St Martin’s Boys’ Secondary School

SCHOOL PROFILE

2014-2015

School

This school is situated in a large urban area and has in the past ten years seen a fairly dramatic decline in its numbers, due in part to demographic changes and also to the growth in popularity of other schools in the general area. In 2012 it will have 100 students in first year, a slight increase from the previous year. The religious ethos of the school is a feature we want to ensure remains strong.

St. Martin’s Secondary School (SMSS) has always streamed its junior cycle classes but in 2012 it plans to move away from this practice in first year and in other classes over the subsequent years. This change has come about in response to educational research findings and to the concerns expressed by many parents about the negative effects of the practice. The school has previously provided subject choice dependent, to some extent, on streaming and in the past Year One students have taken 13 subjects on average. SMSS has limited co-curricular provision which mainly focuses on participation in team games.

The school is 40 years old and has experienced a high retirement rate in the past five years and hence the age profile of the staff is changing with the arrival of a significant number of beginning and early-career teachers. Two years ago, SMSS appointed a new Principal; a teacher with thirty years’ service in the school.

**Priorities for development**

SMSS has engaged in a series of reflective exercises as part of its school planning two years ago and as a result has generated a number of medium-term (mainly curriculum) priorities.

*We should endeavour to;*

Offer **relevant experience** for all of our students in first year: With such a large group in the cohort we have found in the past number of years that more and more students are not appropriately challenged by the programme we have offered in the past. While there are some timetabling issues to be addressed we think that there ought to be a more choice available to students at this stage.

Cater more effectively for **students with SEN**: In common with most schools we have in the past number of years seen a rise in the number of students with SEN in our classes and indeed a greater range of needs within that number. We are conscious that our provision for these students is less than adequate, even with assistance of SNA’s in some cases. We therefore welcome the introduction of the Level 2 Learning Priority Learning Units for this very small targeted group of students.

Address issues of **transition from primary school**: It is apparent from feedback we receive from students and their parents that many students experience significant difficulties in the early stages of year 1 as they attempt to adapt to a new education environment. We are fortunate in that most of our students come from four sending primary schools and so we ought to be able to increase the co-operation with the teachers in 5th and 6h classes in relation to aligning the learning of students more closely.

Utilise the **talents, interests and potential** of its staff: There are quite a number of the newer staff who want to expand the range of the material they teach and some of the more experienced teachers are not convinced that the format of the traditional syllabuses offers students a varied introduction to the subjects

Stabilise its **intake** numbers (which have been falling): Our school had a reputation of being one where students excelled in state examinations, it was known as an ‘academic’ school and attracted students from the extended locality on that basis. For a variety reasons this situation no longer pertains and our identity needs to be re-evaluated and re-stated. The opinion of the staff (backed up by our initial communication with parents) appears to suggest that we ought to consider presenting our school as one where the arts and social sciences are particularly well catered for.

Maintain the focus on **excellence** which has been a significant part of the school’s tradition. In the past this has manifested itself as a concentration on high achievement of our top stream in state examinations but we hope to broaden the excellence ethic to encompass learning and teaching more generally in the school. It is the shared view of the school community that excellence in educational attainment will only come about if the school nurtures excellence in learning and teaching.

Framework Principles

The Framework for Junior Cycle provides principles to inform the school’s deliberations on curriculum enabling us to answer questions about what we want students to learn, how teachers teach and students engage with curriculum, and how individual students experience the curriculum. We are responding to the principles in a variety of ways to generate the curriculum for first years in SMSS in the first instance and for other years in junior cycle subsequently.

**Quality;** *The junior cycle in the school offers all learners a high quality education, characterised by high expectations of the learner and the pursuit of excellence.*

The focus on key skills which is to become the central feature of the Y1 programme will allow students engage with the curriculum in a more coherent way and provide a sense of purpose; linking their experiences in all subjects and cross-curricular themes. We will be working to ensure that the sense of fragmentation that might develop in such a varied programme doesn’t arise and we think that the key skills (along with the Literacy and Numeracy initiatives) will help provide coherence in this regard.

**Well-being**: *The curriculum contributes directly to the physical, mental and social wellbeing of learners*

Each first-year student will encounter courses in personal development throughout the year-long programme. In these, transition from primary schools will feature significantly an emphasis, which in turn will be supported by input from the Guidance Department, by increased communication with sending schools, and by reference to the bridging materials produced by NCCA as well as those developed in association with other schools in the network.

Physical education is a key element in the promotion of well-being and especially in the early stages of year 1, it contributes to the socialisation of young people. We are aware that nutrition plays an important part in facilitating the young person’s capacity to participate in physical activity and therefore we plan to co-operate with our neighbouring girls’ secondary school to provide a course linking topics in physical education with some in the area of nutrition/food preparation.

