

An Roinn Oideachais agus Eolaíochta

Department of Education and Science

**Transition Year Programme Evaluation
REPORT**

**Dominican College
Sion Hill, Cross Avenue, Blackrock, County Dublin
Roll Number 60070K**

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AN ROINN OIDEACHAIS AGUS EOLAÍOCHTA | DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND SCIENCE

EVALUATION OF TY

The Transition Year (TY) programme is a one year programme for students who have completed the Junior Certificate. The TY provides a bridge to enable them to make the transition from the more dependant type of learning associated with the Junior Certificate to the more independent learning environment of the senior cycle. The programme promotes the personal, social, vocational and educational development of students and prepares them for their role as autonomous, participative and responsible members of society. Transition Year fosters academic achievement as students prepare for a Leaving Certificate programme, further study and adult and working life. It encourages the development of a wide range of transferable critical thinking and creative problem-solving skills.

INTRODUCTION

This report has been written following an evaluation of the TY in Dominican College, Sion Hill. 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-ordinator, a core group of teachers and with a small group of students. The evaluation was conducted over two days during which the inspector liaised extensively with the programme coordinator 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, the programme coordinator and members of the core team at the end of the evaluation period.

Dominican College, Sion Hill was founded by the Dominican sisters in 1836 and caters for 300 day students. Students come from economically, socially and culturally diverse backgrounds.

Transition Year was introduced into the school in 1987. The value of TY was recognised at an early stage as its overall aims were seen to reflect the Dominican ethos where all students are encouraged to develop their personalities and talents and each individual is valued. 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.

1 QUALITY OF PROGRAMME ORGANISATION

1.1 Whole school support

The TY programme at Dominican College promotes the college's mission of helping "each student to reach her full potential academically, spiritually, physically, emotionally and socially in a happy secure environment".

Educational provision is enhanced in the college by the provision of TY to all students. Twenty teaching staff are involved directly in the programme and all staff are frequently made aware of developments in TY at staff meetings. There is a very good whole school approach to publicising and implementing the programme in accordance with *Transition Year Programmes Guidelines for Schools*. Morale among the teaching team is very high.

Transition year students are very well supported by school management structures. There is a small core-team, which consists of the co-ordinator, TY year head, and the three TY class tutors. An assembly tutor lesson is timetabled concurrently for each TY class group on Friday afternoons and the year head and co-ordinator are available at this time for class liaison and consultation with the class tutors. In addition, student diaries are checked at this time. This is commended. Academic, pastoral and personal needs of students are all well looked after and good communication systems are in place to feedback to senior management, staff and parents.

TY students are generally grouped in mixed ability class groups with the exception of some classes in the core subjects at certain times of the year.

The principal has a good knowledge of the implementation of the TY programme and issues surrounding the programme. Staff are well deployed across the TY programme and their diverse skills and talents are comprehensively utilised in providing students with a diverse and well-balanced programme. The coordinator has participated in various in-service courses and an ICT course has been provided in the school by Blackrock Education Centre.

Photographs of TY activities and evidence of TY students' artwork are on clear display around the school. There is a continuous slideshow of TY events and activities in the main entrance to the school. This is highly commended as it demonstrates strong support and affirmation for students and their many activities and achievements.

1.2 Resources

The college provides the coordinator with a well-resourced TY office. In addition there is an adjoining storeroom for project work and materials and goods used in TY social activities. This central storage area is accessible to all TY teachers and a concise inventory of resource materials has been drawn up and is available to all staff. The resources stored include Department of Education and Science (DES) and Second Level Support Service (SLSS) materials, information packs, videos and DVDs, education reports relevant to TY and a list of contact numbers of external agencies. It is commendable that these resources are very well organized by the coordinator and utilized by TY teachers. In addition Information and Communications Technology (ICT) is used extensively in all aspects of the TY programme including its planning and organisation.

Each student is required to pay a contribution in order to cover the expenses involved in a variety of activities including the adventure day trip in September, the outing organised for Junior Certificate results day, modern dance and aerobics lessons, the European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL), and the Delphi adventure weekend. The TY capitation grant is used to subsidise activities such as retreats, drama, coach hire and sports.

