

**North Fingal  
Attendance Monitoring Project  
(AMP)  
Final Report**

September 2008

## Contents:

<b>Introduction and Background to the Project</b> .....	1
<b>Immediate Challenges</b> .....	1
<b>Gathering Background Data</b> .....	2
<b>Consultation with Committee</b> .....	2
<b>Viability of the Proposal</b> .....	2
<b>Consultation with NEWB</b> .....	3
<b>Work Programme Development</b> .....	3
<b>Approach to the Project</b> .....	4
<b>Measure 1: Exploring Existing Data Collection Systems</b> .....	5
<b>Existing Data Collection in Balbriggan Community College</b> .....	5
<b>Existing Data Collection in St. Joseph’s, Rush</b> .....	5
<b>Comparing and Contrasting the Balbriggan and Rush Systems</b> .....	6
<b>Other Approaches: Castleknock Community College</b> .....	6
<b>The Future of Attendance Monitoring in North Fingal</b> .....	7
<b>Measure 2: Building an Attendance Monitoring Software System</b> .....	9
<b>The Project Attendance System: a brief overview</b> .....	9
<b>Running the Project Attendance System</b> .....	9
<b>Evaluation of the Project Attendance System</b> .....	10
<b>Measure 3: Exploring Options for Accessing Counselling Supports</b> .....	11
<b>Consultation with NCII</b> .....	11
<b>Developing Referral Protocols</b> .....	12
<b>A Quality Framework for School Counselling</b> .....	12
<b>Reasons Counselling Delivery did not Proceed</b> .....	13
<b>Measure 4: Exploring Supports for Students Transferring from Primary Schools</b> .....	14
<b>Measure 5: Supporting an Application for a School Completion Programme</b> .....	15

**Appendices: see separate documents**

**Appendix 1: Bibliography / Background Research**

**Appendix 2: Project Staffing & Management**

**Appendix 3: Recommendations for Effective Attendance Monitoring**

**Appendix 4: Sample Reports from the Attendance Monitoring Information System**

**Appendix 5: Referral Protocols for Counselling Supports in Schools**

**Appendix 6: A Quality Framework for School Counselling, *by Caroline Lambden***

**Appendix 7: Transfer Programme Overview – Rush National School**

## **North Fingal Attendance Monitoring Project (AMP)**

### **Introduction and Background to the Project:**

In 2003/4 the Fingal Youth at Risk Network (FYNET) prepared a report on services in Fingal to support young people at risk. The report suggested that it would be useful to have a tracking system to provide early indicators of children who, based on their patterns of school attendance, were beginning to disengage from the educational process. Once identified, these children could be given extra supports in the hope of keeping them in school.

In early 2004 an application was made to the Dormant Accounts Fund, requesting €107,500 to support a joint project between Co-operation Fingal and Northside Partnership to develop such a tracking system. It was acknowledged that informal tracking systems already existed in some schools but that there was, at the time, no national system. The Department of Education and Science (DES) had been considering the development of a national tracking system for a number of years, and tracking was to be an important element of the work of the recently established National Education Welfare Board (NEWB). The application recognized calls from the NESF and Fingal Development Board for systems that could help identify young people at risk of dropping out of school early. The proposal suggested that the tracking system, if successfully developed, might at some later date be useful as a model for a national system.

The application also proposed the employment of two part-time attendance monitoring officers (AMOs) who would manage the data input to the system, liaise with existing supports within the schools, and follow up on individuals flagged by the system. The inclusion of follow-up supports modelled approaches successfully implemented under the School Completion Programme in Northside, where staff noted significantly reduced absenteeism in participating schools as a result of phoning the parents of each student marked absent on any school day.

By late 2004, Dormant Accounts had approved the allocation of €66,000 to Co-operation Fingal towards the project, which was revised to reflect this reduced funding. Funding available for software development was severely reduced, as was funding towards employing AMOs. Given this, Northside Partnership agreed to step back from their joint role in the project and allow it to focus entirely on working with schools in the North Fingal area. The schools to be involved were Balbriggan Community College (Balbriggan: second level), St. Teresa's (Balbriggan: primary), and St. Joseph's (Rush: second level). The position of project co-ordinator was advertised in late 2004, and the co-ordinator took up the part-time post in January 2005.

