

Whole School Guidance: Taking the first steps.....



Whole School Guidance (WSG) CPD has been rolled out to over two hundred schools nationally over the last 12 months. Every post primary school is unique in so many ways, and yet every school shares a similar purpose: for every student to feel safe, to thrive and to meet their potential. In this article, a Guidance Counsellor gives an honest and practical account of 'Phase 1' of whole school guidance. Her article illustrates the best and most sustainable approach to developing a Whole School Guidance plan – step by step, one step at a time.



A blank canvas brings potential and expectation. In August 2017 [Dunamase College](#) or Coláiste Dhún Másc opened its doors to first years. Located in Portlaoise, Co. Laois the school is multidenominational and bilingual with an 'Irish language stream' in each year. At the same time as first years were smelling the paint in the newly renovated, state of the art school building, I was going through a transition of my own in Maynooth University. Eight years after having completed my Post Graduate Diploma in Education in UCC I returned to university to undertake the PGDSGC. That year marked a huge departure for me. The learning curve was steep. To gain enough guidance experience with both senior and junior students I undertook my placement training in Killina Presentation Secondary School, Rahan, Co. Offaly while teaching part time at Dunamase College. Since 2018 I have taught History, CSPE and Guidance full time at Dunamase College.

'The only true wisdom is knowing you know nothing'
- Socrates



Being a newly qualified Guidance Counsellor in a newly established school certainly fits the bill for 'WSG: taking the first steps.' Green as I felt (and still do) in setting up a department that serves the whole school amid a finite guidance hourly offering; the DES allocation was 52 minutes per week in year one and less than two hours in 2020, I take comfort in the 'Continuum of Support Model'. Teachers know their students best. In the first three years of establishing the culture of this new school; forging relationships based on mutual respect and trust has been

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prioritised. There is a chicken or egg scenario of culture, policy and planning. Since 2017, the task of creating all the school policy documents has been systematically approached by management and staff. The hand-in-glove nature of these documents is evidence of the collaboration and cooperation at every level in the school. The passion that drives all stakeholders to create an environment where pupils can flourish is inherent and predates policy formation. Whole School Guidance and student wellbeing is embodied in every interaction at Dunamase College. My job is to highlight and coordinate that passion. In truth there are days that juggling this with a near full academic timetable, teaching in both English and Irish, can feel challenging.

I can't but we can....

In December 2019 I attended the NCGE Step by Step Approach to Guidance Planning using the Whole School Guidance Framework CPD. For me, this was an overwhelming day! The duty that I felt towards developing the 'blank canvas' was stifling and having spent the previous year developing our guidance department I felt I'd dropped the ball. My head was a spin with forms, tables and checklists – that felt unchecked. Taking a breath, I stepped back from this to remind myself that our school is in a development stage and cannot 'tick all the boxes' and arguably never will as the process of whole school guidance is subject to the constant ebb and flow of school needs. Following this CPD I requested an in-school workshop with Carol Guildea. Her visit was reassuring and helped me to put in place some practical steps in coordinating whole school guidance at Dunamase College. The first step has been to adapt 'Form A' and circulate to all staff. Feedback from this in our final term will help inform the guidance plan further. In August, as part of the SSE programme, departments will reflect upon our progress to date using 'WSG: Checklist 1'.



Teamwork

Taking the first steps into WSG has been made a lot easier by the supports put in place by the NCGE and the IGC as has peer to peer support. Paul Fields, Director of LOETB schools has also organised WSG CPD which has provided a space in which to think big and time to map out plans to start small. For me, the help provided from these collective bodies has affirmed the teamwork approach that is necessary for WSG on every level. The World Health Organisation (2013) define mental health as 'a state of well-being in which every individual realises his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community'. The canvas was never empty, it is alive with colour. Learning the craft of weaving the many, MANY colourful rods of our school community together is one that I'm continuing to embrace.



Continuum of Support Model Form A

Whole School Guidance	How (Internal)	Who (Internal)	1 st Year	Look-out
Continuum of support	Area of Learning	Programme/Subject	School staff/external	Principal/Staff
Guidance for all:	Developing My Learning			
Guidance for some:	Developing My Learning			
Guidance for a few:	Developing My Learning			

Looking at Whole School Guidance: Checklist 1 RESOURCES

How are we doing? Take some time to reflect on the Criteria in the second column and then indicate how the school is doing against each statement.

FOCUS	Some Criteria to look for	Excellent	Acceptable	Needs attention
School mission & ethos	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students' personal & social, educational & career development is at the heart of the school's mission statement The school is committed to providing all students with access to 'appropriate guidance' through a 'whole school approach to guidance' (guidance for all, guidance for some and guidance for a few) The school's ethos is one that encourages all students to reach their potential The school is committed to identifying and supporting the guidance needs of specific groups of students making transitions (e.g. incoming first year) The school is committed to supporting students experiencing personal crises and difficulties in making transitions and decisions 	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Physical & social environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The school provides a safe and warm environment for students to facilitate their personal & social, educational & career development and learning The school environment provides facilities to support the provision of 'guidance for all', 'guidance for some' and 'guidance for a few' The school provides a designated confidential and private space to support reflection, personal learning and one-to-one guidance counselling The school provides a designated career learning & development room to support career learning & development 	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>



About the Author:
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She has taught in schools in Ireland and Australia. History, CSPE teacher and Guidance Counsellor. Firm believer in the holistic nature of education including coaching many extracurricular sports.