

**An Roinn Oideachais agus Eolaíochta
Department of Education and Science
Subject Inspection of Guidance
REPORT**

**Ashbourne Community School
Deerpark, Ashbourne, County Meath
Roll number: 91495T**

Date of inspection: 01 March 2007

Date of issue of report: 17 January 2008

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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 Ashbourne Community School, Ashbourne, Co. Meath. 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 two days during which the inspector visited classrooms, viewed guidance facilities, interacted with students, held discussions with the deputy principal, with the guidance counsellors, with the chaplain and the year head for first year students. Following the evaluation visit, the inspector provided oral feedback on the outcomes of the evaluation to the deputy 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

Ashbourne Community School, situated outside the town of Ashbourne, was founded in 1994. The school is the only post-primary school in the town and caters for students from diverse, urban and rural, backgrounds. Currently there is an enrolment of 955 boys and girls, with numbers having increased in the past two years. There are fifteen feeder primary schools and a high percentage of students travel by bus from a wide catchment area which encompasses the whole of County Meath. Ashbourne Community School participates in the Guidance Enhancement Initiative (GEI) but is not included in either the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) initiative or the School Completion Programme (SCP).

The school receives a total ex-quota allocation of forty-four hours per week for Guidance from the Department of Education and Science, which includes an allocation of eleven hours for the delivery of the GEI programme in the school. Two qualified guidance counsellors work full-time to deliver the guidance and counselling provision and collaborate with the teachers of science to promote the uptake of science subjects in senior cycle as part of the GEI activities. The guidance counsellors also deliver the guidance module of the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme and work with Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) students to complete the career investigation of the Preparation for Work link module. The deputy principal states that guidance is regarded as being very important and that the care of students is a central concern in the school.

Ashbourne Community School has the services of a full-time chaplain and there is a high degree of collaboration, at both a formal and an informal level, with the guidance counsellors. The school also has the services of a designated National Educational Psychological Services (NEPS) psychologist who visits the school a number of times during the school year to provide support and carry out assessments. However due to the numbers enrolled one of the guidance counsellors who has a specialist qualification also conducts psychological assessments.

Guidance provision is targeted primarily in senior cycle. Classes are timetabled in LCA and modules are delivered in third, the optional Transition Year (TY), fifth year and sixth years. In all other class groups, guidance is delivered either through individual or small group meetings. In addition, personal counselling is offered to students when needs arise.

Ashbourne Community School has excellent facilities for guidance in the form of two offices each with computer, broadband access, phone, shelving and storage. There is also a careers library which can be used for work with small groups. Three guidance notice boards are regularly updated. The guidance counsellors state that Guidance is extremely well supported and has a high profile in the school.

Access to the computer rooms for guidance classes is arranged through a booking system. The demonstration room with data projector is also available for guidance classes, group work or guest speakers. The school has an excellent intranet system through which computers in the guidance offices are linked through the H-drive to the computer rooms and the demonstration room. Students can access the files and the work which has been prepared in advance by the guidance counsellors. This is commended.

There is a good sense of care for students in the school as evidenced by the supports and programmes available to students. A student support task team comprising guidance counsellors, special educational needs (SEN) department teachers, chaplain, year head, class tutor, principal and deputy has operated in the school since 2005. One of the guidance counsellors acts as facilitator of the group which meets regularly a few times per term.

Currently the team is examining student support provision and there is regular input from year heads and the co-ordinator of school development planning. The guidance counsellors report that other members of staff now see themselves as providers of guidance. This collaboration is commended and it is recommended that the school now explores the establishment of a student support/care group with a formalised structure of frequent meetings. This approach would accommodate optimum attendance of members, facilitate the transfer of information on students and ensure that students in need of extra assistance are identified and supported as early as possible. Newcomer students meet with the guidance counsellors before they begin their studies in the school.

Ashbourne Community School has a referrals system in place through which teachers and class tutors refer students to the year head who in turn refers students to the chaplain or to the guidance department. Commendably referral forms have been devised. The guidance counsellors consider that this referral system facilitates collaboration and the sharing of information with the year heads. The deputy principal reports that the guidance counsellors work closely with the year heads. Parents also refer students to the guidance counsellors or students self-refer.

Referrals to outside agencies such as NEPS, the Health Service Executive (HSE), Youthreach and FÁS are effected through the principal's office in consultation with parents. The school's anti-bullying committee introduced the Cool School programme to second year and the NEPS psychologist facilitates group work for first year students. This level of collaboration and commitment to students is commended.

It is commendable that Ashbourne Community School has established a critical incident team and work is ongoing on preparing a critical incident response plan. The team met monthly in the first year and input has been received from students, parents and the NEPS psychologist. The school has simulated a critical incident, a list of relevant contact numbers is readily accessible and a meditation room is available to students. The guidance department has a list of contact numbers of all the local guidance counsellors and an informal network has been established. Protocols are being developed. Currently the school is working on text messaging via computer so that parents can be contacted without the use of the phone. This level of preparation is commended. It is recommended that the school now customises the draft plan and prepares the policy document for ratification by the board of management.

