An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna
Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection of Guidance
REPORT

Coláiste na Toirbhirte
Ard Aoibhinn, Bandon, County Cork
Roll number: 62061T

Date of inspection: 16 December 2010
REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF PROVISION IN GUIDANCE

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Coláiste na Toirbhirte, Bandon. 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 na Toirbhirte is a Catholic girls’ school under the trusteeship of Catholic Education an Irish Schools Trust (CEIST) and serves a mixed rural and urban catchment area. The school has a long history in Bandon, having its origins in a small school established 1829 by Catherine O’Neill. The school has been formed in the tradition of the Presentation Congregation, especially since 1865, following the construction of a new school and convent. Although the congregation has dwindled, the educational philosophy of its members is alive in the present school. The process of renewal that has been characteristic of the congregation continues in the commitment to review and self-evaluation observed during this inspection. The school has a good record of participation in educational initiatives, including the modular whole-school guidance-planning course run by the National Centre for Guidance in Education (NCGE) and the School Development Planning Initiative (SDPI).

Guidance is an integral part of the student-support structures of the school. It is clear that the school’s mission of care is well embedded both in the personal responses of staff and in the structured management of the response. The student-support team is named the care team and meets weekly. The team is composed of senior management the guidance department and the additional educational needs co-ordinator. The home-school-community liaison (HSCL) co-ordinator had been a valuable member of the team until the scheme was ended in the school in 2008. In addition to the core value of support for students enshrined in the school’s mission, a strong association has been established between such support and the educational outcomes for students. In support of this, the staff has engaged with initiatives with a focus on professional teaching practice, such as the Learning School Project and Assessment for Learning. The introduction of Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) as a response to the perceived needs of students is symbolic of this association. Furthermore, the senior management team has identified the promotion of responsible behaviour as a planning objective. It is proposed that this be achieved through an emphasis on positive approaches to student management. Elements of this are already evident in, for example, the Meitheal team of trained student leaders, the class-prefect
system and the active student council. In addition to supports for students, a mentoring system has also been established for new members of staff.

The provision of Guidance is a whole-school endeavour. Collaborative practices are widespread. Good relationships have been established, facilitating communication both on an informal, day-to-day level and formally through regular meetings. Although the guidance department is not represented at the regular meetings of year heads, issues raised at these meetings are relayed as appropriate to the department through ongoing informal meetings with senior management and through the care team meetings. It is suggested that the simple record of meetings seen in some documentation, and available on the SDPI website, be used to record the proceedings of all meetings as appropriate. Where observed, these records provided a useful reference to decisions made and to actions to be taken.

The ex-quota allocation for Guidance from the Department of Education and Skills is twenty-four hours per week. The allocation is used by two members of staff who are guidance counsellors. In addition to their work in Guidance, both guidance counsellors engage in timetabled subject teaching. Although the guidance plan shows a clear commitment to the provision of a guidance programme that includes the requisite personal, educational and vocational components, and a programme that is very well balanced both in the timetabled guidance inputs and in planned intermittent contacts across the year groups, it is not clear that the full ex-quota allocation is being used by the guidance department. This should be clarified.

The facilities for Guidance are good. An office is provided that is centrally located and is suited to the provision of personal counselling. A range of storage and display cabinets have been installed in the office. These include secure storage for items of a confidential nature and open shelving for the display of information leaflets and booklets, both in files and as prospectuses, which form a small library of guidance information. This information is complemented by informative displays of guidance-related materials on walls throughout the building. The office is also equipped with information and communication technology (ICT), including broadband internet access used in consultations with students and in the preparation of planning documents and of materials for use in the guidance programme. The school website is current and informative, having been upgraded recently, and presents good opportunities for the dissemination of and access to relevant information.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

Both the guidance department and whole-school guidance planning are well developed. It is a noteworthy feature of both that review and self-evaluation are evident. It is noted, for example, that consultation with the student council was an ongoing part of the school’s engagement with the NCGE whole-school guidance-planning course. This is very good practice. It is clear that the views of staff and students have been surveyed and that action has been taken following the prioritisation of needs. A commendation of the quality of the guidance department plan was included in a whole-school evaluation carried out by the Inspectorate in 2008 and is upheld by this inspection. Similarly, a recommendation that the guidance department plan be developed in order to highlight the integrated supports available to students has been considerably advanced. It is clear that the guidance department in Coláiste na Toirbhirte functions in accordance with 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, and with the school’s mission to develop students’ potential. Many of the examples of good practice outlined in Looking at Guidance, published by the Inspectorate in 2009, were observed
during the inspection. These include a clear commitment on the part of the guidance department to continuing professional development (CPD) and of senior management to its facilitation. It is recommended that, in light of current good practice, the evaluate-review-design-implement momentum of whole-school guidance planning be maintained. It is suggested that a sub-group comprising members of the student-support team, and supplemented by other staff as appropriate, could fulfil this role by meeting occasionally to monitor the process or by adding an item of planning to the agenda of the student-support team meetings.

