An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Programme Evaluation
Junior Certificate School Programme
REPORT

Mullingar Community College
Millmount Road, Mullingar, County Westmeath
Roll Number: 71450I

Date of inspection: 15 November 2010
EVALUATION OF THE JUNIOR CERTIFICATE SCHOOL PROGRAMME

INTRODUCTION

This report has been written following an evaluation of the Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP) in Mullingar Community College. 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, with a core group of teachers 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, the deputy principal, the programme co-ordinator and members of the teaching team following the evaluation. The board of management of the school was given an opportunity to comment on the findings and recommendations of the report; the board chose to accept the report without response.

Mullingar Community College operates under the aegis of County Westmeath Vocational Education Committee. It is situated near the centre of the town and caters for students from a diverse range of ethnic and social backgrounds and with a wide range of educational and other needs. In order to meet the needs of these students, the school participates in a number of programmes and initiatives, including the Junior Certificate School Programme, Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) and the School Completion Programme (SCP).

JCSP has been part of the school’s curriculum for ten years and currently, one discrete class group in second and third year participate in JCSP. Classes are mixed ability in first year and the cohort that will eventually follow JCSP is identified during first year following a comprehensive consultation process and using agreed unambiguous criteria.

A new principal and deputy principal were appointed shortly before the inspection. They view JCSP as an important intervention in the junior-cycle provision of the school and are committed to its ongoing development. However, they appreciate that elements of the programme are in need of review, particularly in relation to its implementation as a cohesive whole-school initiative and its integration with DEIS and the SCP.

1 QUALITY OF PROGRAMME ORGANISATION

1.1 Whole school support

Timetabling provision for students participating in the JCSP in second and third year is very good. The students have access to a broad and balanced curriculum and the scheduling of English and Mathematics in second and third year is designed to provide students from the JCSP cohort with the opportunity to follow higher level in these subjects. This is very good practice.

The JCSP enjoys a high profile in the school. A number of vehicles, including a dedicated notice board, a year book and a dedicated section on the school’s website, are used to inform the school’s stakeholders in relation to the programme’s various activities.

Adequate time is made available for programme co-ordination and to facilitate requisite meetings. The programme co-ordinator and teachers engaged in the programme are facilitated and
encouraged to attend relevant continuing professional development courses. However, elements of the whole-school management of the programme are in need of immediate review. The review should result in the programme being delivered in a more cohesive fashion and with renewed focus on its impact on teaching and learning across all relevant subject areas. To begin with, a core group to support the work of the co-ordinator must be established. In addition to the JCSP co-ordinator, the group should include the home-school-community liaison (HSCL) co-ordinator, the School Completion Programme (SCP) co-ordinator, representatives from the learning-support department and the guidance counsellor. The year heads could attend meetings of the group, in rotation. Some of the time allocated to the school to support the implementation of the JCSP could be used to facilitate meetings of this group. The group should generate clarity about how the programme can best meet the educational needs of the students and how the resources available in the school can be used to greatest effect. Initial work has started on the development of a literacy and numeracy strategy across the junior cycle curriculum.

The JCSP co-ordinator and the school’s programme co-ordinator should liaise more closely than is currently the case, particularly during the reorganisation of the JCSP within the school. Their complimentary skills and knowledge of the programme should help ensure that the work of the core group will reflect the whole-school nature of the programme and that a comprehensive JCSP plan will emerge from the process.

1.2 Resources

The JCSP is well resourced in the school. The co-ordinator has ready access to the resources required to co-ordinate the programme including adequate co-ordination time. Regular planning meetings involving the co-ordinator and the teaching team also take place. While the benefit that these meetings bring in agreeing and organising the programme’s various initiatives is acknowledged, they should also be used to discuss student profiling statements and to bring about clarity and consistency in relation to how the statements are used. It is particularly important that newly appointed teachers are fully appraised in relation to the use of the statements and to other special requirements of the JCSP.

