

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

**Programme Evaluation
Transition Year
REPORT**

**Loreto College
Cavan
Roll Number: 61070P**

Date of inspection: 15 December 2010



**AN ROINN | DEPARTMENT OF
OIDEACHAIS | EDUCATION
AGUS SCILEANNA | AND SKILLS**

EVALUATION OF THE TRANSITION YEAR PROGRAMME

INTRODUCTION

This report has been written following an evaluation of the Transition Year (TY) programme in Loreto College, Cavan. It presents the findings of the evaluation and makes recommendations for the further development of the programme in the school. During the evaluation, the inspector held meetings with the school principal, a core group of teachers and with a small group of students. The evaluation was conducted over two days during which the inspector liaised extensively with the programme coordinator and visited classrooms to observe teaching and learning. The inspector provided oral feedback to teachers on lessons observed. The inspector also examined students' work and reviewed relevant documentation pertaining to the programme, as well as teachers' written preparation. The outcomes of the evaluation were discussed with the school principal, the deputy principal, the programme coordinator and the core team at the end of the evaluation period. Loreto College, Cavan is a voluntary secondary school under the Loreto Education Trust. Set on a large campus on the outskirts of Cavan town, it has an enrolment of 718 females.

The board of management was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the report, and the response of the board will be found in the appendix of this report.

1 QUALITY OF PROGRAMME ORGANISATION

1.1 Whole school support

The management at Loreto College, Cavan, first introduced the TY programme in 1996. The programme is very well established and has long been a positive addition to the provision for students at the school. The current programme is optional and two mixed-ability class groups were formed from the students who applied for the 2010/2011 academic year. The TY programme on offer is significantly strong and very good efforts are made to ensure that the programme remains fresh and current for students.

The programme is very well supported. School management has appointed a TY co-ordinator and three members of staff who form a core team to plan and manage the programme. This team meets formally each week. Each meeting is minuted and copies of the minutes are issued to the principal. The core team acts as a review and development group to plan for the implementation and future co-ordination of the programme. Although the co-ordinator has been in place for seven years, there have been good opportunities for sharing responsibility. This sharing of responsibility supports good teamwork and helps to develop teachers' skills. Two members of the core team are generally rotated each year to ensure that over time, a good proportion of the teaching staff have had opportunities to be part of the team. Thus there is a very good understanding of the nature of the TY programme and the programme's potential to provide very rich learning experiences for students among the general teaching staff. All members of the teaching staff are encouraged to assist the TY team from time to time and they perform roles such as visiting students while they are on work placement. This engagement facilitates direct contact with the programme for all members of teaching staff and is good practice.

Senior management has provided a very full programme of continuing professional development (CPD) for the teaching staff so as to support the good work of the TY programme. Specific in-service for the TY programme has been facilitated for the co-ordinator and other members of the TY team. The whole teaching staff has had input on a variety of topics such as Inclusion, Healthy

Eating and Assessment for Learning. It is good to note that the TY team has made presentations to staff in order to raise awareness of the TY programme among those teachers that do not teach it. Regular updates from the TY team are a feature of staff meetings which is good practice. The TY co-ordinator holds a meeting with the full TY teaching team twice per year and new teachers to the programme are well supported via information and input from the core team throughout the year. In summary, all of the teachers who work on the TY programme are very well supported.

Effective communication between the TY co-ordinator and the rest of the school community has characterised the development of the programme. The level of communication at whole-school level is mirrored in the provision of advance information on the programme to parents and students, and in regular communication between school and home. The school also maintains contact with other schools to share ideas and good practice.

The programme is delivered by a large team of teachers. Where possible, teachers are invited to become part of the TY teaching team. This good practice extends the learning opportunities for both teachers and students. Each year, experts in specific fields are invited from outside the school on to the TY teaching team to give students a fuller range of educational experiences.

Teachers on the TY team are encouraged to ‘hit the ground running’ at the beginning of each year by the TY co-ordinator so that no time is wasted and so that students become familiar with the methodologies and practices of the programme as soon as possible. This is good practice and very supportive of the students’ experience of the programme.

