Programme Evaluation
LCVP
REPORT

Mayfield Community School
Mayfield, Cork
Roll Number: 91400F

Date of inspection: 10 December 2010
EVALUATION OF THE LEAVING CERTIFICATE VOCATIONAL PROGRAMME

INTRODUCTION

This report has been written following an evaluation of the LCVP in Mayfield Community School. 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, 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 coordinator 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 coordinator and the core team following the evaluation.

Mayfield Community School is a co-educational school which takes part in the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) action plan. The LCVP was introduced into Mayfield Community School in 1997. The LCVP is firmly established as an important programme in the school. All students in fifth year and in sixth year participate in the programme. 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.

1 QUALITY OF PROGRAMME ORGANISATION

1.1 Whole school support

The LCVP is managed and implemented by a core team which includes a teacher with significant experience of the programme. The team consists of teachers of Business Studies, Science, Mathematics, Engineering and Design and Communication Graphics (DCG). The school’s guidance counsellor also links into the programme through a guidance lesson which is scheduled for students once per week. All members of the LCVP team take link module classes. Teachers of modern languages also contribute to the delivery of the programme. Continuing professional development (CPD) has been supported by the senior management team and has been availed of by members of the core team. In particular, where members of the team are new to the programme, it is important that opportunities for further in-service education would be pursued. In addition, the deputy principal has significant experience of the programme and contributes to the work of the team. The appropriation of a wide range of subject expertise to support the programme is positive.

Due to staff mobility in the last number of years, there have been changes in the personnel deployed as members of the core team. Two members of the team have been deployed to teach the link modules for the first time. These teachers were chosen on the basis of their professional backgrounds and the career paths they had pursued prior to entering the teaching profession. This is worthwhile and should provide an additional and very useful perspective in the organisation of the programme in the coming years. The possibility of adding another member of staff to the core team to expand the skills base within the school may also be worth exploring as a means of ensuring consistency and capacity in the future.
Plans to develop an induction process for teachers of the LCVP are being advanced. Currently, the induction process involves support from senior management, the core team, and familiarisation with the LCVP plan and scheme of work. In addition, a PowerPoint presentation has been developed, along with a compact disk ‘subject pack’ which contains all relevant material, teaching resources and school policies. As a possible addition to the current PowerPoint presentation, it is suggested that reference to the specific learning outcomes of the programme might be included, along with the diagrammatic representation of the connection between the link modules and the Vocational Subject Groupings (VSGs) found on page 14 of the Programme Statement. This initiative speaks to the reflective nature of the LCVP team in reacting to the developing needs of the programme. As a further addition to these very worthwhile moves, it is recommended that specific support from the co-ordinator and core team in the area of portfolio items, portfolio deadlines and the recording of the completion of portfolio items should be included as an important element of induction for teachers new to the programme. This will ensure that all students and members of the core team have clarity and support regarding the demands of the programme and, in particular, the portfolio element.

Generally, teachers are aware of the LCVP and VSG teachers have been involved in supporting LCVP students in particular tasks in the past. Items regarding the LCVP have been included in staff meetings. The core team has also highlighted, to some VSG teachers, areas where students may seek guidance regarding activities linked to the programme. However, considerable scope remains for greater planned execution of the LCVP as an integrated cross-curricular programme. It is recommended that the LCVP team works towards heightening the awareness, at whole-school level, of the nature of the LCVP as an integrated programme. The school website link which the team has already proposed to achieve these aims is a very worthwhile move. Further development in this area could be advanced through, for example, the placing of an LCVP notice board in the staffroom. This could include a list of students alongside the VSGs in which they are participating, along with notes when events connected to the programme are taking place. The LCVP team has had opportunities to provide inputs to staff meetings in the past and it is suggested that regular announcements at such meetings of planned events would also serve as a means of highlighting cross-curricular opportunities for VSG teachers, and other teachers. Opportunities to brief staff regarding the aims and objectives of the LCVP and the centrality of cross-curricular work to its success could also be grasped through such inputs or separate presentations. Ultimately, such actions could serve as a foundation for concrete steps whereby cross-curricular links with subject departments could be identified and discussed and could ultimately feature in subject plans at points where these subjects could support LCVP students at particular stages in the year.

