

**This accompanying article, written by Mr. Pat Dunne, Principal, Scoil Muire agus Pádraig, Swinford, Co. Mayo, (one of the presenting schools at the conference) describes the journey taken by this small rural DEIS school during the pilot and presents some of the rich work undertaken by first and second year students supported by school management and the guidance counsellor.**

Scoil Muire agus Pádraig is a small, voluntary secondary co-educational school in Swinford in Co. Mayo. It's a DEIS school in an area where rural poverty can often be silent and hidden. The school values its DEIS status because it provides a powerful platform to make a real difference to the lives of its students and parents through the use of focused supports.



The extent of curricular change in Irish education demands an authentic response from every school. The Junior Cycle curriculum with new specifications, new language, new methodologies and new modes of assessment offers creative possibilities to staff as they work in a collaborative way to prepare the young students for a dynamic and complex world. While the restoration of resources to Guidance is welcome, the demands on the Guidance Counsellor are intense and profound. The Wellbeing Guidelines indicate that 'Wellbeing in school starts with the staff,' (link 1). [https://www.ncca.ie/media/2487/wellbeingguidelines\\_forjunior\\_cycle.pdf](https://www.ncca.ie/media/2487/wellbeingguidelines_forjunior_cycle.pdf) This is a simple but profound truth. It's embodied by the safety message on airlines for parents to put on their own oxygen mask in the event of an emergency before caring for their children. It may seem harsh but there's a definite logic to this advice. So it can be difficult for a school to know where to start given the scale of the change taking place. It's also important to mind people, including the Guidance Counsellor, in the midst of this intense daily activity in school.

The publication of the document, 'A Whole School Guidance Framework' by the NCGE in June 2017 was a key moment for schools. Guidance is an apex point in the whole school, one where students are nurtured and guided as they attempt to manage a range of challenges and achieve their true potential. It provided a coherent place to tease out how 'guidance is a whole school activity.' ([https://www.education.ie/en/Circulars-and-Forms/Archived-Circulars/ci0009\\_2012.pdf](https://www.education.ie/en/Circulars-and-Forms/Archived-Circulars/ci0009_2012.pdf)). It would also help a school to reflect on the efficacy of its guidance service and to help school managements to deepen their own understanding of the notion of guidance for all, guidance for some and guidance for a few which is represented powerfully in the 'Guidance Wheel', [https://www.ncge.ie/sites/default/files/Framework\\_Guidance\\_POSTERS\\_P1ONLY.pdf](https://www.ncge.ie/sites/default/files/Framework_Guidance_POSTERS_P1ONLY.pdf). Therefore, Scoil Muire agus Pádraig

was delighted to join the NCGE pilot project from January to May 2018 following the publication of the Framework. It offered a precious space to reflect on the role of Guidance in the school. Focusing on Guidance provided an anchor for the entire school community to interpret and mediate the change taking place in the school's classrooms and corridors.

At a basic level, participating in the pilot project helped the staff to access expertise within the NCGE and provided opportunities for rich learning from the other fifteen schools. It also focused staff conversations by asking key questions about the nature of the service on offer to the young people. We know that Scoil Muire agus Pádraig is an exceptionally caring school. However, how can we make valid judgements about the quality of the service to the students? A decision to make provision for 400 hours of Wellbeing in 2017-2018 placed Guidance at the heart of each First year student's experience of the curriculum. So there was a deliberate attempt to build on and enhance the existing links between all aspects of school life including the teachers, Year Heads, Pastoral Care team, Guidance Counsellor, mentors and school management to ensure that the students could receive the best possible support.

A weekly meeting between the Guidance Counsellor and school management in addition to the normal Pastoral Care meeting made an enormous difference. It helped us all to deepen our knowledge. While staff were aware of the project, we did not have a major discussion with the teachers about their role in Guidance until we had clarified and deepened our own understanding of the rich possibilities within Guidance.



Meanwhile, the First year students seemed to be making a smooth transition to secondary school. Difficulties with lockers, journals and homework were receding as the Wellbeing classes began to work their magic. The PE classes, the SPHE, CSPE, guidance education and the 'Friends for Life Programme' (<https://www.nbss.ie/interventions-and-projects/wellbeing/friends-for-life>) all created a rich educational experience for the students. One evening three questionnaires entitled 'Developing myself,' 'Developing my learning' and 'Developing my career path' were e-mailed to the First year students without any notice. They were to be completed in the Guidance class the next day. A significant number of students completed them at



home shortly after they arrived and this reminded us of the power of ICT and the hunger among the students to reflect on the content of the questionnaires.

