their parents, students are required to sign a contract of learning and to commit to full participation in the programme. The procedures for application to TY are outlined in the policy. This is very good practice. It is recommended that the admission policy be updated to reflect current practice.

There are currently three TY class groups, with up to 29 students in some base class groups. The numbers of students in these base class groups may erode some aspects of hands-on learning, activity-based and self-directed learning, all of which are essential to TY. Therefore, senior management should consider measures to limit class size in TY with a view to enhancing the student learning experience.

The guidance teacher meets all students individually in the course of the year to discuss their progress. This discussion includes subject choices for Leaving Certificate. Some aspects of guidance are provided to TY students during the co-ordinator's weekly work experience lesson. In order to strengthen guidance provision in TY, consideration should be given to the inclusion of a timetabled guidance module in TY. In addition, it is recommended that differential aptitude testing be carried out to enhance students' ability to choose correct subjects and levels for senior cycle.

TY students with additional learning needs are well supported and resource hours allocated to them are well utilised. There is occasional withdrawal from Irish and French lessons for additional support to students with exemptions or those who do not wish to pursue a modern European language. Differentiation practices are used by teachers, the benefit of which was evident to the student learning experience in the classroom.

The organisation of some class groups into ability streams for some subjects should be kept under constant review. While maintaining an appropriate level of challenge in terms of learning, school management should ensure that there is flexibility built into the organisation of TY class groups for some core subjects. This will help to ensure that the maximum number of students get the opportunity to choose their subjects at an appropriate level in senior cycle.

At the outset of the academic year, students partake in an induction programme. The trip to Delphi adventure centre was praised by TY students as a very useful bonding exercise at the outset of the year.

1.4 Home-school links

Parents of third-year students are invited to a TY programme information evening in March, where the purpose and nature of the TY programme are outlined. In addition, parents of students who have committed to TY are invited to a meeting in the school in September where detailed information is outlined. This is very good practice. In March of TY, the process of subject choice

for senior cycle is explained to parents. Parents are invited to the school's TY graduation event and support many school events and activities throughout the year. The TY programme has received very good parental support as indicated by questionnaires returned from parents of former TY students.

Parents are kept well informed of school activities through letters received and through the TY newsletter. Parents receive meaningful feedback on student progress by means of school reports following examinations at Christmas and summer. The format of the student report template has been adapted and customised for TY. This is very good practice, as it supports the unique nature of TY. To further enhance TY, it is recommended that the students attend the parent-teacher meeting. This initiative will help to support student self-assessment. Students should 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 TY plan in place at the time of the evaluation includes the aims and rationale of TY, some organisational details, individual subject programmes, and correspondence with parents. The plan requires further development and restructuring as required by the Department of Education and Skills circular M1/00. Many subject plans also require further development with a more detailed approach to assessment, evaluation, teaching strategies, cross-curricular approaches and resources. Therefore, it is recommended that each subject department should meet to review its TY planning and should develop an appropriate subject plan. The overall TY plan should be developed as a single cohesive and current document. To further support the planning, review and implementation of TY it is recommended that a TY core team be formed. This team should consist of key personnel involved in the planning and delivery of TY in the school.

The school outlined a number of self-evaluation measures in place for TY. Results of self-review have led to a greater focus on school-based activities. For example, in the interests of inclusiveness the school fashion show and drama production have replaced the musical and a small minority of subjects have been replaced with those that better meet students' needs. 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. To strengthen student evaluation, it is recommended that students be required to maintain a TY logbook diary, where they can record and evaluate their personal TY experiences on a weekly basis.

2.2 Co-ordination

It is very good that the TY co-ordinator, who is year head of the group, has regular class contact with TY students. The co-ordinator currently holds a post of responsibility at assistant principal (AP) level and is supported by a TY assistant co-ordinator who holds a special duties teacher (SDT) post. Duties allocated to these posts are clearly defined and agreed with school management. Pastoral and disciplinary duties are included, as are the following tasks pertaining to TY: planning and co-ordinating the TY programme, monitoring student development and progress and communicating with senior management, staff and parents. These duties are carried out very effectively.

The TY co-ordinator and assistant co-ordinator meet informally to plan and implement the programme. Commitment to a successful programme is high as evidenced by the fact that the co-ordinator visits each class group daily. Very good records are maintained in many areas including work experience, finances, assessment and evaluation.

2.3 Curriculum

The TY curriculum is broadly in line with Department guidelines. It offers students a variety of subjects, modules and activities. Students are enabled to develop their personal confidence and grow in maturity through participation in the numerous activities offered. The curriculum is designed to support each student in the development of their personal talents and aptitudes in line with TY aims.

Core subjects offer continuity from junior cycle. Some optional Leaving Certificate subjects are sampled. This is very good, as it supports students in making a more informed choice for senior cycle. Students develop new knowledge and skills through their participation in subjects such as Enterprise, Astronomy, Computers and Music Technology. A number of students successfully complete the ECDL whereby their enhanced computer skills are certified. The ICT skills developed substantially support students across the wider curriculum.

