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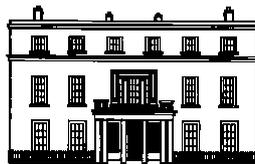
Department of Education and Skills

**Transition Year Programme Evaluation
REPORT**

**Catholic University School,
89 Lower Leeson Street, Dublin 2.**

Roll Number 60540V

Date of inspection: 20 and 21 April 2010



**A N R O I N N | D E P A R T M E N T O F
O I D E A C H A I S | E D U C A T I O N
A G U S S C I L E A N N A | A N D S K I L L S**

EVALUATION OF THE TRANSITION YEAR PROGRAMME

INTRODUCTION

This report has been written following an evaluation of the Transition Year (TY) programme in Catholic University School, Dublin. 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, the TY core-team, the TY co-ordinator and with a small group of students. The evaluation was conducted over two days during which the inspector liaised 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, deputy principal and the programme co-ordinator at the end of the evaluation period.

Catholic University School offers a six-year cycle in which participation in TY is encouraged for all students. There are currently four class groups following the programme. In its mission statement, the school recognises its responsibility to develop the full potential of each student, to engage the whole person, to foster excellence, and to pursue the objective that students become rounded, responsible adults who can make their way in the world. The board of management was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the report, and the response of the board will be found in the appendix of this report.

1 QUALITY OF PROGRAMME ORGANISATION

1.1 Whole school support

There is a whole-school approach to the implementation of the TY programme in the school. The school staff is kept well informed regarding the TY programme through formal meetings of TY teachers and through the notice board in the staffroom. It is recommended that a TY student notice board be put in place to further inform students and the school community regarding TY. There is a structured induction process for new teachers to the school. Through the school development planning process teachers have been up-skilled, the benefits of which were apparent at the time of the evaluation. It is praiseworthy that the TY timetable is viewed as a priority by senior management and is placed at the core of the school timetable. The various elements of the programme are appropriately timetabled.

Student achievement is celebrated by the whole-school community at the TY prize-giving night in May. This is very good. This event is well attended by students, parents and staff. The school yearbook highlights significant aspects of the TY programme through photographs and articles as well as celebrating student success and acknowledging prize winners. The school website and school newsletters also promote, support and celebrate TY on an ongoing basis.

1.2 Resources

The majority of teaching staff is appropriately assigned to teach the programme and teachers' skills and qualities are in the main well utilised in the implementation of TY, particularly in the provision of specific modules. Some outside personnel are also employed to teach such modules.

This provision adds variety to the curriculum. Staff development is critically important to any successful TY programme. Therefore, it is recommended that further whole staff continuing professional development (CPD) be pursued. For example, the school should consider availing of in-house expertise in TY provision and in information and communication technology (ICT) to further develop the skills of staff in these important areas.

There has been some upgrading of ICT provision since the whole school evaluation in 2007 and measures are in place for further enhancement of this provision. For example, broadband internet access has been installed in every classroom. However, it is recommended that ICT facilities be further improved so that access to these facilities is readily available to all teachers who will use them. ICT used appropriately in the classroom can be a very powerful methodology and can greatly enhance the student learning experience. A centralised database of TY resources should be placed on the school computer network as a support to TY teachers in planning for cross-curricular approaches to teaching TY.

1.3 Student selection and support

TY is an integral part of the school's six-year cycle as stated in the school's admissions policy. As a result, the vast majority of students participate in the TY programme with the encouragement and support of the school. Only in exceptional circumstances is a student allowed not to opt for TY. In this context, it is recommended that a specific TY policy be developed outlining its TY provision in a transparent way.

A very comprehensive guidance plan for TY has been developed. This plan emphasises the importance of a whole-school approach to guidance in laying the foundations for life-long career development and outlines many key areas including career exploration and subject choice. The guidance provided to students is appropriate to their needs and is a very good programme.

Students with additional needs are well supported. Those students with planning or organisational difficulties are provided with extra help as part of the study skills programme. Study skills are provided as an aid to all TY students which is a suitable and timely intervention for students at this stage in their learning cycle. Students with exemptions from Irish attend resource classes and individual arrangements are made for some students, as necessary. Small class groups are formed in Mathematics as an additional support and extra tuition in relevant subjects is provided to those who have not chosen a modern European language.

