An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna
Department of Education and Skills

Programme Evaluation
Junior Certificate School Programme
REPORT

St Louis Community School
Kiltimagh, Co Mayo
Roll Number: 91494R

Date of inspection: 12 May 2010
EVALUATION OF THE JUNIOR CERTIFICATE SCHOOL PROGRAMME (JCSP)

INTRODUCTION

This report has been written following an evaluation of the JCSP in St Louis Community School, Kiltimagh. 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 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 following the evaluation.

St Louis Community School was founded in 1993 with the amalgamation of St Louis Secondary School and Coláiste Raifeirí Vocational School. In doing this it was drawing together two well-established schools that had a long and very-well regarded tradition of education. The school draws its students from a wide area that is predominantly rural. A policy of integration and inclusion underlies all of the school’s activities. The school is the sole second-level education provider in its area and also has a large number of post-Leaving Certificate (PLC) courses. The school’s curriculum includes the Leaving Certificate Applied. The school has included JCSP in its curriculum since the inception of JCSP. 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

There is good whole-school support for JCSP. The school is making good use of JCSP in respect of its students with additional educational needs whose needs are met within the school’s mainstream. As far as possible JCSP students are included with other students in almost all classes and their additional needs are met through interventions as necessary. For this reason most teachers of junior cycle classes have some JCSP students in their classes.

The school provides additional support to students who have been identified as needing support in a discreet manner, as its understanding is that this is the wish of parents. This has led to some variations in the way in which JCSP is planned, organised and delivered in the school. It is clear from a review of the achievements of students in the Junior Certificate examination that the school’s JCSP students are achieving well. Students expressed their liking for the Junior Certificate School Programme as it makes school more accessible and interesting to them.

Support for JCSP is led by the principal who is aware of the needs of the programme, displays a good knowledge of the programme, and sees it as a key part of the school’s provision. While on a day-to-day basis JCSP has a low profile in the school, it is included in the school’s prospectus and on its website. The school also has staff room and students’ notice boards for JCSP. The school has a base classroom for JCSP, which is the classroom of one of the JCSP coordinators. This is adjacent to a small storage room that is used for storing JCSP resource materials and records.
Teachers are supported through briefings from the two JCSP coordinators at the beginning-of-year staff meeting where they are reminded of the resources available and how to access them. Teachers are also updated at regular intervals. The use of keywords is emphasised in these briefings and teachers are reminded of the key role of literacy in JCSP and of JCSP teaching strategies. The coordinators also introduce JCSP to new staff members each year. In order to ensure continuity and to build on the school’s experience and knowledge of the programme, the induction of teachers new to JCSP should be structured and the induction programme should be included in the JCSP plan.

JCSP is having an impact on its participant students. It was clear from meeting them that they are aware of the importance of school and that they have good levels of attendance. It is noted that the school has a strategy in place for attendance and that it is planned that further work in this area will take place. This work should include measures and supports that would be aimed at encouraging student attendance.

The school’s first awards night was being planned at the time of the evaluation to acknowledge students’ achievements both academic and other. This is a reflection of the school’s emphasis on the acknowledgement of student achievement. As the school, in line with its present policy of mainstreaming JCSP students, does not at present have a formal presentation ceremony for the presentation of JCSP student profiles it should consider including this in its awards ceremony in future years.

1.2 Resources

JCSP is well resourced in the school. As JCSP and the special-education-needs and learning-support department in the school are interrelated, the resources available for each combine to meet the needs of students. The school, in particular the coordinators and the teachers involved, has prepared a large number of resources for its JCSP students. It was evident also that use was being made of resources provided by the support service. Other resources available for JCSP in the school include the JCSP initiatives of which the school has a high take-up. The coordinators maintain good records of the additional support given to students.