Part of the pilot project involved redrafting the questionnaires to simplify the language. Subsequently, every First year student created a PowerPoint presentation about a specific career. The students used a variety of guidance websites to source information and to structure it for the presentation. The students presented their work to the Guidance Counsellor, the Deputy Principal and Principal. This was a very exciting moment for all students as they took such pride in presenting their learning to staff and their fellow students.

It was important to maintain the momentum which had been created in 2017-2018. So in 2018-2019, the Second years developed a more ambitious learning experience. They decided to organise a careers fair using a 'speed dating' model. Ms Siobhan Kenny, the Guidance Counsellor, provided excellent support for the students. However, the students organised everything. They invited a range of people with very varied career paths and experience to share their knowledge. This included self-employed people, public sector employees and people working in multinationals.



They set up the gym and ensured that the event could go smoothly. The Second years invited the First year students to join them in small groups as they visited the different participants. During the next session, the Second years went around with the Sixth years. This was also very interesting as the nature and range of questions changed as the older students are beginning to formalise possible paths after they finish school next summer. Many teachers visited the event throughout the morning and they were very impressed with the fact that the Second year students had delivered such a compelling event. Many of the participants joined the teaching staff for lunch and this helped the school to build strong links with the community. It was also a small token to thank them for their generosity. Aspects of the event were recorded.

A selection of First and Second year students were interviewed on camera later by Ms Kenny. She explored their experience of the transition to Scoil Muire agus Pádraig and the impact of the Guidance programme on their lives. It's fair to say that Guidance is both physically



*Ms Louise Doherty Primary Teacher with students*



*Ms Lisa Mc Cauley Allergan representative with some Sixth year students*

and symbolically at the heart of the school. This helps to raise its profile and ensure that the students can receive the best possible care. Viewing the recorded interviews also helped the staff to deepen their knowledge of the issues concerning the young people. The experience of the pilot project was shared at the NCGE Dissemination Conference which was held on Tuesday the 13th of November. This was a very powerful learning experience as schools could reflect on how the project had helped them to refine their practice.

As expected, every school's experience was unique and rich. Scoil Muire agus Pádraig's presentation concluded with two songs by two talented First year students singing Let It Be by the Beatles and The Call by Regina Spektor which was part of the soundtrack to the Chronicles of Narnia, Prince Caspian. The lyrics which reminded people to speak 'words of wisdom' and to 'pick a star on the dark horizon and follow the light' were extremely moving and capture a great deal of the essence of the guidance process. In a sense, Scoil Muire agus Pádraig is only at the start of its journey in relation to Guidance. However, the entire school community is very grateful for the opportunity to participate in the NCGE Pilot Project as the knowledge gained will be a powerful catalyst now and into the future for the students within its care. It helped all to see the Junior Cycle key skills in action in a very meaningful way. It reinforced the importance of trusting the students to scope out their own path with a wise Guidance Counsellor supporting and walking the path with them.

The next steps will enhance the existing high quality guidance service. Most students now refer themselves to the Guidance Counsellor and this is welcome as it indicates a greater level of self-awareness among the student body. We feel we now have a ripe moment to engage with an exceptionally busy staff to help them to reflect on their responsibilities in relation to Guidance. Work will also begin on the development of a mediation programme. This will give the students essential lifelong skills to manage their personal and working lives.

Thanks are due to the staff and students in Scoil Muire agus Pádraig with particular thanks due to the Second year students, Ms Siobhan Kenny, our Guidance Counsellor and Ms Ciara O'Shea, our Deputy Principal. It's also important to thank Ms Jennifer McKenzie, Director NCGE, Ms Linda Darbey, Guidance Programme Co-ordinator NCGE, Mr. Luke Dunne, Guidance Programme Administrator NCGE, Mr. David Cullen, Communications Officer NCGE, Mr. Paul Fields, Director of Schools, Laois Offaly Education and Training Board and Mr. Paul King, Chair, NCGE Guidance Committee.