### **Immediate Challenges:**

After reviewing the project proposal, the co-ordinator outlined four pieces of work as priorities for the first phase of the project:

1. Gathering background information, both locally and nationally, on the education system, absenteeism, and on existing and proposed support structures for young people at risk
2. Consultation with the steering committee to build a picture of how the committee members viewed the project, and what their expectations were for its work and outcomes
3. Reviewing the viability of the proposed work, given the reduced funding available, and the developing role of the National Education Welfare Board
4. Developing a detailed programme for the work to be carried out

### **Gathering Background Data:**

Background data was gathered through research and consultation. A list of the sources used is provided in **Appendix 1**. The most relevant items to come from this were:

- A deeper insight into the developing role of the National Education Welfare Board (NEWB)
- Recognition that school absenteeism is often a symptom of wider social and family issues, and so can not always be dealt with purely by intervention by or through the schools.

### **Consultation with Committee:**

Following consultation with the management committee, it was clear that there were differences among individuals in conceptualizing the project's objectives. Those involved at different levels in education delivery understandably saw different needs as priorities. The schools' key needs were for assistance and resources to help them meet the new legislation that had come from the Education (Welfare) Act 2000, and for support in gathering and collating the data that would soon need to be transmitted to NEWB (see below). Other committee members not directly involved in teaching were more concerned with the development of a software model that could recognise and flag known patterns of attendance / absence, systems that could track children throughout their school life and facilitate information exchange as students transferred from primary to secondary school, and systems that could continue to track early school leavers after they had left school.

### **Viability of the Proposal:**

A review of the viability of the proposed work foresaw problems both with the development of the proposed software system and with the placement of project staff in schools to carry out contact work with parents of absent students.

Although the NEWB had been set up through the Education (Welfare) Act 2000, it took considerable time to emerge as an active agent in the delivery of supports at a local level. No educational welfare officer (EWO) had been in place during the initial FYNET consultations in 2003, and NEWB representation in the consultation process is notably absent. By 2005, however, an EWO was in place in North Fingal, and the NEWB were about to roll out their own data collection protocol, the **Student Absence Management System (SAMS)** which would require all schools to provide regular and detailed information on absences.

SAMS would collate data to a central database, so details would **not** be available directly to schools. While it could provide a national record of attendance and help prioritize support targets for EWOs, it would not be of direct use in flagging emerging attendance patterns that could be addressed through in-school supports. It was clear, however, that the development of the project's proposed software system would represent a perceived duplication of work mandated to the NEWB.

The much reduced project budget also proved inadequate for the development of an effective and robust stand-alone software system. In fact, even the originally proposed budget would not have covered the design costs of a system that could have matched the expectations of the committee.

Some schools also foresaw a difficulty in allowing project staff who were not actually employed by the schools to access attendance data that the schools viewed as confidential. Added to this, the original proposal required that AMOs contact parents of absent children **on behalf of** the schools, while they themselves would not be employed by the schools or directly answerable within any given school's management and accountability structures. Following discussions of the potential difficulties of using AMOs in this capacity with the three principals involved, both the second level schools decided to proceed with the project, while St. Theresa's primary school reluctantly felt they had to withdraw.

## **Consultation with NEWB**

The AMP steering committee felt strongly that any work carried out should be complementary to the work of the National Education Welfare Board. In early April 2005, project representatives had a very productive meeting with the Regional Manager (Leinster North / Ulster) of the NEWB and the Education Welfare Officer responsible for the North Fingal area. In essence, it was agreed that, while the development of a software system that purported to be a model for a national system would clash with the NEWB's recently launched SAMS, the Board had no difficulty with the project developing systems that assisted schools in collecting and managing local attendance information, especially if this would better enable the schools to provide accurate data in their SAMS reports. It was recognized that, while schools were now obliged under the Education (Welfare) Act 2000 to provide regular, accurate attendance data, no new resources had been provided to facilitate this, which placed an extra burden on schools.