As virtually all teachers in the school have JCSP students in their classes, the need for teachers to be prepared to make use of JCSP-specific teaching approaches is of key importance. The board of management and school management are highly supportive of teachers’ continuing professional development. They also encourage active membership by teachers of subject associations in all subject areas. The JCSP coordinators are also active in making teachers aware of appropriate continuing professional development (CPD) opportunities. While teachers avail of other CPD there is a concern regarding the low take-up of JCSP-specific CPD opportunities. A priority should be given by the school to increasing this, supported by a strategy and a plan to identify the priority needs of staff and to address these. Among these priorities should be whole-staff CPD in differentiated approaches to teaching. Teachers should also avail of other professional development opportunities through researching good practice in their subject areas, researching the literature, through contact with teachers from other schools and through other activities such as involvement in the State Examinations’ Commission examinations.
1.3 Student selection and support

The school has very good contacts with its feeder primary schools and gets detailed information on all students coming to the school. The transfer procedures for JCSP students coming to the school, identified prior to entry, are the same as those for other students and involve parents coming to the school on two occasions prior to their son’s or daughter’s entry. They include also an induction day for all incoming first-year students and the benefit of the school’s guidance programme.

The school does not have any entrance examination or assessment and it relies on the first-year October examinations and teacher's observations of students in class to identify students that may be in need of additional support in addition to those students who have been assessed as requiring additional support before entry to the school. The information on which the selection of students for JCSP is based is obtained through pre-entry meetings with the parents of incoming first years, information in psychological reports submitted, relevant medical reports, information supplied by the primary schools, and the outcomes of the school’s first-year October examination in Irish, English, and Mathematics that are based on common coursework for all first years in September and October. Students may also join JCSP in second year and in third year. During the evaluation question papers and students’ results were not available for the October examinations. The school should review the assessments in October so that changes of classes for students are kept to a minimum and that as far as possible all students who need it get support from very early in the school term.

Although not stated specifically in any school documentation the main selection criterion used for JCSP is students’ general academic ability. As a number of JCSP students take the higher level Junior Certificate Examination it appears other selection criteria are used also. Students’ achievement and prior attendance should also be included as criteria. The JCSP selection procedures and criteria should be documented and should be included in the JCSP plan.

The school’s guidance plan for JCSP gives information on the guidance support available to students. Further information should be given in the plan on the guidance programme for JCSP students. This should include how the needs of individual students in the areas of attitudes, development of personal management and learning skills, and overall social and personal development will be met.

JCSP students are well-supported academically. Additional support is provided to students in subjects in which they are having difficulty. Where teachers consider it necessary this support may include guidance in relation to state-examinations-related project and practical work. The support may be initiated at the request of the subject teacher, the student’s parents, or the students themselves. Where students are receiving additional support there are reported to be good procedures for communications between the students’ subject teacher and the teacher giving the additional support. There is also flexibility with regard to the assignment of assistance to students when required. This was stated by the school and was also supported by discussion with the students. The availability of this support is much valued by JCSP students.

Learning support for JCSP students is well organised, well integrated, well staffed, and readily available to students. This is facilitated by the fact that the special-educational-needs and learning-support coordinator is also one of the JCSP coordinators. Students find this very helpful. In order to further broaden the support available to students and to have a concerted involvement of each teacher in this, students with a special educational need should each have an individual education plan that identifies the key learning targets that each teacher would work towards achieving. The
school should also adopt as a guiding principle that students’ requirements in relation to additional support are identified as early as possible so it can be provided from the beginning of first year.

The school should combine the range of documentation that it has developed in relation to special needs and learning support into a policy that would describe the school’s practices and give guidance to the staff involved in this area. The policy should be drawn up by the school’s student-support team and discussed with the partners in the school community including the parents’ association. The policy should describe how the school identifies the learning needs of students, how it meets these needs, and how students’ progress is monitored. The policy should also include a description of the role of staff members and other professionals. The policy should have an emphasis on teaching and learning. Provision should be made within the policy for ongoing informal review of the school’s learning-support and special-education provision and a formal evaluation and review every few years. In drawing up the policy the school should make use of the resources of the Special Education Support Service (SESS) and the Department’s publication *Inclusion of Students with Special Educational Needs Post-Primary Guidelines*.