The college's many specialist rooms are used extensively by TY students. The computer room is used extensively for many lessons and in the course of the evaluation it was observed to be used for ECDL and Mathematics. Broadband facilities are available throughout the school and ICT facilities are very well utilized by TY teachers and students. Classrooms are now teacher based and this is reported to be working very well as students can enter a stimulating and subject-relevant learning environment with evidence of their work and projects on display. Teachers are commended on their work in creating a positive learning environment and this was in evidence during all lessons observed.

1.3 Student selection

TY is a core programme in the college and in the current year there are sixty-two students in three class groups. Management and staff believe that providing TY for all students is one of the great strengths of the programme in Dominican College. Students stated that they were very happy to have taken TY as they felt that they were much more confident, and the new level of relationships they had developed with their fellow students and teachers were very strong and rewarding.

1.4 Home, school and community links

An information evening is held for parents of third year students in March of each year to inform them of the nature and purpose of TY. A useful information pack is distributed to parents. Parents are well informed of student progress by means of monthly assessment reports. Student journals are used as a means of communication between home and school.

Parents are invited and encouraged to participate in school events. They are invited to award nights, invited to be guest speakers in the TY programme and may offer placements to students requiring relevant work experience.

The colourful and well-produced college newsletter 'Sion Hill Times' provides the community with much useful information on school activities. There is a special section in the newsletter devoted to TY activities. This is highly commended as it affirms the successes and achievements of TY students and promotes the aims of the TY programme across the school and wider community.

Students undertake three weeks of work experience which forges a strong link with the wider community. It is an integral part of the TY programme in the college. Students organize their own work experience placement with the assistance of the coordinator. Students are reported to be well prepared with guidance given on behaviour in the work place and assistance with CV preparation. Employers are given an information pack and contact is made with them by telephone during work experience. The assessment form is generally returned by the employer to the principal after the work placement.

The multitude of TY activities taking place on an on-going basis ensures that contact with the local and wider community is strong. TY students are involved in many charity collections and flag days including the Hospice Coffee Morning, Pink Ribbon Action Breast Cancer programme and Daffodil Day for the Irish Cancer Society. All students are involved in the organisation of the school's St Vincent de Paul Conference. Christmas cards are designed and sold each year to fund activities which include: Christmas hampers for needy families, Christmas parties for children in need, senior citizens and adults with learning disabilities and weekends away for children from disadvantaged communities. This extensive community work plays a great part in fulfilling the aims of TY in the college.

The school has developed good links with local schools. For example current rehearsals for the musical 'Grease' are taking place in collaboration with a local boys' post-primary school.

1.5 Supports for students

Students are well supported with timetabled guidance provision. They are prepared for work-experience and are given expert advice when choosing their subjects for Leaving Certificate.

Students in some of the lessons observed came from a wide range of cultural backgrounds. There are sixteen students with English as an additional language (EAL) in TY. The majority of these students are withdrawn from Irish lessons and are provided with lessons in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL). The college expressed concerns at the level of extra teacher allocation to EAL students and felt it was disadvantaged in this regard considering its context, catchment and intake cohort of students. In addition special needs students get extra support at this time when necessary.

2 QUALITY OF PROGRAMME PLANNING AND COORDINATION

2.1 Coordination

A comprehensive job specification for the TY coordinator is clearly documented in the written plan. Evidence collected in the course of the evaluation shows that these duties are carried out very effectively. The post of programme coordinator carries a time allowance of two hours and forty minutes and is solely assigned to TY duties. It is evident that many co-ordination tasks are carried out outside this time frame. The commitment and dedication to coordination is highly commended.

Communication links with staff are strong and programme relevant information is disseminated effectively. For example a specific TY notice board is maintained to disseminate programme information. New resource materials are added to the inventory of resources, which is circulated to staff. The coordinator has good contact with all TY classes in that there are timetabled lessons with each group.

2.2 Planning

The core planning team meets formally on a monthly basis and weekly on an informal basis. Monthly meetings are minuted, filed and made available to school management. Items on the agenda vary from TY activities and trips to work experience and assessment. The minutes of recent meetings show that these well-coordinated meetings play a major part in the planning for TY. It is recommended that more extensive cross-curricular planning takes place and that the whole staff becomes more involved with this process.

