An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Programme Evaluation
Junior Certificate School Programme
REPORT

Coláiste na Trócaire Community College
Rathkeale, Co Limerick
Roll Number: 76061W

Date of inspection: 16 February 2011
EVALUATION OF THE JUNIOR CERTIFICATE SCHOOL PROGRAMME

INTRODUCTION

This report has been written following an evaluation of the Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP) in Coláiste na Trócaire 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, 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. As the mock examinations were in progress at the time of the evaluation, third-year classes were not inspected. 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, and the JCSP programme co-ordinator following the evaluation. The board of management was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the report; a response was not received from the board.

Coláiste na Trócaire Community College, Rathkeale is the sole second-level provider in its area and has had the JCSP since 2005. A measure of the success of its JCSP has been the high level of student retention to leaving certificate level. Since 2008 the school has had the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) as a follow-on programme available to JCSP students. The presence of both programmes on the school’s curriculum is an indicator of the school’s desire to meet the educational needs of all of its students. The JCSP evaluation follows a whole school evaluation (WSE) in October 2008 that made recommendations in relation to JCSP, learning and teaching, planning, and guidance. A guidance inspection in 2009 recommended that there be a greater balance between junior and senior cycle guidance.

A school context factor is the extent of non-attendance at school by young Travellers of school-going age in Rathkeale. With about thirty Traveller students available for entry to the school each year, there are just three Travellers in the school. The local visiting teacher for Travellers (VTT) stated that in her opinion the school was doing all it could to encourage Traveller students to enrol and that Travellers believe that the school is now more open and inclusive of Travellers.

1 QUALITY OF PROGRAMME ORGANISATION

1.1 Whole school support

The school and JCSP in particular are in a period of change following the recent appointments of a new principal and deputy principal. A new co-ordinator for JCSP has been appointed recently also. The principal shows commitment to the programme and has confidence in the co-ordinator and the teachers involved in the programme. The school sees the main objective of JCSP as developing students’ literacy and numeracy.

Communication regarding JCSP is fostered through dedicated notice boards for staff and for students. To further the status of JCSP reference should be made to it in the school’s prospectus.
The school intends that its website, which is the course of a re-design, will have a dedicated area for JCSP.

Given the manner in which the JCSP is organised the majority of teachers have JCSP students in their classes and therefore many aspects of JCSP have a whole-school impact. JCSP is supported by the school’s whole-school draft literacy policy and a whole-school numeracy policy is in the process of being developed. The development of these policies is part of a scheme-wide initiative of Co Limerick VEC and both policies have the potential to support the emphasis of the JCSP on the development of students’ literacy and numeracy.

Induction of new JCSP teachers is mainly carried out by the JCSP Support Service. The school’s experience of JCSP should be used to a greater extent in inducting teachers new to JCSP in the organisational and teaching and learning practices of JCSP.

JCSP is supported by whole-school planning activities that currently include workgroups in several areas, including ICT, literacy, extra-curricular activities, and homework. School management is taking a strategic approach to whole-school planning. It anticipates using the additional time that is becoming available as a result of the Croke Park agreement to further develop whole-school planning. As part of this strategy management plans to build staff planning capacity through making use of available continuing professional development (CPD) resources, including possible participation by staff members in a third-level planning diploma programme. Among the outcomes of planning activities to date are draft policies on literacy and on homework. An example of very good practice is the school’s proposed self-evaluation of its homework practices, which will involve parents, students, and teachers.

1.2 Resources

Good resources are available for JCSP including a dedicated JCSP room that also serves as a small classroom. The school is making very good use of resources supplied by the JCSP support service, particularly in the area of mathematics.

The school has an additional teaching time allocation from the Department of Education and Skills of 0.5 of a whole-time equivalent (WTE) in respect of JCSP. The increase to two hours in the allocation of time for coordination, immediately following the evaluation, will be beneficial to the programme; there is however a need to have greater evidence of how the Department’s allocation in support of the programme is used.

Under the direction of school management the schools’ co-ordinator for ICT is planning a major strategic development of the school’s information and communication technology (ICT) system. This will increase further the availability of support for JCSP students.

Along with its draft whole-school literacy policy, the school is currently engaged in the selection of additional reading material for its JCSP students. This is evidence of the school’s support of the key aim of JCSP in the development of students’ reading habits. This key aim should continue to be a central focus of the school’s JCSP and should be reflected in its literacy policy.

