

**An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna
Department of Education and Skills**

**Subject Inspection of Guidance
REPORT**

**Coláiste Mhuire
Askeaton, County Limerick
Roll number: 71700F**

Date of inspection: 1 October 2009

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REPORT ON THE QUALITY OF PROVISION IN GUIDANCE

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Coláiste Mhuire. 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 counsellors. 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 Mhuire is commended for the provision of a programme and service of Guidance of very high quality. The school is a designated community college catering for a mainly rural population. The enrolment of girls and boys is stable at approximately 450 students. In 2004, the school's ex-quota allocation by the Department of Education and Science for Guidance was thirty-three hours per week because of a successful application for extra hours under the Guidance Enhancement Initiative. Because of a drop in enrolment in 2004 for demographic reasons and the introduction of a new scale of allocation under Circular PPT12/05 in 2005, the ex-quota allocation reverted to twenty-two hours per week in September 2005. This allocation is used efficiently and fully by two

job-sharing guidance counsellors who form the guidance department. The department is run in accordance with good practice in every respect, including its administrative and recording procedures, its collaborative work with teachers and management and in its service to students, and their parents. It is clear that the work of the department in, for example, the preparation of documents and plans, and in its administration, is far in excess of what might be achieved within the allocated ex-quota hours.

Although the guidance department comprises just two members, its collaborative work with other departments, such as the special educational needs department, with programme co-ordinators and, in particular, with the student-support team, has broadened its influence, in keeping with the principles of whole-school guidance. Collaboration between the guidance department and senior management is particularly commended. The County Limerick Vocational Education Committee (VEC) Student-Support Team Initiative is noted as a good example of structural support for such collaboration and reflects a similar interest by the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) in the formation of student-support teams in schools. Practice in Guidance at Coláiste Mhuire exemplifies the effectiveness of a planned, structured and integrated approach to whole-school Guidance. In most respects, it echoes good practice in Guidance outlined in *Looking at Guidance*, published by the Inspectorate in 2009.

It is characteristic of such systems, in general, that good communication, relationships and leadership contribute to their effectiveness. This is the case at Coláiste Mhuire. Such structures as the student-support team are effective by virtue of not only the interest and determination of staff, but also of their facilitation by senior management. The participation by the principal in the team is indicative of this management support and of the benefits to communication among all those involved. The team comprises both guidance counsellors, the principal, special educational needs co-ordinator, chaplain, who is a full-time member of staff, a year head and other staff with a professional interest in the process. In effect, the student-support team is a middle-management team that functions at the core of teaching and learning by catering discreetly for the needs of students in collaboration with staff, parents and with agencies external to the school. Its effect is, thus, on learning outcomes for students. This is very good practice.

The provision of Guidance is very good. Timetabled and intermittent class contacts are well balanced across all year groups and collaboration with teachers of subjects such as Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE), Religious Education (RE) and Civic, Social and Political Education (CSPE) enhances this provision. Similarly, a good balance has been achieved between work with individual students, with students in small groups and with classes.

Provision for Guidance is also very good. The school is of a modern design, with well-appointed rooms, including offices for both guidance counsellors. The office and technological equipment appropriate to efficient guidance practice has been installed in both offices. This includes broadband internet access and arrangements suited to counselling.

Effective links have been established with external agencies to which students may be referred for more specialised interventions and who, such as NEPS, may be consulted by the school for advice and information. Referrals to such organisations are managed by the guidance department in collaboration with senior management. Referrals to the guidance department are managed by means of a standard system of referral slips entailing the permission of teachers.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

Guidance provision at Coláiste Mhuire is based on well-organised planning both at the guidance-department level and at the whole-school level. The planning process is ongoing and well documented. It incorporates the programme for all year groups, including the cohort of potential students in transition from primary to post-primary education. It is clear that documents relevant

to guidance planning such as *A curricular framework for Guidance in post-primary education*, published as a consultative document by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) in 2007, have been consulted in the course of planning by the whole-school guidance planning group which is long established. It is also clear that whole-school Guidance as outlined in Inspectorate (2005) policy document *Guidelines for second-level schools on the implications of section 9(c) of the Education Act 1998, relating to students' access to appropriate Guidance* is a core value of guidance planning and provision in the school. It may be of interest that these, and other documents useful in guidance planning, are available for downloading and viewing on the Qualifax website at <http://www.qualifax.ie/>. The guidance department has prepared a list of proposed objectives which it considers would be desirable, ideally, in the guidance service provided. It is recommended that this list which was seen as a separate document be incorporated in the guidance plan. This list demonstrates a serious commitment to self-review and may be an important tool in deliberations with senior management regarding plans for guidance provision in each new school year.