A current TY written plan is in place. It details many aspects of the programme including the background to TY in the school, the 'Multiple Intelligence Theory' rationale for subject provision in TY, assessment details and extra curricular and other activities. However, the quality of this plan needs significant improvement and should be written up keeping in mind Department guidelines on writing the programme. The general introduction should outline how the school will evaluate the TY programme. The appendices to the written plan include a sample TY report card, details of the TY contract of learning, a parent's pack, details of work experience and notes on subject choices. In addition, it is commendable that a common template has been used by teachers to write up the TY subject and module details. However, many of the subject details require more detailed information on areas such as resources, links with other subjects, assessment and evaluation. It is important to state which resources will be used, how links can be developed and

what assessment and evaluation strategies are implemented. It is also essential that the written programme reflects the taught programme and that each subject or activity is modified as necessary after its evaluation.

The organisational details section of the written plan includes much useful information. However, it is recommended that this section be reviewed annually to include class lists of students, TY timetables and detailed evaluation procedures. Much useful information relevant to TY already available could be included into a redrafted written plan.

2.3 Curriculum

The school makes good efforts to apply sound underlying principles in drawing up the TY timetable. Various practical considerations are taken into account in an effort to streamline joint activities including team teaching, tutor time and provision of double periods. These efforts are commended. Development of personal and social skills of students gets a very high priority at Dominican College.

The TY curriculum is generally well balanced between core subjects, modules and calendar activities and events. The core subjects taken by all students on the TY curriculum include Irish, English, Mathematics, Computers, Italian and Personal Development. In addition there are ten week modules in Karate, Dance, Games, Linguistics, Careers, Psychology, DIY, Film Studies and Craft. Students may choose between Social Studies or Tourism Awareness and it is commendable that students who choose Tourism Awareness must organise for one week's work experience in the tourism industry. Students continue with their choice of French or German and choose three History or Geography topics from a list of six. Students rank the following subjects in order of preference: Art, Enterprise, Science, Cookery and Music. In the current year two subjects are offered to students from this list of five. However, following an internal TY curriculum evaluation, consideration should be given to re-balancing the subjects on offer in the curriculum so that all basic aspects of the curriculum are studied by all TY students; for example modules in Enterprise and Science could be offered to all students in an effort to broaden the TY general curriculum.

Timetabling and time provision to subjects is generally good. However, in order to avoid disruption of lesson time it is recommended that consideration be given to timetabling an afternoon for activities. In addition, the allocation of six class periods per week to ECDL needs to be re-evaluated and time saved could be reallocated to other subjects, modules or activities.

3 QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

3.1 Planning and preparation for teaching

There was good preparation and advance planning of the lessons observed during the course of the visit. A written plan was available for each subject in the TY programme. Teaching and learning were enhanced as equipment was ready in advance and handouts and worksheets had been prepared and ready for distribution. The work of the teachers in this regard is commended.

There was extensive planning and preparation of materials for various practical activities observed. Teachers had carried out research in advance of presentations. Planning for use of ICT was very good. Lessons progressed well and were generally presented with enthusiasm and confidence as a result of good planning and preparation.

3.2 Teaching and learning

A variety of subjects were observed during the course of the inspection: Personal Development, Computers, German, Science, Enterprise, Mathematics, Music and TEFL. Students were in a subject relevant and vibrant learning environment during lessons observed. This is commended.

There was good rapport in lessons, which created a good environment for learning. Students were generally addressed by name and an atmosphere of mutual respect existed. Students were frequently praised and affirmed and they responded positively. There was a clear sense of enjoyment in many lessons. Participation in learning was generally good and students demonstrated a strong enthusiasm for their work. However, in some lessons observed, some students did not participate fully. Many of these students were studying English as an additional language (EAL) and perhaps did not have the confidence to ask and answer questions in a large group setting. In addition, in some cases the EAL students sat together in a group. It is recommended that teachers devise strategies to make it possible for all students to participate as fully as possible in lessons. It is suggested that EAL students be dispersed throughout various groups and that input from all students be actively pursued in lessons.

Students carried out practical investigations enthusiastically and followed closely the clear instructions given on worksheets and relayed by teachers. They worked collaboratively and individual help and support were given by teachers when necessary. This is commended.

Students were active in learning as evidenced from students' discussions, practical activities and completion of assignments. Learning objectives were clearly achieved in the vast majority of lessons.

Good health and safety practices were observed during practical activities observed. For example during a science lesson observed students put their school bags in safe storage, white coats and safety spectacles were used and students were verbally reminded of the possible hazards during the investigation. Best practice in handling equipment and chemicals was emphasised. Equipment was set up and put away in an orderly and well-organised fashion. The health and safety procedures implemented are commended.

