An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection of Guidance
REPORT

Saint Vincent’s Secondary School
Dundalk, County Louth
Roll number: 63900R

Date of inspection: 23 November 2009
REPORT ON THE QUALITY OF PROVISION IN GUIDANCE

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Saint Vincent’s Secondary School, Dundalk, conducted as part of a whole-school evaluation. It presents the findings of an evaluation of the quality of provision of Guidance and makes recommendations for the further development of Guidance in the school. The evaluation was conducted over one day during which the inspector interacted with students, held discussions with the principal, and the guidance counsellors and reviewed school planning documentation. Following the evaluation visit, the inspector provided oral feedback on the outcomes of the evaluation to the principal and to the guidance counsellors.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

St Vincent’s has a current enrolment of 853 girls. The school has over twenty feeder schools and these are located in the town of Dundalk and in the surrounding rural areas. The socio-economic backgrounds of the students are mixed and students with all levels of academic ability attend the school. The care of students is considered to be a fundamental principle of education in St Vincent’s and to that end structures have been put in place to ensure that the educational and personal needs of all students are met and that each student feels valued. Guidance is considered by school management to be central to this process. Approximately sixty percent of the students go on to third-level education and a further thirty percent go to colleges of further education.

St Vincent’s receives fifty-five ex-quota hours per week from the Department of Education and Science for Guidance. Two qualified guidance counsellors are allocated forty-four of these hours; a counselling psychologist is allocated approximately four hours per week and the remaining hours are allocated to a former member of staff for additional guidance and counselling activities. The guidance counsellors work in close co-operation with each other and also with the counselling psychologist, the home-school-community liaison (HSCL) co-ordinator, the social, personal and health education (SPHE) co-ordinator, the principal, the programme co-ordinators and the special educational needs co-ordinator. The guidance counsellors meet with the special educational needs teachers once per term to review existing cases or discuss new ones. Also, students with special educational needs are met individually by a guidance counsellor.

Both guidance counsellors are members of the student care team which also includes the principal, the deputy principal, year heads, tutors, the special educational needs co-ordinator and the SPHE co-ordinator. The team meets twice per year. It is recommended that formal meetings of the core members of the team should be held more frequently and that year heads and tutors should only attend these meetings when students from their respective classes and years are being discussed. At the meetings held twice yearly when all members of the team attend, more general issues related to the care system could be discussed. Students identified as having personal problems should firstly be referred to the care team. Having assessed each case, the team should draw up a care plan and decide which members of the team will contribute to implementing it.
This method of dealing with referrals ensures that the most appropriate response to the needs of each student can be planned and that there is a co-ordinated approach to the provision of supports.

St Vincent’s actively promotes the importance of the science subjects. Science is a core subject for first-year students. Students in classes in the first of the two bands which operate in junior cycle are expected to take the subject for the Junior Certificate. The take-up of science subjects for the Leaving Certificate is also promoted and students are encouraged to explore and consider science-related courses at third-level or in further education, as part of the guidance programme for senior cycle students. The guidance department collaborates with the science department to plan activities for students. All year groups participate in science-related activities. Links with national scientific and engineering agencies have been established and the school participates in the STEPS to engineering programme, in National Science Week activities and in a number of scholarships for Science. A science week is organised in the school to coincide with the National Science Week. Students in the school have won science scholarships and awards. Discussions have commenced between it and the Dundalk Institute of Technology (DkIT) to explore the possibility of the Institute providing practical experience and lectures for interested students. All of these activities are commended.

The guidance department has for a number of years been involved in the promotion of women in science and engineering. It is suggested that the guidance department makes contact with Women in Technology and Science (WITS), a network established to actively promote careers in science and technology for women (www.witsireland.com).

Guidance is timetabled for Transition Year (TY), Leaving Certificate Applied, fifth-year and sixth-year students. While classes in Guidance are delivered, periodically, to junior cycle students by arrangement with other subject teachers, Guidance is delivered mainly on a one-to-one basis. Group counselling is undertaken if considered appropriate. It is recommended that a better balance of delivery between classroom guidance and one-to-one counselling should be implemented to ensure that all students are provided with guidance activities to assist them in the development of self-management skills and to assist them in connecting the subjects they are studying to their future life choices. These activities should commence in first year and should be developed further in every year throughout students’ second-level schooling.

Facilities for Guidance are good. Each guidance counsellor has an office which is equipped with a computer, broadband connection, telephone, shelving and secure storage. The guidance counsellors share a laptop computer and a data projector for use in classrooms. Due to the increase in student numbers in recent years, a room that had been dedicated for Guidance has been converted into a classroom. The guidance-related materials and resources that had been housed in the classroom have been transferred to the guidance counsellors’ offices. Some of the materials are now located in the school library. School management recognises the difficulties that have arisen for the guidance department due to the loss of the room and is committed to restoring the provision as soon as accommodation becomes available. This is good.

