An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection of Guidance
REPORT

Saint Joseph’s Community College
Carrigaholt Road, Kilkee, County Clare
Roll number: 70880F

Date of inspection: 7 May 2010
REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF PROVISION IN GUIDANCE

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in St Joseph’s Community College. 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

St Joseph’s Community College is a small co-educational post-primary school on the outskirts of Kilkee catering for students from a largely rural background, although a significant number are members of families who have relocated to County Clare from urban areas, especially Dublin, under the Rural Resettlement Scheme. The school is the result of the amalgamation in 1990 of St Joseph’s Mercy Secondary School and Kilkee Vocational School, whose site was used for the community college. The school’s mission clearly reflects the amalgamation and refers to its Christian and caring ethos and to the partnership of school and community. While its location is on the West Clare peninsula, many of its students and teachers have experience, under European Union (EU) projects, of schools in countries such as France, Germany and Holland.

The current enrolment of students is 182, representing a drop from over 200 in the previous school year. An unfortunate consequence of this fall in enrolment is the concomitant reduction in the ex-quota allocation for Guidance from eleven hours per week to eight hours per week in accordance with Circular PPT12/05. The ex-quota allocation is used entirely by the guidance counsellor in the provision of a part-time guidance service and a programme that is balanced and well planned. The school comprises five year-groups, from first year to fifth year. All fourth-year students, whether qualified to, or not, participate in the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP), including work experience. In fifth-year, only students with recognised subject combinations participate in year two of the LCVP.

In addition to a guidance counsellor, the school employs a chaplain and an additional educational needs co-ordinator. A pastoral-care system is in place that is overseen by the chaplaincy and includes year heads and class teachers. Links with management are ongoing and of a level and blend of formality and informality that is appropriate for a school of its size. Guidance provision is a balanced blend of the personal, educational and vocational. The guidance counsellor and chaplain meet weekly. Timetabled middle-management meetings facilitate the year heads in meeting the principal and deputy principal each week. In view of the potential benefits to efficient
communication, it is recommended that consideration be given to the attendance by the guidance counsellor at these middle-management meetings. For the same reason, it is recommended that a representative of the additional educational needs team be included in the meetings of guidance counsellor and chaplain. A student-support team exists in the school, comprising senior management, the guidance counsellor, chaplain, additional educational needs co-ordinator and the social, personal and health education (SPHE) co-ordinator. Communication among these staff members is ongoing and informal, and relates generally to the school’s responses to the needs of students. It is recommended that some formality be attached to the student-support team by, for example, a clear definition of roles, responsibilities and lines of communication among members of the team, and by the arrangement of structured meetings when appropriate. In order that any potential duplication be avoided, it is also recommended that a similar process of clarification be applied to other roles and responsibilities associated with the care, management, support and guidance of students.

The timetable for Guidance is well balanced between inputs, both to individuals and to class groups, across the school’s five year groups. Ongoing communication between the co-ordinator of SPHE and the guidance department ensures a collaborative approach to the delivery of the curricular elements of the guidance programme common to SPHE.

Apart from access by student groups to information and communication technology (ICT), the facilities for Guidance are good, comprising a well-placed guidance office with the requisite electronic and office technology. The room is suited to the practice of counselling and contains a library of guidance-related materials such as college prospectuses and career information. It is suggested that students’ access to guidance materials would be enhanced if some of the materials were placed in the school library, currently in the process of development, particularly in view of unavailability of the materials on days on which the guidance counsellor is not in attendance. Access to ICT in the course of guidance sessions with individual students ensures the immediate availability of up-to-date information. It is recommended that, considering the importance of the availability of such information to larger groups in Guidance and in other subjects, the remediation of difficulties with the technical upkeep of computer workstations be given priority. At the time of the inspection, only nine of the twenty available workstations were available for use.

