

***Making tangible teaching progress:
On being a Foreign Language Assistant
at Presentation De La Salle College;***

PDLS and its values

Presentation De La Salle College (PDLS) is a co-educational secondary school in the south-east of Ireland. Despite being based in the rather small “Bagenalstown”, PDLS sports a rather large student body of about 700 students. Nevertheless, it aims to foster the “whole” development of all students, which extends past mere academic success. This really rang true to me and is reflected well in the school’s annual awards night, whose significance I will discuss later on. Before that, in the following section I will outline the most prominent characteristics and differences of the Irish school system as I perceived them through the limited lens of the one school I attended. Finally, I will detail my own role and tasks as a foreign language assistant.



The Irish school system

To begin with, structurally, the Irish school system differs greatly from the German one. As often proposed in Germany, Irish students visit primary school for six years. When working at a secondary school, that means that the youngest students (1st years) are usually already 12-13 years old. Accordingly, secondary school lasts from 1st year until 6th year. Therefore, 6th year students do their leaving certificate after 12 years of school altogether. The leaving certificate entails exams in a minimum of 6 subjects. Per subject, a maximum of 100 points can be attained. Moreover, only the 6 best subjects will be graded, allowing for a maximum of 600 points. The students’ score out of 600 determines whether they are eligible for their desired university degree, if they intend to pursue higher education.

Differences between the Irish and German school systems

Now, knowing the general outside structure of Irish secondary schools, I want to focus on the skills, knowledge and values that are taught. For this purpose, considering the range of subjects taught at a school provides a great pathway towards understanding its goals and priorities. Therefore, I will now use them as a starting point for relating my impressions of PDLs as part of the Irish school system.

So, which Irish subjects don't we have in most German secondary schools? First, in PDLs's junior cycle, which comprises first to third years, it is mandatory to take Social, personal and health education (SPHE). SPHE's issues are presented through the lens of three strands that build on one another. First, the "myself" strand encompasses topics such as self-identity. Second, the "myself and others" strand is about relating to others and forming social bonds.

Finally, issues around "myself and the wider world" are taken up in the final strand, which in turn lead to new views of the self. This subject more than any other epitomises the goal of the whole development of the student.

While I only assisted in German, English and PE classes, I also got the chance to shadow a teacher in CSPE. CSPE stands for Civic, Social and Political Education. Both SPHE and CSPE fall under the umbrella term of Wellbeing subjects. While to me this is a meaningful addition to standard subjects, it appears that they are associated with a significantly lower status than the standard subjects. This is further reflected in the current move to discontinue CSPE as a subject and integrate it into SPHE and other Wellbeing subjects. In light of the rise of the far right across Europe and as a politics student myself, it seems crucial to me, to dedicate more space and time to political education in the future curricula of Irish schools. While some schools offer the new subject "Politics and Society" at Leaving Cert level in 6th year, it is currently not part of Presentation De La Salle College's curriculum.

Junior Cycle Subject Awards

Award	Sponsor
J.C Visual Art	Board of Management
J.C Business Studies	Board of Management
J.C CSPE	Board of Management
J.C English	Board of Management
J.C French	Board of Management
J.C Geography	Board of Management
J.C German	Board of Management
J.C Graphics	Board of Management
J.C History	Board of Management
J.C Home Economics	Board of Management
J.C Irish	Board of Management
J.C Mathematics	Board of Management
J.C Music	Board of Management
J.C Traditional Irish Music	Spink Comhaltas Ceoltóirí
J.C Physical Education	Board of Management
J.C Science	Board of Management
J.C Wood Technology	Board of Management