The current school calendar indicates that TY students return to school approximately one week after the school's September opening. This practice must cease. Circular M1/00 states that the integrity of the school year should not be compromised for TY students. TY students are required to attend school for a minimum of 167 days similar to all other students in the school. The school also currently operates a strategy of releasing TY students for a class period on Tuesday afternoons. This practice should also cease. TY students should receive their entitlement to a minimum of twenty-eight class contact hours per week as outlined in circular M29/95. While it is acknowledged that the school implemented the recommendation regarding the length of the school week highlighted in the whole school evaluation report (2008) for all other year groups, it is essential that this provision be afforded to all students and that the above recommendations are put in place without delay.

1.4 Home-school links

Dissemination of information on TY and communication with parents in relation to the programme are good. Parents of third-year students are invited to a TY programme information evening in April at which they are provided with an outline of the programme and are made aware of the nature and purpose of the TY programme. This meeting is followed up with a meeting for TY parents in September. As an additional support to parents and students, it is recommended that the practice of parents being invited to a meeting in advance of students making their final choice of subjects for Leaving Certificate be reinstated during the course of their TY year.

Senior management, the TY co-ordinator and the TY dean of discipline maintain close links with parents throughout the year. Parents are invited to significant events throughout the year, including the TY graduation night. Parents also support TY in the school in many ways, including helping with work experience placements and with many of the extra-curricular activities on offer in the school. During the TY parent-teacher meetings, parents receive useful information on their son's progress. It is also reported that teachers receive useful evaluative feedback from parents on students' TY experiences. To strengthen this process, it is recommended that consideration be given to having the student present at one of the two parent-teacher meetings convened in the course of the year. This would allow the student voice to be part of this process.

2 QUALITY OF PROGRAMME PLANNING AND CO-ORDINATION

2.1 Planning

A small TY core team consisting of the TY co-ordinator and the TY class tutors has been put in place. This was a recommendation made in the whole school evaluation report of 2007. Regular meetings of the team are convened to plan, monitor and evaluate the ongoing implementation of the programme. This is very good. The TY co-ordinator also meets with the TY dean on an ongoing basis to look after the welfare needs of students and to ensure student adherence to the school's code of behaviour.

The TY written programme provides a good overview of the programme for the year in question, together with individual subject and module plans. The aims of the school's TY programme are also clearly stated. The plan contains useful information on assessment, certification, evaluation and work experience. As the TY written programme is not fully in line with Department guidelines, it should be further developed to include a section on the organisational details of TY in the current year. This section should include student lists, main calendar features of TY, finances, lists of subjects and modules and details of each option block.

Individual subject plans examined are inconsistent in their adherence to the subject plan template for TY. The majority of TY subject plans are written up under the headings, aims, course content, teaching methods and assessment. Reference should also be made to the duration of each module, the course objectives, resources, links with other subjects and self-evaluation strategies. Each subject department should meet to review its TY planning and should develop an appropriate subject plan using the common template outlined in Department guidelines. In addition, the content of some subjects should be re-evaluated to ensure that there is a suitable balance between core academic material and innovative TY material. Senior management and teachers should make reference to Circular M1/00 in this regard. Reference should also be made to the website of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, www.ncca.ie/transitionunits, where useful resource material on the development of transition units may be found.

School self-evaluation measures for TY include input from senior management, the TY core team and from subject teachers who contribute their opinions on TY at a general staff meeting. As a consequence, new modules are introduced and options are modified to meet student needs. Further evaluative measures developed with parents and students would help to strengthen the overall school self-evaluation process for the TY programme. The school is encouraged to provide for the training of all staff in the awareness of TY aims and in writing the TY programme. It is recommended that the TY plan be developed and reviewed and that the whole staff be involved in this review.

2.2 Co-ordination

Formal TY programme coordinating structures are in place and are operating effectively. TY co-ordination duties are clearly documented as part of a post of responsibility agreed between the post holder and the board of management. The TY co-ordinator has been assigned the post of programme co-ordinator with three hours allocated in lieu of duties carried out. Senior management should refer to the circular PPT 17/02 where the suggested duties and conditions pertaining to this post are clearly laid out. Specific duties detailed include coordinating all TY activities and liaising with many individuals and departments, such as senior management, other post holders, the TY dean of discipline and TY class tutors. These duties are carried out very effectively. Communication with parents, senior management, teaching staff, students and the whole-school community is also very effective. The timetabling of a tutor lesson for each TY class group ensures regular contact between students and their class heads. The TY co-ordinator also holds the position of guidance counsellor and in this capacity has regular contact with TY students.