The school has a wide range of other supports for its JCSP students. Among these are the homework club and the provision of breakfast. The school also liaises with external agencies where necessary in supporting its JCSP students. It was clear from interviewing JCSP students that this support is much appreciated by students. It is clear also that they all had clear ideas about their future education and careers. This is a further measure of the success of the programme and the impact of the supports given to students.

### 1.4 Home-school links

An indication of the high value that the school places on contact with students’ homes and liaison between the school and students’ homes is the support given by its board of management to the retention of the school’s home-school-community liaison (HSCL) teacher. The HSCL coordinator plays a key role in the linkage between the school and its feeder primary schools that forms part of the school’s transfer programme.

Because of the policy of the school not to distinguish overtly between students, parents of JCSP students do not receive JCSP-related material from the school. However parents are met individually and information on JCSP is given to them privately. The school should review this, bearing in mind the need for all members of the school community, especially the parents of the participating students, to be given documentation on the programme, including correspondence as necessary in relation to their children's participation in JCSP. The school should also consider having JCSP events in the school to which parents are invited.

The sending of JCSP postcards to students' homes by teachers has been shown to be highly beneficial to home-school links. The postcards also help in building on students’ sense of achievement in JCSP. As well as the certificates of achievements that the school sends to students’ homes the school should also give consideration to sending JCSP postcards.

### 2 QUALITY OF PROGRAMME PLANNING AND COORDINATION

#### 2.1 Planning

The school has a JCSP plan that includes information on the selection criteria for students, the calendar for the year, and the initiatives that have been undertaken. The plan is associated with
other JCSP-related documents and reflects the commitment that the school has to planning for its JCSP students. In order to provide the school community with accessible information on the school’s JCSP, the plan should be developed further through including information on a range of areas including selection of students, the JCSP curriculum, education support for JCSP students, guidance for JCSP students, and guidance to teachers on JCSP methodologies. A comprehensive JCSP plan will also provide a basis for evaluation and review of the programme.

In addition to its JCSP plan the school has plans that address the development of students’ literacy skills, their numeracy skills and their personal and social development. These should be included as part of the JCSP plan. The focus of the school’s JCSP literacy strategy is the adoption by subject teachers of specific techniques in addressing the literacy demands of their subject areas. They include the use of keywords, key concepts and key spellings and also the use of such JCSP initiatives as Drop Everything and Read, Word Millionaire, Make a Book, and Read Along. The school has also adopted techniques for enhancing students’ literacy for general use. In the case of the mathematics department, numeracy development is addressed through the inclusion in its department plan of a section on planning for students with special needs. This could be broadened through including information on how students’ needs in Mathematics are established on entry to the school and on how they are communicated to mathematics teachers. The plan should also refer to communication with the parents of students, the measurement of improvement in students, and the details of how the additional support is carried out and integrated with the students’ main mathematics class.

The school shows good practice in the informal evaluation that takes place each year involving the principal, the deputy principal and the JCSP coordinators. To complement this ongoing evaluation, the programme should be evaluated on a formal basis, about every three years. The evaluation should involve a survey of the parents of students, of teachers, former students of the programme, and other school staff not involved in JCSP. As part of the evaluation there should be an analysis of the destinations of students who have graduated from the programme. The analysis should use the information that the school already records. Following evaluation of the programme a review should take place. This review should be inclusive of parents, students, past students, and staff and should include the curriculum, student assessment, programme record keeping, information and communication technology (ICT) in JCSP, teaching and learning methodologies, CPD for JCSP staff, and collaboration among the staff involved in the programme.