Worksheets were distributed in most lessons and served as a means of focusing students' attention on the material being investigated and discussed. It is recommended that this practice be extended across all lessons and when appropriate, individual worksheets be given to students so that they can maintain a record of their work. The very good practice of giving annotated and formative feedback to students on their work should be extended to all subjects.

Effective use was made of questioning in many lessons observed. Students were affirmed when they answered correctly. Questions were used to stimulate interest and motivation. Students frequently asked questions, which were either expertly answered or let out to the whole class for further discussion. However, it is recommended that greater use be made of individual questioning in some lessons in an effort to involve all students in the lesson.

The whiteboard was used effectively to summarise key words and as a focus for key ideas throughout lessons. There was very effective use of ICT in many lessons. Examples include students preparing a presentation, researching for a project and well-researched teacher presentations, which acted as a focus for widespread, class discussion. There was a further example where students used ICT very effectively as an aid to composing a piece of music. Team teaching, group work and role-play were used very effectively in some lessons. Students sat in a

circle in other lessons, and this aided discussion and worked very well in less formal teaching and learning settings. Students were sufficiently challenged and in some lessons a points system ensured that each group competed and rose to the challenge. Students exhibited a very good sense of pride in their work. Commendable differentiated teaching methods were in evidence. Teaching methods were generally innovative in line with the *Transition Year Programmes, Guidelines for Schools*. Traditional subjects were taught in new and innovative ways and all subjects fitted well into the overall provision for TY in the school.

Students learned about themselves as individuals, their attitudes, feelings and emotions. They gained confidence in talking about themselves in a group setting. In one particular case students learned about the everyday world of advertising and how to critically analyse information being presented. Discussion on gender issues followed. Language support for EAL students is commended with a special class formed for those who are withdrawn from Irish. The emphasis on student's personal development and maturity is commended across the range of subjects evaluated.

3.3 Assessment

Self-assessment and critical analysis is promoted by means of a student logbook where students record their weekly reflections on the work they have completed and activities they have undertaken. There was clear evidence during the evaluation that many of these logbooks are maintained to a very high standard. It is commendable that parents are kept informed by means of a monthly report, which is based on a well thought out credit system. In addition TY students have a Christmas examination after which a report is sent home. There is an annual TY parent-teacher meeting and there is ongoing communication with parents by means of the student journal. In May students have a portfolio interview based on many aspects of their work including projects, essays, reports on trips and activities and objects made during practical lessons. Students are graded based on a well-structured marking scheme. This means of assessment is highly commended.

Transition Year culminates each year with a presentation of certificates and prizes and an exhibition of students' work. A special guest speaker attends this event and this TY graduation event is well supported by parents. School certificates have two categories; distinction and merit and are awarded for various subjects and activities. External certificates are awarded including the Department certificate and the ECDL certificate. In addition awards are given for academic progress, special contribution, special achievement, full attendance and special gold, silver and bronze certificates are awarded to high achieving students. This very good level of support and encouragement for students is highly commended.

4 PROGRAMME EVALUATION AND OUTCOMES

4.1 Programme evaluation and review

The TY programme is evaluated annually. A student questionnaire is distributed and feedback is carefully analysed. Students rank prepared statements regarding TY on a scale of one to four and the results are graphed on bar charts. These results inform changes in the programme in future years. However, there is scope for further expansion of the evaluation process to include more input from the whole staff and parents. In addition, individual subjects and modules need ongoing evaluation and modifications made to reflect the evolving trends of TY.

4.2 Attainment of programme objectives

It is reported that the skills obtained in developing a wide range of courses and modules in TY have ongoing beneficial effects in delivering the curriculum to other years. Students reported the great benefits they have received as a result of completing TY. These include achieving more confidence and maturity, being better able to make informed subject choices for Leaving Certificate and developing an enhanced relation with other students and teaching staff. The murals and artwork developed by TY students, which enhance school corridors, helps to make the school a vibrant learning environment for all. School management reported that the principal benefits of TY in Dominican College are that it provides a bridge between Junior and Leaving Certificate, it allows greater time to develop students' social and personal skills and it allows students to try new subjects and to determine those they wish to take for Leaving Certificate. The main difficulties reported by school management are financial constraints, work experience placements and following up on assessments not returned from employers, as well as time constraints in organising TY activities.