The second-year and third-year JCSP classes are provided with a broad range of subjects including five periods of English and Mathematics per week. A significant number of JCSP students receive additional support in English and Mathematics during small-group withdrawal from subjects such as Irish. Very good links are maintained with the students’ mainstream teachers and, in the best cases, the statements followed in the mainstream classes inform the material being covered during withdrawal. The learning-support team are innovative and enthusiastic and are willing to implement different learning-support models. Consideration should, therefore, be given to the use of team teaching and in-class co-operative support. This would harmonise the provision of learning support with the overall JCSP literacy and numeracy strategy and would ensure that students would have full access to all of the subjects on their curriculum.

Second-year JCSP students have three classes of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) per week and apart from developing their ICT skills, the students use the classes to research material relevant to other subject areas, to prepare project portfolios and to develop their literacy. This very good model of ICT integration should also be introduced into the third-year programme.

1.3 Student selection and support

Students transferring from the feeder primary schools benefit from a very good transfer programme. Senior management, the HSCL co-ordinator and the SCP personnel all play
significant and complementary roles in ensuring the transfer from primary to post-primary school is well managed, that the parents are well informed and that the students feel welcome from the outset. Once they have transferred, the first-year students participate in an induction programme designed to acquaint them with the operation of the school and to familiarise them with the social, cultural and personal issues they may encounter as they settle into first year.

A range of standardised tests is used to establish the educational and other needs of the incoming students. The results of the assessment tests are also used as the baseline for the school’s DEIS plan and will inform the literacy and numeracy targets to be contained therein. Given the range of agencies involved in supporting students in the school, robust procedures should be established to ensure that the targets are circulated and agreed and the approach adopted in achieving them is uniformly implemented.

The procedures for selecting students for the JCSP are thorough and inclusive of teachers and parents. In order to capture existing good practice and to inform future developments, these procedures should be more clearly documented in the JCSP plan.

Guidance and counselling provision for students involved in the JCSP is very good. Each class group has one class of Guidance each week and there is ready access to the school’s guidance service outside of formal class time. Additional support is provided by an educational psychologist, who is available to students on site and liaises with the learning-support teachers in relation to teaching and learning. This latter initiative is funded by the SCP. In order to ensure that all these various initiatives complement each other, it is recommended that there be greater liaison between the various agencies involved in their delivery. The school’s care team should take responsibility for co-ordinating this element of the school’s activities.

1.4 Home-school links

The school works hard to maintain close contact with the parents of JCSP students. The HSCL co-ordinator plays a key role in this regard and, in addition to regular visits to the home an attractive facility is available to parents when they visit the school. Very good use is made of the student journal as a means of ongoing communication with parents but there is scope to extend the degree to which the JCSP postcards are used to inform parents of students’ progress and to involve them in the programme’s ongoing activities.

The school’s website is due to be upgraded in the near future. Information about the JCSP is prominently displayed on the existing website. This is very welcome and reflects the profile the programme enjoys in the school. The upgrading of the website provides an ideal opportunity to enhance the section dealing with the JCSP and should include updates on the initiatives being undertaken as part of the programme, extracts from the yearbook, details of the curriculum being followed by JCSP students and other relevant material pertaining to the implementation of the programme.

2 QUALITY OF PROGRAMME PLANNING AND CO-ORDINATION

2.1 Co-ordination

A very experienced co-ordinator is in place and receives appropriate levels of support from school management. Regular meetings of the teachers involved in the JCSP are facilitated and, while the outcomes of these meeting, particularly in relation to the design of the initiatives in which the
students participate, are very worthwhile, greater care should be taken in recording the minutes of the meetings and the key decisions taken.