1.2 Resources

The programme is appropriately timetabled and a good balance is maintained between the different aspects of the programme. The programme offers students good opportunities to sample a range of subjects to build on their experience from junior cycle and to inform their subject choices for Leaving Certificate. In addition, the TY timetable is sufficiently flexible to accommodate a very wide range of stimulating cultural, sporting, and charitable learning events for students. This range of activities significantly enhances the TY programme as it provides a diverse range of relevant and life-enhancing experiences for students.

A two-week work experience period, divided into two separate week-long blocks, one in October and the other in April, is allocated to work experience. This represents good practice as two weeks allows for flexibility and sufficient experience. Students are encouraged to choose their own placements and are taught the relevant skills to be successful in this area. It was evident from discussions with students, and from the records and folders examined, that purposeful work-experience placements are availed of by the students. The TY co-ordinator acknowledged that there was some opportunity to expand the community aspect of the work experience and was in the process of examining how this aspect could be developed.

The facilities provided for TY are good. A well-equipped office has been provided for TY co-ordination. The school provides specific TY notice boards for students and teachers to enable good communication. Classrooms are teacher based so students move from room to room. Students have access to all of the classrooms and specialist rooms as appropriate.

The use and application of information and communication technology (ICT) is very well established on the programme. In a range of subjects observed over the evaluation it was clear that ICT applications were well integrated into the programme both in terms of teaching and learning, and assessment. Timetabled ICT classes are used to develop skills and to work on projects and

individual tasks which are used to support students' achievement of the European Computer Driving Licence. Students also have timetabled lessons in the use of multi-media equipment and software. This combination of ICT subjects provides a very relevant and rich learning opportunity for students and is an example of very good use of resources.

1.3 Student selection and support

The school has prepared a Policy on Admission to Transition Year. This document is appropriately inclusive and should be incorporated into the school's enrolment policy.

Third-year students and their parents are provided with relevant and timely information regarding the TY programme. The quality of the information is very good as are the arrangements made to disseminate it to the relevant parties. Students are invited to apply for the TY programme. The decision to offer a student a place is made by the principal after taking into account a number of issues. To increase transparency in the application process, consideration should be given to developing a set of clearly defined criteria for acceptance on the programme, after consultation with all stakeholders, in line with the school's ethos and values. When these are agreed, the criteria should be published for dissemination to the whole school community. Consideration could also be given to incorporating an interview into the application process.

It is clear that very good systems are in place for the support of students as they progress through the programme. The school has a very strong pastoral care team; care for students is a priority for the school. Students are assigned to class groups in TY, taking friendships and their base class group assignment into account. This has proven very effective. Students are provided with an induction programme which is a very good way to introduce students to the TY programme and to support friendship and bonding in their groups. In addition, the school operates a very good pastoral care programme in the TY year which is considered by the school as a follow on to the Social Personal and Health Education programme. It also incorporates issues regarding the workplace. This programme is allocated one period per week on the timetable which provides a good forum for issues as they arise.

Teachers of subjects in the programme are aware of TY guidelines and methodologies and are enthusiastic in their planning and delivery of the programme. Students are supported in subjects through appropriate planning and the provision of a stimulating and challenging programme. Great care is taken to ensure that the programme emphasises the enjoyment and satisfaction to be derived from engaging in learning. It was also clear from observations and interactions that students were busy and involved in purposeful TY activities. Equally, they were impressive in their ability to discuss and reflect upon their experience of the programme.

Students have a period of timetabled Careers Education with the guidance counsellor each week. This is a good use of resources as it provides students with regular opportunities to explore personal, vocational and career issues.

1.4 Home-school links

The links between home and the TY programme are well developed in Loreto College, Cavan. Parents are supportive of the work of the TY programme and events including an annual parent teacher meeting, a graduation evening and an awards ceremony to celebrate students' achievements are very well attended.

Regular communications are issued from the school such as letters, newsletters and messages in the students' journal. The school's website is also being used very effectively as a communication channel. Reports are sent home at Christmas, Easter and at the end of the summer term.