## **Work Programme Development**

Following the meeting with NEWB, a new programme was developed in consultation with the project's committee members, and particularly with the principals of Balbriggan Community College and St. Joseph's, Rush. The programme consisted of six measures, outlined below:

1. Explore existing data collection systems used in schools, and suggest ways in which they might be improved
2. Design a basic attendance monitoring system and explore how useful it could be in:
  - a. Providing accurate information on individual attendance
  - b. Highlighting developing patterns of attendance
  - c. Outputting accurate reports to the NEWB standard
3. Explore options for accessing counselling services to specifically assist those with early-stage attendance issues
4. Explore supports for students transferring from main feeder primary schools, and methods to identify students with potential attendance problems at an early stage
5. Support long-term assistance for schools in the North Fingal area by providing data to support an application for a School Completion Programme (SCP) in the area

Although significantly cut down, Measures 1 and 2 were similar to the original objectives of the project proposal submitted to Dormant Accounts. Measures 3-5 represented new directions for the programme and grew directly from consultations with the schools. These measures reflected resource, funding, and structural issues that had been identified as barriers to the schools' capacities to effectively manage attendance and absenteeism.

Measure 3 was included as a direct request from both principals, who recognized that poor attendance was often symptomatic of wider social and family issues. Measure 4 would attempt to forge stronger links between feeder primary and secondary schools, and to develop structures for the communication of each student's attendance data to the relevant second level school at the time the student transferred. Measure 5 recognized the broad difficulties involved in providing the manpower, time, and resources required to tackle attendance issues in what are primarily educational establishments. This measure would, if successful, address these through the School Completion Programme, already well established nationally.

The work programme was approved by the project management committee in June 2005, and received approval from the Dormant Accounts Fund in August.

**Approach to the Project:**

In order to make the best of the 5 measures of the revised workplan, especially given the relatively small budget available, the management committee agreed that AMP should see itself as a pilot project whose objectives were primarily to explore and learn. While it was hoped that important work in helping the schools to identify and support target students was to be carried out, it was recognised that the project's real potential lay in making recommendations and suggesting models for how schools could collect and utilise attendance data, and how early intervention supports could be implemented for target students in the hope of keeping them in school for longer.

## **Measure 1:**

### **Exploring existing data collection systems**

Collecting accurate data on attendance over the period of the academic year in a modern second level school is not a straightforward process. The major factors that impact on data collection are:

- The “culture” of the school
- The administration procedures in place for data collection
- The effectiveness of these procedures
- The manner in which the data is collected and in which collected data is collated
- The number of registrations (roll calls) taken each day
- The distribution of the students at the time of registration (whether or not they are in their form groups, or split between a number of different class groups<sup>1</sup>)
- The resources available to monitor and manage attendance

All these factors contribute to the degree of accuracy / inaccuracy in the final data. The approaches to data collection in the two schools (Balbriggan Community College and St. Joseph’s) at the time when the project began are outlined below:

#### **Existing Data Collection at Balbriggan Community College**

A number of years prior to the beginning of the project, Balbriggan Community College installed a swipe card registration system that works in tandem with the Anseo programme from Ivertec. Students were issued with swipe cards which they used to “sign in” and “sign out” of the school building. Swipe points were available at entrances and exits. Data on arrival and exit of each student was automatically forwarded to the Anseo computer system. A keypad was also available to allow students to “swipe in” without their cards. The swipe card method relied on students to use the system, and not all of them did. A separate, manual registration was taken during first period, and this information was used to manually update and correct the Anseo data, a task carried out by a part-time administrator in charge of attendance. No manual register was carried out in the afternoons, because no staff member was available to process it (an afternoon registration was put in place with support from the project in November 2005).

Late students were required to report to the attendance administrator, who ensured their arrival was entered to the system, and provided them with a stamped late note which they showed to their teacher upon reaching the classroom. The school’s designated Attendance Officer (AO) collected a list of the students showing as absent from the Anseo system and attempted to confirm that the list matched actual absent students. As the students were in their form groups for the first period of each morning, this was reasonably straightforward if carried out straight away. After first period, however, students moved into class groups and it was much more difficult to track down and check on an individual student. Lists of absent students from each year were also provided to year heads.

#### **Existing Data Collection at St. Joseph’s in Rush**

St. Joseph’s used the attendance module of the Facility software system from CCM Software to capture attendance data. Students gathered in their form classes before period 1 (first thing in the morning) for the purposes of registration. A second register was taken before period 6 (first thing in the afternoon) when students were in class groups. Rush operated an OMR (optical mark recognition) system that interfaced with the Facility software. Form and class lists were printed on

---

<sup>1</sup> A form group comprises of all students assigned to a particular class in a particular year; a class group often comprises of students from different form groups, brought together as a single class for the purpose of teaching a particular subject.

