An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Programme Evaluation
Leaving Certificate Applied
REPORT

Presentation Secondary School
Clonmel, County Tipperary
Roll Number: 65430P

Date of inspection: 16 February 2011

AN ROINN OIDEACHAIS AGUS SCILEANNA | DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND SKILLS

EVALUATION OF THE LEAVING CERTIFICATE APPLIED

INTRODUCTION

This report has been written following an evaluation of the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme in Presentation Secondary School, Clonmel. 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, the co-ordination team and with a small group of students. The evaluation was conducted over two days during which the inspector liaised extensively with the programme co-ordinators 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 and the programme co-ordination team following the evaluation.

Presentation Secondary School is an all-girls voluntary secondary school that caters for 480 students from a considerable range of socio-economic backgrounds. The school has provided the LCA programme for its students since 1999 and currently has a total of seventeen students enrolled in the programme, nine students in fifth year and eight students in sixth year. The board of management was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the evaluation, and the response of the board will be found in the appendix to this report.

1 QUALITY OF PROGRAMME ORGANISATION

1.1 Whole school support

Senior management has demonstrated its full commitment to the LCA programme through the provision of a wide range of resources that help to facilitate the effective delivery of LCA. The allocation of weekly meeting times for the LCA teaching team combined with delegated responsibility for the programme to two co-ordinators, one for each year group, also demonstrates this commitment and has resulted in a vibrant and well implemented programme.

LCA is a fundamental component of the school's curriculum and is part of the fabric of the school's daily activities. Upcoming events are highlighted and as a large number of teachers is involved in delivering the programme, a good degree of awareness of LCA exists among the teaching staff. In addition, the teaching staff are kept informed through the circulation of a staff newsletter, the LCA notice board and through the teachers' participation and attendance at events organised for and by LCA students.

Plans are in progress to develop a formal teacher induction programme. This is a worthwhile endeavour and should result in the collation of a large variety of useful resources that will help teachers new to delivering LCA courses adapt to the challenges that they may encounter.

1.2 Resources

Teachers are assigned to teach the programme based upon their qualifications, skill sets, interests and experience of teaching LCA class groups. The LCA teaching team consists of an appropriate blend of new and experienced teachers and this helps to maintain continuity within the programme

while also facilitating the introduction of new methodologies. This blend increases the capacity of the LCA teaching staff and has resulted in the formation of a committed teaching team who are open to the implementation of new methods and strategies for the benefit of the school's LCA students.

The LCA curricular framework has been implemented in a manner that has resulted in the compulsory components of the programme being timetabled in accordance with the various timetabling guidelines. All timetabled subjects are allocated an adequate amount of time and in some cases receive considerably more than the minimum requirement. Senior management should monitor these allocations on an ongoing basis and endeavour to ensure that courses that promote the key principles of the programme such as literacy, numeracy and communication skills are given maximum weightings where possible.

Both LCA groups are assigned a home classroom and the recent development of an additional specialist room has enabled the inclusion of Hair and Beauty as an elective component on the fifth-year curriculum. Information and Communication Technology (ICT) resources are currently being updated, and on completion will assist teachers in their plans to incorporate additional ICT resources into lessons. Planning the most worthwhile applications of such resources should form a significant portion of the discussions at LCA teaching team meetings and there should be considerable focus on utilising ICT to enhance students' learning. The continued development of infrastructure and facilities further demonstrates management's commitment to providing the optimum teaching and learning environment for LCA students.

Currently LCA students are encouraged to contribute to the costs of implementing the programme financially. They are asked to pay part of this fee at the enrolment stage and the remainder at a later stage. It is recommended that the school would highlight the voluntary nature of this contribution and sever the link between its payment and students' enrolment in the programme.

1.3 Student selection and support

Effective procedures are in place to ensure that students who would benefit do avail of the programme. Initially the Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP) team and the relevant year head meet with the programme co-ordinator for the incoming LCA group. Additional information is gathered from the learning support teachers and guidance counsellor. This information is analysed and a target group of students is identified. Parents of these students are invited into the school for an information evening where the benefits of the programme are discussed and students are encouraged to apply for a place. These interventions help to ensure that the students for whom the LCA programme is the most suitable choice secure a placement for it.

