An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection of Guidance
REPORT

Presentation Secondary School
Thurles, County Tipperary
Roll number: 65460C

Date of inspection: 30 April 2010
REPORT ON THE QUALITY OF PROVISION IN GUIDANCE

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Presentation Secondary School, Thurles. It presents the findings of an evaluation of the quality of provision in Guidance and makes recommendations for the further development of Guidance in the school. The evaluation was conducted over one day during which the inspector visited classrooms, viewed guidance facilities, interacted with students, held discussions with teachers and reviewed school planning documentation. Following the evaluation visit, the inspector provided oral feedback on the outcomes of the evaluation to the principal and guidance counsellor. The board of management of the school 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.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

Presentation Secondary School, Thurles is Catholic voluntary secondary girls’ school situated close to the centre of the town. It caters for the educational needs of six hundred students from the town and from a wide catchment area comprising thirty-four primary schools. The number of students enrolled continues to rise. An addition to the school was officially opened in 2010, which, in the process of providing extra accommodation, linked successfully two older sections of the buildings. The school is very well maintained and decorated.

The ex-quota allocation for Guidance by the Department of Education and Skills is twenty-four hours per week. In accordance with Circular PPT12/05, this will rise to 28 hours per week for the school year beginning in September 2010. The allocation is used efficiently in the provision of an excellent guidance programme. There is clear evidence of good communication and collaboration between the guidance department and other staff, including senior management and this collaboration enables ongoing formal and informal communication. Examples include the attendance by the guidance counsellor at the weekly meetings of the care team, the whole-school guidance planning team and ongoing and substantial work between the guidance department and the special educational needs department. Liaison with the parish is facilitated by the regular attendance of a curate who is chaplain to the school on a part-time, voluntary basis and who works closely with staff in support of students and in arrangements for liturgical celebrations.

Communication between the guidance department and staff is ongoing and effective. Participation by the guidance department in teams such as the crisis response team and the middle-management team ensures continuous engagement with school processes and, coupled with a strong element of self-review, ensures a process of ongoing improvement. This is good practice.
A system of academic monitors has been established in the school through which small groups of sixth-year students are monitored by responsible teachers. This interesting development establishes a clear link between the supports provided and their outcomes, both personal and academic, for students. The monitoring system is also closely linked to the school’s pastoral structure of year heads and class tutors which, in turn, is closely linked to the guidance department. The systems operate discreetly and referrals to the guidance department and to outside agencies are managed in appropriate confidence. In addition, inter-agency collaboration has been established in Thurles through the Thurles Inter-Agency Forum that has met regularly since the latter half of 2009, having been established under the Agenda for Children’s Services of the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs. The Forum brings together not only schools but also local and national agencies, and professionals with educational, family and youth support responsibilities such as the Health Service Executive (HSE) and the National Education Welfare Board. This is very good collaborative practice.

The facilities for Guidance are good. A spacious office is centrally located in the school. The office is accessible in reasonable confidence while maintaining the integrity of the guidance counsellor. The office is suited to the practice of counselling and is equipped with the requisite electronic and office technology.

Guidance lessons are timetabled for the school’s computer room. This is clearly advantageous to the delivery of the guidance programme, enabling students’ ready access to information. The value of such access is recognised by the school in its arrangements for supervised use of the computer facilities by students during lunchtime and after school.

Timetable provision for Guidance is appropriate and balanced, consisting of planned intermittent inputs into all year groups and timetabled contact with the Transition Year (TY), Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) and Leaving Certificate classes. Similarly, an appropriate balance has been achieved between guidance department contacts with class groups, with smaller, more specialised groups and with individual students. These interventions are well managed. Subsequent appointments, made either through students’ self-referrals or at the suggestion of staff members, are similarly well managed using a standard referral system.

**Planning and Preparation**

Guidance planning is of the highest standard, and is in keeping with and facilitates the implementation of the school’s mission to nurture and encourage personal development. Both the documentation and the content of the documents show clear understanding of the planning process. The staff handbook, for example, defines the roles and responsibilities of the year head, class tutor and other staff members with specific support roles. A guidance planning team meets at regular intervals throughout the year and comprises the guidance counsellor, senior management, a year head and programme co-ordinators. The team is a formally structured task group as part of school development planning. It is recommended that, in view of the role of the social, personal and health education (SPHE) department in the delivery of elements of the curricular guidance programme that are common to SPHE, a member of that department be included in the whole-school guidance planning team. Good use has been made of the available planning resources such as those on the websites of the Department and of the National Centre for Guidance in Education (NCGE). The guidance department plan is an integral part of the whole-school guidance plan, which is, itself, integral to the school plan. Guidance inputs into programmes such as TY and LCA are clear and comprehensive.
There is clear evidence of ongoing and significant participation by the guidance department in most aspects of the life of the school in collaboration with staff and management. Examples of such participation include the transition process from primary schools, collaboration with the school-development planning co-ordinator and the timetable planner, and communication with and the provision of information to parents.