The school keeps very good records of CPD undertaken by individual teachers and whole-school CPD. It is important that the extensive whole-school and individual CPD that is being undertaken by school staff is closely linked to the school’s needs and that it leads to measurable impacts on teaching and learning. To achieve this, the school should develop a CPD strategy to support it in meeting its priority needs as determined through its whole-school planning process. The school
should further develop the practice that has commenced at a whole-school level of requiring teachers to give feedback to their colleagues on external CPD undertaken and extend it to subject-specific CPD undertaken.

In the case of the whole-school JCSP in-service that is planned for later this year, its benefits should be maximised by each subject department meeting to develop action plans that will apply the learning from that in-service.

1.3 Student selection and support

As part of its enrolment strategy the school has developed very close relationships with its feeder primary schools that involve regular visits by school staff. Some teachers from the school give taster classes to students in the primary schools. There is a paired reading programme in the primary schools that is carried out by Transition Year students. While their low take up of education is a matter of concern, the school is happy that it is doing as much as it can to secure the enrolment of Traveller students. The school is planning to invite Traveller parents to a dedicated open night. Because of impending changes with regard to the Visiting Teacher Service for Travellers, the school’s strategy is to form direct links between it and Traveller parents.

The school has a detailed and careful selection process for JCSP students. The selection criteria are documented in the school’s JCSP policy document. This is very good practice. The school also shows very good practice in its provision for review of students’ participation in JCSP. This provision for review recognises that the key criterion for a student’s participation in JCSP should be that JCSP is meeting a need that would not otherwise be met.

Almost all school support for JCSP students is part of the school’s overall student support structures. It is evident from documentation supplied and discussion with the teachers that the school is committed to supporting first-year students during the transition from primary school through fostering links with primary schools and allowing students to become familiar with Coláiste na Trócaire before entry. The transfer programme includes a comprehensive range of activities that begin in primary school and continue through first year. This is very good practice and it is clear that students benefit from it.

Under the leadership of school management the school has a strong focus on academic attainment by students of which JCSP is a key element. This is supported by the provision of supervised study facilities in the evening, on Saturdays, and during holiday time.

A significant feature of the school is the quantum of resources that is allocated to the care of students. As well as junior cycle and senior cycle care teams that meet once each week for one class period, there is also a school-support team that meets for a double-class period each week. In addition the special-needs team meets weekly. The school-support team has a purely pastoral role and the care teams have disciplinary and academic roles as well as a care role. The care teams are further sharpening their focus on students’ academic progress through the inception of periodic reviews of the academic progress of each student. In allocating staff resources for further developing the planning and coordination of JCSP it may be necessary for the school to review its care structures and the resources that are used for them to ensure that functions are not duplicated.

Several of the JCSP students have special educational needs and come within the remit of the school’s special-education department. From discussion with the co-ordinator of the special-education department and a review of documentation it is clear that support of students is well organised and includes very good information sharing when students are transferring to second-
Evidence was also seen of very good planning and record keeping in respect of students with special education needs. Additional support given to students is very well planned.

The school’s special-education-needs plan gives clear information on many aspects of the school’s special-education provision. It is noted that the school has plans to develop this further into a special-education policy that describes how the Department operates in respect of individual students and that gives information on the support being given to students.

The recommendation in the school’s WSE report regarding the formation of a whole-school guidance planning group that would meet on a regular basis should be acted on at the earliest opportunity. The school has plans to further develop the draft guidance plan and to bring it before the board of management. As the school’s guidance programme is further developed, there should be greater provision of guidance in junior cycle and the development of a dedicated guidance programme for JCSP students, which should be documented in the JCSP plan.

1.4 Home-school links

The school has high-quality systems for monitoring students’ attendance. In addition the students’ journal is well used to give students positive feedback and to keep parents informed on students’ progress. Good school-home communication is also supported by the school’s newsletter.

The school reports issued to students’ parents are of the standard format. As the school develops further its links with parents the school report format should be examined so as to ensure that the information that parents receive on the progress of their children is as clear and useful as possible. This could be achieved through including information in reports parents on what their children need to do in order to achieve better. Reports should also state what the parents and the school can do to help students to achieve.

JCSP postcards are used regularly within the JCSP to convey information on programme activities to students’ homes. This practice should be reviewed and the JCSP postcards should be used solely to convey information to parents on students’ achievements. In this way JCSP postcards will become associated with good news on their children’s achievements.