An annual budget for guidance department resources is provided following discussion with the principal.

Planning and Preparation

Guidance planning has been ongoing in Ashbourne Community School since 2005. The student support task group which is a sub-committee of the whole school development planning (SDP) group

has been considering provision of student support and this has now broadened into guidance policy planning. To date an outline plan has been drafted, targets identified and a guidance programme for the school year has been drawn up. It is to be commended that the sub-committee is evaluating existing supports and moving on to identifying gaps in current provision. Commendably evaluation of programmes by senior students is carried out.

One area of special consideration by the group has been student transitions and the school is now looking at developing an induction programme to integrate into fifth year those students who have completed the TY programme with students from the previous third year who did not take the TY programme. The planning group have identified three areas for improvement namely, making the area of subject choice more explicit; addressing gaps in guidance provision for students with special educational needs; considering how best to support the middle group of the student population. This approach is commended as it enables the school to build on existing strengths.

One of the guidance counsellors has completed the on-line planning module for guidance counsellors offered by the National Centre for Guidance in Education (NCGE) and has participated in courses on special educational needs offered by the on-line provider Profexcel. Information has subsequently been disseminated to colleagues. This level of collegiality is commended. Information to support work on planning is available in publications – Planning the School Guidance Programme, issued by the National Centre for Guidance in Education (NCGE), Guidelines for Second Level Schools on the Implications of Section 9 (c) of the Education Act, relating to students' access to appropriate guidance, published by the Department of Education and Science and the Department's template for guidance planning, available on www.education.ie.

The guidance counsellors report that pastoral care is very strong in the school. There is close collaboration between the guidance department and the teachers of Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE). Apart from classes for LCA students and the modules for third years and older class groups already mentioned, Guidance is delivered by the guidance counsellors through either SPHE or religion classes. Every teacher is regarded as having a role in delivering aspects of the guidance programme for example information on subject content and study skills. While this co-operation is commended it is recommended that the school reviews the current timetabling arrangements for Guidance in order to ensure the best possible and most equitable deployment of resources and to address the imbalance in provision between junior and senior cycles. Given the number of students enrolled in the school consideration should be given to reviewing the current emphasis on individual provision vis-à-vis access to Guidance for all students.

Ashbourne Community School has engaged with the local primary schools to provide a transition programme for incoming first year students which includes input from both the parents' association and the student council. This is commended. The programme begins with visits by a team from the school to the primary schools to outline to pupils the provision in Ashbourne Community School. This is followed by an open day in October for prospective students and their parents where information sessions, exhibitions of work and demonstrations are arranged. An assessment day takes place in January where the pupils visit the school to complete pre-entry tests.

In March the team revisits the primary schools to meet with teachers and the chaplain meets with pupils. The school hosts an information session for parents of incoming students and a guidance input is provided on subject choice. In this regard parents could be directed also to the information available regarding subject choice on www.qualifax.ie. Worksheets on new subject areas are provided to the primary feeder schools. As the school offers a wide choice of subjects and does not provide sampling of subjects before students decide their choices it is recommended that the school considers how the transfer programme could be enhanced to provide some taster classes. This approach would assist students in making more informed choices for the Junior Certificate. Arising from the meetings with parents a number of referrals are made by parents to the guidance and the special educational needs departments and the school begins, at this time, to make preparations for students who may need extra support. This preparatory approach is commended.

The special educational needs department in Ashbourne Community School hosts an annual meeting of representatives from the feeder primary schools chaired by the NEPS psychologist and attended by the guidance counsellors. This event provides an excellent opportunity for resource and learning support teachers from the feeder primary schools to meet with the teachers who will provide educational support to their pupils when they transfer to second level. The structures of the special educational needs department and the provision in Ashbourne Community School are explained by school personnel, the calendar of transfer events is detailed and an explanation is provided to primary school representatives of the type of information that is useful to the Community School when pupils are transferring. This approach is commended as an excellent model of student support and of collaboration between NEPS, feeder primary schools and second level school.

Commendably there is ongoing liaison between the guidance and the special educational needs departments. The guidance counsellors meet with all students receiving extra educational support and with their parents upon request.

There are two induction days for first year students at the beginning of the new school year when students meet with the class tutor, the year head and other support personnel. The school has produced a very helpful welcome booklet for first year students where school structures and procedures are clearly explained, information on homework is provided and the roles of key personnel described. The school also operates a mentoring system, co-ordinated by the student council, where two senior students visit each first year tutor group on a regular basis.