The required 7.5 hours guidance is provided for fifth-year students in a flexible manner. Examples of this approach include team-teaching with the Vocational Preparation teacher and borrowing class time from other subject areas. To further improve this aspect of the programme's delivery, school management should make every effort to schedule a guidance class for both year groups throughout the year. This will enable students to meet with the guidance counsellor on a more regular basis thereby enhancing the benefits of the current guidance provision.

A number of useful supports are utilised to assist students with additional educational needs. LCA students are tested and retested to determine their levels of progress and to identify their requirements for reasonable accommodation in certificate examinations. A draft literacy and numeracy policy is also being developed by the learning support team and once completed, this policy should help teachers to incorporate common literacy and numeracy strategies across the

range of LCA courses. The active involvement of special needs assistants in lessons characterised the good levels of student support observed during the evaluation. The possibility of re-introducing co-operative teaching methods in mainstream lessons should also be explored where appropriate. If re-introduced in a formal and structured manner, teachers would benefit from the specialised expertise of their learning-support colleagues.

Student induction to LCA is well planned and was reported to be beneficial particularly in relation to teambuilding. Induction takes place in September and both fifth and sixth-year groups are involved. Induction comprises of various activities that focus on increasing students' understanding and awareness of key terms and practices that are fundamental to the delivery of the programme. The time taken to develop a positive group dynamic is commended.

1.4 Home-school links

Parents of prospective LCA students are given details of the programme and informed of the possible benefits for their daughter prior to application. This occurs primarily at an information evening hosted for parents of third–year students. Additional information on the LCA programme is also made available to parents at the annual open evenings. Parents of incoming LCA students are encouraged to attend an informal coffee morning in September. It was reported that this event is successful as it provides teachers and parents with useful opportunities to develop links and to discuss students' participation and development within the programme.

Ongoing communication is maintained with parents through regular correspondence in relation to students' academic and personal development and in relation to their attendance. Good quality and regularly maintained records are utilised effectively to ensure that parents are fully aware of the ramifications of falling below the required 90% attendance threshold. To supplement these reports, a text-alert system provides real-time information for parents and helps in some respects to eliminate unnecessary absences. The pastoral care team also utilises attendance records to identify at-risk students especially those who may not gain full credits due to their poor attendance. This information is then used to target specific students in an effort to maximise their achievement.

The end-of-year award ceremony is also utilised to maintain a positive link with the parents of LCA students, to celebrate students' achievements and to mark the occasion of their graduation from LCA. This event helps to highlight the positive impact of the programme and to reward students for their commitment and diligence throughout the duration of the programme.

2 QUALITY OF PROGRAMME PLANNING AND COORDINATION

2.1 Planning

A significant level of programme planning has resulted in the formation of a LCA policy document and supporting LCA planning files for each year group. Considerable time has gone into the development of these documents and the resulting programme reflects this level of effort. Each year group's teaching team meets weekly and these meetings are chaired by the relevant co-ordinator. Planning meetings take place monthly between senior management and the co-ordination team. Records of discussions and decisions made at these meetings are maintained and were available for review during the evaluation. The records outlined the focus of meetings and included elements of programme review and the organisation of work placements. Cross-curricular planning is also facilitated at the weekly meetings enabling teachers to discuss possible links and to identify areas for development. One such example of cross-curricular planning was evident in

the general education task where statistical analysis of data was presented using appropriate ICT software. The continued development of cross-curricular links between subject areas should be pursued and developed where possible.

Self-evaluative practices occur during some of the weekly meetings. During a meeting observed by the inspector the school's work experience procedures were discussed in preparation for an upcoming round of placements. Past experiences were reviewed and decisions were made regarding future student interviews. The practice of including students in these deliberations is commended. To develop reflective practices further, focused self-evaluation should be incorporated into the programme's ongoing review system. This could include indentifying an area for improvement, gathering measurable indicative data and implementing strategies aimed at improving the specific aspect of provision. This should then be reassessed in order to ascertain if a measurable improvement has occurred.