1.2 Resources

Senior management is very supportive and has a very good knowledge of the LCVP and has ensured that appropriate staffing and timetabling are in place to effect the running of a successful programme. Students in fifth year and in sixth year are provided with two lessons per week for link module classes and with one lesson for Guidance each week. Additional staffing is used by senior management to support the modern language module, as well as some of the subjects which are necessary for students to participate in the programme.

Students participate in Guidance lessons each week and the guidance counsellor maintains links with the LCVP team and with the overall programme. In particular, the guidance counsellor supports students in researching the career investigation element in their portfolio as well as in preparation for work experience. In addition, the guidance counsellor is involved in informing parents about the programme when students are entering fifth year. The LCVP plan notes the
guidance counsellor’s place in supporting the programme. It is very positive that these links have been established.

There is good access to information and communications technology (ICT) resources, with link module teachers prioritised if they wish to book an ICT room for part of their double lesson. This allows students to access ICT and the internet when they need to do so. Given the amount of time LCVP students may spend in the ICT rooms, it is recommended that teachers should look to expand the print-rich environment in these rooms, with a particular focus on the requirements of the LCVP. In particular, displays of the specific learning outcomes would be worthwhile, along with keywords and ideas, relevant acronyms, and displays of students’ work or LCVP events. Such material would be of benefit to all students, but particularly those who may have difficulties in literacy development and need some additional support in this area. Good work in the development of learning environments relevant to the LCVP was observed in teacher classrooms and the extension of these approaches to ICT rooms would consequently be consistent with already established good practice within the department.

1.3 Student selection and support

Students and parents are given timely and accurate information regarding the LCVP. A parents’ information evening is organised regarding subject choice for students moving from Transition Year (TY) to fifth year and is addressed by the guidance counsellor. The guidance counsellor is also available to discuss any concerns or queries parents may have about the programme. The home-school-community-liaison (HSCL) co-ordinator is available to advise and facilitate parents’ attendance at these information sessions. Parents are also provided with a booklet explaining the programme. These arrangements are all positive. It is suggested that a presentation by a member of the core LCVP team at the aforementioned parents’ night might serve to further highlight the programme for parents.

Students going into fifth year are informed regarding the programme through guidance lessons in TY and by their subject teachers. Students are further informed regarding the different elements of the programme upon entry to fifth year by their link module teachers. To add to these arrangements, it is suggested that it may be worthwhile to carefully explain the nature of the *ab initio* programme in a modern European language and the place of the VSGs in the programme both prior to entry and at the beginning of fifth year. This might be done to assuage any initial concerns or misunderstandings students might have about these two areas.

Learning support is provided for students on the basis of need and is student specific rather than LCVP specific. Support is available for students with additional educational needs. The school is conscious of the need for whole-school literacy supports to be provided by subject teachers and this is supported through CPD opportunities for teachers. English language-support lessons are also provided for students with English as an additional language (EAL). The school’s move towards wider use of whole-school literacy strategies should also prove beneficial in supporting these students.

A good level of awareness of the LCVP among students, prior to their entry to the programme, was evident during the evaluation. Students were very aware of the potential benefits to themselves of successful completion of the programme. In addition, they highlighted useful links the programme made between their school work and the world of work, as well as specific skills they had learned. During the interview with students, the potential to focus on particular elements of the programme during induction was raised. In particular, links to the VSGs may be worth
highlighting and exploring to a greater degree for the duration of the programme, where appropriate.

1.4  Home-school links

Parent-teacher meetings are organised for each year group once per year. These are used to inform parents of students’ progress. Very regular updates regarding students’ progress in the LCVP are also posted to parents along with, when necessary, updates regarding internal deadlines for portfolio items. Additional contacts may be made with students’ homes as circumstances demand. Students are provided with regular and useful feedback from their teachers regarding their progress.

A number of valuable links have been developed by the LCVP team with businesses and the local community. A local pharmaceutical company has provided invaluable support for students through its involvement in mock interviews, workshops, guest speakers and visits to its plant. In addition, the guidance counsellor regularly organises visits from local entrepreneurs and community organisations who will speak to students. Connections are then made to their work in the link modules. LCVP students have also participated in the Junior Achievement Programme with the support of the core team. All of these experiences are worthwhile. However, there is some scope for the range of speakers and visits by students to out-of-school sites to be expanded somewhat. It is therefore recommended that, in order to provide greater balance and breadth to the programme of activities, the school should expand its links with outside community and voluntary enterprises, education providers and businesses, in the specific context of the LCVP. The school is well-placed to achieve this, as such links were clearly evident through other areas of school life during the evaluation. A wider array of these links will help students by providing a selection of possibilities which are more directly relevant to the subjects they are studying as part of the overall programme.