2.3 Curriculum

Students are provided with a broad and varied curriculum so that they can develop new skills and competences, build on their academic achievements and prepare for senior cycle and their future role in society. Activities outside the classroom are encouraged and supported by the school, as these activities are seen as a vital element of the TY programme. The needs, interests and abilities of students are prioritised. Project work, teamwork and group work have been successfully integrated into TY provision in the school through active student participation in, for example, the Get Up and Go Mini Company, the Young Social Innovators and the BT Young Scientist and Technology Exhibition. Involvement in the President's Award scheme (Gaisce) is very praiseworthy and is an important asset to any TY programme. It is noteworthy that there have been many student successes in these activities and this builds on student confidence and self-esteem in line with TY aims. The support and encouragement given to students to participate in out-of-school activities and competitions is praiseworthy.

Core subjects offer continuity from junior cycle and are allocated regular lesson periods throughout the week. Students study a core curriculum which includes Irish, English, Mathematics, a modern language, Religion, Career Guidance and Social Personal and Health Education (SPHE). Many optional Leaving Certificate subjects are sampled, some of which are timetabled on a ten-week modular basis. It is praiseworthy that a very large number of modules specifically designed for TY are offered to students as this affords great variety to the curriculum. On Tuesday afternoons, students may opt to partake in Drama, Art Craft and Design, Sports Science, Martial Arts or Technical Graphics. The timetable is structured so that students may

choose three of the above options in the course of the year. Some new subjects have also been introduced. Those who excel at Technical Graphics in TY are encouraged to choose this subject for Leaving Certificate. Important ICT skills are taught and consolidated through student participation in the European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL).

The uniqueness of the one-year TY experience, in which the main emphasis is on confidence-building and maturity, should underpin the school's TY curriculum. This was not the case in some subjects. Circular M1/00 states: 'A TY programme is not part of the Leaving Certificate programme and should not be seen as an opportunity for spending three years rather than two years studying Leaving Certificate material.' The issue of the over emphasis on the academic elements of Leaving Certificate courses in TY was identified in the whole school evaluation conducted in 2007. While some progress has been made, this issue needs to be addressed by senior management and TY teachers. Senior management is urged to prioritise this matter. The content of the TY programme should be reviewed on a regular basis to ensure that there is a suitable balance between core academic material and innovative TY material in line with Department guidelines. The current arrangement of the organisation of some class groups into ability streams should also be reconsidered. It is recommended that a flexible approach to the teaching and division of TY class groups be adopted.

Work experience provides a vocational element to the programme. Tasks undertaken in an adult working environment play an important part in the development of students' experiential learning and form an integral part of the TY learning experience in the school. Parents and students take responsibility for finding suitable work placements. Students are well prepared for work experience with support from the TY co-ordinator and school guidance service. Work experience is organised in two blocks, each of one week's duration. Students recalled the value of their experiences while meeting the inspector in the course of the evaluation. To enhance the student experience, it is recommended that each student is required to maintain a reflection journal which forms part of their TY portfolio. Some TY students carry out valuable voluntary work with the community as part of their social outreach commitment in TY. Consideration should be given to facilitating all students with the opportunity to spend one week in community service during TY. This provision would strengthen the social awareness element of TY while further promoting the school's ethos and mission.

3 QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

3.1 Planning and preparation

A range of lessons and modules were observed in the course of the evaluation and a written current plan was available for all subjects evaluated. The taught programme reflects, in the main, the school's plan for the programme. However, subject planning, as mentioned earlier in this report, is in need of review. Lessons were well planned with individual lesson plans available for some subjects. There was effective planning for resources with handouts, materials and practical and ICT equipment ready in advance of lessons. The varied methodologies observed and the good level of advance planning for lessons led to effective student learning.

3.2 Learning and teaching

The structure of lessons was good and the pace was appropriate to students' abilities as observed. Classroom management was effective. There was a good atmosphere in lessons and relationships

in the classroom were very good with student learning enhanced as a result. Students were afforded the opportunity to develop a multitude of skills in line with TY aims. For example, students gained confidence at communicating, at observing and at problem-solving and critical thinking skills were developed during some lessons. This is very good. During many lessons, teacher inputs were appropriately short, clear and concise. High expectations by teachers ensured that students were sufficiently challenged to maximise their potential.

A range of methodologies was employed by teachers and these were used appropriately in the delivery of lesson material. Best practice was observed where well chosen and well designed worksheets were given to students during lessons. The level at which the assigned work was pitched was appropriate for the majority of lessons. In some cases, the focus of lessons and the choice of resources were inappropriate, as there was a clear focus on content from the Leaving Certificate syllabus. While the quality of teaching and learning was good in such lessons, such material is only appropriate for use with fifth and sixth year students. Therefore, it is recommended that teachers make themselves fully aware of TY aims and subject departments should ensure that TY courses are designed in line with Department guidelines. Reference should be made to the publication *Transition Year Guidelines, Programmes for Schools*, which is available for download on the website of the Department, www.education.ie.