2 QUALITY OF PROGRAMME PLANNING AND COORDINATION

2.1 Planning

Planning for the TY programme is of a very high standard. The TY plan presented during the evaluation showed that reflection, evaluation and future planning are central to the activities of the core team. This plan is focused on the desire to provide the best possible TY experience for students within the school's resources and is highly praised. The team is keen to ensure that the TY plan remains fresh and contemporary for students. The programme is monitored carefully and evaluation and review, which includes meaningful and relevant contributions from all of the parties involved, is a strong feature of the programme. Currently there is a strategy to review the promotional documentation available to parents and students to better reflect the nature of the programme. This reflects the insightful planning and evaluation that characterises the TY programme at the school.

The TY co-ordinator, with the support of the principal, designs the TY programme each year. The work of the TY co-ordinator and the core team to address the specific needs of students each year, to review existing provision and to research new modules and fresh approaches to keep the TY programme vibrant and challenging is acknowledged here. This involves developing a very good relationship with students to discover their needs and interests and contributes to a programme that sustains students' momentum, motivation and morale.

Individual subject plans have been developed by the teaching team in line with the TY subject planning template. It is clear that subject plans, as evidenced in the TY plan and the lessons observed, illustrate an appropriate balance between syllabus topics from the Junior Certificate and the Leaving Certificate on the one hand, and new, interesting and innovative topics selected by the teachers. 'Once off' events and stimulating topics combine to form a challenging, engaging and student-centred curriculum for TY students. The best of the plans used learning intentions or outcomes to frame lessons. It is recommended that all lesson plans use learning outcomes to help focus on students' learning. In addition a theme, for example, 'Women in History', could be chosen by teachers and students each year. This would further enhance opportunities for cross-curricular learning.

2.2 Coordination

The dedication and commitment of the TY co-ordinator and the core group is key to the success of the TY programme in the school. This team has a timetabled period for meeting each week. Evidence was provided in the form of minutes to show this time is being used very well to plan on a long term and shorter term basis for the TY programme. The minutes of meetings also show that the implementation of plans is very efficient and thorough.

The administration of the TY programme is very good and the documentation and records associated with the programme are presented to a high standard. Minutes of meetings are typed, agreed and presented to the principal alongside issues to be dealt with in the following week. Financial planning for the programme is the responsibility of the co-ordinator who makes reports to the principal and the school's bursar. This represents effective practice.

Programme co-ordination is very good and is characterised by clarity of vision, reflection and careful preparation. Key building blocks include a planning process, contacts with the community and outside agencies, communication and evaluation procedures. The perception of the TY programme by the students and their parents is of a valuable educational and developmental experience.

2.2 Curriculum

The TY curriculum provided is comprehensive in both breadth and depth. There is an appropriate balance between the academic, vocational and personal development aspects of the core curriculum. This balance allows the programme to link effectively with the Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate programmes on offer in the school and also provides a very wide and interesting range of complementary activities and experiences for students. Appropriate time periods are provided to facilitate practical work and for regular engagement with subjects.

Students are offered a core programme of Irish, English, Mathematics, Religious Education, Pastoral Care, French or German, and ICT. The provision of pastoral care each week gives students a very good opportunity to raise specific issues as they arise. In addition students are given the opportunity to sample a range of subjects including Physics and Chemistry, Home Economics, History, Geography, Business and Finance, as well as European studies. Studying these subjects helps students to make better informed subject choice decisions for the Leaving Certificate. Students are also provided with a range of modules designed specifically for the TY programme which include First Aid, Multi-media Studies, Health and Safety Education, Careers Education, Spanish, Development Education, Chinese Cultural Studies, Art Studies, Music Education and Speech Training. These support good subject choice decision making and also give students opportunities to engage with new and exciting subject matter.

The provision of ICT education on the TY programme is very good. The combination of ICT studies and Multi-Media Studies allows students to focus on the practical application of various technologies in a studio environment. During the evaluation students were developing a blog on the school website which demonstrated students' high levels of digital literacy. This is very supportive of students' life-long learning.

