

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

**Programme Evaluation
Transition Year
REPORT**

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

Date of inspection: 27 November 2013



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

REPORT ON THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN TRANSITION YEAR

INFORMATION ON THE PROGRAMME EVALUATION

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| Dates of inspection | 27 and 28 November 2013 |
| Inspection activities undertaken <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Review of relevant documents• Discussion with principal, co-ordinator, students and key staff• Interaction with students | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Observation of teaching and learning during seven class periods• Examination of students' work• Feedback to principal and co-ordinator |

MAIN FINDINGS

- Very good quality teaching and learning was observed in Transition Year (TY) lessons.
- A comprehensive range of core subjects, a subject-sampling layer of subjects, and a range of complementary experiences are offered to TY students.
- Provision for the programme is very good and is subject to regular change arising from on-going school self-evaluation.
- The compulsory TY programme holds a significant position within the school curriculum and is valued by the students, teachers and school management as a meaningful academic, social and personal developmental experience for students.
- The programme is very well co-ordinated and a strong emphasis is placed on students' learning.

MAIN RECOMMENDATIONS

- The use of Leaving Certificate textbooks in some subject areas in TY should be phased out.
 - Coursework and portfolio assessment should be given an increased assessment weighting in end-of-term assessments.
 - Subject planning documentation for TY should be extended beyond identifying course content to reflect the range of very effective teaching and learning experiences observed in lessons.
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INTRODUCTION

St Mary's is a voluntary secondary school for girls with a current enrolment of 318 students. The school serves the town of Macroom and its surrounding rural hinterland. The compulsory TY programme has been developed and offered to students for many years and is well embedded in the school curriculum. Following Junior Certificate and TY, students can choose the Leaving Certificate or the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP).

TEACHING AND LEARNING

- Teaching and learning of very good quality, that fully reflected the philosophy and rationale of the TY programme, was observed in lessons. Students were provided with a significantly different pedagogical experience that focused on their individual and collaborative engagement with participation in the planned learning in each classroom.
- Classroom experiences were interactive but particularly focused on activating students to respond to the range of tasks and stimuli provided. In the Biology, Physics and Home Economics lessons observed, the students were engaged in practical and achievable experimental tasks that were clearly linked to and scaffolded within previous learning. A modern language lesson had students engaged in the four skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening supported by very effective audio-visual materials. Business students explored the range of issues involved in car insurance for young drivers through individual live on-line applications for insurance cover, while mathematics students were clearly challenged by tasks based on practical applications of correlation. An English class group was engaged in a thematic analysis of a short film that was suited to a detailed exploration of film as text.
- In each lesson, careful preparation by the teacher included establishing clear linkage to previous learning and the setting of an appropriate pace for learning within the mixed-ability class contexts. It was clear that co-operative learning strategies were routine practice in TY lessons and students readily engaged in these activities. The overall structure, purpose and planned outcomes of these lessons were clear. Student feedback from co-operative learning activities was very effective in advancing the intended learning outcomes of lessons.
- It was clear that these lessons were fully appropriate to TY, based on the fundamental principle of varied and engaging pedagogical practice that supports students' active participation in their own learning. It was equally clear that the teachers had achieved the appropriate balance between providing a TY experience for students that would support their transition to more examination-focused approaches in fifth year and sixth year. It is therefore somewhat incongruous that students are required to purchase Leaving Certificate textbooks in their TY core subjects. These textbooks were not used in the lessons observed but were visible on students' desks. The extent of textbook use in TY lessons was discussed with teachers and it is recommended that textbooks for fifth year be purchased on completion of TY and that their use in the TY programme be phased out.
- Classroom routines in relation to the aforementioned co-operative learning strategies, the organisation of experiments, safety in the laboratories and the use of the student journal are well established. Students were observed to be courteous, friendly and mutually respectful of their peers and teachers in a very positive learning environment.

- Assessment practices are under review within the programme. Currently, students experience a combination of classroom-based and end-of-term tests. They also complete a range of projects for individual subjects that can form part of an overall assessment of student achievement. The inclusion of coursework components, already being trialled within Christmas examinations, should be increased from the current twenty percent weighting, reflecting the weighting for such components at Leaving Certificate, to fifty or sixty percent of the marks for each assessment. This would place greater value on the applied and practical elements of subjects, on the skills and competencies developed, and would reward students for their efforts in these areas.
- A very positive progress and goal-setting interview with individual students in January of each year provides further assessment of on-going achievement and guidance for students on progression from the programme. The current portfolio element of this interview should be extended, based on the contract of learning that is agreed at that interview. It is recommended that this portfolio should become part of the end-of-programme assessment for each student thus allowing them to demonstrate the outcome of their agreed contract of learning.

PROGRAMME PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

- The programme is appropriately organised and timetabled providing the required layers of experience for students. A comprehensive range of core subjects, a subject-sampling layer of subjects, and an extensive range of complementary experiences is offered including work experience, a language exchange and a school musical.
- On-going internal review and self-evaluation of the programme have resulted in the aforementioned changes to assessment, attention to attendance, punctuality and the use of the school journal to record homework. In the current year, particular attention is being paid to limiting and rebalancing the impact of out-of-class involvements on core classroom engagements while also expanding the quality of production of the school musical. Such a culture of self-evaluation towards improvement is very positive. The development of a wider range of locally-based social and community involvements for students should be considered in a future review.
- Discussions with a core group of teachers, a representative group of students and senior management revealed the significant position that the programme holds within the school community as a meaningful academic, social and personal developmental experience for the students involved.

PROGRAMME PLANNING, CO-ORDINATION AND EVALUATION

- Leadership and co-ordination of the programme are of very high quality. Due to the resource implications of staff retirements, the deputy principal has undertaken the co-ordination of the programme in recent years. A comprehensive and very effective approach to programme planning, record keeping, communication, student support and review strategies are reflected in the current very effective operation of the programme.

- More detailed subject-specific TY planning should however be advanced. Subject planning documentation should be extended beyond identifying course content to reflect the range of very effective teaching and learning methodologies observed in lessons.

The draft findings and recommendations arising out of this evaluation were discussed with the principal and deputy principal at the conclusion of the evaluation. The board of management of the school 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.

Appendix

School response to the report

Submitted by the Board of Management

Area 1 Observations on the content of the inspection report

The Board of Management of St Mary's welcomes this report and feels that it is an accurate reflection of the commitment of management, staff and pupils to the Transition Year Programme. The Board wishes to commend and congratulate the Co-ordinator and staff involved with Transition Year whose very good work is recognised throughout the report.

The Board is particularly pleased that the report recognises that Transition Year holds a significant position within the school as a meaningful academic, social and personal developmental experience for the students.

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

As part of future subject planning teachers will be asked to document the teaching and learning experiences and methodologies that are particular to transition year.

As part of our annual review consideration will be given to further increasing the assessment weighting of coursework and the portfolio over end of term assessments.