Ashbourne Community School hosts an information evening for parents of first year students in September organised by a guidance counsellor and the year head. This provides an opportunity for parents to raise any issues or concerns they may have and to receive feedback from the year head or from senior management on how students are experiencing the settling-in process. The guidance counsellor meets with individual parents during the information evening or meetings are arranged for later. During the first term the chaplain focuses on meeting and supporting first year students. Each student is met individually and referred to the guidance department or to the year head if necessary. The guidance counsellor also visits first year class groups to introduce the guidance service and explain procedures. Informal meetings take place between the year head, guidance counsellors and chaplain. It is recommended that a record of these meetings be maintained. All of these activities to support the transfer of students are commended.

Currently there is no specific guidance input by the guidance counsellors in second year. The guidance counsellors liaise with the anti-bullying group who work with second year students. Individual appointments are offered as required.

In third year the guidance counsellor borrows class periods from teachers of SPHE to provide a six-week module on subject and programme choice for senior cycle. Handouts on subject choice and programme content as well as information on skills and talents desirable for certain subjects are provided for students. The school also hosts an information session for parents of third year students on subject choice. Separate presentations, providing information on the TY and LCA options, are made to parents on the same evening. An information booklet has been prepared for parents on Leaving Certificate programmes and subject outlines. Parents are welcome to make individual appointments with either of the guidance counsellors. This support is commended. The guidance counsellors work with any students considering leaving school before completion of the Leaving Certificate and discuss options available.

The TY is optional and at present there are four class groups. The guidance counsellor borrows three class periods to provide a revision module on subject choice.

Work on motivation and study skills is done by the guidance counsellors with fifth year students. A guidance module is provided in the last term through borrowing the SPHE class. Information is provided on options available after the Leaving Certificate and worksheets are used. The Differential Aptitude Tests (DATs) are administered. A personal profile is developed for each student and test results are returned to students in small groups of two or three. In Leaving Certificate year there is a focus on career research. The guidance counsellors meet with each class group and occasional classes are borrowed. At least two individual interviews are offered during the first term. The school hosts an information session for parents of sixth year students on application to the CAO.

Classes are timetabled in the computer room to deliver the guidance module of the LCA syllabus. Visits to organisations such as Fáilte Ireland and the Garda College are organised for LCA students. The guidance counsellors borrow classes to facilitate the completion of the career investigation element of the LCVP link modules. Currently the LCVP link modules are offered as an option against either PE or a study period as well as a seventh subject option. As the LCVP is a discrete Leaving Certificate programme option a review of the timetabling arrangements is recommended.

Senior students attend open days and other career and course information events and representatives from colleges and training organisations visit the school to provide talks. Commendably the school has developed a policy on student attendance at open days where the school organises a visit to one career event and students are encouraged to make individual arrangements to attend other events of specific interest to them. This is commended as it helps students develop self-management skills. Senior students have access to relevant websites.

The guidance counsellors report ongoing collaboration with senior management regarding subject and programme choice through formal and informal meetings. Regular meetings take place with senior management as well as contact via the school's email system. Meetings are also arranged on a regular basis with the year heads.

The guidance department reports an open-door policy and good contact with parents. The guidance counsellors attend all parent-teacher meetings and meet with parents in small group sessions as required to discuss student progress. The school hosts an annual awards ceremony to acknowledge and celebrate student achievement in both academic and non-academic spheres.

Apart from links established with industry through the work experience programmes the school also liaises with a number of organisations to provide information and support for students. This networking is commended.

The GEI is progressing well in Ashbourne Community School. The aim of the original GEI proposal was to promote the uptake of science subjects, create a gender balance in these subject areas and strengthen links with industry. Commendably, activities such as trips and information events to support these aims are focused in first and second years. A module is provided in TY to enable students who have not completed junior cycle science to take up biology. Applied Mathematics is offered outside timetabled class time since 2004. The school reports enhanced links with both science-based industry and the science faculties of some third level colleges. ENFO is established and developing in the school. Ashbourne Community School participates in the Green Schools Project and has gained the Green Flag. Statistics on the uptake of science subjects at senior cycle are being logged and analysed and the school is now focusing on sustaining numbers in the science classes. It is recommended that the overall effect of the GEI in the school be evaluated as part of the guidance planning process.

The guidance counsellors are members of the Institute of Guidance Counsellors (IGC). The school facilitates attendance at local and national in-service, relevant guidance events and the local professional development sessions to support counselling.

Teaching and Learning

In the course of the evaluation four class groups were visited, one third year, one TY and two fifth year classes. The lessons were very well planned and structured. Commendably there was evidence of continuity with previous lessons. The aims of the lessons were clearly explained to students. The pace and content of the lessons were appropriate to the class groups.