Links between the guidance counsellors and management are mainly informal and as required meetings take place. Formal meetings take place through the care team and the guidance planning team meetings. The guidance department operates an open-door policy in relation to referrals. Students can be referred by members of staff, by parents or they may self-refer. The more structured system of referral suggested above should be considered, except in cases of self-referral or where sensitivities or confidentiality require direct referral.
As appropriate, students are referred to the counselling psychologist with whom the guidance counsellors work closely. The guidance department has also established links with a wide range of external support services to which they refer students who may require specialist supports. These include: The Health Service Executive (HSE) counselling and social support services; family support workers; substance abuse and addiction counselling services; and voluntary and community support services. A new youth centre, Apple Tree Foundation has been established by local professionals. The centre provides counselling and other supports to young people in Dundalk. One of the guidance counsellors is a member of the committee of the Dundalk Partnership. A list of all of the external services to which the school has established links is included in the guidance plan. The assigned psychologist from the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) liaises mainly with the special educational needs department. Links have also been established with third-level institutions, colleges of further education, training bodies and local businesses. All of this is commended as good practice.

**Planning and Preparation**

Guidance planning has commenced and a planning team has been established. The guidance plan is at a draft stage. It is recommended that this be further developed. The following documentation should be consulted as aids to this process: *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 of the Department; *Planning the School Guidance Programme* published by the National Centre for Guidance in Education (NCGE); and the guidance planning template which was prepared by the Department and is available on its website at www.education.ie. The template sets out the steps which the team should follow in the planning process. It also has links to the relevant documentation which should be consulted in the process of guidance planning. It is also recommended that representatives of students, parents and the local community be co-opted onto the committee to ensure that the views of all of the school’s partners are included in the plan. The student representatives could assist the planning team in relation to the questionnaire for sixth-year students which are planned as part of the process of monitoring and evaluating the guidance programme. The parents’ representative could also assist in obtaining feedback from parents.

The draft guidance plan contains a description of guidance programmes as they are currently being delivered. The section *Future Developments in the Guidance Programme* includes proposed expansion of the second year programme and continued work on the fifth and sixth year guidance booklet. Greater detail around the guidance activities for each year-group should be set out in the plan.

The guidance counsellors assist in the assessment of incoming students and in the identification of those students who may require additional learning or personal supports. At an open night for the parents of first-year students, the guidance counsellors explain their role. The guidance counsellors introduce themselves to all first-year classes. They consult with the year head, class tutors and the SPHE co-ordinator to identify students who may benefit from group or individual counselling to assist them in coping with the transition from primary to post-primary education. Science activities for first-year students include a science quiz afternoon and a science trip. First-year students take a wide range of subjects and choose three of five optional subjects. They make a final choice of subjects for the Junior Certificate at the end of first year. The guidance counsellors assist students in making their choices. It is recommended that, in working with
students and parents, the guidance counsellors recommend the *Subject Requirements* module on www.qualifax.ie as a source of up-to-date information on the implications of subject choice.

A module in Guidance is planned for second-year students and this is good. Students in second year make important decisions some of which may have long term consequences for them, for example the levels at which they take a subject for the Junior Certificate. Research indicates that second-year students are more likely than those in other years to become disaffected with school and may become unmotivated. This can lead to some students experiencing behavioural and personal problems. It is recommended that the planned module should assist students in identifying their personal strengths, qualities, interests and learning styles. A module for second-year students which includes exemplar lessons is included in the resource *eQuality Measures*. This resource has been circulated to all post-primary schools and the module is also available on the Scoilnet website (www.scoilnet.ie/eQuality_Measures.shtml).

The guidance programme for third-year students includes sessions on stress, study skills and coping with the preparation for the Junior Certificate. Students and their parents get information about programme options in senior cycle. Aptitude tests are administered and the results of these are used to assist students in making their subject choices for the Leaving Certificate. A booklet has been prepared by the guidance counsellors to provide students with information and advice about all of the subjects offered to senior-cycle students. It lists the third-level courses for which specific subjects are required and those for which study at higher level is a requirement. It also provides information about apprenticeship training and it includes the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). There is an information evening for students and parents on the TY. Students attend *Science Week* seminars and the science subjects are promoted. All students going directly into fifth year and LCA are met individually. The third-year programme is comprehensive and relevant.

Junior-cycle students do not have access to information and communications technology (ICT) for guidance purposes. There are many guidance related resources which have been prepared for junior-cycle students on websites such as www.careersportal.ie and www.qualifax.ie and it is recommended that access to these should be made available.