The system of referrals to the guidance department is formalised by the use of a standard referral slip. Student may self-refer or may be referred by parents and peers, or by staff through the system of year heads and class tutors. Collaborative practice among staff in key areas of student support has been developed in the current school year. Referrals to external agencies including the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS), the health services and the local family resource centre are managed by members of the student-support team in collaboration with senior management.

**PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

The guidance department plan is well developed and comprehensive. The plan includes the guidance programme for each year group and an outline of the links with other members of staff, including senior management. It is good practice to include the department’s short-term goals in the plan. It is recommended that these be included and that they form the basis of discussions with senior management regarding guidance provision for the subsequent school year.
Whole-school guidance planning has been initiated and all staff members have been involved in discussions regarding its implications. A whole-school guidance planning team has been formed but has not met during the current school year. It is suggested that, for efficiency, and considering the overlap in the membership of the teams, the student-support team might be an appropriate group by which the co-ordination of whole-school guidance planning might be advanced. Much has been achieved already by the student-support team. Work to date has been well structured and documented and follows the scheme recommended by the School Development Planning Initiative (SDPI). The outcomes to date have included the introduction of study-skills seminars for students and the development of a handbook of study-skills materials, the improvement of broadband internet provision and the decision to place Science among the core subjects for Junior Certificate examination students.

Examples of current good practice in the school include the strong guidance department and chaplaincy, the guidance department plan, the procedures for dealing with crises, the school’s commitment to the regular review of policies and the encouragement and engagement by staff in continuing professional development (CPD). The inclusion of non-teaching staff in, for example, the procedures for crisis management is good practice. It is recommended that these practices be identified and included in the plan. Useful information regarding the whole-school guidance planning process and templates for its implementation may be found on the Department website at www.education.ie and in publications such as Planning the School Guidance Programme published by the National Centre for Guidance in Education (NCGE). Looking at Guidance, published by the Inspectorate of the Department of Education and Skills, also available on the Department website, outlines many examples of good practice in Guidance and is an essential reference in the process of whole-school guidance planning. It is suggested that an initial step in the clarification of roles might be the delivery of short presentations to staff by those with core student-support roles such as the guidance counsellor, chaplain and additional educational needs co-ordinator. Similarly, the roles of staff in the implementation of policies and procedures such as the school’s responses to crises should be considered and clarified. It is recommended that the involvement of all subject departments in the provision of supports for students be reiterated and that the value of such provision to good teaching practice and to positive outcomes for students be emphasised.

Students’ transitions are well managed. An induction programme has been developed by staff to ease the transition from primary schools and includes an open evening in spring and various familiarisation and bonding exercises during the first days of the autumn term. A mentoring system has been established by the chaplaincy through which first-year students are paired with senior students to aid and monitor the process of settlement. First-year classes are of mixed ability and optional subjects for the Junior Certificate examination are chosen in the last term in that year following experience of all available subjects. Similarly, the arrangement of optional subjects for the Leaving Certificate examination is based on students’ preferences. This is good practice. The recent decision to make Science a core subject accords well with efforts nationally to increase students’ participation in the sciences, engineering and technology. Planned intermittent guidance-department inputs to the decision-making processes are appropriate. Timetabled contact with first-year classes is good practice, familiarising students with the resources and skills needed for long-term personal, educational and career management.

The school, as an integral part of the community, has established close links with parents, businesses and, on a wider scale, the providers of training and of further and higher education. The local youth café uses students’ ideas and evaluations in planning its services and local businesses are supportive in providing work experience for LCVP students. In addition to contacts made during parent-teacher meetings and open days, the guidance department provides
items for inclusion in the school’s newsletter and participates in information sessions for parents regarding study skills, optional subjects and the educational and vocational opportunities available to students after leaving school. Of particular note is the school’s proposal that parents participate in the evaluation of its whole-school provision of Guidance. Students already participate annually in the process by completing an evaluative questionnaire. This is good practice and should provide useful additional information to staff who may be involved in the preparation of the whole-school guidance plan. The school should plan the revival of the student council. The inputs by students to which allusion has been made indicate that students are consulted regarding issues of relevance to them. The formalisation of these inputs using structures proposed by, for example, the Student Council Support Service at http://www.studentcouncil.ie/ and the Irish Second-level Students’ Union at http://issu.ie/ is recommended.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

