Subject Inspection of Guidance
REPORT

Saint Peter’s Community School
Passage West, County Cork
Roll number: 91391H

Date of inspection: 1 December 2010
REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF PROVISION IN GUIDANCE

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Saint Peter’s Community School. 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

The school occupies an elevated site overlooking Cork harbour in a catchment area between Cork City and Carrigaline that is bounded by the river Lee. Three hundred and sixteen students are currently enrolled in an almost equal ratio of males and females. The ex-quota allocation for Guidance from the Department of Education and Skills is thirteen hours per week. The allocation is used fully and efficiently for that purpose by the guidance counsellor and is supplemented by an additional eighty minutes from the school’s resources. This good practice facilitates the induction into the existing guidance department of a staff member newly qualified in Guidance.

The system of supports for students is of a very high standard and is very well supported by senior management. In addition to the guidance department, the additional educational needs department and the chaplaincy are well formed and work in the context of the school’s mission, which is strongly support oriented. The guidance department works closely and collaboratively with the other support-giving departments. The structure of supports is formalised in the best interests of efficiency, good communication and good relationships. The well-structured student support team, for example, comprises representatives of the guidance department, the additional educational needs department, the chaplaincy and senior management. The team meets weekly. Meetings are minuted. Communication is enhanced by this practice, by the attendance of the core student-support team at middle-management meetings and by the clear definition of the roles and responsibilities of the departments. A student council contributes to the formation of the school. Weekly meetings of the student council are followed by a meeting of delegates with senior management. This has found expression in, for example, the negotiation by the student council of an extension of after-school study in response to the requests of students. This is good practice.

Guidance provision is well balanced in every respect. The programme includes provision for students in all year groups, as individuals and in larger groups, and across the range of personal, educational and vocational guidance. The facilities for Guidance are of a high standard and include the requisite technological and administrative equipment in an office that is located centrally but with due deference to confidentiality.
Communication with parents and with external agencies such as the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) is managed collaboratively by the student-support team and senior management. This is very good practice and is enabled by good communication within the school. In consequence, links with these agencies, including local and regional employers and the institutions of higher education, further education and training, are of mutual benefit to students through, for example, work experience, and to the agencies through, for example, the publicising of their services. Referrals operate in the same context of good relationships and communication. Referrals to the guidance department are structured, by the use, for example, of standard appointment slips where appropriate.

**PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

The school development planning process has been rigorous. A suite of policies has been developed that undergo regular review, subject departments have been well formed and supports for students have been firmly embedded in the school’s structures and procedures. Guidance planning, both at the guidance department level and at the level of whole-school guidance planning, is very well advanced and is supported by clear documentation that includes relevant policies, programme outlines and links to other supports, to subject departments and to external agencies. The process is guided by a planning team that includes representatives of senior management, the guidance department and the additional educational needs department. Guidance plans have been reviewed and have been ratified by the board of management. Good practice found in St Peter’s Community School equates well to that outlined in the Inspectorate publication *Looking at Guidance* (2009).

The inclusion of indicators of success in guidance planning documents is very good practice. The criteria are compatible with the school’s mission and provide an evaluative tool on which to base further development. Further refinement of the criteria could include the establishment of baseline data that could be used to measure, for example, percentage increases in identified targets. The school’s general guidance programme includes a comprehensive programme for the induction of new students that includes presentations to parents through open days and information sessions in which the guidance department participates. Students’ subject choices are facilitated by a modular system in first year whereby students experience all available subjects, enabling informed choice. Optional Leaving Certificate examination subjects are chosen prior to entry to Transition Year (TY), which is compulsory. Deferring subject choice until the latter part of TY should be given serious consideration. In principle, this would favour work towards getting a balance between some continuation of essential core subjects, a tasting and sampling of other subjects (from [http://ty.slss.ie/aboutus.html#purpose](http://ty.slss.ie/aboutus.html#purpose)) and lessen possible distractions for students during the examination year.

