Programme Evaluation
Leaving Certificate Applied REPORT

CBS James’ Street
Dublin 8
Roll Number: 604101

Date of inspection: 19 October 2010
EVALUATION OF THE LEAVING CERTIFICATE APPLIED

INTRODUCTION

This report has been written following an evaluation of the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme in CBS James’ Street. 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 co-ordinator of the programme and with a small group of students. The evaluation was conducted over two days during which the inspector liaised extensively 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 following the evaluation.

CBS James’ Street is located in the south inner city area of Dublin. The school is a participant in the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) initiative and has provided the LCA programme for its students for a considerable period of time. Currently there are thirty students enrolled in the school’s LCA programme, fourteen students in fifth year and sixteen students in sixth year. The board of management of the school was given an opportunity to comment on the findings and recommendations of the evaluation; the board chose to accept the report without response.

1 QUALITY OF PROGRAMME ORGANISATION

1.1 Whole school support

Senior management is committed to the LCA programme and has supported its implementation for a significant period of time. The principal was instrumental in introducing the programme to the school and has a good understanding of the effective organisation and delivery of the programme. Senior management has addressed a number of recommendations made during previous evaluations such as the introduction of a new vocational specialism and ensuring that the LCA co-ordinator has timetabled contact time with each LCA class group. The attention given to the earlier recommendations is commended.

Many aspects of the leadership of the programme have been delegated to the LCA co-ordinator. Regular contact with senior management is maintained through formal and informal meetings with the co-ordinator and members of the core team.

There is a good level of awareness of the LCA programme in the school and of the activities and tasks associated with it. Current whole-school initiatives include the provision of LCA staffroom and student notice boards and the allocation of time during staff meetings to highlight specific LCA issues. The LCA student notice board is used in a positive manner to highlight events and to identify student achievements such as work experience commendations from employers and photographic records of students’ activities. Students’ task work activities are often used as additional means of further integrating LCA students with their fellow students. These activities include the organisation of football leagues for first-year students and LCA involvement in the
French culture day activities. The presence of an LCA student on the student council is another indication of the full integration of LCA students in the school. Induction for teachers new to the LCA is primarily informal and is carried out by the co-ordinator and members of the teaching team. Senior management encourages and facilitates the attendance of the LCA teachers at continuing professional development (CPD) courses provided by the LCA support service. In addition to this formal CPD, subject departments also collaborate with and support teachers new to the programme.

1.2 Resources

In almost all cases, teachers assigned to teach the programme are deployed based upon their qualifications, skill sets, interests and experience within the programme. The teaching team is relatively constant and has developed a considerable array of skills applicable to the programme. Suitably qualified personnel are not deployed to teach all specialist subjects. Where this is the case senior management should make every effort to remedy the situation.

The LCA curricular framework has been developed in the school in a consultative manner resulting in the allocation of the appropriate number of class periods to all aspects of the various constituent courses. All modules are completed within the appropriate timeframes and in the correct sequence. Courses are timetabled effectively and are dispersed appropriately throughout the teaching week resulting in students receiving the minimum required twenty-eight hours class contact time.

Information and communication technology (ICT) resources are readily available in almost all classrooms. Students access ICT resources during the completion of their task work but also when required throughout the year in the school’s very well-equipped library and computer classroom. The LCA co-ordinator and members of the core team also have appropriate access to ICT in order to support programme planning. This access should help with the ongoing updating of the programme planning documentation to electronic format.

1.3 Student selection and support

Student access to the programme is outlined in the school’s admission and enrolment policy. This is further developed in the LCA plan. This is good practice as it helps to ensure that both parents and students are fully aware of the access routes to the programme from the outset.

There is a clear system in place in the school in relation to the identification of potential LCA students. This system involves the LCA co-ordinator garnering information from the Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP) co-ordinator, the learning support team, third-year class teachers and year heads and members of the wider teaching team. The liaison between these groups helps to ensure that students are correctly placed in the programme most suited to their individual needs at senior cycle. The prospective LCA students identified are encouraged to apply for a place in the programme and are then interviewed accordingly. Students and parents are given comprehensive and timely support in relation to enrolment in the programme. This is carried out on an individual basis usually involving the LCA co-ordinator and parents during information evenings held in the school. These procedures are effective.

A clear and sequential guidance plan for the delivery of guidance to LCA students has been developed. Where guidance was observed during the evaluation it was well structured and focussed on delivering appropriate information aimed specifically at identifying progression routes for LCA students. In doing so, students are given every opportunity to avail of the various post-
leaving certificate and college courses available to them. A qualified guidance counsellor is timetabled to teach the guidance component of the Vocation Preparation and Guidance (VPG) course that incorporates planned excursions and activities.