Leaving Certificate Subject Awards

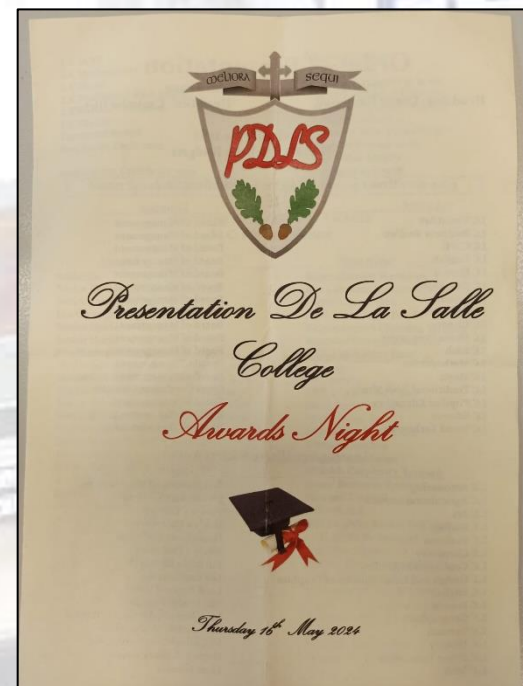
Award	Sponsor
L.C Accounting	Bagenalstown Office Services
L.C Agricultural Science	Jordan Agri Services
L.C Art	Parents' Council
L.C Biology	Healy's Pharmacy
L.C Business	James Cody and Sons
L.C Chemistry	Healy's Pharmacy
L.C Construction Studies	Burnside Hydracyl
L.C Design and Communication Graphics	Lee Engineering
L.C English	Lord Bagenal Hotel
L.C French	The Chalet Fenagh
L.C Geography	John Murphy Memorial Trophy
L.C German	Cllr. Arthur McDonald
L.C History	McCullagh Service Station
L.C Home Economics	Doyle's Railway House
L.C Irish	Liam Somers

Beyond the regular subjects, I also worked with students with special needs once a week in “An Grianan”, a secluded set of quiet rooms, whose name roughly translates to “a sunny place”. Here I mainly facilitated work on individualised learning portfolios with subject areas such as Literacy, Numeracy, and Living in a Community. Aside from the obvious differences in the Irish school system such as the different subjects and mandatory school uniforms, there are more subtle yet still consequential differences.

For instance, I have perceived a certain formality or strictness in the communication and the relationships between teachers and students. For instance, different teachers I worked with often reprimanded students for what felt like very minor misdemeanours to me. To the teachers, it seemed, private conversation topics between students, even when they are only barely heard as a whisper, are very impudent. This strictness also became evident in the social point system that is employed by the school. By means of this system, students may increase their score through desired behaviour such as volunteer work or decrease it through undesired behaviour such as being late.

While, through a German lens, this might seem counterproductive for the purpose of creating a pleasant learning environment and intrinsic motivation, the effect I observed was decidedly more positive. Throughout all classes, many students seemed to feel and exhibit a great sense of belonging toward the school. They wore their uniforms beyond the school gates and school hours and felt thoroughly supported as well as challenged by the school. The school’s culture of acknowledging and honouring the students’ successes in different areas becomes most evident in PDLS’s annual awards night.

For this special night, all students who will receive an award are invited to attend and to bring their family and friends. As for the awards, most of them are awarded once for junior and senior cycle students respectively.



Besides subject awards for the best student, in, for instance, Science class, and sporting achievement awards, more unique awards can be found.

Accordingly, the Personal Achievement Award was given to a student who only recently fled to Ireland, because of the Russian war on Ukraine. He managed to impressively improve his language skills within a semester and now contributes to a host of extracurricular activities. Other prominent awards include the Senior Leadership Award, the Faith in Action Award and awards in acknowledgement of committees like the Green Schools Committee or the committee of the well-liked students' paper "The Pres Release". While receiving an award on this special occasion would already allow for students to feel seen in their achievements, the awards night I attended was rendered even more personal by means of a school tradition. The tradition works as follows: One of the teachers that chose the designated winner of an award writes out a short eulogy, praising the winner's character and their achievements. These texts are then read out by a teacher who is the master of ceremony for a set of awards such as the sports awards.

Only then, after the text is read out on stage, it will be revealed who won the award.

Consequently, the eulogies are received with great suspense and anticipation, while making the students feel especially seen.

Contribution to School Life Awards M.C: Ms. Michelle Bridgett	
Award	Sponsored By
Personal Achievement Award	Presentation Sisters
Outstanding Achievement Award	Hanton Q.S
Social Awareness Award	St. Canice's Credit Union
Most Dedicated Junior Student	Bank of Ireland
Most Dedicated Senior Student	Alltech Farming Solutions
Faith in Action Award	Bagenalstown Parish
Junior Leadership Award	Bank of Ireland
Senior Leadership Award	Bank of Ireland
CEIST Award	CEIST Trustees
Wellread Award	Brian Doyle Haulage