Cross-referencing was observed in many of the policies seen in the course of the inspection. This is very good practice and is symbolic of an integrated approach to practice, to planning and to policy development. Continued progress in this regard is strongly suggested, considering the work already done. It may be possible to focus on specific aspects of policy with wider application, such as the issue of confidentiality, which is relevant to, for example, counselling, the teaching of Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) and the use of psychometric tests. Similarly, assessment practices in Guidance and in the assessment of individual needs could be considered with a view to a school-wide, integrated assessment policy. *A curricular framework for Guidance in post-primary education*, published as a consultative document by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) in 2007 includes significant references to,
among other subjects, the role of SPHE in the delivery of the curricular element of the guidance programme. It is recommended that reference be made in the whole-school guidance plan to this element of the programme. It is also recommended that the departmental plans of relevant subjects be updated to complete such cross-referencing.

The school has strong links with the local and regional communities, facilitating work experience for Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA), Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) and TY students. Guidance department links with the Institute of Guidance Counsellors (IGC) enable engagement with continuing professional development that is encouraged and facilitated by senior management.

**TEACHING AND LEARNING**

A lesson on the theme of the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) was observed in the course of the inspection. The lesson, which was well planned and implemented, was delivered in a computer room served with broadband internet access. The lesson was well structured with a clear statement of learning objectives at the outset, a variety of activities relevant to the topic and a summary prior to the conclusion that included guidelines for students with a desire for further information and consultation.

A brief introduction was preceded by a roll call and the distribution of a concise printed summary of the UCAS system. The information imparted during the lesson was comprehensive and current. Skilled use was made of the information and communication technology (ICT) facilities both in the delivery of the lesson and by students in accessing relevant websites. A practical demonstration of the variety of resources available on the UCAS website was interspersed with references to other sources of information in digital form, such as the Qualifax website, and by reference to work done by students during previous lessons, including an aptitude test. This is good practice, illustrating the integrative approach taken to the topic and the inclusion of students as learners. Students were encouraged to investigate the features of the website, both during the lesson and in their own time, facilitating differentiation among students. This was augmented by communication with individual students that was well balanced with inputs to the class in general, facilitated by the room layout that enabled movement by the teacher among students.

Questions were used appropriately throughout the lesson. It was clear that, in establishing a good relationship with students, considerable knowledge of their individual preferences had been accumulated, enabling the use of questions that were well targeted and focused.

**ASSESSMENT**

The use of test instruments and inventories is in keeping with good practice. The relatively recent decision by the guidance department to replace a standardised test of general ability with a test with more current norms is indicative of the school’s culture of self-review. A wide range of psychometric instruments is used collaboratively by the guidance department and the additional educational needs department. Following initial screening for general ability, literacy and numeracy in the course of the school’s induction process, newly entered first-year students with identified needs are monitored by the additional educational needs department and further diagnostic assessments are used as appropriate. The outcomes of this process are used in collaboration with staff, particularly with the end-of-term examinations, to monitor progress and to identify students with more specific needs.
A combination of standardised and less formal instruments is used by the guidance department as aids to students’ decision making. Very good practice was observed in documents outlining guidance department involvement in this process. This included a clear role in students’ decisions regarding subject and programme choice, and regarding the levels at which subjects are studied, and in the school’s procedures for dealing with these issues. It is clear that these processes are collaborative, with the participation of senior management and subject teachers. The documentation of these processes is clear. Of particular note is the inclusion of evaluative comment, needs identification and prioritisation, and a clear link to plans. Other documents relating to the administration of the guidance department, such as the records of the student-support team and guidance planning meetings and the records of interviews with students, are of a high standard.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Guidance provision is well balanced.
- The ex-quota allocation for Guidance is used fully and efficiently.
- The system of supports for students is of a very high standard.
- The guidance department works closely and collaboratively with the other support-giving departments.
- A well-structured student support team meets weekly.
- Guidance planning is very well advanced.
- Many policies that relate to Guidance are cross-referenced with the guidance plan.
- The use of test instruments and inventories is in keeping with good practice.
- Guidance department documentation is well presented and includes evaluative comment.

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

- Deferring subject choice until the latter part of TY should be given serious consideration.
- It is recommended that the curricular element of the whole-school guidance programme be cross-referenced in subject department 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.

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