It is evident that the co-ordinator collaborates effectively with the teachers involved in the JCSP in designing and implementing the initiatives in each year of the JCSP. The current second-year initiative, which operates in partnership with the school’s Leaving Certificate (Applied) students, is a particularly good example of the design and delivery of a cross-curricular project in a whole-school setting. The wider area of how this and other initiatives impact on the students’ achievement in literacy and numeracy is less impressive. The meetings of the teachers pay very little attention to JCSP statements and as a consequence, practice in relation to how the statements are used across the curriculum varies widely. Furthermore, teachers new to the school have very little understanding of the role of the statements and how they should impact on students’ learning. With this in mind, and in light of the earlier recommendation in relation to the core team, it is important that the roles and responsibilities of the co-ordinator be agreed and documented. As part of this process, the co-ordinator’s role in developing links among staff involved in the programme, including sharing of methodologies and teaching approaches; liaising with JCSP staff to address their continuing professional development needs; planning to meet the educational needs of individual JCSP students; managing the development of the school’s JCSP plan; and leading regular formal review and evaluation of the programme should all be considered.

The JCSP core team should support the work of the co-ordinator and should act as a forum for decision making. The expertise of the JCSP teaching team should also be exploited in agreeing modifications to existing practice and in managing the implementation of any decisions taken. This is particularly true in relation to the use of statements and in developing a cross-curricular approach to meeting the students’ literacy and numeracy needs.

2.2 Planning

Formal JCSP planning is in its infancy. Some of the components of a documented plan for the JCSP have been prepared and are contained in the school’s JCSP folder. The process of compiling this documentation into a single JCSP planning document should now commence. It is recommended that the JCSP core team take responsibility for managing the development, implementation and review of the plan. The development of the plan should include all the key stakeholders and should detail how the programme operates in the school. The plan should include the yearly schedule of programme activities for each JCSP class group. The year plan already included in the JCSP folder can act as a basis for this work. The plan should be ratified by the school’s board of management and should be subject to regular review.

2.3 Curriculum

A key element of the JCSP is the development of the students’ literacy and numeracy. In recognition of this, the new management team recently introduced standardised testing for incoming first-year students. This very welcome development allows the school to gather baseline data in relation to the literacy and numeracy proficiency of the students. In tandem with this, the school is developing the scope of the existing literacy and numeracy policies. The learning-support department will play a key role in developing the strategy and in broadening the scope of the existing literacy and numeracy policies, particularly in relation to their role in modifying the delivery of the wider curriculum across the school. The task will involve leading a whole-school reappraisal of what student proficiency in literacy and numeracy means in each subject area and determining how the individual subject can, in turn contribute to developing the students’ literacy and numeracy skills.
The policies that emerge from the review should inform the targets for improvement contained in the school’s DEIS plan and should identify the most effective manner in which the JCSP can be targeted as a vehicle in achieving them. Furthermore, care should be taken to ensure that all initiatives targeting students are used to inform the review process and to inform good practice in implementing the policies, upon their completion. Finally, the approach to retesting students should be clearly specified and procedures for communicating student progress to the wider staff should be agreed and documented in the new policies.

3 QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

3.1 Planning and preparation

Subject department planning is well underway. A section of the staff room is set aside to house the plans for each subject department and it is evident that subject department planning is now an integral part of the school’s activities. The majority of these plans were reviewed as part of the inspection and very few made mention of the JCSP or the role that the different subjects could play in enhancing the literacy and numeracy of the JCSP students. As a result, there was little evidence, for example, of key words being used in the lessons visited during the inspection. There was, however, some very good individual practice in subject department planning and also in the wider area of cross-curricular planning. A key focus for the next phase of subject department planning should be to capture and mainstream this existing good practice.

Student profiling is carried out in most of the subjects in the JCSP. However, the manner in which it is carried out is left to the discretion of individual teachers and as a result practice varies widely. Student profiling is a core element of the JCSP and through the profiling system students should form a picture of what they have achieved and be fully aware of their targets in individual subject areas. The opportunity to involve students in setting and agreeing their own learning targets should be considered, and it is therefore recommended that an agreed approach to student profiling be adopted by all of the JCSP teachers.