2.2 Co-ordination

Each LCA group has a co-ordinator responsible for planning and implementing the programme for their particular year group. This system is working effectively. To facilitate the planning and organisation of the programme, each co-ordinator is designated co-ordination time to carry out the various duties attached to the role. Communication between the co-ordinators, senior management, the teaching team and the school's programmes co-ordinator is good ensuring that common goals and initiatives may be developed and integrated into the programme. One tangible example of this is the common approach taken to the correction of students' written work. This policy, identified by senior management, developed by the learning support team, promoted by the co-ordination team and implemented by the LCA teaching staff demonstrates how effective leadership can have a positive effect in the classroom.

Both co-ordinators are timetabled for regular contact time with the relevant LCA group. This also ensures that students are informed about task deadlines and other organisational matters and that each co-ordinator can maintain a good level of awareness of students' wellbeing and their levels of participation in school activities.

The management of tasks and key assignments is delegated to subject teachers and discussed at the weekly meetings. An anchor teacher is assigned for each task and cross-curricular links are explored prior to students' commencement of task work. Key assignments are monitored during each session and are submitted to the LCA office upon completion. This system is operating well.

2.3 Curriculum

The LCA curriculum is broad and balanced and provides a suitable diversity of experience for students. The curriculum complies with the relevant Department of Education and Skills guidelines and circulars. The vocational specialisms, Hotel Catering and Tourism and ICT provide students with a good blend of vocational and life skills. These skills are supplemented by those gained from the completion of Childcare and Hair and Beauty electives in fifth and sixth year. The introduction of Spanish as the modern European language component of the programme has enabled all students to engage in this new subject at *ab initio* level.

Considerable efforts have been made to develop the school's work experience practices. Primarily this has been the remit of the school's co-ordinator of programmes. To date, a draft policy has been developed and this policy outlines key individual's roles and responsibilities. The current practices relating to work placements are very beneficial to students and help to create meaningful

experiences for them. Currently these practices include students applying for vacancies advertised on the school's work experience notice board, sending their letters of application and curriculum vitae electronically to the co-ordinator of programmes and preparing for an interview organised by the school. This very real experience for students helps to replicate the job application procedures that students will face later in life. In addition to these procedures, each student is assigned a teacher mentor to guide and to help them with their work placement. The mentor visits the workplace twice during each of the four two-week placements. Following each placement students are de-briefed and given developmental feedback to improve their future work experience placements. The planning, implementation and review systems that are in place in the school's work experience programme are commended.

3 QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

3.1 Planning and preparation

Subject plans presented during the evaluation were generally good. However, in some instances there is considerable scope for development. Efforts should be made to develop course module plans to a consistently high standard across all subject areas. Particular attention should be given to those that consist of printed outlines of the relevant syllabus documents. A more consistent approach could be achieved through discussion at the weekly meetings where a common agreed format could be developed. Models of existing good practice should be used to inform this discussion. Appropriate methodologies and assessment procedures, opportunities for cross-curricular integration and literacy and numeracy initiatives should all be included within this agreed format.

The planning and preparation for lessons observed was of a very high standard. Many efforts were made to prepare learning activities and resources that complemented the chosen topic or the desired learning outcome. Examples of good planning included the preparation of role play activities, teaching aids and resources, ingredients and utensils, as well as a number of appropriate collaborative learning activities. This preparation of resources and the careful planning of activities enabled teachers to ensure that students took an active role in lessons and took ownership of their learning in many respects.

One example of highly effective planning occurred in a Social Education lesson. In this instance a considered approach was taken to the introduction and development of the topic of refugees. To maximise the students' understanding and empathy for refugees, students were given a number of imaginary scenarios and were asked to place themselves in each one. Then groups were formed and a role play was used to develop the topic. The planning and preparation required to maximise the benefits of this activity were considerable. Despite the challenges presented by the task the students' application to the task and their participation and engagement in this emotive activity helped them gain a fuller understanding and appreciation of the topic. The carefully considered approach taken to engage students with the topic and achieve the intended learning outcomes is commended.

ICT and audio-visual resources were incorporated into some lessons and where utilised they enhanced students' experiences. The increased use of innovative and effective ICT resources should be further facilitated following the planned investment in ICT infrastructure. With this in mind the LCA teaching team should begin to identify suitable ICT resources and begin to catalogue and circulate them among the teaching team. The learning support and resource team

should be involved in this activity as they have already identified a number of electronic resources in the draft learning support policy.