The board was used effectively to highlight key words, formulae, equations and problems in many lessons. ICT was used as an aid to student learning in some lessons. However, it is recommended that well-thought-out concise ICT strategies be used more widely as an aid to student learning. This would help to consolidate the learning process and to link more abstract classroom material to students' everyday lives. The planned more widespread availability of ICT resources will aid this process. It was recommended in the whole school evaluation report of 2008 that the integration of ICT into teaching and learning be developed. The development of ICT is of particular importance to student learning in TY and should receive due attention of senior management.

Students demonstrated positive attitudes to learning. However, the reorganisation of the physical environment in some lessons and activities would have helped to ensure better levels of participation by some students. The high quality of students' understanding was reflected in student questioning and in responses to questions. Very good use was made of various questioning strategies in lessons visited. Individual questions elicited specific responses while higher-order questions encouraged students to explain their reasoning which students did effectively. Evidence was provided in the course of the evaluation to indicate that students' understanding of material was of a high quality.

Activity-based learning formed part of many lessons and activities observed during the evaluation. Students used computers to carry out research tasks, learned how to test and improve their physical fitness, learned to build confidence through performance and learned various practical skills. It is suggested that further whole-class discussion and the production of a relevant worksheet would provide more focus for some research tasks. The attention to the development of students' personal and social education in some lessons was good and in line with TY aims.

Teachers were knowledgeable and enthusiastic and concepts were explained with clarity. Many lessons were presented with energy and enthusiasm by teachers. Affirmation of students was a key feature of many lessons observed. Good development of cross-curricular approaches was forged in some cases. The use of short and well-thought-out demonstrations using practical equipment was a very effective strategy in some lessons. Material was presented in an innovative way with effective links to everyday applications and to the historical development of the subject. This is particularly praiseworthy.

3.3 Assessment

Formative assessment strategies are good and it was clear that teachers were implementing skills and strategies acquired at recent in-service. Continuous assessment is in place with regular ongoing assessment of projects and assignments. There is good emphasis on homework assignments. Parents receive meaningful feedback on student progress by means of school reports sent home following examinations at the conclusion of each module. The criteria for assessment include comments on attainment and areas for improvement.

To strengthen the assessment process and to introduce a balance to the examination process, it is recommended that students be required to maintain a portfolio and that a portfolio interview be introduced as part of students' overall end-of-year assessment. For example, students may be required to choose what they consider to be some of their best work for this interview and interview criteria and marking should be clearly set out. In addition, consideration should be given to students maintaining an electronic portfolio, where photographic evidence of TY activities undertaken can be stored and presented. Reference should be made to the website www.slss.ie.

5 SUMMARY OF STRENGTHS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- There is a whole-school approach to the implementation of the TY programme in the school.
- Regular meetings of the TY core team are convened to plan, monitor and evaluate the programme.
- Formal TY programme co-ordinating structures are in place and are operating effectively.
- A very large number of modules specifically designed for TY are offered to students and this affords great variety to the curriculum.
- High expectations of teachers ensured that students were sufficiently challenged to maximise their potential.
- Teachers were knowledgeable and enthusiastic and concepts were explained with clarity. Many lessons were presented with energy and enthusiasm by teachers.
- Formative assessment strategies are good.

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

- It is recommended that TY students receive their entitlement to a minimum of twenty-eight class contact hours per week and should attend school for 167 days per year.
- The TY written programme should be developed and reviewed in line with Department guidelines.
- Each subject department should meet to review its TY planning and should develop an appropriate subject plan using the common template outlined in Department guidelines.
- The content of the TY programme should be reviewed on a regular basis to ensure that there is a suitable balance between core academic material and innovative TY material.
- It is recommended that a flexible approach to the teaching and division of TY class groups be adopted.
- The integration of ICT into teaching and learning should be developed, and should receive due attention of senior management.

- Portfolio interview should be introduced as part of students' overall end-of-year assessment.

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Appendix

School response to the report

Submitted by the Board of Management

Area 1: Observations on the content of the inspection report

The Board notes the very positive report on Transition Year that has been given in the Inspection and the Board would like to commend all of those involved, including the Principal, Deputy Principal and Transition Year Co-Ordinator for their work.

Area 2: Follow-up actions planned or undertaken since the completion of the inspection activity to implement the findings and recommendations of the inspection

The Board has asked the senior management and the teachers to consider how to further improve the teaching and learning environment for Transition Year students in the light of the recommendations of the report.