There is also a very extensive range of complementary and co-curricular activities provided for students which contribute to a very full and well-balanced programme. These include a variety of short and longer term activities. Some of these activities have very close links to the modules provided for students such as the exchange programme which is closely linked to the European Studies programme. Other examples include breakfast mornings, cookery demonstrations, recitals and plays in languages studied by the students. Students are also provided with activities such as mini-company and outdoor pursuits, and they participate in the annual BT Young Scientist and Technology Exhibitions. Activities provided also include inspirational speakers from various walks of life and specific personal development opportunities and opportunities for learning for life. In summary the range of activities provided for students is stimulating, relevant and is entirely in the spirit of the TY guidelines.

The TY curriculum is reviewed and revised each year which is good practice. Students are canvassed to establish what parts of the programme may need change. This approach to programme design represents good practice. The TY programme is often used by management as a platform upon which different approaches to teaching and learning can be established. This is very appropriate.

It is very positive to note that recommendations made in previous subject inspection reports relating to the TY programme have been fully implemented. For example, Ordnance Survey Ireland maps of Cavan town were obtained for the Geography department after a subject inspection in Geography and as a result of a Music inspection, Music was introduced to the TY programme. The principal leads these developments with the subject department teams as inspections occur. This is very good work.

3 QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

3.1 Planning and preparation

Planning and preparation for the lessons observed was very good. Individual teacher plans were available for all of the lessons observed in addition to the subject plans and the wider TY plan. The plans for lessons were well thought out and demonstrated a very good awareness of the interest and motivations of the students. The methodologies planned for lessons showed a high degree of consideration by teachers. New and interesting methodologies were planned for with care and very good knowledge of students' abilities. It is very positive to note that all lesson plans address relevant aspects of students' personal development and that students are encouraged to review and reflect on their experiences in meaningful ways. The very best plans were laid out using learning outcomes in association with suggested methodologies and assessment frameworks. It is recommended that all planning be documented in this way. This method of planning will further enhance and enable cross-curricular planning in TY.

Teachers prepared very effectively for the use of resources to support learning. For example, handouts, notes, materials and other equipment was on hand and accessible for lessons. In some cases audio visual and ICT presentations were also prepared and ready for use. All of the materials prepared for lessons were appropriately tailored to the lessons involved and contributed significantly to successful learning for students.

During the evaluation it was obvious that the teachers prioritised the development of the learning environment for students. All of the classrooms observed were bright and inviting and had displays of students' work and relevant exemplars on show. In some cases the presentation of material was very carefully attended to and added significantly to the professionalism and finish of students' work. It is recommended that this approach be extended.

3.2 Learning and teaching

A total of eight lessons were observed as part of this evaluation. The quality of teaching and learning observed was very good.

The structure of lessons ensured that lessons ran smoothly. Roll call and recording of absences took place in all instances. In all cases, lessons began with an introduction of the topic to be addressed and in most cases a learning outcome/intention was written on the board for students to maintain focus. This very good practice should be used by all teachers. There was an expectation of work from the outset of each lesson. It was obvious that students were familiar with different styles of individual and group work methodologies being used in lessons and they engaged enthusiastically in all of the activities provided. All lessons were concluded appropriately and in some instances very good use was made of evaluation techniques.

A range of resources and methodologies was used in all lessons. This good practice helps students to stay focussed and to assimilate information from different sources. In addition to teacher presentation, brainstorming, questioning and mind-maps, visual stimulus materials, notes and ICT

were used to very good effect. In one of the lessons students used digital cameras and a range of software to create a document. This level of engagement with ICT is very purposeful.

Classroom management was very good in all of the lessons observed. Teachers' management of students' activities was positive and pleasant and students were carefully monitored at all times. Students were affirmed regularly and as a result they were enthusiastic about and appeared to be enjoying their learning. Students' behaviour was exemplary in each of the lessons observed and the atmosphere was very conducive to learning.

The pace of lessons was appropriate in all instances. Students were deeply engaged in all of the learning tasks set and they were keen to complete all challenges that were presented. High expectations of teachers ensured that students were sufficiently challenged to maximise their potential.

The topics for study were presented to students using methods appropriate to the mixed-ability structure of the lessons and to the TY guidelines. It is very positive to note that students' interests and motivation are accommodated in planning for learning, and during lessons. Students are encouraged to use their experience and knowledge to solve problems and to elicit knowledge on a daily basis. This approach supports independent learning and is very good practice.