2  QUALITY OF PROGRAMME PLANNING AND COORDINATION

2.1  Planning

A good written plan for the LCVP has been prepared by the core team. The plan lists the aims and objectives of the programme and includes information regarding its structure and management. Specific learning outcomes for the programme are also listed and these are linked to the termly plan. Resources and assessment details are included, along with arrangements regarding students’ work experience. It is suggested that the specific learning outcomes could also be linked to activities students undertake over the course of the year. Beyond this, the sharing of these plans, along with assessment criteria for students’ portfolio work, with students would be a worthwhile approach to adopt, conforming with the principles of assessment for learning. The proposed inclusion of the plan as a key element in the induction programme for teachers new to the programme is very worthwhile. Beyond this, and in light of discussions with the core team regarding the attendance and literacy difficulties of some students, it is suggested that the subject plan should also include explicit links to the DEIS planning process and its actions in these areas.

A very good level of collegiality and collaboration between teachers on the core team was evident during the evaluation. Formal meetings of the core team are held once per term this year and there are numerous informal meetings. In the past it has been possible for senior management to schedule more formal meetings, but timetabling constraints have made this difficult this year.
Senior management has examined this issue and is pursuing means whereby it can expand the time allocated for formal meetings of the team. It is recommended that senior management should continue with these efforts so that the team can avail of further opportunities to discuss both the organisation of activities and teachers’ practice. There is evidence that reflection and review form part of the ongoing interaction between members of the core team and with senior management. In addition, results in the certificate examinations are reviewed every year. The co-ordinator plans to introduce a formal questionnaire as a further development of the team’s evaluation procedures, to be distributed to selected teachers, parents and students. This is strongly encouraged. In addition, the use of focus groups of students could be worth pursuing as an alternative or parallel means of accessing students’ views on the activities being undertaken. Evaluation procedures should be formalised and noted as a key element of practice in the subject plan.

2.2 Coordination

The LCVP co-ordinator is a post-holder and has been co-ordinating the LCVP for two years. While the co-ordinator has attended a limited amount of formal CPD, there is significant internal support which he has availed of. The deputy principal has considerable experience of the programme through his involvement in the relevant support service. In addition, an experienced member of the LCVP team is supportive of his work and the co-ordinator has accessed material from the support service. Notwithstanding these very good sources of support, the co-ordinator’s plans to engage with further external CPD are strongly encouraged. The quality of programme co-ordination is good and the programme is well-structured and organised. There is good communication between the co-ordinator and senior management. The LCVP co-ordinator is involved in teaching the link modules since the beginning of this year. This is good practice.

Co-ordinating the LCVP involves carrying out a range of duties and activities including the planning and recording of students’ work experience, chairing meetings with the core team, the co-ordination of portfolio completion, collection and communication to the State Examinations Commission (SEC), and encouraging the sharing of experience within the core team. These duties are carried out effectively and the co-ordinator is focused on supporting the successful implementation of the programme.

Appropriate resources and facilities are available to support the co-ordinator in carrying out the duties which have been outlined. At present, the co-ordinator does not have a time allocation assigned to support the carrying out of his duties, as is recommended in the Programme Statement for the LCVP (p.58). It is recommended that opportunities to provide additional time for the co-ordinator should be explored by senior management, as far as are practicable within the constraints of available resources. In particular, this time could be used very effectively by the co-ordinator in supporting the completion of portfolio items by students, particularly where consistent absenteeism is an issue.

2.3 Curriculum

Students undergo an induction process at the beginning of fifth year. This includes an outline of the programme over the two years and the coursework involved. It is suggested that the PowerPoint presentation currently being adapted for teachers might be usefully adapted for students as well, focusing in particular on the role of the VSGs and on the specific learning outcomes which they will achieve as part of the programme. Following induction, a programme of activities and learning opportunities is provided. These activities form the basis of the various
reports and documents that populate students’ portfolios. In carrying out activities leading to the preparation of portfolio items, students also encounter much of the theoretical content of the course.