### 2.2 Coordination

Coordination of the school’s programme is challenging, because so many teachers are involved in JCSP, and is carried out in an effective and committed manner by the two coordinators who meet weekly. Among the areas examined at the coordinators’ meetings are the whole-school approach to literacy and numeracy, the use of keywords in lessons, and the importance of differentiation. In order to clarify the role of the coordinators a role description should be prepared that could be included as part of the JCSP plan.

The school has assigned an appropriate time allocation to the coordination of JCSP and this is used in preparing JCSP materials, linking with the large number of teachers involved in JCSP, and keeping records of and feeding back to students on their progress. It is also used in meeting parents and in replacing JCSP teachers engaged in initiatives. The coordinators are strong in their support of the school’s participation in JCSP initiatives and a significant proportion of their time is spent in managing them. Because of the nature of the school’s JCSP, meetings with individual subject teachers take place during break times or other free time. For example the coordinators meet twenty six teachers of third year students each month. The only time the entire group of
JCSP teachers meet at the beginning of year staff meeting. It is suggested that a greater use of ICT in planning and dissemination of information might assist communication among the JCSP teaching team.

The coordinators show very good practice in giving each third-year JCSP student a monthly update on his or her progress by recording the comments of each teacher on the progress of each student. The school should consider the advantages to be gained from recording these in a digital format so that all teachers would have ready access. The information could also be stored in a way that would be accessible by parents through the school website. In time the recording of JCSP students’ progress that is at present carried out in third year should be extended to the other years of the programme. This could be facilitated through use of the school’s internal ICT network.

Membership of the team that supports the programme should be increased to include two other teachers with an involvement with JCSP students, or the HSCL teacher or the guidance counsellor. The team should meet weekly or fortnightly and place a special emphasis on the encouragement of consistent approaches to teaching and learning. The JCSP coordinators should report formally to school senior management each half term on the progress of each JCSP student and on teaching and learning and assessment within JCSP.

2.3 Curriculum

The school makes the full school curriculum available to JCSP students. As well as the school’s Junior Certificate programme, the JCSP curriculum is supplemented by JCSP initiatives and activities that are highly valued by students. The JCSP curriculum is broad, and it offers choices to its students. The school’s JCSP curriculum also addresses the development of students’ literacy and numeracy and their personal and social development. There is a need for greater emphasis on the development within subjects of students’ literacy skills. To supplement this and also the school’s existing work in the development of students’ literacy skills there should be a greater emphasis on the encouragement and development of students’ reading. This should be done through a more concerted approach to the development of students’ enjoyment of reading. Information on this may be obtained through the JCSP website [http://jcsp.slss.ie/](http://jcsp.slss.ie/).

3 QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

3.1 Planning and preparation

JCSP students are in mixed-ability classes for almost all subjects. Planning for teaching and learning for JCSP is carried out as part of the subject-department planning process. Given this, it is necessary that subject plans should be based on addressing the learning needs of a mixed-ability group and should be based on the achievement by students of learning objectives that can be differentiated. This may require upskilling on the part of some subject departments that should be supported by whole-school CPD. It also has implications for the development of collaborative subject-department planning. Another area that needs to be developed further by each of the school’s subject departments in this context is the use of ICT in teaching and learning.

All lessons seen were planned and prepared well, most very well indeed. It is recommended that in planning for lessons, greater account should be taken of the need for student activity in learning, for in-class student assessment, and for the use of strategies for differentiation and mixed ability.
Learning and teaching

Most lessons were well structured with a range of different methodologies being used in almost all lessons. There is a need however in lessons for a greater use of methodologies that encourage active learning by students. Examples of these methodologies are pair work, project work, practical demonstrations, role-playing, discussion, and questioning. Such methodologies have the potential to place student learning at the centre of lessons.