Acknowledgement of Committees	
Committee Name	Certificates Presented By
Prefects 2023/24	Ms. Kathleen Burke
Meitheal Leaders 2023/24	Ms. Genevieve Maher
Student Council 2023/24	Ms. Neasa Egan
Green Schools Committee 2023/24	Ms. Irene Connors
Wellread Committee 2023/24	Ms. Glenda Coburn
Pres Release Highly Commended 2023/24	Ms. Emma Bolger
GSA Team 2023/24	Ms. Stephanie O' Neill
PDLS Amnesty Team 2023/24	Ms. Orla Dalton
Dream Space Ambassadors 2023/24	Ms. Karen Scanlon
Young St. Vincent de Paul 2023/24	Ms. Stephanie O' Neill
Wellbeing Team 2023/24	Ms. Elaine Murphy

Student of the Year Awards	
	Presented By
First Year	Ms. Kim Dudley
Second Year	Mr. Gearóid Hourihane
Third Year	Mr. David McGrath
Transition Year	Mr. Michael Meaney
Fifth Year	Ms. Genevieve Maher
Sixth Year	Ms. Marian Walsh

Perpetual Trophy presented by Derek McCullagh
Bank of Ireland prize presented by Sean O' Byrne

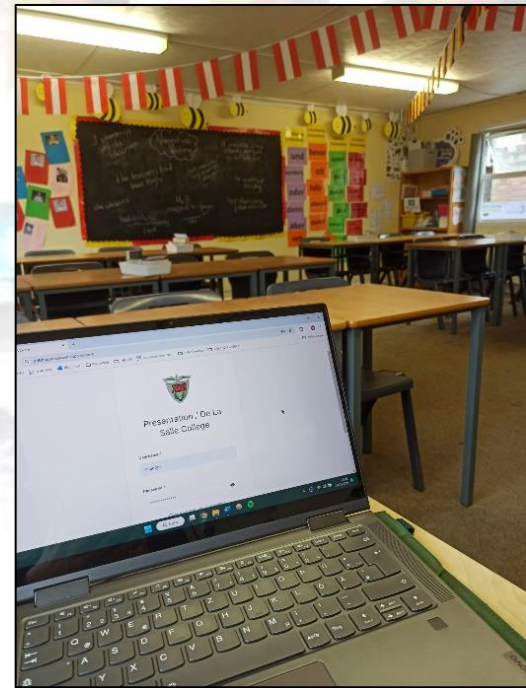
On being a foreign language assistant

Finally, I will provide insight into a few of the roles and activities I took up during my term at PDLs. The purpose of this, is to give an idea of what you can broadly expect. However, with many of the tasks, especially the extracurricular ones, it is crucial to say that most of them are voluntary. So, instead of joining PE classes, you could for instance ask to attend a weekly class of your second bachelor subject. Overall, my timetable tended to vary a bit from week to week, depending on school excursions or exam schedules. In a regular week, I took part in about thirteen German classes, two English classes, two PE classes and worked for one hour in the special needs program.

Moreover, I did one-on-one speech and Grammar coaching sessions with 6th year students and had assigned hours to prepare teaching material during school hours. A regular school day would last from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., including prep hours. Regarding classroom activities I prepared, they could range from introductions to the perfect tense to treasure hunts around Bagenalstown, in order to actively practice the vocabulary needed to give and take directions. I was also given the opportunity to introduce a new sport during PE class and to write a short piece in the school newspaper. Additionally, I joined two short school trips, one of which was an intriguing visit to the European Parliament Offices in Dublin. During this trip, the students received insight into political processes, career options and most importantly, the relevance of the EU and politics for their own lives.

Finally, the most beneficial role that I was able to briefly fill was that of a substitute teacher for German and English class. Here I was able to prepare materials myself and use materials provided by the main teacher I worked with. She was an indispensable source of guidance and reassurance, not only for my substitute work but my internship as a whole. This role of a substitute teacher, of course, falls under the category of decidedly voluntary opportunities provided by PDLs.

That being said, no other activity I was entrusted with during my term has given me a wider range of experience or has been a greater source of confidence on my journey to becoming a teacher than the 15 lessons I gave on my own.



Conclusion

So, to sum up, if you are thinking about becoming a foreign language assistant at PDLs, I can assure you of two things:

First, if you want to participate in school life beyond shadowing teachers and possibly conducting your own lessons, there will be plenty meaningful opportunities for you to contribute, especially if you take the initiative. **Second**, you will be valued greatly by the staff and students both as a person and as a contributor to the work and spirit of Presentation De La Salle College.