Many modules offered are of eight-week duration. This ensures variety and diversity throughout the TY curriculum. Students' needs and interests are prioritised. Some new subjects are introduced including Construction, Engineering and Infinity Mathematics. Students who have not chosen Business at junior cycle can take up the subject in TY while those who are skilled in this field are also supported in a separate class group. This is good practice. On Monday mornings a triple class period is timetabled for activities. In the interests of further variety, consideration should be given to the inclusion of Agricultural Science on the TY curriculum as an optional subject and the inclusion of an additional modern European language such as German, Spanish or Italian.

Activities outside the classroom are encouraged and supported by school management and these activities are a vital element of the TY programme. Confidence building is promoted through these activities. Examples of such activities include Enterprise Market Day, Shakespeare workshops, 421 Drug Education, YSI Speak Out and Road Safety.

Students' experiential learning is developed through work experience. This provides a vocational element to the programme. Work experience is organised in three blocks each of one week duration. Students are encouraged to sample different work placements for each block. Most employers return an evaluation form to the school. 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 to actively participate in their local community through involvement in the Gaisce programme, Young Social Innovators and through visits to the local day care centre. Student participation in the Log on Learn module whereby computer skills are taught to retired members of the local community is a praiseworthy initiative. It is suggested that TY provision be expanded to include a placement for every student in a local centre. 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

Planning for resources was very good. Handouts, materials, ICT and practical equipment were ready in advance of lessons. This good level of advance planning for most lessons, which included well-thought out teaching and learning methodologies, led to effective student learning. A written current plan was available for all subjects evaluated. The taught programme reflected the school's plan for the programme.

3.2 Learning and teaching

Most lessons were well structured. Where appropriate, the practice that was observed in some lessons of sharing learning objectives with students should be extended. The pace of lessons was suitable to students' abilities. Better organised seating arrangements for some lessons would have ensured enhanced lesson delivery and student outcomes.

There was a very good atmosphere in all lessons. Relationships in the classroom were also very good and student learning was enhanced as a result. Classroom management was effective for the vast majority of lessons. Teacher inputs were generally short, clear and concise. Teachers in the main demonstrated an awareness of TY aims while delivering their classroom lessons. They had high expectations of students and students responded positively to these expectations. Challenging tasks in terms of learning were set and the students were positively affirmed on completion of assigned tasks.

The varied and effective methodologies utilised by most teachers ensured that students' interest and motivation were maintained. Opportunities for learning were maximised through expert use of ICT in many lessons and through good use of the board to highlight key words, formulas or ideas. These methods should be extended and their benefits maximised across the curriculum. Students' attention was focused on important aspects of the lesson through well thought out strategies. In some lessons, teacher aids were over-utilised with little time for effective teaching, student participation or classroom interaction. This should be avoided with enhanced advance planning and preparation.

Learning was student focused and was activity based in many lessons. Group work ensured greater levels of student participation in some lessons observed. Teacher demonstrations were effective in the delivery of lesson objectives. The target language was well utilised in appropriate lessons and the use of film clips added variety to some 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. Higher-order questions encouraged students to explain their reasoning, which is good practice. Individual questions elicited specific responses and their use should be extended. The supportive classroom atmosphere was enhanced by means of teachers circulating and helping to solve individual student queries.

Students' confidence was developed and reinforced in line with TY guidelines through many active-learning experiences. For example, in the Physical Education lesson team working skills were developed, challenges were set and achieved and students completed a reflection log on their activities. Students developed important skills in design, analysis, problem-solving and language

development. The skills developed are in line with TY aims. Differentiated teaching practices were in evidence with individual and group support provided by the teacher as needed.

Concepts were explained with clarity and students demonstrated positive attitudes to learning. Where active teaching was observed, teachers were knowledgeable, enthusiastic and innovative. 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.

3.3 Assessment

TY students sit class tests on an ongoing basis. It is good practice that these reports are customised to TY by indicating participation, initiative and level of responsibility.

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 in some lessons, the standard of this work was not consistent. All teachers need to be vigilant in relation to students' application and work ethic throughout TY.

To strengthen the assessment process and to introduce further balance to TY assessment, 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 with interview criteria and marking clearly set out. For example, students could be required to choose what they consider to be some of their best work for this interview. In addition, consideration should be given to students maintaining an electronic portfolio with, for example, photographic evidence of activities undertaken during TY included in the portfolio.

4 SUMMARY OF STRENGTHS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- A whole-school approach to the planning, development, and promotion of TY is fostered by senior management.
- TY co-ordination duties are carried out effectively.
- Teachers' skills are well utilised in designing and implementing the TY programme.
- The curriculum is designed to meet students' needs and is broadly in line with Department guidelines.
- There was a very good atmosphere in all lessons. Relationships in the classroom were very good and student learning was enhanced as a result.
- Teachers had high expectations of students and overall students responded positively to these expectations.
- Learning was student-focused and was activity-based in many lessons.
- Students' confidence was developed and reinforced in line with TY guidelines through many active learning experiences.

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

- The admission policy should be updated to reflect current practice on the TY application process.
- Timetabled guidance and provision of differential aptitude testing should be introduced to enhance guidance provision.
- A TY core team should be formed.
- The TY plan requires further development and restructuring.
- The organisation of some class groups into ability streams for some subjects should be kept under constant review.
- Students should be required to maintain a TY logbook diary.