Good use was made of a range of questioning techniques in the lessons observed. Specific questions were asked of named students while higher order questions encouraged students to debate and to explain their reasoning. This is very good practice.

In all cases the delivery of information by teachers was enthusiastic and motivational. In most cases the level of oral input by teachers was appropriately limited and teachers' input was designed to encourage students to think, reflect and respond. This student-centred approach to help students analyse, synthesise and communicate effectively is very positive. Where appropriate, teachers should limit their input in favour of students' responses.

The skills being developed in the lessons observed were in line with the TY guidelines and very worthwhile. There was good correlation with topics in related subject areas. Students were encouraged to make comparisons and to link aspects of their learning. The evidence presented which included students' written work, artefacts and digital work, points to a very high level of learning on the part of students.

3.3 Assessment

Good quality assessment practices were evident in the lessons observed. There was evidence of continuous, written and oral assessments in these lessons which appropriately reflect the nature of the subjects. Some of the subject plans included detailed marking schemes which were easy for students to use. A group evaluation using an assessment rubric was observed in one lesson. This is very effective practice and should be extended.

The planned assessment of students' work within the overall programme includes a combination of summative, formative and portfolio assessment. Students present their work in the form of projects and portfolios. Examination of a selection of these folders during the evaluation showed clearly that significant tasks with an appropriate level of challenge for the students are assigned, and there is much attention to detail in their presentation by students. These assessment methods are appropriate to the topics for study and to the subject plans. Assessment of these portfolios forms part of the overall assessment of learning in the programme which is good practice.

Students on the TY programme are awarded a range of certificates on satisfactory completion of certain tasks and projects. These include certificates for Drive for Life, a range of coaching certificates in sport, First Aid, Food Safety, Pope John Paul II Award and Gaisce. In addition to the school's TY programme award these combine to form a valuable portfolio of students' achievements over the TY year.

Teachers use a variety of assessment tools with students and self-assessment is also promoted. A separate TY report form has been developed for use at Christmas and Easter. The student portfolio and a work-experience report are presented for assessment at the end of the year. Teachers are also asked to take into account a range of factors such as students' attendance and enthusiasm as well as their academic progress in subjects. The outcomes of these assessments inform a final grade of excellent, distinction, merit and credit. These are presented at an awards and celebration evening.

4 SUMMARY OF STRENGTHS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The TY programme is very well established and is a very positive addition to the provision for students at the school.
- The programme is very well supported by the school principal and school management; this includes the provision of a very full programme of CPD for teaching staff.
- There is very good support for and awareness of the TY programme's potential to provide very rich learning experiences for students amongst the whole teaching staff.
- Very good systems are in place for the support of students in TY including a timetabled period for pastoral care, and care for students is a priority among staff.
- Planning for the TY programme is of a very high standard and preparation, reflection and evaluation are key strengths of the programme-planning process.
- Vision, high quality administration and good communication with all parties ensure that the co-ordination of the programme is very good.
- The TY curriculum is well balanced and comprehensive in both breadth and depth.
- The quality of provision for ICT education on the programme is very good.
- The recommendations for subject inspections relating to TY have been fully implemented.
- The quality of teaching and learning was good in the lessons observed. This was supported by a very high level of planning on the part of individual teachers.
- The assessment modes and procedures used in TY represent very good practice.

As a means of building on these strengths the following key recommendations are made:

- The policy on admission to TY should be included in the general school policy on enrolment.
- The application process should include a transparent system by which students are assigned to the programme.
- Those plans that have not used lesson outcomes thus far should develop the TY subject plans in terms of learning outcomes for students.

Appendix

SCHOOL RESPONSE TO THE REPORT

Submitted by the Board of Management

Area 1: Observations on the content of the inspection report

Area 2: Follow-up actions planned or undertaken since the completion of the inspection activity to implement the findings and recommendations of the inspection

The Teachers of T.Y. have taken action on the Learning Outcomes
The T.Y. Policy and T.Y. form will be sent out with the 3rd Year Reports in Mid-December each year
The T.Y. policy was reviewed by the B.O.M. A process to identify “reserved placed” was identified.