Subject Inspection of Guidance
REPORT

Coláiste Pobail Mhichíl
Cappamore, County Limerick
Roll number: 71810M

Date of inspection: 12 May 2010
REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF PROVISION IN GUIDANCE

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Coláiste Pobail Miichil. 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

Coláiste Miichil is a vocational school in the scheme of County Limerick Vocational Education Committee (VEC). The school offers post-primary education to Leaving Certificate level and further education through post-Leaving Certificate (PLC) courses in the areas of childcare, information and communication technology (ICT) and crafts. Outline planning permission has been granted for the construction of a new school under public private partnership (PPP) in the nearby town of Doon that is to cater for the amalgamation of Coláiste Miichil, and the two post-primary schools in Doon. An announcement in July 2010 by the Department of Education and Skills indicated an expectation that construction of the school would begin in early 2012.

Fifty-two post-primary students were enrolled at the time of the inspection. In addition, thirty-eight students were enrolled in two PLC courses in Childcare and in Business. The ex-quota allocation for Guidance from the Department of Education and Skills is eleven hours per week. The allocation is used wholly and effectively for Guidance. These hours are allocated by the Department in accordance with the schedules in Circular PPT12/05. They include three hours per week arising from the school’s participation in the School Support Programme of Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS), the Department’s action plan for educational inclusion.

The number of students enrolled with additional educational needs is relatively high. Provision for those needs through collaborative practice among staff, and between the school and County Limerick VEC, is of a very high order. It is normal in a small school that student-support processes are informal. It was observed during the inspection that, although this is the case in Coláiste Miichil, the formalities associated with support work, such as the arrangement of structured meetings and their documentation, were also of a high standard and in keeping with good practice. Such structures, encouraged by senior management, enable clear and active communication and collaboration between the guidance department and, for example, the
additional educational needs department, the home-school-community liaison (HSCL) co-ordinator and those involved in the School Completion Programme.

It was particularly noted that supports for students were very well integrated and that arrangements for the monitoring and evaluation of elements of the DEIS programme were a well-structured component of formal planning. These included the active involvement of the VEC through its school planning co-ordinator and the division of responsibility among staff for, for example, the literacy and numeracy component, and the retention and attendance component of the school’s DEIS plan. Similarly noted were the clear and current minutes of meetings, the use of published documents such as *Looking at Guidance* and the resources of the Irish Association of Pastoral Care in Education (IAPCE) to inform planning, and communication with other schools as resources for professional learning. The student-support team, comprising the guidance counsellor, additional educational needs co-ordinator, a senior staff member and senior management has a strong integrating role. This is reflected in good practice across the school’s supportive activities.

It is clear that the integration of supports facilitates the implementation of a well-balanced guidance programme. This has been achieved in relation to the personal, educational and vocational elements of the guidance programme, the spread of guidance inputs across the student cohort and the variety of individual and group interventions by the guidance department. Of similar support to the guidance department has been the availability of administrative and technological resources for the efficient maintenance of the guidance service. The arrangements for the guidance office are not ideal. Although the room itself is well equipped, central and suited to the practice of counselling, the lack of availability of offices in the school necessitates its sharing with other staff. It is recommended that some rearrangement of accommodation be considered in the light of the counselling and other guidance needs of the school. In the longer term, plans for the amalgamation of the schools should include provision for those needs.

The size of the school enables close and ongoing links with parents, most of whom are known to staff members. Referrals to external agencies are managed collaboratively by the student-support team with the support of parents.

**Planning and preparation**

Whole-school guidance planning is of a very high standard and is in keeping with practice outlined in *Looking at Guidance*, (2009). The guidance department plan is, effectively, the whole-school guidance plan. Given the quality of the plan, the size of the school, the role of the guidance counsellor in the school and the close, collaborative relationships among staff and management, this is practical. The plan includes clear, time-limited objectives and appropriate references linking the guidance plan to the plans of other departments in the school, including Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE), Religious Education (RE), the additional educational needs department and HSCL. Guidance planning includes provision for review and self-evaluation. This is ongoing, largely informal and enlightens discussions with senior management regarding the guidance department needs, prior to each new school year. It is recommended that short-term plans that emerge from the process of self-evaluation and review be included in the guidance plan. For example, the school’s procedures for dealing with crises are comprehensive and involve trained staff. These procedures should be noted and included.
Students are well supported throughout their schooling by guidance provision that is well balanced across personal, educational and career guidance and by a personalised service that is well integrated with the other supports, including DEIS structures, available in the school. Decisions regarding, for example, subject, programme and career choices are made in a context that, through the involvement of senior management and good communication with parents, maximises the effective use of the school’s resources in the interests of students. The guidance department has timetabled inputs into senior cycle classes and into both PLC classes. Contacts with other year groups are intermittent, in accordance with the well-developed and appropriate plan and in collaboration with, for example, the SPHE department.