In one class, which was conducted in the computer room, good use was made of the school's H-drive and pre-prepared materials for the lesson. The guidance counsellor went around the class helping students who needed assistance accessing files and documents and providing encouragement and affirming effort. Good use was made of handouts and of the FÁS website to prepare for a forthcoming visit to a careers information event. This use of information technology to support and encourage learning is commended. Some members of the class group were absent doing other course-related tasks. It is recommended that the school reviews all co-timetabling arrangements so that all students have an opportunity to attend all guidance lessons.

In another lesson good use was made of a PowerPoint presentation to provide information to students. This methodology is commended. However, given the amount of material covered in the lesson, it is recommended that more active involvement on the part of the students with more time for assimilation and reflection is included in the planning of time.

Handouts were also used in lessons to initiate group work and discussion. The introduction of the Differential Aptitude Tests (DATs) was skilfully linked with feedback from students. Excellent use was made of the general area of attainment and the concept of multi intelligence to locate DATs scores within the total picture of the student's abilities and talents. Vocabulary to describe personality and character traits was extended and students were encouraged and given opportunity to consider different ways of regarding ordinary, everyday aspects of life. Classroom management was excellent and the use of humour to bring students back on task is commended.

Where appropriate the guidance counsellors went around the class encouraging students, affirming effort and answering questions. High levels of attention were given to individual students and the guidance counsellors also engaged in whole-class teaching in order to provide information, explanation and to check understanding.

During the lessons a variety of methodologies was employed including use of the whiteboard, PowerPoint presentation, computers, handouts, pair work, discussion, questions and answers. A friendly and relaxed class atmosphere and good working relationships were evident in all lessons. Students demonstrated good knowledge of topics. Good rapport and mutual respect were evident between guidance counsellors and students. Students were positively affirmed and encouraged. There was a high level of participation and engagement on the part of students. The good practice of roll call at the beginning of the lessons was noted.

Assessment

Psychometric testing is used by the guidance department for diagnostic purposes and to assist with subject and programme choice. The AH2 test is administered by the guidance department and the

results are used for diagnostic purposes. Since the AH2 does not have Irish norms and it has not been up-dated in recent times it is recommended that the school reviews the use of this test. In this regard the school should refer to the Circular Letter 0008/2007 and the accompanying information regarding tests on the Department website (www.education.ie).

One of the guidance counsellors also administers dyslexia screening tests in junior cycle and students are referred on as necessary. This use of resources is commended. The EirQuest Careers Brief is administered in third year to assist students as they make subject and programme choice. The Differential Aptitude Tests (DATs) and the Rothwell Miller Interest Blank are completed in fifth year to assist with course and career choice. The Careers Interest Inventory is administered in sixth year. Senior students also have access to the interest inventories within Career Directions, QualifaX and UCAS websites.

The guidance counsellors maintain student profiles from first year onwards and records of meetings are maintained in filing cabinets. The guidance department tracks the initial destinations of students using information collected at the annual graduation ceremony in September. A record of student destinations is circulated to staff and to the principal. Past students are welcome to visit the school and to meet with the guidance counsellors for further information and support.

Summary of Main Findings and Recommendations

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- There are excellent facilities for Guidance in Ashbourne Community School and a well established guidance system operates in the school.
- Guidance planning has been initiated, targets identified and a guidance programme for the school year drafted. Good use is made of ICT in the delivery of Guidance.
- A wide range of programmes and subjects is offered to students.
- The school operates a transfer programme for first year students. A high level of collaboration exists between Ashbourne Community School, the feeder primary schools and the NEPS psychologist to smooth the transfer of students into the post-primary school.
- There is a good sense of care in the school and good collaboration between colleagues.
- A good deal of work has been completed on the school's critical incident response plan.
- The GEI is progressing well in the school and the take-up of science subjects in senior cycle has increased.
- The lessons observed were well planned, prepared and structured. A friendly and relaxed class atmosphere conducive to learning prevailed.
- Good rapport and mutual respect were evident between students and guidance counsellors in all lessons and there was a high level of engagement on the part of students.

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

- The school should consider the current timetabling arrangements for Guidance in order to ensure the best possible and most equitable deployment of the ex-quota allocation of hours and to address the imbalance in provision between junior and senior cycles.
- It is recommended that the school explores the establishment of a student support/care group with a formalised structure of frequent meetings to facilitate the transfer of information on students and ensure that students in need of extra assistance are identified and supported as early as possible.
- The school should consider extending the current transfer programme for incoming first year students to include some taster subjects.
- A review of the timetabling arrangements for the delivery of the LCVP is recommended.
- It is recommended that the school reviews the current psychometric tests used.
- It is recommended that the overall effect of the GEI in the school be evaluated as part of the guidance planning process.

Post-evaluation meetings were held with the deputy principal and the guidance counsellors at the conclusion of the evaluation when the draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation were presented and discussed.