Where good practice was seen in lessons, key JCSP objectives were integrated into the lesson, students were enthusiastic, and high quality interaction was taking place between students and between students and teacher. There was a notable lesson on a history topic in which students’ confidence and their research and drafting skills, as well as their ability to express themselves were being developed. In this lesson student learning was effectively differentiated. In a science lesson observed there was very good class participation and keyword lists were being used. There was also very good variety in the methodologies used. In both lessons teachers and students were active within the classroom and were engaged.

In a few of the lessons the learning objective was stated at the outset of the lesson and at the end in summarising the lesson. While questioning of students was used in almost all lessons in many cases it would have been more effective if a variety of question types was used, including open questions as well as closed questions. Questions should be directed to individual students and to the class as a whole. Questioning of students should also be used to a greater extent to clarify what students had learnt during and at the end of lessons.

Students in their interview expressed their liking for teachers explaining things properly and for getting on well with their teachers. On the basis of the classes observed this is happening in the majority of lessons where there were very good teacher-student relationships. In most lessons also students were encouraged and given individual attention. In most lessons students were giving good attention to the lesson and were engaged. In almost all lessons it was clear from the engagement of students, their answers to questions and the questions that they asked that they were learning.

As well as the usual subjects where projects are part of the curriculum, students do projects in English when they have finished parts of the course. Students reported using computers in class to a small extent only and this is an area that should be developed by the school.

It was reported during the evaluation that when students receive additional support in a subject, the teacher giving the additional support and students’ class teacher for that subject maintain good contact so that students are enabled to derive the maximum benefit from that support. This is good practice.

Assessment

While the completion by teachers and students of JCSP profiling statements takes place in most subjects in other years, in first year statements are completed for Irish, English, and Mathematics. This good practice should be extended to other subjects. Students should be made aware of the progress they are making through being given the opportunity to see the statements they are working on in all subjects and years.

Good practice was seen in relation to assessment of students’ progress in some lessons where their work was taken up for assessment by teachers on a regular basis and assessed using formative
assessment. Students were given acknowledgement of what they had achieved and guidance on what they should do to achieve further. The school, through its subject-department planning process, should aim to extend this practice to all subjects and classes.

The JCSP coordinators show very good practice in meeting third-year students each month to let them know how they are progressing and what they should do to get better results. They also give students guidance on project and homework. This practice should be extended so that each JCSP teacher is involved and that it takes place across JCSP.

4 SUMMARY OF STRENGTHS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Support for JCSP is led by the principal who is aware of the needs of the programme, displays a good knowledge of the programme, and sees it as a key part of the school’s provision.
- JCSP is having an impact on its participant students. It is clear from a review of the achievements of students in the Junior Certificate examination that the school’s JCSP students are achieving well.
- The board of management and school management are highly supportive of teachers’ continuing professional development. They also encourage active membership by teachers of subject associations in all subject areas.
- The school has very good contacts with its feeder primary schools and gets detailed information on all students coming to the school.
- Learning support for JCSP students is well organised, well integrated, well staffed, and readily available to students.
- The HSCL coordinator plays a key role in the linkage between the school and its feeder primary schools that forms part of the school’s transfer programme.
- The school has a JCSP plan that includes information on the selection criteria for students, the calendar for the year, and the initiatives that have been undertaken.
- The coordinators show very good practice in giving each third-year JCSP student a monthly update on his or her progress by recording the comments of each teacher.
- In almost all lessons it was clear from the engagement of students, their answers to questions and the questions that they asked that they were learning.

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

- In order to build on the existing strength of the school’s JCSP and to extend its benefit throughout the school, a priority should be given to increasing the level of participation of teachers in continuing JCSP-specific professional development.
- To build on the success to date and the wide acceptance of JCSP, the school should review its approach so that all members of the school community, especially the parents of the participating students, are given documentation on the programme, including correspondence as necessary in relation to their children's participation in JCSP. The school should also consider having JCSP events in the school to which parents are invited.
- The school should build further on the work that has been done in the area of student literacy by placing a greater emphasis on the encouragement and development in students of an enjoyment of reading.