Subject Inspection of Guidance
REPORT

Saint Vincent’s Secondary School
Saint Mary’s Road, Cork
Roll number: 62590A

Date of inspection: 3 December 2010
SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Saint Vincent’s Secondary 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 was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the report; a response was not received from the board.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

Saint Vincent’s is a girls’ secondary school in the North Cathedral area of Cork. The current enrolment of students is 287 girls. The ex-quota allocation for Guidance from the Department of Education and Skills is twenty-two hours per week. Although the school has experienced a fall in enrolment in recent years, its ex-quota allocation for Guidance has been maintained through its participation in the Guidance Enhancement Initiative and in accordance with Circular PPT12/05. The ex-quota allocation is fully used in the delivery of Guidance.

At the time of the inspection, the guidance department was adjusting to staffing changes. These related to the approved leave of one key member. Also, staff members who have held key roles in the school’s system of supports for students had retired in the recent past. These include staff with roles in the pastoral support system of year heads and class teachers, in the student-support team, in home-school liaison, in processes for dealing with crises and in whole-school guidance planning. Prior to these changes, for example, a small student-support team had met weekly in a formal setting, in addition to ongoing informal contacts. This was good practice. Despite these changes, the maintenance of support structures for students continues to be a priority for the school. Staff members with student-support responsibilities co-operate with the guidance department in the provision of these supports and in ensuring that students have access to appropriate Guidance. It is recommended that, in view of the staff changes already mentioned, the co-ordination and integration of the various supports be reviewed. As planning progresses, the professional expertise and structures specific to areas of student support such as Guidance, additional educational needs, school completion and chaplaincy should be maintained in order that such expertise might be further developed and shared. Plans should also aim to enhance the school-wide value added to learning and teaching through the supports being provided by staff in those areas.

The view of Guidance espoused by the school is in accord 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. The programme is
balanced across year groups and between contacts with classes, small groups and with individual students.

The facilities for Guidance are good. The guidance office is equipped with the requisite administrative and technological equipment, including broadband internet access. The office is appropriately and flexibly arranged for counselling, administration and information retrieval.

Communication with regard to the support needs of students is enhanced by good relationships among staff with the support of senior management. Communication with senior management is ongoing and combines the formal and informal through arranged meetings and ad hoc contacts. This is appropriate for a school of this size and in keeping with the good relationships that have been established. Whole-school formal communication with students is maintained through the elected student council and is enhanced by regular formal consultation by students with senior management. Communication with parents is on an open door basis that is supplemented by a guidance-department presence at parent-teacher meetings and open days, and through the arrangement of more formal presentations on, for example, subject and programme choice. Referrals to external agencies are managed by senior management in collaboration with the student-support team and parents. A standard system is in place for referrals to the guidance department. Referrals are made by staff, parents and through student self-referral.

**Planning and Preparation**

Guidance department planning is of a very high standard. The plan includes the guidance programme for all year groups and refers to the collaborative links between the guidance department and other staff. Of particular note is the commitment to end-of-term review and self-evaluation in collaboration with senior management. This is good planning practice. It is clear that the school’s participation in the modular whole-school guidance-planning course provided by the National Centre for Guidance in Education (NCGE) has been productive, as has engagement with the School Development Planning Initiative (SDPI). The guidance department plan is an integral part of the whole-school guidance plan, which is also very well advanced. Links have been established, in documents and in practice, with the other supports offered to students. Formal links are supported by ongoing informal communication.

In the light of the recent staff changes in the guidance department, the value of structured and well-documented planning was clearly evident in the continuity of roles and responsibilities that was facilitated by lucid documentation. In addition, the collaborative support of senior management and staff was observed to have been of vital support in the smooth transfer of responsibilities.

In the past year, the school has prioritised the development of services to cater for the additional needs of students. Because of the ongoing collaboration of staff, the guidance department has had an important role in these developments. Substantial work has already been completed in the context of guidance department participation in the modular whole-school guidance-planning course provided by the NCGE. The structure provided by this development is a useful one by which an integrated system of supports might be developed.

