

**An Roinn Oideachais agus Eolaíochta  
Department of Education and Science**

**Subject Inspection of Guidance**

**REPORT**

**Saint Mary's Secondary School  
Macroom, County Cork  
Roll number: 62320R**

**Date of inspection: 8 May 2007  
Date of issue of report: 6 December 2007**

**REPORT ON THE QUALITY OF PROVISION IN GUIDANCE**

**SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT**

This report has been written following a subject inspection in St Mary's Secondary School, Macroom. 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 the 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 to this report.

**SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT**

St Mary's Secondary School is a Catholic girls' school under the trusteeship of the Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy which will be transferred to trust of CEIST (Catholic Education – An Irish Schools' Trust) when that body is fully operational. Currently 323 girls are enrolled and it is projected that enrolment will remain at about this level for the coming school year. Longer-term projections indicate a rising school-going population. It is estimated that the population of Macroom has increased by a third in recent years to approximately 5,000. Large-scale infrastructural projects are about to begin, with the building of new roads connecting the Ballincollig bypass to the County Bounds and which will reduce the driving time to Cork City to twenty-five minutes. The school is close to the centre of the town. Building has begun on the relatively confined school grounds as part of the rationalisation of the school and convent complex. The building is expected to be in commission by the end of the 2007-2008 school year.

Guidance provision at St Mary's Secondary School is a testament to able staff, good planning and attention to administrative detail. This is all the more evident given recent developments in building, staffing and trusteeship. Despite the potential for upheaval following any of those events the school has maintained a clear priority for Guidance and student support. One factor in the smooth transitions has been the excellent documentation of systems and plans. This has enabled continuity and has eased the burden of change for staff. The principalship is held in an acting capacity during the current secondment of the principal. For Guidance, it has been a fortunate aspect of senior management that positions have been held by staff qualified in, or sympathetic to, Guidance. Because of senior management changes, the present guidance counsellor is employed on a temporary basis and will shortly complete studies for the Graduate Diploma in Guidance and Counselling. As an interim

measure, the thirteen hours which are allocated to the school for Guidance are being shared among staff for the delivery of Guidance and are being well used. The majority of individual hours are on the timetable of the trainee guidance counsellor whose actual hours of work are well in excess of those required. The guidance allocation for 2007-2008 will remain at thirteen hours and it is recommended that those hours be on the timetable of the guidance counsellor.

The school is currently in a supernumerary staffing situation although a number of staff have retired in the recent past. These, and other factors, are reported by the principal to have had a limiting effect on the distribution of resources, particularly in the area of special education. It is to the credit of the special education team, however, that the area is well serviced and that individual education plans have been put in place for all prioritised students, twenty-three in number. Good communication between the special education team and those involved in Guidance and spiritual care ensures a comprehensive programme of supports for students. This is further enhanced by the year-head system in which student management, administration and guidance are major responsibilities for those involved.

A good balance has been achieved in the delivery of Guidance to all year groups and in the context of classroom, small group and individual contacts with students. The integration of elements of the Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE), Religious Education (RE), Civic, Social and Political Education (CSPE) and Physical Education (PE) programmes with the guidance programme, particularly in the junior cycle, is well in keeping with the *Draft Guidance Framework* recently published by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA).

Facilities for Guidance are very good. They include an office, which doubles as a counselling room, with computer, broadband access, printer, telephone and photocopier. Appropriate storage, both secure and open, has been provided. Students have access to guidance-related information in the careers library and on display boards which have been strategically placed throughout the school for most impact. Students may also access information on the school's information and communication technology (ICT) system either in the ICT room by arrangement with staff, or in the guidance office.

The school has in place a very good support system for students, characterised by excellent integration and teamwork founded on planned formal and informal meetings and on good communication, ably led by the principal. The specialisms and expertise of those involved are well understood and the upgrading of skills, at all levels of staff, through continuing professional development is encouraged and facilitated.

Referral systems within the school and to agencies external to the school are managed by the principal in collaboration with the student-support team. The guidance counsellor receives referrals from staff and by self referral of students. A National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) psychologist is not currently assigned to the school. Referrals for psychological assessment are made through the Scheme for Commissioning Psychological Assessments.

## **PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

Whole-school planning is at an advanced stage at St Mary's and is in keeping with best practice. Documentation of the process is excellent in both the developmental and permanent aspects of the plan. The personal plan and programme of the guidance counsellor are also excellent as is the whole-school guidance programme. Whole-school guidance planning has, to date, been an integral part of the school plan. A team approach, specific to whole-school guidance planning, has been initiated recently to formalise the guidance aspects of the school plan. A review of current practice has been carried out and prioritised needs have been identified using school development planning templates. The review has been commendably broad and centred on student support. The high standard of existing documentation lays an excellent foundation for this work. It is to be commended that planning documentation, while clarifying the roles and responsibilities of those involved in student support, has taken account of the school-wide implications of Guidance and links into other school policies. It is particularly noteworthy that existing plans are based on a firm commitment to the basic values

espoused by the school, that these values are clearly stated at the outset and that they are to be the touchstone against which actions in Guidance are to be evaluated.