A current planning priority is the employment of an additional qualified guidance counsellor so that the added ex-quota allocation will be used fully for Guidance. Plans for this are at an advanced stage. Also well advanced are plans for the establishment of a guidance-planning group, comprising representatives of staff, students and parents. The inclusion of students and parents in the planning process is in keeping with the Education Act 1998 and is evident in the school’s structures such as the parents’ council and the students’ council, both of which are consulted regularly and have significant advisory and evaluative roles in the school. The guidance programme is evaluated regularly by students as an integral component of the programme and, in conjunction with ongoing self-review by guidance staff, leads to continuous development and improvement. A similar process obtains among staff through weekly meetings of a curriculum review group that monitors educational provision and proposes changes to the general programme by making best use of available resources. An example of this process is the provision of a course for students on the seven habits of effective teenagers. Documents seen in the course of the inspection record considerable progress in reviewing the needs of the school and in proposing the introduction of the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) in 2011. The documents also attest to the value of structured approaches to the design and implementation of plans. It is a positive feature of planning that support for students has become a locus of interest in the school’s consideration of its practices in teaching and learning. This was observed in guidance department planning and, particularly, in the planning of the special educational needs department. The inclusion of all students’ needs in the remit of the additional educational needs department is of particular note.

The inclusion of continuing professional development (CPD) as a core element of planning is in keeping with best practice. It is clear that an ethos has been developed in which CPD is valued, encouraged and facilitated at all levels. For the guidance department, this includes active membership of the regional branch of the Institute of Guidance Counsellors (IGC) and participation in its CPD activities, including professional counselling support. Other examples include the training of senior students through the Meitheal organisation as mentors to first-year students, and staff training through Kilkenny Education Centre in information and communication technology (ICT) skills, managing classroom behaviour and approaches to literacy. The school is an active participant in programmes of educational development and is currently involved in the national pilot programme for the induction of teachers through which established teachers become mentors to newly qualified colleagues.

The school’s links to the wider community are extensive and some have been referred to above. These links are an effective extension of the educational and personal supports available to students through the guidance department and other school supports. They facilitate students whose work experience in TY necessitates engagement with local employers and the arrangement of visitors to the school on matters of educational interest such as local politics. It is clear that collaboration among staff is a core component of such arrangements and enables guidance department links with local and regional educational providers.
TEACHING AND LEARNING

The main aim of the lesson observed was to record students’ evaluation of the guidance programme. Although this was the case, very good practice was observed in differentiating the needs of students and in responding to those needs. Guidance lessons are timetabled for one of the school’s computer rooms and provision is made for the use of other spaces when appropriate, as, for instance, when presentations are made by visiting speakers. This arrangement is an example of the efficacy of short-term planning and of its place in the whole-school guidance planning, having come about as a result of discussions with senior management regarding guidance department needs.

The lesson was well planned and carried out. Materials were to hand, including an electronic presentation that was clear and informative. The presentation also demonstrated an appreciation of the balance between personal, educational and vocational guidance and the roles of other staff in supporting students as part of the whole-school guidance programme. Classroom procedures, such as a roll call and announcements, were well established and enabled a rapid engagement by students with the content of the lesson. The faultless integration of ICT was exemplified by its use throughout the lesson and included a preview of the lesson, presented by means of a data projector, and the completion by students of an electronic guidance-programme evaluation form.

Students were engaged throughout the lesson. A good relationship had been established with the class and it was a notable feature of interactions that not only were students identified by name but that the inclusive ‘we’ was also used regularly, as in, “We look for your feedback”. Engagement was also maintained by the variety of methods used, including the electronic presentation, clear spoken instructions to students, individual student work at computer workstations and the formation of a small group of students whose interest lay in pursuing courses in Dublin. Students were well informed and were familiar with online resources such as Qualifax, Career Directions and Careers Portal. The information imparted during the lesson was accurate and current.

ASSESSMENT

The assessment of each new cohort of students is carried out by the special educational needs department beginning in early September. This comprises the assessment of general ability, literacy and numeracy and precedes further diagnostic assessment of students provisionally identified as having additional educational needs. The school is currently considering the use of a more recently standardised test of general ability following a review of assessment procedures. This is good practice. It is suggested that the administration of such tests prior to students’ entry to the school would assist in decision-making regarding the composition of mixed-ability classes.

An assessment of students’ aptitudes is carried out by the guidance department while students are in the early stages of the senior cycle. A range of interest inventories, including web-based instruments associated with, for example, the Qualifax and Careers Portal websites, is used throughout the guidance programme to inform and to clarify students’ decisions. The procedures used are in accord with good practice. The documentation of the process is of a high standard, consistent with similar standards in other documentation of guidance procedures and practices such as the records of meetings with staff and with students, and documents used to track the initial destinations of students after the Leaving Certificate examination.
SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- Guidance provision is of a very high standard.
- Collaboration among those with specific roles in support of students is ongoing and substantial.
- Structures are in place that enable an effective combination of formal and informal supports for students.
- Guidance planning at department level and at the whole-school level is effective and very well documented.
- Guidance department involvement in the school’s processes and systems is in keeping with and facilitates the school’s mission.
- Supports for students extend beyond the school and involve local social-care, professional and business interests.

As a means of building on these strengths, the following key recommendation is made:

- It is recommended that, in view of its importance in the delivery of shared elements of the curricular guidance programme, a representative of the SPHE department participates in the whole-school guidance planning team.

Post-evaluation meetings were held with the guidance counsellor and with the principal at the conclusion of the evaluation when the draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation were presented and discussed.

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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

We are happy that a full and thorough Inspection was conducted and the report is an accurate reflection of the Guidance practice in our school.

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 Co-ordinator of SPHE programme is now a member of the Guidance planning group. SPHE teachers are actively involved in school guidance.