All core portfolio items are prepared by students and, of the optional items, a work experience diary and recorded interviews are submitted. Portfolio items are prepared in school under the supervision of the co-ordinator and the link modules teachers. Portfolio items are included as part of students’ assessments and reports home in fifth year and in sixth year. This is good practice. Portfolio items are stored on the school network, on students’ memory sticks and hardcopies are stored by the co-ordinator. In addition, backup copies are printed and teachers store students’ work on their own memory keys. These arrangements are comprehensive and constitute good practice. LCVP students carry out enterprise activities as part of the programme. Examples of enterprise activities undertaken by students have included participation in the Junior Achievement Programme, organising excursions and a charity raffle.

All students engage in a five-day period of work experience in March of fifth year as part of their studies. Students are informed about the requirement to participate in work experience in January and are provided with letters of introduction. They are expected to find a suitable placement based on their VSGs and career interests, where possible. This is linked to their work on a career investigation as part of their portfolio, again, where practicable. School management reports that this has become more challenging in the recent past due to the economic downturn. The co-ordinator contacts employers by phone during students’ work experience to ensure the initiative is running smoothly. It is recommended that the school should investigate the possibility of school staff visiting workplaces during the placement period. It is also recommended that, where telephone contact is made, students should also be spoken to so that a clear impression of their experiences can be formed. As part of the students’ work experiences, employers are requested to complete and return evaluation forms provided by the co-ordinator. This is good practice.

Arrangements for the provision of a language module are in place for those students who are not taking a modern European language, other than Irish and English, in the Leaving Certificate. These students attend one lesson per week throughout fifth year and sixth year in French. A full plan regarding this ab initio module in French was presented during the evaluation.

3 QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

3.1 Planning and preparation

Section 2.1 of this report refers to long-term planning for implementing the LCVP in the school. The classwork carried out in lessons visited reflected the objectives of the programme and was in keeping with planning documents. However, a significant challenge presented in the case of some class groups where there was a high level of persistent absenteeism, with a consequent impact on students’ learning and the development of their portfolio work. There is clear evidence that the core team recognises this as an issue and links with students’ year tutors and with their parents were regularly pursued. The possibility of discussing this problem, within the team, as it pertains to planning may also be worthwhile.

Medium-term planning was presented and appropriate resources were ready for use in lessons. Teachers’ lessons were well-prepared. In one instance, specific learning outcomes were clearly set out in a teacher’s planning. This was very good practice and should be emulated by all teachers of the link modules. Links to VSGs could also be highlighted in planning, where applicable. The
recording of the completion of portfolio items which was noted in one teacher’s planning, was also very worthwhile.

3.2 Learning and teaching

The standard of teaching observed during the evaluation ranged from good to very good. Lesson content included the completion of portfolio items, revision of the audio-visual element of the examination and an evaluation of a career investigation. Lessons were well-paced and there was an appropriate balance between teacher-led activities and students engaging in independent or semi-independent activities. Teachers frequently displayed an awareness of the need to scaffold student learning where it was appropriate to do so. Very good practice was observed where the learning objective for the lesson was delineated at the outset. In this context, teachers are encouraged to highlight links to relevant specific learning outcomes where students are undertaking activities which can be supported through their previous learning and knowledge. Lessons were clearly structured and pacing was managed well.

A range of resources was used in lessons including the television, DVD and photocopied resources. It is suggested that marking criteria for the portfolio should be shared with students, both as a distributed photocopy to be stored in their folders, and through the use of a data projector or overhead projector to guide their work during particular lessons. There was very good access to the ICT room and teachers used this effectively to support students’ learning. Students displayed good understanding of the use of ICT during lessons.

Classroom management was good or very good in all cases. A good relationship between teachers and students was evident in the lessons observed. Teachers affirmed students’ efforts. A number of students with English as an additional language (EAL) were present in lessons. Teachers were conscious of the need to support these students and expressed an interest in professional development in this area. It should be noted that a number of methods used by teachers during the evaluation to support students with difficulties in literacy development may also be useful in supporting the acquisition of academic language by EAL students. In addition, the website of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) at www.ncca.ie contains a number of very worthwhile supports for EAL students in post-primary schools.

A variety of classroom methodologies, appropriate to the LCVP, was observed in use in lessons. These included questioning of students, student writing and note-taking, the use of ICT and the provision of handouts, along with individual and group activities. The use of pair and group activities is particularly encouraged, within the context of the aims of the programme. Good practice in this area was observed where students were placed in pairs to expand their understanding of the career investigation and each member of the pair was given a specific task to complete with shared knowledge then being noted by the individuals. Students engaged diligently in all activities set during lessons.