**Creativity and innovation;** *The curriculum provides opportunities for learners to develop their abilities and talents in the areas of creativity, innovation and enterprise and offers sufficient choice and flexibility to meet the needs of learners*

The curriculum will be built around

1. Some subjects as well as a range of short courses and interdisciplinary themes which the staff will develop especially in the areas of arts and social sciences
2. introductions to the required curriculum components
3. overarching theme connected to identity (student in school, school in community)

**Participation, relevance and enjoyment**; *The curriculum as experienced by the learners encourages participation, is engaging and enjoyable for learners, and relevant to their lives*

The feedback from students who have experienced Y1 in SMSS and their parents suggests that much of the school work in which they have been involved appears unconnected one element with the other and disconnected with the lives of the young people. To get our students engaged and to keep them that way we think that the learning has to have large elements of active participation on the part of learners. We will look to including significant levels of project activity (in subjects and cross-curricular work), to having a greater recognition of the learning opportunities offered by the school’s hinterland (in terms of places and people) and to using a key skills emphasis to encourage participation. In this context staff members have identified a need for CPD to assist them in integrating key skills in the design and delivery of curriculum components.

**Inclusive education**; *That the experience of junior cycle is inclusive of all learners and contributes to the achievement of equality of opportunity, participation and outcome for all*

The emphasis on examination preparation as a key driver in the school has for some time been problematic for staff and students. More and more students see the exam in its current form as irrelevant and those who have an engagement with the exam mind-set see the Leaving Certificate as the significant factor and appear to regard the Junior Certificate as somewhat detached from that. We hope that our Y1 programme can offer a way of involving all students and at the same time providing a sound basis for the curriculum components (subjects and other courses) which will ultimately feature in their junior cycle qualification.

Added to this, the increase in the numbers of students with SEN in the school is asking questions of us in terms of the real access those students have to the qualification system. The introduction of school certification at Level 2 offers a great opportunity to provide a real qualification pathway to more students. The school will begin in Y1 (by reference to the IEP’s of the students involved) to identify those students who might benefit from undertaking a programme in years 2 and 3 focused on achieving a L2 qualification.

This renewed focus on inclusion will pose significant challenges, not least in terms of the teaching approaches to be adopted by our staff. The school will, as a matter of urgency, look to the support available to assist in strengthening the capacity of teachers to plan for differentiated teaching in Y1.

**Continuity**; *The curriculum will build on students’ learning to date, actively support their progress in learning, and facilitate them in preparing and planning for future learning*

A number of the courses and themes developed within the school will incorporate material from 5th and 6th Class curriculum material. We have liaised with the teachers in our sender schools on how this might be done and some of them have committed to tailoring their curriculum decisions to accommodate the directions contained in these courses/themes.

The required curriculum components will rely heavily on the bridging documentation that has been developed by the NCCA and the additional material developed in association with our sending schools.

**Lifelong learning**; *Students will develop the skills of managing and directing their own learning that will assist them in meeting the challenges of life beyond school, in further and continuing education, and in working life.*

The role of keys skills in preparing young people for life outside school and life after school is a something we regard as very significant. The school has of course considered how the complete set of junior cycle key skills (Managing Myself, Staying Well, Communicating, Being Creative, Working with Others, Managing Information and Thinking) can feature in all of the courses and themes it develops. Given that we are placing special focus on easing the transition from primary, the school has decided to highlight in particular the skills of Managing Myself and Staying Well as we believe that the elements of those skills are most likely to help the young students in our school adapt to the changed environment of post-primary school. However, these are also skills which will assist the individual to maintain a strong relationship with learning, now and in the future.

**Literacy and numeracy**

A number of the priorities for development we have identified will call for the consolidation of the literacy and numeracy levels of all students during their first year in the school. With this in mind, all staff have received CPD to help them embed literacy and numeracy in their lessons.

**Evidence of learning**

A number of teachers in the school have been involved in assessment for learning initiatives based in their subject areas in recent years. Their experience tells us that this has been a successful departure by and large. Other colleagues are interested in using the AfL approaches and we hope to provide some time (and a structure) to allow for an on-going exchange of ideas within the staff on this. It has been suggested that we adopt an approach to gathering evidence of learning in Y1 that derives from the AfL principles. In terms of recording and reporting evidence of learning beyond the everyday learning setting, we plan to rely largely on student-generated portfolios to provide the basis for reporting to parents. This will provide some challenges in terms of procedure and logistics but it is consistent with our desire to begin developing students’ capacity to take a greater role in their own learning. It also marks something of a departure for teachers in terms of how they participate in the gathering of evidence of learning process but again consistent with the direction we envisage in years 2 and 3.

**Certification**

The school will offer its students access to certification aligned with Level 3 and Level 2 of the National Framework of Qualifications. While the first year of the junior cycle will not of itself contribute directly to certification for either it will allow some foundations to be put in place for them. In year one, we will identify the students for whom certification at Level 2 will be the most appropriate qualification pathway. The students’ exposure to the curriculum components within the programme will provide a basis for their engagement with a wider range of those components in years 2 and 3 of the junior cycle as they prepare to submit work for certification.

The majority of the students beginning Y1 in 2014 will work towards a Level 3 qualification in 2017. Those few students with difficulties from the lower functioning mild to higher functioning moderate range of general learning disabilities will work towards certification at Level 3 where they are able but for the most part will follow an individualised Level 2 Learning Programme and Level 2 short courses.