The Guidance programme for all year groups is comprehensive and shows a thorough understanding of the developmental guidance needs of each year group. Examples are the well-structured process of induction for incoming students which is managed by an enthusiastic team and the decision to offer all subjects to first-year students. Junior Certificate optional subjects are chosen in the spring term of first year. The school has an open policy of admission and welcomes students with special educational needs. Resources to cater for the individual needs of potential students are sought from the Department of Education and Science in advance of entry where possible. It is recommended that a statement regarding the availability of resources on page five of the admissions document be deleted or modified to reflect this open policy.

Subject and programme choice for the senior cycle is managed in a similarly student-friendly way. All senior cycle students are met individually on a planned basis by the guidance counsellor. Information sessions are arranged through class contact and at evening sessions for parents. Subject choice for the Leaving Certificate is based on students' preferences and is equitable and balanced. Optional Leaving Certificate subjects are chosen during Transition Year (TY), which is taken by all students.

Very good use is made of ICT for planning and for teaching purposes. Web-based information is accessed using a variety of sources such as Qualifax and Career Directions. Planning the use of ICT in the guidance programme is an integral part of the process of continuous communication between the principal and guidance counsellor. Similarly, the consideration of the guidance implications of curricular and other planning is promoted by staff and management who are competent in this area.

A flexible and open system of parental involvement is encouraged by management. Parents may contact the guidance counsellor by telephone or by formal appointment. The guidance counsellor attends parent-teacher meetings and organises information events on career and subject choice and on study skills. Mock interviews are arranged annually for senior students by the Parents' Association in collaboration with the guidance counsellor and with local employers.

The wider community is also involved through the work-experience programme for TY and LCVP students, presentations by An Garda Síochána and others on issues such as road safety and bullying. Visitors to the school include speakers from a range of training and education providers at further and higher education levels. Such initiatives are commended.

The school's commitment to continuing professional development of staff has already been commended and is noted to be an important part of whole-school and subject-department planning.

## **TEACHING AND LEARNING**

The lesson observed in the course of the inspection was with a class of fifth years on the topic interview preparation. The quality of teaching was akin to the high standards seen in all other aspects of the inspection. Preparation and planning were very good. Materials and resources were to hand. Good references were made throughout the lesson to previous learning and to the experiences of past students. Similarly, the topic was placed in the context of future lessons and of the probability of interview experiences. A data projector was used seamlessly in the presentation of slides to illustrate the points being made. Handouts and worksheets were relevant, stimulating, well timed and brief. A range of questions, varying from those demanding factual to more analytical answers, was used throughout. Very good use was made of the voice in encouraging, prompting and questioning. A well-organised role play, featuring an interview situation, was arranged during the class and was entirely appropriate to the lesson. The responses of students showed that such an exercise is a regular part of their schooling.

The atmosphere during the lesson was calm and receptive, aided by clear instructions and a varied flow of activities.

Movement in the room was facilitated by the arrangement of desks. Contact was made with each student during the lesson and encouragement was given to focus on the task at hand.

Students responded well to directions and engaged with the materials, presented as handouts and worksheets. Responses to questions showed an ability among students to apply new learning to past experience and to extrapolate general principles from an analysis of the material.

## **ASSESSMENT**

The induction of incoming first-year students begins in the autumn prior to entry, with an open evening and the early stages of enrolment. Part of the process is the assessment of general educability and literacy in February. Assessment is carried out by a team comprising the guidance counsellor, special education co-ordinator, principal and others. This team approach is again commended. The results of the assessment are used to monitor students' progress, especially through first and second year, to ensure mixed-ability classes and to aid in the identification of students with special learning needs and of those with language deficits. Ten students are enrolled whose language of birth is not English. Further diagnostic assessment is carried out by the special education co-ordinator in the early stages of first year and decisions regarding appropriate action and the use of resources are made on the basis of the results. The AH2 test is used as the test of general ability. It is recommended that, where tests of general ability are being proposed, consideration be given to the use of tests which have been standardised more recently on an Irish sample.

A number of interest inventories are used to inform students' decision-making in the senior cycle. Some, such as those associated with Qualifax and Career Directions are web based. Others are paper based, such as the Career Interest Inventory and the MUASIC test.

The destinations of students who have left school are tracked by the guidance counsellor. In recent years it has been found that mobile-phone contact has been possible with all who have left. The documentation associated with this and with all other contacts is excellent. Student profiles, meetings and follow-up actions are meticulously documented. Similarly, meetings with staff on guidance issues are documented and retained in accordance with high standards of practice.

## **SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Guidance provision is excellent.
- The service is well planned and documented.
- Student support is a well-integrated, efficient system.
- Communication, both formal and informal, is very good.
- Teamwork is a strong characteristic of the school.
- The facilities for Guidance are very good.

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

- It is recommended that the full hours allocated to Guidance be on the timetable of the guidance counsellor.
- It is recommended that a statement regarding the availability of resources on page five of the admissions document be deleted or modified to reflect the school's policy of open admission.
- It is recommended that, where tests of general ability are being proposed, consideration be given to the use of tests which have been recently standardised on an Irish sample.

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.

#### Appendix

### **SCHOOL RESPONSE TO THE REPORT**

Submitted by the Board of Management

### **Inspection Report School Response Form**

#### **Area 1 Observations on the content of the Inspection Report**

The admissions policy has now been amended to reflect the recommendation.