special templates that required only absent students to be marked. For morning registrations, these templates were prepared the day before by the attendance administrator (again, a part time position) and collected in the mornings from the staff room by form teachers. Following registration, they were returned to the office of the administrator by a prefect (student) from each form class and were very quickly scanned using an optical mark reader and automatically updated to Facility. Similar templates were used for the afternoon registration, and the administrator tried to ensure that these were processed before she left for the day. Late students were required to report to the administrator's office to ensure their presence was updated to the system, which they generally did. The school operated a policy of giving detentions for three late mornings, and this was implemented, in a discretionary manner, by the attendance administrator. Students who managed to slip in late without reporting to her office were flagged by her system, showing up as absent in the mornings, but present in the afternoons. The attendance administrator passed these details on to teachers to follow up.

### **Comparing and Contrasting the Balbriggan and Rush Systems:**

Both the Balbriggan and Rush schools relied primarily on one part-time administrator to carry out the majority of the processing work on day-to-day attendance data, and both used specialized computer software to collate the data. Rush used morning and afternoon registers to gather data, while Balbriggan used student swipe-in, supplemented by manual registration, with additional checking. When compared directly, the approach used in Rush provided accurate results before the end of the first period, while the Balbriggan approach provided somewhat less accurate results, requiring more input, and with results not generally available until after the first period. Results for afternoon attendance were considerably more accurate in Rush. Some of the main reasons for the difference in accuracy are outlined below:

- The slightly longer working hours of the attendance administrator in Rush allowed her to process the afternoon figures each day before she left
- Rush operated a morning assembly, where students get together briefly before class, and their use of Facility, which keeps track of class groups as well as form groups, allowed them to easily create templates for the students in period 6 classes
- Systems were in place in Rush to ensure that completed manual registers were returned promptly. Similar systems existed in Balbriggan, but were less robust
- The Balbriggan swipe-in system placed the responsibility for "signing in" on the *student*; the Rush system placed responsibility for collecting accurate attendance data on *form teachers*

### **Other Approaches: the Facility ePortal System at Castleknock Community College**

Castleknock Community College is part of the County Dublin VEC and was established in 1995. The school caters for approximately 1100 students, about double the number attending Balbriggan Community College.

As part of a pilot project by County Dublin VEC, Castleknock used the Facility ePortal system to monitor attendance. ePortal is a recent addition to the standard Facility CMIS (Central Management Information System) from CCM Software, as used by most second level schools in Ireland. ePortal is a web-based system, which integrates into the Facility system. The system provides resources that allow the school to set up and maintain student records, carry out curriculum planning and scheduling, and monitor attendance, and it allows data in Facility to be accessed and updated over the internet.

Laptop-enabled teachers used the ePortal system to send attendance data directly from the classroom to Facility, which was immediately updated. The system also allowed parents to access details of their child's attendance and academic performance over the internet, using a secure username and password.

At Castleknock, the system was being introduced on a phased basis, and as of March 2006 was used to track attendance for junior cycle (first through third year) students. Teachers completed the registration on laptops provided by the school, and connected to Facility ePortal using wired network ports available in each classroom. The system is capable of allowing teachers to record attendance on a lesson-by-lesson basis, although at the time of the study data was only being collected for the first period in the morning, and the first period in the afternoon. A member of the teaching staff, who is also a year head, took care of day-to-day system administration.

### **The Future of Attendance Monitoring in North Fingal**

With the growing popularity and availability of the internet, falling costs for hardware, and the requirement that attendance data be accurately and regularly forwarded to NEWB, there is little doubt that ePortal and similar systems represent the way of the future for attendance monitoring in Irish schools. Given the ubiquity of Facility CMIS in second level schools, Facility ePortal is well placed to be the platform of choice as the technology is more widely implemented.

Facility ePortal is an impressive addition to the attendance monitoring mechanisms in Castleknock Community College. Castleknock, a reasonably new school, appears to have both the infrastructure and the personnel to operate the system effectively, and may well serve as a model for future roll outs. While there are no immediate plans to introduce ePortal to the schools in North Fingal, the system, if implemented, would have some significant benefits:

- It simplifies the process of gathering data and minimises the time required to administer data collection. It significantly decreases the administration burden for the school, which would free up staff time to follow up on absent students (e.g. contact parents)
- The system would be in line with VEC recommendations for the future development of attendance monitoring systems
- CCM Software offers a comprehensive program of training which ensures all users will have the required product knowledge
- A secondary benefit would be the provision of laptops to teachers, which could be used productively as curriculum / teaching resources