Students’ parents have come to the school for a Christmas celebration that was planned by the JCSP students and the school has plans for a greater parental involvement in the programme. It is planning to invite parents to the annual ceremony for presenting JCSP profiles. This is very good practice.

2 QUALITY OF PROGRAMME PLANNING AND COORDINATION

2.1 Planning

A feature of the school’s class organisation for JCSP is the mixed-ability nature of all junior cycle class groups. Planning for JCSP takes place in the context of the school’s whole-school planning and self-evaluation processes. Planning for the JCSP each year should be carried out by a planning group that should include the principal or deputy principal, the JCSP co-ordinator, and the special needs co-ordinator and/or guidance counsellor.

The school’s JCSP planning file shows very good practice in including JCSP subject plans for each year. This allows for comparisons to be made at a programme level between the approaches
being taken in different subjects. It also supports a concentration on teaching and learning in JCSP subjects at a programme level. As part of the JCSP planning process the school should have as a target to have common approaches to teaching and learning within subjects and between subjects.

A JCSP planning meeting should be held early in each school year to decide on the profiling statements that are to be completed by individual students in each year group. As well as some subject-specific statements, some cross-curricular statements should be selected whose completion could be shared between subject teachers. At least one other meeting, and preferably two, should be held each year to review the statements being followed by students and to award completed statements to students at the end of third year.

The JCSP co-ordinator has carried out very good work in drawing up a JCSP policy and a plan for further development of JCSP. The documents are evidence of considerable thought and effort. In particular the plan reflects a continual evaluation of the programme. To develop JCSP planning further both documents should be drawn together as the school’s JCSP plan. The JCSP programme-planning group or the JCSP support group should take responsibility for this work. As well as the school policies relevant to JCSP the plan should contain policies or plans that are adapted for JCSP, such as a JCSP guidance plan. The plan should also include an outline schedule for the school’s JCSP year. Having a comprehensive plan will facilitate sharing of information among the staff involved and through that further development of JCSP as the needs of the JCSP student group change.

The school is planning to have regular informal reviews of its JCSP. This is good practice and where possible staff, students, and parents should be involved in the review. The school sees students’ participation in JCSP as having led to a positive rapport between staff and students. It has also led to increased self-confidence and self-esteem on the part of students and has had an impact on students’ academic attainment.

In their interview during the evaluation, JCSP students stated that for them JCSP meant getting help and teachers breaking down difficult material into easy steps. They most like the fact that they are in a small group and can say what they want to say. There is nothing about JCSP that they don’t like. They like reading and can see that their reading and spelling has been improved.

The school reports that the retention rate to leaving certificate level of JCSP students is very high and their senior cycle outcomes are good.

The function of students’ JCSP folders needs to be clarified within the school’s JCSP. These should be used by students to keep examples of their good work and achievements of which they are proud. It should serve as a reminder to them of that work and the achievement reflected in it.

2.2 Coordination

The JCSP co-ordinator, who is in that position since September 2010, is fully committed to the role and carries it out in a committed and diligent manner. An indication of her commitment to that role is the quantity of continuing professional development that has been undertaken by her since her appointment. A role description together with an agreed list of duties has recently been prepared in respect of the JCSP co-ordinator. To further the development of JCSP student profiling should be further developed so that it takes place in all years, and meetings should be held of JCSP teaching teams.
As the JCSP co-ordinator is currently carrying out that role without the assistance of a support team, the school is planning to appoint such a team at the earliest possible opportunity. This team should meet regularly. It should have teaching and learning and student achievement at the core of its role. One way in which this might be done is through having representative of the JCSP teaching team for each year on the team. It is recognised that this may not be possible in the short term. Consideration should be given to having the guidance counsellor, the school’s programme co-ordinator, and the learning-support co-ordinator on the support team or available to meet the team from time to time.

2.3 Curriculum

The school’s JCSP policy document shows good practice in including the curriculum offered to JCSP students. The JCSP curriculum to be included in the JCSP plan should indicate the modifications made for individual students and the reasons for those modifications.

As part of the school’s emphasis on literacy and numeracy the mathematics teachers are focusing on the literacy aspects of the new Project Mathematics curriculum in their teaching. This is good practice and each subject department in its planning should take account of the need to develop students’ literacy and numeracy. Students’ personal and social development is specifically addressed through the work of the JCSP co-ordinator who meets each of the JCSP class groups on a weekly basis. At these meetings personal and social development statements are worked on by students.

