Subject Inspection of Guidance
REPORT

Ursuline Secondary School
Thurles, County Tipperary
Roll number: 65470F

Date of inspection: 19 October 2010
SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in the Ursuline Secondary School, Thurles, conducted as part of a whole-school evaluation. 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 two days 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 counsellors.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

The stated values of the Ursuline Sisters include holistic development, creativity and respect. These values clearly underpin the school’s provision of Guidance and are visible throughout the building by, for example, their symbolic display in classrooms and at the entrance to the school. Highly committed staff members, both clerical and lay, provide a firm foundation of guidance and support for students through dedicated work that extends beyond the normal school day.

The ex-quota allocation for Guidance from the Department of Education and Skills is thirty hours per week. These hours are allocated by the Department in accordance with the schedules in Circular PPT12/05 and are based on the number of students enrolled in this school, which tends to be stable in the region of 720. The allocation is used fully and effectively in the provision of Guidance. Two guidance counsellors are employed, who deliver twenty-two hours and eight hours of Guidance respectively.

The facilities for guidance are very good and include a centrally located and convenient office equipped with the requisite office and technological equipment. The office is suited to the provision of personal counselling. Additional facilities include a small guidance library adjacent to the guidance department office that is accessible by all students, and displays of guidance-related notices and posters in many parts of the building. This is good practice.

The guidance department programme is well planned and well balanced. The support of junior cycle students, particularly in the transition from primary schools, in collaboration with the Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) department and the middle-management structure of year heads and class tutors, is very good practice. Good relationships between staff and students are established and maintained. A good balance has been achieved between work with individual students and with class groups. Each of the two Transition Year (TY) classes, five fifth-year classes and five sixth-year classes is timetabled for a guidance lesson each week. The Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) classes, LCVP1 and LCVP2, are similarly timetabled. While this balance is appropriate, others should be considered. These include balances between timetabled interventions and other, planned but intermittent, interventions, between work with students and work with other staff, and between formal and informal engagements with
management, parents, and with external agencies. These, and other responsibilities of the guidance department, are outlined in the department plan and are consistent with the view of Guidance expressed in Guidelines for Second-Level Schools on the Implications of Section 9(c) of the Education Act 1998, Relating to Students' Access to Appropriate Guidance published by the Inspectorate in 2005. It is recommended that the senior cycle timetable for Guidance be reviewed in the context of the overall balance of the guidance department programme and plan.

The context of collaborative practice in which Guidance is delivered, and which includes inputs into the school’s boarding facility, favours a very good balance between personal, educational and vocational guidance. These links are enhanced through extensive collaboration between the guidance department and others, such as those involved in the delivery of supports for the additional needs of students and teachers engaged in the delivery of SPHE. Personal, religious and moral supports are important elements of the school’s ethos and, while these are delivered specifically through the religious education (RE) department and through the part-time chaplaincy, there is a high level of involvement of staff in general.

It is recommended that consideration be given to a more formal structure to bring clarity to the roles and responsibilities associated with the available supports for students. In formalising structures, it must be emphasised that current good practice should not be diminished, but, rather, enhanced by ensuring continuity of provision in the context of change. In order to achieve this, it is suggested that a small student-support team be established that is representative of the school’s main supports for students, such as Guidance and special educational needs. It is also suggested that the terminology used to describe the team should be carefully considered so as to be inclusive of, for example, support, care, guidance and additional needs. It is likely that, in its initial stages, some of the work of such a team would include whole-school planning of the various supports. In this context, the recommendation, below, of a whole-school guidance planning task group should be considered.

The collaborative links between the guidance department and staff include a referral system that is based on a tacit understanding of the counselling role of the guidance department. Referrals are largely informally arranged through staff and by students’ self-referral. Formality within the bounds of confidentiality is brought to referrals by ethical good practice in recording and in subsequent contacts with staff, students and parents. Referrals to external agencies are managed by senior management in collaboration with the guidance department and the special educational needs department as appropriate.

**Planning and Preparation**

The guidance department plan is well documented and balanced. The plan includes an outline of the guidance programme across the school and the links that have been established with other departments, such as those for special educational needs, SPHE, TY and the LCVP. In the light of this good practice, and in the light of the recommendation made below in relation to whole-school guidance planning, it is recommended that the plans of other departments include references to the supports available to students, both from teachers within those departments and from the guidance department. It is also recommended that the shorter-term aims and priorities of the guidance department be included in the guidance department plan in order to facilitate discussion with senior management around these issues, particularly in late spring when school planning for the new school year is underway.
Aspects of whole-school guidance planning have been initiated in the context of the organisation of pastoral care. Such planning has been substantial and includes the structuring of roles and responsibilities of year heads and class tutors, the procedures to be applied in dealing with crises and the relationship between supports for students and the values espoused by the school. This work provides a firm foundation on which to base whole-school guidance planning and, by extension, the planned development of an integrated system of supports for students. It is emphasised that supports available to students are themselves an integral part of effective learning and teaching and, hence, of subject-department planning. It is recommended that a task-group be formed to advance the planning of supports for students in the context of the process promoted by the School Development Planning Initiative (SDPI). The student-support team, already recommended, should have a core role in this development and should be supported by the inclusion of other interested staff. Useful information as to the process is available from a number of sources including the Department’s website at www.education.gov.ie and the websites of the SDPI at www.sdpi.ie and the National Centre for Guidance in Education (NCGE) at www.ncge.ie.