Obstacles that might need to be addressed in order to introduce the system successfully include the following:

- Schools would need to invest significantly in the technologies required to operate the system. Hardware requirements would include laptops for all teachers, in-class infrastructure / networking points / wireless network systems, and web server systems
- ePortal would require an able administrator in each school with a good knowledge of the technologies involved, and an ability to troubleshoot problems as they arise
- Both administration staff and teachers would need to be trained to use the new system. Even a high tech system like ePortal can only produce accurate and useful information on attendance if **all** staff are using it correctly and consistently

In the interim, local schools would perhaps be better served by maximising their use of Facility CMIS. Balbriggan Community College, in particular, might benefit from Facility's OMR (optical mark reader) features, already used by St. Joseph's in Rush, which allow attendance data to be inputted very

quickly and accurately. At the same time, it would seem sensible to suggest that emphasis be placed on building *effective ancillary mechanisms to support the accurate gathering and utilisation of attendance data*.

## **Measure 2:**

### **Building an Attendance Monitoring Software System**

As already explained, funding was not available to develop a full stand-alone software system to monitor attendance, and in any case commercial versions of such software were already in use in both of the participating schools. Measure 2 set out to build a cut down attendance monitoring mechanism using the Microsoft Excel spreadsheet package customised with Visual Basic for Applications (VBA). The idea was suggested by a similar approach used in the St. Finian's School Completion Programme in Swords that had been developed for the SCP by Ciaran Mythen, one of the parents who happened to have the high level VBA skills needed. Ciaran agreed to work with the project to help us build a customised Excel workbook which, for the purpose of this report, we refer to as the Project Attendance System (PAS).

We anticipated running the PAS in parallel to the systems already operating in Balbriggan and Rush primarily to use as a benchmark that would allow us to compare aspects of the two existing systems. We also wanted to test if it was possible to maintain accurate attendance records and output a range of useful attendance reports using such a cut down system. Finally, we wanted to see if our system could be made to output attendance / absence reports in the format required by NEWB. At that time, neither Anseo nor Facility could output reports in this format, and they needed to be calculated manually, which took considerable time.

The PAS was commissioned in July 2005, to be ready for the school year 2005-6, beginning at the end of August. In tandem with this, the position of Attendance Monitoring Officer (AMO) was advertised, and interviews carried out in July. The AMO took up her part-time position on September 15th 2005, and was based in the attendance office in Balbriggan Community College. As the project did not have a capital budget, a computer system was provided by Co-operation Fingal for the duration of the programme. The AMO's main role was to assist the schools to gather more accurate attendance data and to enter this data into the PAS.

### **The Project Attendance System: a brief overview**

The Project Attendance System ran in Microsoft Excel, and appeared at first glance to be a particularly complex Excel workbook. Separate sheets were given over to student details, class details, and attendance data. A main navigation sheet provided a summary of attendance data for the entire school, a clickable interface to allow the user to navigate to a given date in order to enter attendance data, and a selection of data management tools for updating data and creating reports (sample pages from the PAS are shown in Appendix 4).

Before being deployed in either of the schools, complete data records for each student needed to be input into the system. Once this was done, the system could be updated daily with the names of absent students entered into the absent list for any given day. This list also had a section that allowed the reason for the absence to be entered, using the same letter codes employed by the NEWB. As data built up in the system, it was possible to create a report that listed the students absent on any given day, or that summarised student absences over a given period. Reports could be requested detailing the attendance records of an individual student, or providing the list of students absent in a given time period, with reason for absence shown by NEWB code. NEWB format reports could also be created (see sample in Appendix 4).

### **Running the Project Attendance System**

The PAS was implemented in both schools and run through to the end of November 2005. In Balbriggan, absence data was gathered directly from the period 1 manual registration, and thus was different from the raw data being entered into the Anseo system there. In Rush, absence data was

also gathered from the period 1 manual registration, but this was essentially the same data that was entered, by OMR, into the school's Facility system. The software itself was monitored in how it handled and output data, and the programmer came in every two weeks or so to deal with bugs or to discuss requests for changes in how data was managed. By the end of November, we could see that:

- The data in the St. Joseph's version of the PAS matched closely to the data in the school's Facility system, with the Facility system being somewhat more accurate
- The data in the Balbriggan version of the PAS did not match very closely with the data in the school's Anseo database. The discrepancies were down mainly to inaccuracies in the manual registrations (i.e. in how data was **gathered**) coupled with some inaccuracies associated with the PAS

Since the PAS did not add any level of accuracy to the St. Joseph's attendance data, and since the AMO post was part time with limited hours, it was decided to discontinue maintaining the St. Joseph's PAS. The three months of data that had been entered into both systems had already allowed us to compare elements of the two systems and identify weaknesses in the approach to attendance data gathering in Balbriggan. Attendance data for Balbriggan continued to be entered into the PAS for the remainder of the 2005-6 school year, and compared with the data in the school's own systems, while at the same time new procedures were implemented with a view to improving data gathering mechanisms. The learning from this work is detailed in **Appendix 3**.

### **Evaluation of the Project Attendance System**

While the PAS is, in principle, an effective mechanism for collating attendance data and outputting attendance reports, there are limitations to using an Excel / VBA system for this kind of data management in practice. The most notable limitation was the need for the operator to type in the names of the absent students each day. Apart from the time needed to do this – the average absentee list for Balbriggan was anywhere between 40 and 80 students – any, even very slight, discrepancy between this input and the way the name was typed in the PAS student record sheet led to some inaccuracies in data output. At our request, the program included a function to validate names entered into the daily absence lists (i.e. check them against the main bank of student records), but the inability of the PAS to allow the names of absent students simply to be ticked was a serious disadvantage.

A second limitation was the unpredictable way that the VBA code sometimes expressed when changes were made to the structure of the Excel workbook. This occasionally meant that some small section of the program failed as a result of an upgrade or addition. Ciaran, the programmer, was very diligent in tracking down and fixing these bugs, but they made customisation of the PAS more difficult than it might have been. Other limitations included the ease with which the user could accidentally erase or overwrite data, and the way the program tended to slow down when it was generating some reports.

On the other hand, the PAS showed that it was possible to collate attendance data for a large school for an entire year using a customised version of an Excel spreadsheet. Particularly, it was possible to output a range of different reports on student absence levels, and the PAS successfully outputted reports in NEWB format before either of the commercial packages had modules that could do so.

By the end of the year, the Project Attendance System had still not been used to create the school's official attendance returns to NEWB, but this was primarily because of difficulties with the mechanisms for gathering accurate attendance data, and not with the application itself.

## Measure 3:

### Exploring options for accessing counselling supports

The experiences of participating schools supported the growing understanding that serious absenteeism from school is often a *symptom* of wider difficulties in a student's life – family or social issues that cannot always be addressed by the schools themselves. The principals in Balbriggan and Rush expressed an interest in developing models for counselling services to tackle such issues. Both schools had previous positive experience with counselling supports. The guidance counsellor in Balbriggan Community College was a trained Reality Therapist. St. Joseph's had in the past used an art therapist paid for by additional funding that the school had sourced.

Originally the project had intended to fund counsellors directly to work in each school over a short period of time. Because of the cost of counselling services, it expected that no more than 150 hours of counselling could be provided with available funding. In an effort to extend this, the project contacted the National Counselling Institute of Ireland (NCII) to offer unpaid counselling hours to third year counselling diploma students, each of whom is required to deliver 300 hours of practical counselling as part of their qualification. In discussions with the Academic Director, an option was worked out whereby NCII would, for the available funding, provide 200 hours of counselling through appropriately trained third year students, as well as providing a framework for the delivery of counselling in schools, and an evaluation of work carried out. NCII would ensure counsellors received appropriate levels of supervision from qualified counselling supervisors. The proposal to work with NCII was agreed by the committee in October 2005.

### Consultations with NCII

Caroline Lambden was assigned by NCII to carry out the reporting and evaluation elements of Measure 3. In initial consultations she outlined how the work would be carried out. Referral protocols would need to be developed to allow the schools to identify and refer target students to the proposed service, along with individual progression plans for each participating student. Each school would ideally have a "care team"<sup>2</sup> which would be responsible for progressing students into the counselling process and monitoring changes in their attendance or behaviour. NCII would provide two student counsellors - because the term "counsellor" might be viewed negatively by some students, they would be referred to as Attendance Support Workers (ASWs). Caroline would work with the ASWs in developing a template to assist in student profiling. Measure 3 itself would be referred to as the Attendance Support Programme. It was agreed that the main objective of the Attendance Support Programme would be to find out what works when planning and delivering counselling in a school environment.