The school has been involved in many JCSP initiatives that have been evaluated by the school. This is good practice.

3 QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

3.1 Planning and preparation

Each lesson was well planned and in cases where planning was of a very high quality opportunities were available for high levels of student participation. A feature of the planning and preparation of lessons was the extent to which very good use was made of JCSP materials. From an examination of the subject planning documentation it is evident that profiling statements are being used in all subjects. There is a mixed level of detail in the subject plans; planning for JCSP at a subject level varies from lists of topics to be covered to more detailed planning that makes use of learning objectives. Making use of the learning objectives included in subject syllabuses in drawing up JCSP subject plans is good practice. As well as outlining the topics to be taught, subject plans should also include teaching methodologies, provision for differentiation, and information on assessment.

3.2 Learning and teaching

Teaching and learning in the classes visited was good or very good in all cases. Each lesson was well introduced and in some lessons the lesson objectives were on the board and were used in introducing the lesson. Learning objectives should be used explicitly in the introduction of each lesson and also be referred to during lessons and at the end of lessons for summarising and assessment. A feature of each lesson was the good use being made of keywords to help students’ learning. They were on display in many classrooms. In one case keywords were used at the end of the lesson in summarising the lesson.
There was a good pace to most lessons and each lesson was well structured with a range of student activities taking place. Overall JCSP methodologies were well used in lessons. In all lessons students were given individual attention. In some lessons there was scope for greater student participation. This could take place for example by the teacher speaking for less of the time or by asking students to explain what it was they were learning or through setting small tasks for students to perform in small groups.

Some lessons would have benefited from a greater extent of questioning of students. In particular, different question types could have been used, for example open questions and pausing after asking the question before requesting a student to answer. Information and communication technology (ICT) was used to students’ benefit in several lessons. In some lessons the good practice was seen of effectively summarising students’ learning at the conclusion of the lesson. The laboratory lesson observed showed good emphasis on safety and proper procedures and precautions. Students in all classes were attentive and engaged at all times. While there were very good student-teacher relationships evident in each lesson, it was noticeable in the case of one lesson that participation by boys in the lesson was noticeably less than that of girls.

It was evident in all lessons that students were learning. This was clear from students’ general engagement, the questions that they asked, and the answers they gave to questions.

As well as embracing JCSP methodologies in the JCSP lessons, JCSP teaching and learning methodologies have influenced the teaching of other teachers throughout the school. This has partly been influenced by a whole-staff presentation on differentiation given by the JCSP co-ordinator.

3.3 Assessment

Students’ work was examined by the teacher during each lesson. Their written work was checked regularly in all classes observed. The good practice of giving students feedback and advice as to how they could improve was seen in some lessons.

In their interview students stated that they had been involved in deciding on statements and in deciding on the achievement of learning targets. These are good practices that are core elements of JCSP.

It was evident in all lessons that teachers had high expectations for their students. Teachers are commended on this. Profiling of students takes place in first year and in third year. Profiling is not carried out in respect of the second year students. However it is planned that it will be carried out from September.

4 SUMMARY OF STRENGTHS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The school has a detailed and careful selection process for JCSP students with selection criteria documented in the school’s JCSP policy document.
- The school is committed to supporting first-year students during the transition from primary school.
The school’s practice of including JCSP subject plans for each year in its JCSP planning file supports a concentration on teaching and learning in JCSP subjects at a programme level.

Considerable thought and effort has been put into drawing up a JCSP policy and a plan for further development of JCSP by the JCSP co-ordinator.

Students find that being in JCSP helps them in understanding difficult material and they can see that their reading and spelling has been improved.

The JCSP co-ordinator carries out the role in a committed and diligent manner.

Each lesson was well planned.

Teaching and learning in the classes visited was good or very good in all cases.

It was evident in all lessons that students were learning.

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

- The recommendation in the school’s WSE report regarding the formation of a whole-school guidance planning group that would meet on a regular basis should be acted on at the earliest opportunity.

- The following steps should be taken by the school in relation to the organisation of its JCSP: the JCSP plan and policy should be developed further; student profiling should take place in all years; meetings should be held of JCSP teaching teams; and a JCSP planning meeting should take place early in each school year, followed by profiling meetings during the year.

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