The resources of the wider community are used productively to facilitate this process, not only for students but also for staff. This is exemplified by the provision of advice and continuing professional development (CPD) by County Limerick VEC, and the encouragement and facilitation by senior management of attendance by guidance personnel at events organised by the Institute of Guidance Counsellors (IGC). Similar positive links have been established with the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS). Events recently organised in the school, including dramatic performances related to its policies on bullying and on substance use, are evidence of the interlinking of these processes. Similarly, an awards event observed in the course of the inspection displayed well the relationship between affirmation, support and positive learning outcomes for students who had participated in the Junior Achievement programme. The event, involving a visitor to the school, was well planned by number of staff members.

In the context of the proposed amalgamation of the school with others in the locality, planning for the continuation of current good practice should be a matter of priority. It is strongly suggested that communication with the guidance departments and student-support teams in the other amalgamating schools should be an ongoing and formal process to ensure the longer-term consolidation of the support systems. The strengths of Coláiste Phobail Mhichíl in catering for the individual needs of all students by linking good practice in personal, educational and vocational guidance and other supports to learning outcomes for students should be at the core of this planning.

**TEACHING AND LEARNING**

The lesson observed in the course of the inspection was well planned. The lesson was well structured, beginning with the normal formalities of roll call and announcements, and enabling students to settle and to adjust. Although the lesson had been timetabled for the computer room and although that technology was not used on this occasion, the drawbacks of such an arrangement were quickly overcome by the use of relevant and stimulating materials and good use of the whiteboard.

The lesson topic related to the researching of a career investigation that was being undertaken by students. Following an introduction and outline of the process, a presentation was made that incorporated the use of handouts, including advice about the location of relevant websites and a summary of the career investigation process. These were supplemented by useful materials, such as the national qualifications framework. The information presented was current and accurate. The presentation was enhanced by the use of humour and the obvious understanding of the needs of individual students.
Students’ knowledge was assessed effectively throughout the lesson by the use of questions appropriately pitched at students’ level of ability and interest and understanding. Good contact was maintained during the lesson by movement by the teacher between students and by the use of a variety of question types directed at individual students and at the class. Regular reference was made to the topic of the lesson and to the handouts, including directions regarding the completion of brief questionnaires that added variety to the lesson while prompting thought about career decision making.

Students were attentive and engaged during the lesson. Responses to questions displayed an informed awareness not only of the issues being considered but also of the decision-making process. Students were clearly comfortable in their engagement and sought clarification as appropriate.

**ASSESSMENT**

As the school’s only qualified test user at the time of the inspection, a member of the guidance department administers standardised tests of general ability and aptitude in accordance with ethical principles. The results of tests of general ability, available early in the first term, are used in monitoring students’ progress and are used collaboratively to inform the decisions of the additional educational needs department regarding their learning needs. These and other instruments are used by the guidance department while working with students in advance of career decisions, particularly in the senior cycle. A range of interest inventories and preference questionnaires, in both paper and digital formats, are also used. A noteworthy innovation of the guidance department is a compilation of non-standardised interest inventories that provide a useful suite of easily accessed instruments for class use or for use by individual students.

Consistent with the findings of this report regarding guidance department planning, the records and administrative practices of the department are of a high standard. It is clear that the professional practice of the department is well informed and structured.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The ex-quota allocation for Guidance is used fully and effectively.
- Guidance is well integrated with the other support services available to students in the school.
- Strong collaborative links have been formed among staff, with parents and with the wider community in support of students.
- Links with County Limerick VEC have facilitated well-structured provision by the school in support of students.
- Guidance planning is comprehensive and very well documented.
- Professional practice in the guidance department is of a high standard and incorporates continuing professional development.
As a means of building on these strengths, the following key recommendations are made:

- The accommodation needs of the guidance department should be addressed.
- It is recommended that the short-term plans emerging from the review process be included in guidance plans.

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.