Further consultation outlined more specifically the work that NCII would carry out for the project:

- Develop job descriptions for counsellors, outlining the work to be carried out, and person specifications outlining required skills, qualifications, and experience
- Develop terms of reference for counsellors, specifying the scope and details of the work, and including mechanisms for data recording, reporting, communication with the schools, etc.
- Consult with the Project Co-ordinator and input into the development of a referral protocol
- Provide two adequately trained / qualified counsellors (third year students, or students who have completed third year) to carry out 200 hours of direct supports with young people and provide adequate counselling supervision, in line with NCII guidelines

---

<sup>2</sup> See Appendix 5: Attendance Support Programme Referral Protocol, and the section Building Terms of Reference for the Care Team

- Develop systems for monitoring the impacts of counselling and provide a comprehensive report on the work carried out, detailing a model of good practice for the delivery of counselling supports through schools

### **Developing Referral Protocols**

Referral protocols are extensive guidelines and supports that allow a school to effectively carry out all of the steps involved in identifying target students and progressing them into the Attendance Support Programme. The protocols needed to be both comprehensive and flexible enough to be applied in the different circumstances of different schools and school cultures. Significant consultation with school staff went into the development of the protocols, and they were much more difficult and considerably more time-consuming to put together than had at first been anticipated.

The finished protocols provide detailed templates for:

- Building terms of reference for a care team
- Informing school staff about the programme
- Informing parents / guardians about the programme
- Inviting parents / guardians to discuss a child's possible participation in the programme
- Obtaining consent to allow a child to participate in the programme
- Shortlisting students who might be suitable for the programme
- Profiling individual students, at a basic and an in-depth level
- Arranging support (counselling) sessions
- Tracking changes in student attendance, attitude, behaviour, etc.

The full collection of referral protocols is available in **Appendix 5**.

The process of developing the referral protocols highlighted the importance of having sound and consistent referral procedures for a counselling system operating within a school. It also identified many areas, not all of which were obvious at first glance, where attention needs to be given, responsibilities need to be allocated, or consents need to be obtained and documented as part of the referral process.

### **A Quality Framework for School Counselling**

The Quality Framework for School Counselling document was developed by Caroline Lambden and covers the following areas:

- Standards for schools counselling programs
- Specifications, job descriptions, and major areas of job responsibility for counsellors working in schools
- The national context of counselling in schools
- A guide to professional qualifications in counselling, taking account of the National Educational Framework
- An evaluation framework for counselling in schools

The full Quality Framework is available in **Appendix 6**.

### **Reasons Counselling Delivery did not Proceed**

The actual delivery of counselling supports did not proceed during the lifetime of the project. The initial plan was to begin delivering the service in February 2006, and continue to the end of May 2006. Over this 16 week period, we hoped to provide one-to-one attendance supports / counselling to about 12 targeted students with early stage attendance issues. Unfortunately, the process of developing the referral protocols ate significantly into this time and these were, in fact, not completed until late in April. Given the lead-in time that would have been required to implement the protocols in the schools, set up and brief care teams, and begin referral, it was judged not feasible to proceed with the delivery during this term.

A second attempt was made to deliver the service for the period of September through to the Christmas break in 2006. At this stage, a number of other issues arose that further delayed the implementation until it was too late in the term to proceed. We had originally focused on providing the service to second year students, both because this is often the year when attendance issues first surface, and because second year students were not in exam preparation that might be interrupted by our work. By the following September, these students were now in third year and preparing for their Junior Certificate exams. Similarly, the student counsellors identified by NCII had now completed third year and were technically no longer students. This made it difficult for NCII to provide the required insurance cover for the proposed work, which led to further delays. By November 2006 it was clear that the counselling supports were not likely to be delivered, and the project was coming to the end of its active phase in December of that year.

While it is regrettable that the actual counselling supports were not delivered, and that the proposed models and evaluations were therefore not completed, the learning from the creation of the referral protocols and from the difficulties encountered was, nevertheless, valuable. It is doubtful, with hindsight, that we could have effectively delivered the service using counsellors we had hired in ourselves, as per the original plan, without referral protocols. The amount of preparatory work required within a school to ensure effective referral and monitoring of the work represented is, in itself, important learning. Caroline Lambden's Quality Framework is also a useful outcome of the work, setting out as it does the terms of reference for counsellors working in school environments.