Extensive links have been established with the wider community, including the business community and regional and national education providers. These links have enhanced the guidance programme by facilitating work experience for TY and LCVP students, by providing speakers on educational, career and social topics delivered through the curricular guidance programme and by facilitating visits to work places and to institutions of training and education.

While the communication system is mostly informal, it is collaborative at all levels and is based on good relationships among staff. In some cases, notes of meetings are taken. Some formalisation of this process is recommended to enable, for example, interdepartmental tracking and linking as part of the overall student-support planning process.

Professional development of the guidance team is encouraged and facilitated by senior management. A member of the team is an active member of the Institute of Guidance Counsellors (IGC), attends the regular meetings of the local branch and participates in continuing professional development organised by the Institute, including professional counselling support. This is good practice.

**TEACHING AND LEARNING**

It was noted in the course of the inspection that the relationship between the guidance team and students was very positive, enabling students to approach members of the team with ease and facilitating affirmative responses by the team. The value of good relationships was demonstrated during the lesson in which students were addressed by name and the atmosphere was one of attention and engagement.

The lesson observed was a response by the guidance team to requests by students for further information and experience of the Qualifax website. It was one of a series of weekly lessons that alternate between a classroom and the school’s information and communication technology (ICT) room. On this occasion, available ICT, including a laptop and data projector, was used effectively to demonstrate in a classroom the functions of the Qualifax website by means of a wireless broadband link.

The lesson was well structured and planned. The roll was called at the outset, materials were to hand and internet links were established without delay. Students were questioned throughout the
lesson, both individually and generally, and reciprocated by requesting information that was relevant and discerning. Questions such as “What do you know about…?” were highly effective in determining students’ current level of knowledge and responses were used to tailor the lesson to the needs identified continuously by this process. The conversational style of the presentation was appropriate to the theme and to the content of the lesson. It was clear that students were curious about the topic and that their learning grew from this curiosity.

Students remained engaged throughout the lesson. In the closing stages, arrangements were announced about further practical experience for students in the use of the website and the opportunity was well used to summarise the content of the lesson. In a brief conversation before dismissal, students displayed an awareness of issues in education such as the value of continuous assessment and of the balance between oral skills and literacy in languages.

ASSESSMENT

To date, the induction of incoming first-year students has begun with the Entrance Day in the spring prior to entry. A decision has been made that, beginning in the current year, an open day will also be arranged prior to Christmas to inform incoming students and their parents about the school and its operation. The Entrance Day has been used to provide such information, to allow prospective new entrants access to some experience of new subjects and to assess levels of literacy. The collaboration of the guidance department and the special educational needs departments in the administration of the test mirrors similar good practice throughout the school year.

While the special educational needs department is currently undergoing some staffing changes, collaboration continues to be strong between the two departments. This extends to the administration of a test of general ability soon after entry in September. The results of this assessment are analysed by the special educational needs department. Information from contacts with feeder primary schools is also analysed. These analyses are used to inform plans to meet the potential learning-support needs of students. It is suggested that the information to be gained from the results of this assessment may be useful in making educational decisions regarding new students and that its administration at an earlier stage might be considered. It is a notable feature of collaboration that education plans for students thus identified are shared with the guidance department and are the basis of exemplary work by both departments in support of students.

An aptitude test and a range of interest inventories are used by the guidance department, particularly at senior level. These include the web-based Qualifax and Career Directions questionnaires and other paper-based inventories and interest blanks, used to stimulate discussion in classes and in follow-up one-to-one sessions. High ethical standards are apparent in the documentation and general approach to all tests and instruments.

Guidance department documentation is of a very high standard and is a good example of how a structured approach to documentation facilitates record-keeping and planning. Records are kept of all meetings with students and of subsequent actions. Meetings with staff on guidance issues are minuted. All records are filed and kept in secure storage. Documents observed included the plans and general administrative records of the guidance department, such as those used to track student destinations after leaving the school.
SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Guidance provision and the facilities for Guidance are of a high standard.
- The allocation of hours for Guidance by the Department of Education and Skills is used effectively.
- Guidance provision across personal, educational and career guidance is well balanced.
- Guidance provision for individual students, for small groups and for classes is also well balanced.
- Supports for students throughout the school are very effective, if largely informal.
- Collaboration among staff in support of students is ongoing and effective.
- The school has effective links with parents and with the community.
- Guidance department plans and documentation are clear and well presented.

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

- It is recommended that a task-group be formed to advance whole-school guidance planning.
- To bring clarity to the roles and responsibilities of staff associated with the available supports for students, more formal structures should be developed.
- The senior cycle timetable for Guidance should be reviewed in the context of the overall balance of the guidance department programme and plan.
- Some formalisation of systems of communication is recommended.

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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