The lesson observed was well prepared and executed. Materials were to hand and included handouts that were appropriate to the content and to students’ developmental level. Following a brief period of settlement, a roll call and introduction, a class of first-year students participated in a series of activities on the topic of active learning. The lesson was one of a planned series aimed at increasing students’ self-management and study skills as part of the guidance programme. It is significant that the topic was one that had emerged as a priority through the whole-school guidance planning process and was an interesting example of a positive outcome of that process.

A range of teaching methods was observed, including brainstorming, the use of graphic and visual stimuli and the skilled use of questions. Relationships in the classroom were positive and enabled interaction that was personal and well managed. Students were addressed by name and it was clear from their responses that the content of the lesson was being absorbed and accommodated. Directions were clear and students’ understanding and responses were checked individually throughout the lesson. The materials were presented in a developmental sequence that was an effective blend of theory and practice. A method of active reading was introduced and its application demonstrated using material from a geography textbook. Students responded well to directions and participated productively in this and in the other activities introduced.

Students remained engaged throughout the lesson. It was clear that students were stimulated by the range and creative use of materials. To illustrate the composition of a spider diagram, for example, keywords were written on stickers and incorporated into work done on the blackboard. Prior to the lesson’s conclusion, its content was summarised and the work of future lessons was outlined. It was evident that the practical application of the study techniques learned and practised in the course of the lesson were to be reinforced during subsequent sessions. This is good practice and provides a coherent structure for students on which to accommodate learning.

ASSESSMENT

Tests, inventories and psychometric instruments are administered by the guidance department to students in third year and upwards. These include a standardised aptitude test and various paper based and web-based inventories, such as those associated with Qualifax, Careers Portal and
Career Directions. Use is also made in the course of interviews with individual students of a decision-making system designed for that purpose.

Consideration is being given to the assessment of newly enrolled students. Current practice is that, following entry, students are monitored and where concerns are expressed by subject teachers regarding students’ progress, diagnostic assessments are carried out by the additional educational needs department. If a decision is made to introduce some pre-entry assessment, it is recommended that the instruments chosen should be accompanied by appropriate norms. Information regarding many of the available psychometric instruments may be accessed at http://www.education.ie/servlet/blobservlet/pp_approved_tests_2009_10.pdf?language=EN or through the Qualifax website. Where such tests are used, it is good practice to assess general ability, literacy and numeracy. Used carefully, these assessments provide additional information that may enhance the monitoring process by providing reliable information in support of decisions regarding students’ placement in classes of mixed ability and those who display the potential to benefit from additional interventions. It is recommended that any decisions regarding pre-entry assessments be made in consultation with the guidance department, the additional educational needs department and senior management.

The documentation by the guidance department of assessments and of interviews with students is of a high standard. This enables the compilation of student profiles that are of use not only while students attend the school but also in gathering information regarding the initial destinations of students after the Leaving Certificate examination. The process is facilitated by continuing contacts with past students of the school and is reciprocated by those willing to visit the school to provide information regarding their current status.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The ex-quota allocation for Guidance by the Department of Education and Skills is used fully and effectively.
- In addition to Guidance, the school provides a range of supports to students.
- Communication is an appropriate blend of the formal and informal.
- Guidance department planning and documentation are of a high standard.
- Substantial progress has been made in whole-school guidance planning.
- Effective links in support of students have been established with local and regional groups and agencies.
- Students’ transitions are well managed by the school.

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

- To facilitate efficient communication, arrangements should be made to enable staff with student-support roles to participate in relevant meetings.
- The technical upkeep of computer workstations should be given high priority.
- In decisions regarding the use of psychometric tests, the availability of appropriate norms should be a determining factor.
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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