Learning was evident in all lessons through students’ answering of teachers’ questions, engagement in tasks, completion of portfolio items and awareness of topics previously undertaken as part of the programme. A key challenge for the LCVP team is support for students with difficulties in literacy development. This was evident in the limited portfolio work undertaken by a small number of students. Members of the team frequently displayed elements of good practice in seeking to support students who faced these difficulties. In different lessons, good practice was noted where teachers highlighted for students the need to text-mark and to note keywords, provided writing models, organised guided reading and scaffolded students’ engagement with portfolio items through the provision of a questionnaire. All of this was most worthwhile. It is
recommended that the LCVP team should take the opportunity to discuss key literacy strategies which could be adopted to further enhance students’ ability to engage with the programme. This could form part of wider literacy initiatives at whole-school level. The adoption of further directed activities related to texts (DARTS) and teacher modelling of writing activities could all be useful in this regard. Further support in this endeavour can be accessed at www.jcspliteracy.ie.

3.3 Assessment

Formative assessment of students was frequently evident in lessons through the use of questioning in class, correction of students’ work and portfolios. Beyond this, the sharing of assessment criteria for their portfolio work with some students was very good practice and should be extended to all classes. This will support students in assessing and revising their own portfolio work, where appropriate, and should be included as policy in the programme plan.

A process approach to the writing of portfolio items was evident in a number of lessons where students’ drafts were corrected, with commentary, and a redrafting of their work was expected prior to its collection. This was good practice. As previously highlighted, in one instance, a high level of absenteeism in a class group had a clear impact on students’ completion of their portfolio work. This is a key challenge for the core team which they recognise and have approached diligently. Practices to support students towards completion of portfolio items have included a very structured approach to the completion of portfolio items, with clear deadlines. Other strategies suggested in this report, such as stronger links with VSG teachers and a wider range of visits in and out as part of the programme, could serve to increase student engagement still more.

A good system of formal assessment of and reporting on students’ progress is in place in Mayfield Community School. Regular class tests are organised and there are formal examinations in October, December, Easter and at the end of the school year. Students in sixth year also participate in mock examinations. Students’ portfolio work is included as a key component in formal assessments. Results are communicated to parents and to senior management and are posted on the school’s e-portal system.

Results in the certificate examinations are reviewed each year by the LCVP team. This is good practice. It is also very affirming of teachers’ work as there is a discernible and significant advance apparent in students’ achievement over the last number of years. This is something which should be acknowledged and celebrated as part of the team’s evaluation of its own work.

As part of the evaluation, students participating in the LCVP were interviewed by the inspector. They displayed a good awareness of the benefits of the programme including their use of ICT; links between school and working life; insight into the world of work; and the possibility of gaining additional CAO points.

4 SUMMARY OF STRENGTHS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- An LCVP co-ordinator and a core team are in place.
- A programme plan has been prepared and the programme is effectively co-ordinated.
- Plans to develop an induction programme for teachers of the LCVP are being advanced.
• Senior management is very supportive and has a very good knowledge of the LCVP.
• A full plan and details of the *ab initio* modules in French are in place.
• Good links have been developed with the guidance department and the guidance counsellor provides good support for the programme.
• A good to very good standard of teaching and learning was observed.
• Lessons were clearly structured and involved regular engagement with ICT.
• Awareness of the literacy difficulties faced by some students was evident and the use of particular methodologies to support these students was observed.
• Good classroom management and good relationships were evident.
• Significant advances in student achievement are evident in the last number of years.

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

• Specific support from the co-ordinator and core team to manage the student portfolio should be included as an important element of induction for teachers new to the programme.
• Senior management should explore opportunities to provide additional time for the co-ordination of the programme.
• The LCVP team should work towards heightening the awareness, at whole-school level, of the nature of the LCVP as an integrated programme. A strategy to heighten the integrated nature of the programme should be developed.
• Links with outside community and voluntary enterprises, education providers and businesses should be expanded.
• Greater use of and reference to the specific learning outcomes of the programme should be made in teacher planning, lessons and activities.
• Senior management is encouraged to expand opportunities for members of the core team to conduct formal meetings.