The Transition Year programme at Dominican College fulfils the TY programme objectives very well. There is a strong emphasis on personal development as evidenced by including this subject on the curriculum for all TY students. There was promotion of various key skills in the subjects and modules evaluated and there was a good emphasis on self-directed learning. Students obtain good experience of adult and working life and enhance their social awareness and maturity through involvement in many voluntary and community oriented activities.

5 SUMMARY OF STRENGTHS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The TY programme at Dominican College promotes the college's mission.
- Transition Year students are very well supported by school management structures.
- Photographs of TY activities and evidence of TY students' artwork are on clear display around the school.
- A central storage area is accessible to all TY teachers and a concise inventory of resource materials has been drawn up and is available to all staff.
- ICT is used extensively in all aspects of the TY programme including its planning and organisation and in many lessons.
- Staff are well deployed across the TY programme and their diverse skills and talents are comprehensively utilised in providing students with a diverse and well-balanced programme.
- Good health and safety practices were observed during practical activities observed.
- Students are well supported with timetabled guidance provision.
- Parents are well informed of student progress by means of the monthly assessment reports.
- The multitude of TY activities taking place on an on-going basis ensures that contact with the local and wider community is strong.
- Community work plays a great part in fulfilling the aims of TY in the college.
- TY coordinator duties are carried out very effectively.
- Communication links with staff are strong.
- The core team meets formally on a monthly basis and weekly on an informal basis. Monthly meetings are minuted, filed and made available to school management.
- A current TY written plan is in place.

- Various practical timetabling considerations were taken into account in an effort to streamline joint activities including team teaching, tutor time and provision of double periods.
- There was good preparation and advance planning of the lessons observed during the course of the visit.
- The teacher based classrooms added to the learning experience as students were in a subject relevant and vibrant learning environment during lessons observed.
- There was good rapport in lessons, which created a strong atmosphere for learning. Students were frequently praised and affirmed and they responded positively. There was a clear sense of enjoyment in many lessons. Students exhibited very good sense of pride in their work.
- Students were active in learning. Learning objectives were clearly achieved in the vast majority of lessons.
- Commendable differentiated teaching methods were in evidence. Teaching methodologies were generally innovative in line with the *Transition Year Programmes, Guidelines for Schools*.
- Students learned about themselves as individuals, their attitudes, feelings and emotions. They gained confidence in talking about themselves in a group setting.
- Self-assessment and critical thinking were promoted by means of a student logbook. It is commendable that parents are kept informed by means of a monthly report, which is based on a well thought out credit system. Transition Year culminates each year with a presentation of certificates and prizes and an exhibition of student work.
- Students reported the great benefits they have received as a result of completing TY.

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

- More extensive cross-curricular planning should take place and the whole staff should become more involved with this process.
- The TY written plan should be reviewed.
- Consideration should be given to re-balancing the subjects on offer in the curriculum so that all basic aspects of the curriculum are studied by all TY students, and this review should draw upon more feedback from the whole staff and parents.
- Individual subjects and modules within the curriculum require ongoing evaluation and modification to reflect the evolving trends of TY.
- In order to avoid disruption of lesson time, it is recommended that consideration be given to timetabling an afternoon for activities. In addition, the allocation of six class periods per week to ECDL needs to be re-evaluated.
- Teachers should develop strategies to make it possible for all students, and especially EAL students, to participate as fully as possible in lessons.
- Worksheets should be given to all students so that they can maintain a record of their work and the very good practice of giving annotated and formative feedback to students on their work should be extended to all subjects.

Appendix

School Response to the Report

Submitted by the Board of Management

Area 1 Observations on the content of the inspection report

In relation to the 'Transition Year Programme Evaluation', the Board wishes to acknowledge that it considers its contents to be a fair and accurate reflection of the Transition Year Programme at Dominican College, Sion Hill. We are particularly pleased that the report highlights the success of our Transition Year in fulfilling its "objectives very well" and in promoting "the college's mission".

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 a result of the recommendations of the report the following actions have been implemented or planned for this academic year:

- An afternoon for activities has been timetabled for this academic year 2007-08
- Plans are in place to involve the staff in more extensive cross-curricular planning.
- The Transition Year written plan will be reviewed this year.