Some LCA students in need of specific literacy supports are provided with additional tuition during scheduled withdrawals from mainstream lessons. To build upon this support, co-operative teaching should be considered as an alternative to individual student withdrawal from lessons. Supplementary supports for other students in need of learning support occur on a needs basis at specific times during the school year, particularly when task deadlines are imminent or when task reports require a significant quantity of supporting text. The literacy initiative ‘drop everything and read’ takes place each day during the school’s literacy development week. This initiative was observed during a Social Education lesson and was most successful as students were encouraged to read publications provided during this time. This most worthwhile initiative could be included as a regular event for LCA students throughout the year.

A whole-school learning support policy is currently being developed by the school. As part of this policy the LCA core team should identify the LCA students in need of additional educational supports. Once completed a student register should be compiled. Each student should be identified by means of appropriate supports to further include them in the teaching and learning of the various subjects and courses. This register could be circulated among subject teachers for use during lessons and should place particular emphasis upon developing students’ literacy and numeracy skills.

Student induction takes place at the beginning of fifth year and students are given very good information about the programme’s curriculum and modes of assessment. The provision of weekly class contact time for the LCA programme co-ordinator and the fifth year group has been beneficial in the development of a group dynamic and team ethic among the current fifth-year students.

1.4 Home-school links

Parents of prospective LCA students are given details of the programme and informed of the benefits for their son prior to interview. This occurs at an information evening hosted for parents of third–year students, additional information on the LCA programme is also made available to parents at the annual open evenings held each year.

The school has devised a number of methods to communicate effectively with parents of LCA students. These methods include hosting coffee mornings, the introduction of a text-alert system, annual parent-teacher meetings that form an integral part of the mainstream fifth and sixth year parent-teacher meetings, regular phone calls from the LCA co-ordinator and home visits by the home-school-community liaison (HSCL) co-ordinator. These lines of communication have been further improved by the development of new report templates that incorporate the official names of courses studied by LCA students.

The end of year graduation ceremony and the yearly merit awards are another opportunity taken by the school to maintain links with parents. These events provide parents with a definite reason to attend school events and they are used to promote the positive aspects of the programme.
2 QUALITY OF PROGRAMME PLANNING AND COORDINATION

2.1 Planning

A detailed programme plan has been developed. This plan includes the following: student selection procedures, minutes of LCA teaching team meetings, reporting procedures, curriculum and accreditation details, individual subject plans and programme evaluation questionnaires. The complete two year plan for each student cohort is devised at the beginning of each two-year cycle using the programme’s curricular framework document. The programme plan also contains the modular plan for each course offered within the programme. These subject plans were generally of good quality, however there was some variation. The examples of best practice included the identification of students’ learning outcomes for each topic, suggested teaching resources, listed active methodologies suitable to the topic and to the programme’s aims, identified speakers and guests and suitable assessment methods. The LCA co-ordinator and core team should endeavour to promote these good practices and also promote the inclusion of specified literacy and numeracy initiatives and additional active learning strategies.

A core team is in place to help oversee the implementation and efficient organisation of the LCA programme. This team has representatives from the various elements of the programme including a member of senior management. The core team meets regularly to plan and monitor the programme’s development. Effective discussion and dialogue takes place at these meetings; recorded minutes are maintained and relayed to senior management. It is suggested that each agenda for core and teaching team meetings should contain entries aimed at promoting active teaching and learning methodologies and additional literacy and numeracy initiatives.

Cross-curricular planning and course integration mainly occurs during students’ task work activities. This form of integration is essential and should be further developed throughout the teaching team during day-to-day activities where possible.

2.2 Coordination

The LCA programme co-ordinator is responsible for many aspects of the implementation of the programme including co-ordinating student task work, maintaining attendance records, work experience and assessment. The duties attached to this role are carried out efficiently and very effectively.

A considerable amount of time is allocated to the LCA co-ordinator to co-ordinate the programme. This has resulted in the LCA co-ordinator being deployed for less than the required minimum of eighteen hours teaching time. This situation should be addressed as a priority.

The LCA co-ordinator has developed a number of procedures to ensure that student work is completed in a timely manner. The system currently employed to store students’ key assignments is effective and each teacher is delegated partial responsibility for the maintenance of good records and for the timely completion of students’ work. This system is operating well and ensures that a number of checks are in place to ensure that all students complete their work on time and to an appropriate standard.

2.3 Curriculum

The LCA curriculum in CBS James’ Street is broad, balanced and beneficial to the LCA students. The curriculum complies with the relevant Department of Education and Skills guidelines and
circulars and has recently been reviewed resulting in the introduction of Graphics and Construction in place of Office Administration and Customer Care in fifth year. The LCA programme now encompasses a wide range of specialisms and electives including Information and Communication Technology, Science and Religious Education. Currently the Leisure and Recreation course is completed in fifth year. Consideration should now be given to delivering this course over two years as is common practice in many schools.

The programme co-ordinator oversees the students’ work experience placements. During these placements, the co-ordinator visits the place of work or contacts the employer to ensure that the work placement is successful. Students are also encouraged to maintain a work experience diary during their placements and revisit their experiences during their weekly guidance lesson. The overall organisation and delivery of the various elements of the work experience is commended.