TY students have one class of Guidance per week. The programme includes exercises to identify personal skills, qualities and interests and matches these to career areas. Students undertake interest tests, prepare curriculum vitae (CV) and prepare for work experience. They attend a workshop to evaluate their work experience and this is good practice. Students attend *Science Week* activities and seminars and a TY science quiz. They attend career events and visit local businesses. The inclusion of the wide variety of relevant activities in the TY programme is commended.

There is one class of Guidance per week for students in LCA Year 1 an in LCA Year 2. A guidance counsellor delivers the module in Guidance which is a mandatory element of the LCA programme.

Fifth-year classes have one class of Guidance per week. The programme includes research on careers; personal goal setting; a focus on study skills; and an introduction to the Central Applications Office (CAO) and the Universities and Colleges Applications Service (UCAS). A large number of students in St Vincent’s make applications to colleges in the United Kingdom and they commence the preparation of their personal statement which is required under the UCAS system. Students attend career events and talks. A booklet for fifth-year and sixth-year students is currently being prepared by the guidance counsellors. An outline of the booklet was made
available to the inspector. The contents of the booklet will be wide ranging, comprehensive and relevant and should prove to be a valuable resource for students and their parents.

Sixth-year students have two classes of Guidance per week. The second class period is used to deliver a programme of outside speakers who provide information on courses, careers and on other relevant issues for school leavers. Students have access to ICT for guidance purposes and this is good. Topics covered in the programme include: a revision of the CAO and UCAS systems; information on Post-Leaving Certificate (PLC) courses; apprenticeship training; information on the Higher Education Access Route (HEAR); information about grants, scholarships and other forms of financial assistance for students in higher or further education and training; and preparation for life after school. Students attend career events and college open days. The programme is relevant and is commended.

The extra work undertaken by guidance counsellors necessitated by applications under the UCAS system is considerable. The time for this must be factored into the use of the allocation of the ex-quota hours provided by the Department for Guidance.

The guidance counsellors are facilitated to attend continuing professional development (CPD) events. Both attend the counselling supervision programme which is supported financially by the Department. This is all good practice.

**TEACHING AND LEARNING**

Two classes were visited in the course of the inspection and lessons were observed. The first lesson was with a fifth-year group. The topic of the lesson was *choosing a career*. The lesson commenced with a roll call. Students were then questioned about personal interests and how they contribute to choosing a career. This was followed by a PowerPoint presentation which outlined interest categories. Questioning about each interest category described took place during the presentation. Students were then assigned to groups of four and required to undertake a task related to the linking of interests to careers areas. The details of the task were outlined in a worksheet. Students undertook the task and completed the worksheets, which were then collected.

The methodologies used in the lesson were varied and maintained the interest of the students. It was a lively class with all students engaging in the activities. There was excellent rapport between the guidance counsellor and the students and it was evident that students enjoyed the group activity. During the group work the inspector interacted with students and discussed the issues covered in the lesson.

The second lesson observed was in a sixth-year class. The lesson commenced with a reminder about a college open day and students were questioned about an open day that some had already attended. The main part of the lesson was a revision of the CAO system and a PowerPoint presentation was used to highlight the main points around the application process. Each student had a copy of the CAO handbook and all referred to this throughout the presentation, many using a highlighter pen to mark some of the points covered in the presentation. The reasons why students should choose to make their application online were discussed. The presentation also revised the NFQ and the points system. Students were informed about the HEAR scheme and invited to meet with the guidance counsellor individually if they required information about the scheme. Questions were invited throughout the lesson. The students engaged with the lesson.
throughout and there were many questions asked. The content of the lesson was timely as students are currently preparing to make their CAO applications.

**ASSESSMENT**

Incoming students undertake the Group Reading Test II, and school-set tests in English, Gaeilge and Mathematics. The results of these tests are used to identify students who may require learning support.

The Differential Aptitude Tests (DATs) are administered to third-year students. The results of the tests are used to assist students in making their subject choices for the Leaving Certificate. A range of interest inventories are undertaken by senior-cycle students.

An annual report is compiled on the initial destination of past students. This is good practice.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- St Vincent’s provides a supportive and caring environment where all students can develop holistically.
- The school has established links with a wide range of external support services and with third-level institutions, colleges of further education, training bodies and local businesses.
- Guidance planning has commenced and a planning team has been established.
- Science is promoted in the school and science-related activities are provided for all year groups.
- There is good collaboration between the guidance and SPHE departments in the planning and delivery of programmes for junior-cycle students.

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

- The guidance plan should be further developed.
- There should be greater balance in the provision of guidance programmes between junior and senior cycles. The planned module for second-year students should be developed as a priority.
- A dedicated classroom for guidance should be provided as soon as additional facilities become available to the school.
- Students should have earlier access to ICT for guidance purposes.

Post-evaluation meetings were held with the guidance counsellors 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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