3.2 Learning and teaching

All lessons observed were structured appropriately and were paced according to students' needs and abilities. One lesson observed provided a good example of how a topic could be introduced, developed and reinforced using a variety of methodologies. In this lesson students were encouraged to sketch their self-portrait, compare and contrast their work and then create a clay model in their own image. These activities were managed effectively and helped students to structure their progression through the topic. Good use was made of informal pair work that allowed students to assist one another depending upon the particular task.

A hallmark of lessons observed was the teachers' efforts to generate interest in the subject matter. A wide variety of methodologies were utilised to achieve this desirable outcome. These methods included collaborative learning strategies, role play and active learning methods including the creation of mood boards and collages. Common strategies to reinforce learning included good levels of cross-curricular integration, the use of visual resources to support vocabulary development tasks and the use of keywords and phrases to develop sentences based upon the lesson content. The incorporation of such a diverse range of teaching and learning strategies is commended. Aspects of teaching and learning that could be further developed include the further use of literacy skill development tools such as keywords, spell-checks and word banks and the extension of the think-pair-share strategy prior to discussions and debates.

In all lessons observed students took an active role in their learning and participated well in the various learning activities. In most cases students contributed readily to discussions and demonstrated a good degree of learning when questioned by their teachers and by the inspector.

Student behaviour was of a high standard throughout the evaluation. Effective classroom management strategies helped to ensure that students remained engaged. The development of this positive and mutually respectful environment is commended.

3.3 Assessment

Following their commencement of the programme, fifth-year LCA students sit Wide Range Achievement Tests (WRAT) and the resulting information is used to inform the teaching team. Formal assessments take place for LCA students at the end of each term. Sixth-year LCA students also sit 'mocks' prior to their certificate examinations. Ongoing class assessments take place throughout the year and often incorporate elements of key assignment and task work. Students were questioned throughout the lessons observed and this provided teachers with good levels of feedback pertaining to students' understanding. Oral feedback was administered to students regularly and this helped to inform teaching practices.

Some very useful assessment for learning (AfL) techniques were incorporated into some lessons observed. In one instance, students working in pairs utilised mini-whiteboards to display their answers to questions posed by the teacher. This strategy allowed students to collaborate and to contribute to the lesson in an understated manner. This helped them to develop their confidence and also gave the teacher a good insight into the level of learning of each group. This strategy has a wide range of applications and should be further developed throughout the teaching team.

4 SUMMARY OF STRENGTHS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Senior management is very supportive of the LCA programme and has facilitated the development of resources, facilities and planning systems.
- The LCA programme is co-ordinated in an efficient and effective manner.
- Good systems are in place to identify suitable candidates for the programme.
- Programme planning is of a high standard.
- The LCA curriculum is broad and balanced and has evolved over time to meet the changing needs of the student cohort.
- Work experience placements are organised and implemented in a manner that helps to create a realistic and worthwhile learning experience for students.
- The teaching and learning observed during the evaluation was generally of a high standard and was characterised by good student participation and involvement in learning activities.

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

- Senior management should monitor LCA subject timetable allocations on an ongoing basis and endeavour to ensure that courses that promote the key principles of the programme such as literacy, numeracy and communication skills are given maximum weightings where possible.
- Senior management should timetable guidance for all LCA groups.
- Any request for financial contributions towards the implementation of the programme should explicitly outline the voluntary nature of the donation and should not be linked to a student's enrolment in the programme.

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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, staff, parents' council and students of Presentation Secondary School, Clonmel welcomes the LCA Report for the positive acknowledgement of the many strengths of the programme in our school. The report captures the caring ethos of the school, the high quality of teaching and learning and the commitment of the teaching staff to using a wide range of teaching strategies and resources. The Board of Management is pleased that the report acknowledges the support of senior management team, the dedicated professionalism of the teaching staff and the support offered to 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

1. Guidance is timetabled for all LCA groups now.
2. Financial contributions are not linked to the student enrolment in the programme.
3. A Curriculum audit is underway regards timetable allocations.