Individual teacher lesson planning was, in most instances, very good. A great deal of care was taken in modifying the lesson content to suit the needs and aptitudes of the students while retaining high levels of expectation of student attainment, engagement and contribution to the lessons. Planning for the inclusion of resources in lessons is also very good. In the best cases, the resources reduced the reliance on the text book and on verbal communication with students and allowed the students to collaborate and to participate actively in the lessons.

3.2 Learning and teaching

The quality of teaching observed during the inspection was very good. The material covered in the lessons was in keeping with the relevant subject department plan and was focussed on learning objectives that were agreed at the outset of each lesson. The lessons were well structured and facilitated active learning and interaction between the students. There is room, however, to further develop the lesson structure so that the degree to which the students’ literacy and numeracy is developed during each lesson is enhanced. The JCSP student profiling system should play a key role in any such enhancement.

A number of teaching methods were in evidence. ICT was successfully integrated in several instances and served to develop the student’s ICT skills while also enhancing their understanding of the lesson material. The integration of relevant resources, some created by the teachers and
some by the students, ensured that strong links were made between the students’ prior learning, their interests and aptitudes and the lesson content. A thematic approach linking the evangelists to an artefact being collaboratively created by the class as part of their art craft and design programme was a particularly good example of how an approach in one subject can stimulate students’ interest in and knowledge of a range of curricular areas.

All of the lessons were characterised by very good differentiation where the needs of individual students were catered for and appropriate levels of support and challenge were provided to each student. Classroom management, student engagement and behaviour were very good and the lessons were conducted in an atmosphere of mutual respect where the students were expected to contribute positively to the lessons and to achieve to their potential. Some of the rooms were decorated with posters and charts. This served to create a visually stimulating environment and to raise the profile of the subject. This good practice should be universally adopted across the school.

The quality of student learning was in almost all cases very good. The students were well able to carry out the tasks assigned to them and their written work, evident from their homework copybooks and their notebooks, was of a good quality.

3.3 Assessment

Ongoing assessment practices through the use of class tests, homework assignments and teacher observation in class are very good. However, a key vehicle in assessing student progression and in promoting self evaluation is the use of the profiling statements and, as outlined earlier in this report, their use needs to be reviewed. In addition to the review, the school should provide in-house training for existing teachers on the most appropriate use of the profiling attainments and develop an induction programme for teachers new to the programme. These initiatives should support clarity and consistency in relation to how the statements are used, as the current situation where practice is left to the discretion of the teachers is untenable. Arrangements for storing the statements should also be reviewed.

4 SUMMARY OF STRENGTHS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The senior management team and teaching staff are committed to the development of the JCSP in the school. The school boasts the requisite skills and aptitudes to ensure that the programme’s ongoing development is well managed and that all of the stakeholders are included in the process.
- The JCSP is very well supported in terms of co-ordination, promotion, curriculum provision and in relation student support.
- The school is committed to maintaining close contact with the parents of JCSP students. Arrangements to include parents in the transfer programme from feeder primary schools and in the selection of students for the JCSP are very good.
- The quality of teaching and learning is very good.

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

- The whole-school management of the programme is in need of immediate review. A core team should be established to support the work of the co-ordinator and to ensure that the various initiatives targeting the school’s JCSP students operate in a complementary and cohesive fashion.
• The role of co-ordinator must be specified. A clear role descriptor should be prepared and closer co-operation with the school’s programmes co-ordinator should be established and maintained.

• The meetings of the teaching team should, in addition to current activities, focus on student profiling as a key activity. Provision, including training and an induction programme for new teachers, should be made to ensure that all teachers teaching the JCSP cohort manage the student profiling process in a uniform manner.

• Work on developing the literacy and numeracy strategy in junior cycle should continue and the policies that emerge from the review should inform the targets for improvement contained in the school’s DEIS plan and should identify the most effective manner in which the JCSP can be targeted as a vehicle in achieving them.

Post-evaluation meetings were held with the principal, deputy principal, JCSP co-ordinator and members of the JCSP teaching team at the conclusion of the evaluation when the draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation were presented and discussed.

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