Subject Inspection of Guidance
REPORT

Scoil Mhuire Gan Smál
Blarney, County Cork
Roll number: 62090D

Date of inspection: 3 October 2006
Date of issue of report: 22 February 2007
SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Scoil Mhuire Gan Smál, Blarney. 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 on the findings and recommendations of the report; the board chose to accept the report without response.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

Scoil Mhuire Gan Smál is a Catholic voluntary secondary school located on the outskirts of Blarney. The school has a large catchment area extending from the edge of Cork city, approximately five miles away, to Berrings in the west. The school was founded under unitary management in 1952. It came subsequently under the trusteeship of the Irish Sisters of Charity. Since 1994 the school has been in the trusteeship of the Diocese of Cloyne.

The school has an allocation of seventeen hours for Guidance on the basis of the September 2005 enrolment. The current enrolment of 418 students will entitle the school to the same allocation of hours in the 2007-2008 school year. One qualified guidance counsellor is currently employed as a full-time teacher and is timetabled for sixteen hours of Guidance, the remaining hours being timetabled for Social, Personal and Health Education and another subject. Of the available Guidance hours, one session per week is devoted to each of the two fourth year (Transition Year Programme) classes. The remainder are used for individual and group work and for classroom Guidance by arrangement with subject teachers. It is recommended that provision be made for the use, for Guidance purposes, of the full seventeen hours in the 2007-2008 school year.

It was noted that the current timetabling arrangements fall forty-five minutes short of what is required to ensure that all students have access to twenty-eight class contact hours. The school indicated that it would be addressing this matter and making adjustment to the timetable for future years.

An office has been allocated for the use of the guidance counsellor. The office is well located in an area which is accessible yet unobtrusive, and is equipped with furniture suited to counselling, office administration and secure storage. A computer, with internet access and printer, and a telephone have been installed. The guidance library is divided between the guidance counsellor’s office and the school library and contains a range of materials freely available to students. The display of posters and other Guidance-related materials on notice boards throughout the school is commended.
Student may access digitally stored information in the guidance’s office or in the well equipped information and communication technology room. Access to Qualifax and other Guidance-related information is usually arranged by the guidance counsellor in consultation with the information technology manager.

Links with others involved in student support and guidance are maintained on an informal level. The advantages of clear, formalised procedures and practices have been demonstrated in the school’s excellent responses to recent critical incidents. Close cooperation among staff is evident in the school’s responses at all levels, personal, educational and administrative, and demonstrates its adherence to its stated values as a Catholic school.

Links with management are continual and informal. Middle-management meetings are held on an ad hoc basis. It is noted that the code of behaviour is clear although it contains little reference to the supports available to students in difficulty. It is suggested that, in reviewing the code, the supports available to students might be elaborated upon in the context of the positive promotion of responsible behaviour.

Referrals to the guidance counsellor are made on an ongoing basis through the principal and the year head system, by informal contact with subject teachers and by student self-referral.

It is noted that a decision was made by the school that this inspection would proceed despite the intervention of a critical incident whose repercussions were still being catered for. It is indicative of the efficacy of the school’s response that the agreed procedures had had a calming effect in a time of trouble.

**PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

The school has engaged with the School Development Planning Initiative (SDPI) and is in the initial stages of whole-school guidance planning. Following a recent workshop a decision was made to set up a small guidance planning and student support task group. A number of interested staff have been identified. It is recommended that the group would comprise staff involved in Guidance, Special Educational Needs and chaplaincy and that strong channels of communication be maintained with senior and middle management. The very good work of the school in support of students would be reinforced by bringing some formality to the relatively informal structures. It is suggested that the recording of decisions taken at meetings by the use of simple agendas and minutes would be an effective means of advancing the planning process. Recent documents published by the SDPI ( [www.sdpi.ie](http://www.sdpi.ie) ) on guidance planning will prove useful as will those to be found at [http://www.ncge.ie/documents/Guide_Counselling.pdf](http://www.ncge.ie/documents/Guide_Counselling.pdf). Similarly, [Guidelines for second-level schools on the implications of Section 9(c) of the Education Act (1998), relating to students' access to appropriate guidance](http://www.education.ie/servlet/blobservlet/review_guidance_) published in 2005 and the recent report on the Review of Guidance, available at [http://www.education.ie/servlet/blobServlet/review_guidance_](http://www.education.ie/servlet/blobServlet/review_guidance_), both published by the Inspectorate of the Department of Education and Science, should prove useful.

The guidance counsellor has devised a comprehensive personal plan and programme. This includes a review of the Guidance needs of senior students. Feedback is also sought from the student council. The evaluation of student needs is an important part of the planning cycle and is commended. Interaction with students during the inspection revealed openness to the eliciting of student opinion. It is suggested that the student council might also be an effective vehicle by which to elicit the responses of students at junior level. The approach to planning favoured by the SDPI involves the review-design-implement-evaluate cycle. Evaluation is, ideally, carried out
against a background of predetermined indicators of success, set in the initial design phase. One of the initial tasks of the student support and planning group will be the identification of existing support and guidance interventions, programmes and policies and their efficient integration into the whole-school guidance plan.

A comprehensive programme has been devised with a balanced input into junior and senior cycle classes. All of the major transitional phases are catered for, including the transition from primary to post-primary school, the choice of optional subjects and programmes during first, third and fourth years and educational and vocational choices in senior cycle. Study and examination skills are taught to all year groups by subject teachers, as part of the Social, Personal and Health Education programme and by means of targeted inputs by the guidance counsellor during third and sixth years. Coincidentally, an invited speaker was presenting a day seminar on study skills to sixth-year students on the day of the inspection. Counselling support by the guidance counsellor on a one-to-one and small group basis is available to students at all levels.

The Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) and Transition Year Programme (TYP) are available to students on an optional basis. Regular, informal consultation takes place between the co-ordinators and the guidance counsellor. Items for inclusion in the guidance counsellor’s programme and the integration of Guidance into the curricular programmes are among the issues dealt with during consultations. Similarly, close contact is maintained between the guidance counsellor and the trained Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) and Special Educational Needs co-ordinator. Much of the school’s Guidance programme at junior level is delivered by SPHE teachers, the guidance counsellor and Special Educational Needs co-ordinator being among them.

Access to information and communication technology is available both in the guidance counsellor’s office and in the school’s computer room. It is reported by the guidance counsellor that access is readily available to individuals and groups and that the broadband system facilitates access to online services such as Qualifax, Career Directions and Careers World. The system is used during some TYP guidance classes and arranged guidance sessions with fifth and sixth-year classes.

Consultation takes place between the guidance counsellor and the deputy principal regarding curriculum planning, especially as it relates to subject choice. The deputy principal prepares the school timetable and administers the scheme of subject and programme options available to students in first, third and fourth year and prior to entry. The school is commended for basing optional subjects and programmes on the expressed preferences of students. Sixth-class pupils of feeder primary schools choose three subjects from Music, Art, Home Economics, Technical Graphics, Materials Technology (Wood), and Metalwork. Some flexibility of choice is allowed at the beginning of first year. At the end of first year students make final decisions regarding subject choice for the Junior Certificate Examination. Students choose three subjects from the three originally chosen and Business Studies, a subject taken by all first year students. Subject choices made prior to entry should be monitored and, if necessary, altered to avoid the possibility of gender bias in Junior Certificate Examination subjects.

The guidance counsellor is available at all parent-teacher meetings and during the school open night in October each year. Information evenings are also arranged as appropriate for parents on topics such as the CAO in December and subject choices in March. The principal and deputy principal operate an open-door policy in relation to appointments with parents and the principal attends the monthly parent council meetings. Consultation with the guidance counsellor is readily
arranged by appointment or by telephone. Visits by the principal and guidance counsellor to primary schools in the catchment area are arranged in October each year.

Links have been established with outside agencies such as the National Educational Psychological Service, FÁS and the Health Board where referrals out are necessary. Such referrals are normally managed by the principal. Work experience is managed by the co-ordinators of the LCVP and TYP. Students attend college open days and career exhibitions by arrangement with school management. Visits of larger groups to functions such as the Career Options Exhibition organised by the Cork Branch of the Institute of Guidance Counsellors are organised by the guidance counsellor with the cooperation of other staff. These visits are supplemented by visits to the school by representatives of the further and higher education institutions.

Open days and information sessions for guidance counsellors, run by the further and higher education institutions and by the Institute of Guidance Counsellors, are attended by the guidance counsellor. Cover for such events is arranged through the principal and deputy principal using a roster system. The guidance counsellor is a member of a counselling supervision group organised by the Institute of Guidance Counsellors under the scheme funded by the Department of Education and Science.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Preparations for a career investigation were in progress during the lesson observed. The lesson was the first in a series with this group of twenty-four Transition Year students and preceded a session to be held in the computer room. A well-balanced mixture of approaches and materials was used. The blackboard was used effectively, as were handouts and a brainstorming exercise. Thorough knowledge and understanding of the material was demonstrated and it was presented clearly and in order. New terms were introduced sensitively and explained simply.

Questions were particularly well used to draw on student experiences and students reciprocated with questions seeking clarification. Movement between desks during the lesson was made easy by the room layout. Students were attentive and absorbed and followed directions as required. Good eye contact was maintained throughout the lesson. Student responses showed understanding of the concepts used and showed the ability to generalise in, for example, looking at the range of alternatives open to those leaving school.

The session ended with a summary and an outline of the work to be done in the coming weeks.

ASSESSMENT

Collaboration between the guidance counsellor and the Special Education Needs co-ordinator in the administration, analysis and interpretation of various psychometric instruments is commended. Two assessment sessions are arranged for incoming first year students during February prior to entry. Among the assessments are a test of general ability and an assessment of reading skills. Tests are generally used for monitoring purposes and in the diagnosis and remediation of learning difficulties. It is noteworthy that particular care is taken in the ethical use of the tests. An aptitude test battery is administered to students in third year and is followed by the reporting and interpretation of results on an individual basis. Various interest inventories are
used at senior level, particularly in the TYP. The availability of broadband internet access has enabled the use of web-based inventories such as those on the Qualifax and Career Directions websites.

The destinations of students who have left the school are recorded by the principal and deputy principal.

The guidance counsellor maintains records, as appropriate, of meetings with students. The records are well kept and in secure storage.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Support for students is very good.
- The system of student support reflects the school’s Catholic philosophy of education.
- Support structures for students are based on informal channels of communication.
- The guidance counsellor is considered to play an important part the school’s support structures.
- The guidance counsellor’s personal plan and programme are comprehensive.
- The facilities for Guidance are good.
- The school is engaged in the school development planning process and is at an early stage in whole-school guidance planning.

As a means of building on these strengths and to address areas for development, the following key recommendations are made:

- All hours allocated to Guidance must be used for that purpose.
- It is recommended that the proposed guidance planning team be established as soon as possible.
- An early item for discussion should be the clarification of channels of communication with, and respective roles of, all involved in the support and management of students.
- It is recommended that some formality be introduced into the recording of meetings.
- It is recommended that the matter of ensuring that all students have access in future years to twenty-eight class contact hours be addressed.

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.