3 QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

3.1 Planning and preparation

During the course of the evaluation the planning and preparation for lessons observed were of a very high standard. This planning included the preparation of teaching aids and resources including worksheets, mood boards, photographs, games, ICT and web-based resources. The preparation of these resources enabled teachers to integrate learning activities into their planned lessons and created engaging lessons where students were actively involved in their learning.

Excellent planning and preparation was observed in a modern European language lesson where each element of the lesson was supported by prepared resources and teaching aids. This resulted in each segment of the lesson utilising a specific resource to enhance students’ learning.

The sequencing of lessons and topics was also well planned and on a number of occasions teachers encouraged students to prepare for upcoming events. One such example included a VPG lesson where students were involved in preparing for the impending visit of a trade union official. In this lesson, students prepared their questions and researched a number of areas of interest and enquiry. This allowed students to take ownership of their learning and helped to instil a sense of responsibility among the group. This good practice is commended.

ICT and audio-visual resources were incorporated into a number of lessons. When used appropriately they made a significant impact on students’ engagement in the lesson. To maximise the benefits of these resources interesting, highly visual or interactive resources should always be identified and integrated into suitable lessons.

Currently the planning for students with additional educational needs is primarily the remit of the school’s learning support team. To further develop a more integrated approach to providing educational supports, the LCA co-ordinator, core team and teaching team should investigate all opportunities to support the integration of students with additional educational needs into LCA lessons. These strategies should be identified and developed at LCA team meetings and introduced to mainstream LCA lessons on a phased trial basis. An evaluation of the success of these strategies should then take place allowing teachers to identify the most suitable methodologies for each individual student.
3.2 Learning and teaching

All lessons observed were well structured and paced according to students’ needs and abilities. In most lessons, the desired learning outcomes for lessons were identified and shared with students at the beginning. In a few instances these learning outcomes were revisited at the end of the lesson to recapitulate keywords and the key points learned during the lesson. This good practice should be adopted by all teachers.

A good range of appropriate teaching methodologies was employed during the lessons observed. These methodologies were generally active and were suitable to the topic, content and students. Examples of appropriate active learning methodologies observed included brainstorming, role play, independent student activity, pair and group work, the use of keyword lists, student led estimation and measurement, group, individual and student demonstrations, the completion of worksheets, the use of subject specific word-banks and mind-maps and lively discussions and debates. These varied and interesting methodologies created motivating lessons and encouraged students to take a full and active role in their learning.

To further improve the benefits of some of the active methodologies employed in LCA lessons the teaching team should promote deeper analysis of themes and topics during discussions. To achieve this goal, the use of think/pair/share may help students to develop their contributions further by allowing them time to formulate their opinion, discussing it with their partner and then sharing their developed idea with the class group. Another possibility includes the further structuring of research tasks to ensure that students’ research, especially web-based research, is focused and clearly defined.

In all lessons students demonstrated a good degree of learning when questioned by their teachers and by the inspector. Teachers’ expectations of student performance and achievement were generally high. Further differentiation may be achievable through the setting of appropriate targets for individual students in relation to the completion of their key assignments. This will help students to achieve their full potential.

Classroom management was very good and a positive learning environment was evident throughout the evaluation. Students were mannerly and very well behaved. When discussing the programme, students spoke highly of their experiences and listed a variety of benefits from their participation.

A good level of student learning was evident in almost all the lessons observed. Students demonstrated a wide variety of acquired skills and their communication skills were well developed allowing them to partake in discussions on a wide range of topics. Students’ newly acquired practical skills were also evidenced by their task work and key assignments.

3.3 Assessment

LCA students are formally assessed at the end of each term. In addition to these assessments, sixth-year LCA students sit ‘mocks’ prior to their certificate examinations. Class work is assessed regularly and students received good levels of feedback during the lessons observed. Students were questioned throughout the lessons observed and this provided teachers with good levels of feedback pertaining to students’ understanding. It was reported that some teachers incorporate a number of assessment for learning (AFL) techniques into their junior-cycle lessons. The use of these AFL practices should be utilised in LCA class groups and will help to further inform teachers and increase students’ levels of understanding.
4 SUMMARY OF STRENGTHS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- There is an effective system in place in the school in relation to the identification of potential LCA students.
- Very good links have been developed and maintained between the school and the parents of LCA students.
- The LCA programme is efficiently and very effectively co-ordinated in CBS James’ Street.
- The LCA curriculum is broad, balanced and suitable for the school’s student cohort.
- Planning and preparation for lessons observed was of a high standard.
- A wide range of appropriately diverse active teaching and learning strategies were employed during the lessons observed.

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

- As, currently, suitably qualified personnel are not allocated to teach all specialist subjects, senior management should make every effort to address such instances
- The LCA co-ordinator must be deployed to teach a minimum of eighteen hours per week.
- The school should consider delivering the Leisure and Recreation course over the two years of the LCA programme.

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