The guidance programme is a well-balanced combination of curricular and service components. The curriculum for Guidance includes the social, personal and health education (SPHE) department’s provision of elements common to Guidance to junior cycle classes and planned intermittent interventions, particularly at the stages of major transition for students. The guidance department has a core role in preparations for the design of the annual timetable through consultations with students regarding their subject preferences. Subject-department co-ordinators collaborate with the guidance department in devising and presenting information regarding the range of optional subjects and programmes available to students at the end of first year and in the senior cycle.

Similarly, the services of the guidance department, including personal, educational and vocational counselling, are available to all students through planned contacts, especially with newly entered first-year students and with students in the senior cycle. A standard referral system is in place, utilising appointment slips with the permission of teachers. Referrals to the guidance department are made by staff, through the student-support team and by student self-referral. Referrals to external agencies are co-ordinated by the student-support team in collaboration with senior management.

**TEACHING AND LEARNING**

A lesson on the theme of the Central Applications Office (CAO) application system was observed in the course of the inspection. The lesson was a continuation of work done in previous lessons in preparation for students’ applications for courses, not only through the CAO but also to other institutions. A variety of resources were used that were appropriate to the cohort and stimulated thought and discussion among students. The resources utilised included a quiz and a short, inspirational digital clip that was used as the basis of an effective question and answer session. Previous learning was consolidated through discussion in small groups. These groups were used efficiently to verify that learning had occurred and to clarify issues identified by students.

The lesson was well planned. ICT was used effectively throughout and quiz questions were distributed on a prepared handout. The objectives were stated at the outset and a roll was called. Students were addressed by name and good relationships had been established. The order in which material was presented ensured variety and student engagement, which remained high. Students responded well to directions to form small groups, for example, and were focused during the tasks presented to them.

The information presented was accurate and the skilful use of questions drew on students’ experiences to enable the formation of relevant associations between the theory and experience. Student self-evaluation was encouraged. Higher-order questions were used skilfully to extend learning, particularly in relation to the adoption of flexible approaches to decision making and to future choices. This is good practice.
ASSESSMENT

Incoming students are assessed prior to entry for general ability, literacy and numeracy by the additional educational needs department. The results of these assessments are used to ensure classes of mixed ability in the junior cycle and to identify students who may need the additional support of the additional educational needs department. Further diagnostic testing is carried out as needed, subsequent to entry. The psychometric test of general ability that has been in use is now of limited validity. It is recommended that a test with norms for the relevant Irish population be used. It may be useful to administer both tests initially in order that some comparison through, for example, statistical analysis may be made between the results. A list of test instruments may be found on the Department website at http://www.education.ie or through a link on the Qualifax website.

A range of other assessment instruments is used by the guidance department, particularly with students in senior cycle classes. These include a major aptitude test, administered during Transition Year (TY) and paper and web-based instruments, such as those associated with the Career Directions website. These are used in guidance lessons and with individual students as aids in the clarification of students’ personal and career decisions.

The documentation of plans and processes by the guidance department is of a high standard. Students’ career profiles are maintained on a proprietary online service, enabling student access and entrusting responsibility for their updating to students themselves. Records are kept of significant meetings with staff and students about all aspects of Guidance, including the tracking of students’ initial destinations after leaving school and the progress of whole-school guidance planning.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Guidance is an integral part of the student-support structures of the school.
- A strong association has been established between supports for students and the educational outcomes for students.
- There are many collaborative practices that support the delivery of Guidance in the school.
- The facilities for Guidance are good.
- Both the guidance department and whole-school guidance planning are well developed.
- The guidance programme is a well-balanced combination of curricular and service components.
- The documentation of plans and processes by the guidance department is of a high standard.
- The school website is current and informative.

As a means of building on these strengths and to address areas for development, the following key recommendations are made:
In the light of current good practice, the momentum of whole-school guidance planning should be monitored by the student-support team.

The full use of the ex-quota allocation for Guidance should be clarified in guidance plans.

A more-recently standardised psychometric test should be used for the assessment of general ability.

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.