The location of the school close to the centre of Cork has facilitated the forging of productive links to business and educational establishments. Programmes, such as the work-experience programme for students of the optional Transition Year (TY) and of the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP), and the school’s programme of visiting speakers, have benefited
from these contacts. Similarly, guidance department involvement in the local branch of the Institute of Guidance Counsellors (IGC) has enabled participation in continuing professional development (CPD) offered by the Institute as part of its regular meetings and in professional counselling support managed in conjunction with the Department of Education and Skills. Such CPD is encouraged and facilitated by the board of management as a key element of its support for Guidance.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

The lesson observed incorporated a presentation to the TY class on the work and training of the chartered accountant by two members of a large accountancy firm. Planning for the lesson was conducted by the guidance department in collaboration with the co-ordinator of TY. This reflects the effective collaboration observed throughout the inspection both among the school’s staff and with external agencies.

Students were engaged throughout the presentation. Where clarification was sought by students, it was sought with interest and in a polite, conversational manner that suited the occasion. The presentation was informative and was appropriately personalised to fit the context of the school. Information and guidance regarding the preparation of a curriculum vitae (CV) was also given in the course of the lesson, complementing the work of the guidance department through practical examples from personal experience and in the form of a sample CV.

The lesson was well structured. A technical difficulty preventing the use of a digital presentation was overcome effectively by the use of printed notes. At the outset, a roll was called and the speakers were introduced. Prior to the conclusion of the lesson, the speakers were thanked for their presentation and students were informed about the content of subsequent lessons.

ASSESSMENT

Effective recording processes and comprehensive records add clarity and structure to the work of the guidance department. Records management is in keeping with good practice. Records are both paper based and in digital form as appropriate. Information and communication technology (ICT) is used competently in both the administration and delivery of Guidance.

The assessment of newly enrolled students is carried out collaboratively by the additional educational needs department and the guidance department. Levels of literacy, numeracy and of general ability are assessed in order to identify students with additional learning needs. Contacts with primary schools and with parents in the course of the admission process provide additional information on which decisions are made. The results of the assessments are also used to ensure the formation of classes of mixed ability in first year and to monitor student progress, particularly in the junior cycle. Further diagnostic assessment is carried out by the additional educational needs department. Ongoing communication with the guidance department ensures that the guidance needs of identified students are catered for and that arrangements are made for reasonable accommodations in the certificate examinations.

Each first-year student participates in a one-to-one session with a member of the guidance department. This is a useful intervention that fosters good relationships and, within the bounds of confidentiality, informs collaborative planning among departments with student-support responsibilities. The co-ordination of visiting speakers is managed through collaboration with, for
example, the social, personal and health education (SPHE) department and the religious education (RE) department. Similarly, the integration of some of the curricular components of the guidance programme with the SPHE curriculum is considered on an ongoing basis by both departments. This is good practice, making efficient use of the available resources.

A range of interest questionnaires and aptitude tests is administered to students in the course of the guidance programme, particularly in the senior cycle. These include digital and paper-based instruments that are used as aids to students in the clarification of personal, educational and career decisions. This is good practice.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The ex-quota allocation is fully used in the delivery of Guidance.
- The maintenance of support structures for students is a priority for the school.
- The view of Guidance espoused by the school is in accord with Department guidelines.
- The programme of Guidance is well balanced across year groups.
- The facilities for Guidance are good.
- Guidance department planning is of a very high standard.
- Whole-school guidance planning is well advanced.
- Collaboration among staff in support of students is strong.
- Records management is in keeping with good practice.

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

- The co-ordination and integration of the supports available to students should be reviewed in light of recent staff changes.
- The professional expertise and structures associated with the supports available to students should be maintained in order to enhance the school-wide value being added to learning and teaching by staff involved in those supports.

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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