Because Measure 3 did not reach the delivery and evaluation stage, the potential for matching up third year counselling students looking for counselling hours, with schools seeking counselling services, but often with limited financial resources, remains unclear. The project's experience would seem to suggest that this approach would be most effective where:

- Proper referral and operational protocols are in place to support the work
- The school has applied the staffing resources to ensure the referral protocols are fully and consistently implemented
- Detailed induction has been carried out with the counsellors in advance, and they have access to adequate supervision
- A monitoring system is in place within the school that attempts to measure the results of the work, by examining behavioural or attitudinal changes in participating students
- Insurance issues have been worked out that provide adequate indemnification for the school

## **Measure 4:**

### **Exploring Supports for Students Transferring from Primary Schools**

This measure was originally envisaged as involving the design and agreement of formal mechanisms whereby attendance records for students transferring from primary schools would be made available to the target second level school, preferably well in advance of the beginning of the school year. Such formal methods did not exist between feeder primary and second level schools in North Fingal at the time the project operated, although significant information on some students was communicated on an ad hoc basis.

As it happened, this work was not undertaken during the lifetime of the project, due both to time / resource limitations, and to the fact that most of the project's other work was focused on second level schools, with little in the way of contact and communication with primary schools.

However, when it became clear that the delivery of counselling supports would not be proceeding, the Committee took the opportunity to reallocate, with the permission of the Dormant Accounts Fund, some of the Measure 3 funding towards a number of pilot "transfer programmes" that delivered supports directly to sixth class students in advance of their move to second level. The contents of these transfer programmes, which comprised between 90 minutes and three hours with each class, were based loosely on similar programmes developed and operated by the School Completion Programme in Northside. The following primary schools participated in the programme:

- St. Theresa's National School, Balbriggan – 2 x 6<sup>th</sup> classes
- St. Mologa's National School, Balbriggan – 3 x 6<sup>th</sup> classes
- Rush National School, Rush – 3 x 6<sup>th</sup> classes
- St. Catherine's National School, Rush – 1 x 6<sup>th</sup> class

The transition programmes in Balbriggan were delivered by Geraldine McQuillan, a retired teacher. The programmes in Rush were delivered by Kim O'Connor, a qualified youth worker. The feedback from teachers and students involved in the transfer programmes was mostly positive (a brief overview and evaluation of the transition work delivered by Kim O'Connor in Rush National School is provided in **Appendix 7**).

Partly based on the success of these transfer sessions, the North Fingal DEIS Programme (see Measure 5) has developed a more comprehensive transfer programme which will be run over a period of six weeks in 2008 with 6<sup>th</sup> class students from St. Teresa's. Half day advance visits will also be organised for all incoming first year students to Balbriggan Community College and St. Joseph's in Rush, to help orient them to the very different procedures of secondary school.

## **Measure 5:**

### **Supporting an Application for a School Completion Programme**

While it was never envisaged that the project would be involved directly in accessing a School Completion Programme for the North Fingal area, Measure 5 was designed to ensure that our work would, where possible, feed into and support such an application. At the time the measure was framed, in 2005, Balbriggan was already seeing significant residential development and population growth, and an increase in the numbers of immigrants, families on rent supplement, and of disadvantage generally. These factors contributed to increasing levels of educational disadvantage in the area. Nevertheless, it was expected that an application for a School Completion Programme, and for recognition of North Fingal as an educationally disadvantaged region, would be made well after the project was completed.

In the event, Balbriggan Community College, St. Joseph's in Rush, and St. Teresa's National School were successful in an application under the DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) programme in late 2006. This was a significant step forward for the region, as DEIS was being promoted by the Department of Education and Science as a new action plan for educational inclusion that would integrate and develop upon existing supports. The successful application brought a full School Completion Programme to the participating schools, along with considerable extra resources, including access to Home / School Liaison services. The new School Completion Programme Co-ordinator for North Fingal took up her post in mid 2007.

In hindsight it is clear that the successful application by local schools for DEIS superseded the actions laid out under Measure 5 of the Attendance Monitoring Programme. On the other hand, the principal of Balbriggan Community College has suggested that the impact of the initiative contributed to bringing issues of attendance and disadvantage to the attention of the Department, and helped to add weight to the application that, in essence, allowed North Fingal to be designated as an educationally deprived area requiring extra supports.