The planning process is further formalised by the adoption of the guidance plan by the board of management. Policy documents are reviewed by parents prior to presentation to the board for its consideration of them. This is very good practice.

There is clear evidence of the participation and assistance of the local partners in education, including parents and employers, in events organised in collaboration with the guidance department such as information evenings, work experience and the arrangements of visits to and by the school. This is commended.

The breadth of whole-school guidance is amply demonstrated by the continuing professional development (CPD) of members of the guidance team. In addition to being active members of the Institute of Guidance Counsellors and participating in events organised by the Institute, such as ongoing support for professional counselling, CPD events have included topics such as Adlerian approaches to dealing with young people, child protection, drama as a tool for counsellors and counselling the bereaved. The encouragement of, and facilitation by senior management of participation in these events further illustrates the school's commendable commitment to rigorous planning.

LEARNING AND TEACHING

Two lessons were observed in the course of the inspection. In both cases, the quality of learning and teaching was high. In addition to the core topics of study skills and a review of a recently attended career exhibition, students were subtly encouraged to examine issues such as career choice, the points system for entry to higher education institutions and the availability of post-leaving courses and to use online resources such as Careers Portal. Teachers' expertise and personal resources were amply displayed during the lessons during which students were continuously encouraged by the appropriate use of questions to consider the issues being dealt with and to seek further information. Students responded well to prompting and to the materials presented. The use of information and communication technology (ICT) is commended. Students were familiar with the technology and it was clear that it was being used properly as a tool for accessing and processing information, important skills in the context of Guidance.

Lessons were well structured and planned. The roll was called at the outset and some announcements were made prior to the introduction of the main topics. The information was summarised and further work was assigned before the lessons ended. The lessons were well paced and varied, maintaining students' attention throughout. Opportunities for students' self-directed learning were abundant, particularly where ICT was used. Questions were well formed and included a range of a higher-order questions that clearly prompted students' thinking.

Students were engaged throughout and, in brief conversations prior to the end of the lessons and in their questions to teachers, showed themselves to be interested in and reflective not only on their personal development but also on the school and community. It was clear that good relationships existed in the classrooms and that these were a contributing factor in the good order and atmosphere observed during the lessons.

ASSESSMENT

Collaboration between the guidance and special educational needs departments in the assessment of students is highly commended. This facilitates an integrated approach to student induction, assessment, and monitoring and to continuing supports for students throughout their schooling. It also highlights the positive results of structured approaches to planning already mentioned. A range of standardised assessments is used especially as part of the process of induction of new students that begins while students are in primary schools and that continues through first year. Assessments of general ability are carried out in January prior to entry. These assessments are used to ensure classes of mixed ability in first year and to monitor students' progress. Further diagnostic testing is carried out by the special educational needs department to determine, and to provide for, the individual learning and educational needs of identified students. Aptitude tests are administered while students are in Transition Year (TY) and in fifth year and the results are interpreted for students in the course of individual interviews and in keeping with good assessment practice. Various on-line instruments are used in the course of guidance classes, particularly in the senior cycle, as aids to students in clarifying personal, educational and career decisions. The ongoing review by the guidance department of the instruments used is commended.

Records are maintained and stored appropriately. Documentation of meetings, both with individual students and with staff is of the highest order. Such documentation includes records of students' initial destinations after leaving school, compiled in collaboration with senior management, the results of reviews of guidance provision by parents and students and records associated with assessments.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Guidance provision is of very high quality.
- Good use is made of available resources.
- Collaboration among staff and with management is a key characteristic of the school.
- The support of students is a core value.
- Supports for students are structured and planned.
- Students, parents and management are involved in the planning process.
- The documentation of plans and processes contributes to the effectiveness of the guidance service.

As a means of building on these strengths, the following key recommendation is made:

- It is recommended that list of proposed objectives which the guidance department considers would be desirable in the service provided be incorporated in the guidance plan and used, as appropriate, in deliberations with senior management when planning provision for each new school year.

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.

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