

**An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna**

**Department of Education and Skills**

**Subject Inspection of Music  
REPORT**

**Hartstown Community School  
Clonsilla, Dublin 15  
Roll number: 91339F**

**Date of inspection: 11 December 2009**



**AN ROINN DEPARTMENT  
OIDEACHAIS OF EDUCATION  
AGUS SCILEANNA AND SKILLS**

**REPORT  
ON  
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN MUSIC**

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**SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT**

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Hartstown Community School, Clonsilla. It presents the findings of an evaluation of the quality of teaching and learning in Music and makes recommendations for the further development of the teaching of this subject in the school. The evaluation was conducted over two days during which the inspector visited classrooms and observed teaching and learning. The inspector interacted with students and teachers, examined students' work, and had discussions with the teachers. The inspector reviewed school planning documentation and teachers' written preparation. Following the evaluation visit, the inspector provided oral feedback on the outcomes of the evaluation to the principal and subject teachers. The board of management was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the report, and the response of the board will be found in the appendix of this report.

**SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT**

Hartstown Community School caters for 547 male and 483 female students. Music is available in all year groups and in all programmes. Transition Year (TY) is an optional programme in senior cycle and Music is compulsory within this for the full academic year. For students following the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme, Music is provided in the first year of the programme. This is sufficient provision. In all programmes, timetabling arrangements for Music are satisfactory. There are an adequate number of double periods allocated to each class group to facilitate practical work.

The system in place for choosing subjects in senior cycle offers a high level of choice and flexibility to students. In junior cycle, students choose from a restricted range of optional subjects from set bands determined by school management. There is some flexibility in the system where a student wishes to change subjects. It is suggested that the limitations on choice in junior cycle be considered when this arrangement is next reviewed.

The music department is staffed by three specialist music teachers all of whom have been teaching in this school for a significant length of time. They are all members of the Post Primary-Music Teachers' Association (PPMTA). The school is very supportive of teachers' continuing professional development and attendance at conferences hosted by the PPMTA is facilitated. This affords the teachers the opportunity to keep abreast of all information pertaining to music education at second level and to keep up-to-date with ongoing curricular innovation. All this should pay dividends not only in terms of the CPD of the teachers but also for the continuing development of the music department.

Budgetary arrangements in the school are supportive of the subject. Currently, there is no pre-determined budget in place for Music. Instead, direct requests are made to school management

when resources are needed. Management and staff are satisfied with this arrangement. Overall, Music is well resourced in this school. Each teacher has been allocated a classroom and these rooms are all very spacious. The music department is appropriately equipped but there is scope to enhance this provision over time by providing more than one set of percussion instruments. Two rooms have been equipped with a computer while, in the third, the teacher uses a personal laptop when the need arises. Senior management has indicated that extra computers will become available shortly for the music department. This is welcomed. Music technology is available as a choice to students as part of the practical component of certificate examinations in this school and is also provided to TY students. Information and communications technology (ICT) is used as a teaching tool by all teachers.

All music teachers are currently using small, portable stereos. There is a shortcoming which should be addressed by school management as funding becomes available. These stereos limit the quality aural development as all audio signals come from one part of the room only. An investment in audio equipment which allows speakers to be mounted on the wall on both sides of the white board would be of significant benefit to students. This would allow for appropriate aural stimulation for all students.

Good efforts have been made at creating a learning environment in the music rooms that is stimulating for students. On the day of the evaluation, some subject-related posters, both professionally printed and handcrafted, were on display. However, the quantity of illustrations in each of the music rooms varies considerably. It is recommended that classroom displays should be increased and updated on a regular basis and that more student project work should be displayed in all music rooms. This would ensure that the learning environment maintains its interest for students.

In addition to the curricular opportunities, a wide variety of additional musical activities is available for the students. These include participation in the school choir, talent shows, lunchtime concerts, workshops, Hallelujah concerts in The Point, performances at the annual open day and the school musical. Instrumental tuition is provided for students. Links have also been established with Draíocht, a community theatre. TY students attend workshops and also participate in a Song School which is funded by Fingal County Council. These activities have raised the profile of Music considerably in this school. The commitment of the music department in facilitating all of these activities is highly commended.

## **PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

The school provides formal opportunities for subject departments to meet three times each year. Records of all such meetings have been kept by the music department. The music teachers also meet informally throughout the year. A very good level of planning for the timetabled lessons in Music was evident in this school. In addition, there is a good level of advance planning to ensure the smooth operation of the many musical activities that take place.

Subject planning documentation for Music was presented during the evaluation. This documentation outlined the organisation of the department and programmes of work scheduling the topics to be covered. These were relevant to the syllabuses and to the requirements of the examinations. It is good to note that some thought has been given to the intended learning objective of topics in this documentation. The music plans for TY and LCA are creative and innovative. These expose students to a wide breadth of music experiences and this is very good.

One scheme of work was presented during the evaluation. This contained a detailed plan of work for each of the classes concerned for the full academic year. Planning for the individual needs of a class group is very good practice and one that should be adopted by all members of the music department. In this regard, there is a need to distinguish between short-term and longer-term planning. It is fully appropriate that short-term planning should be detailed and thorough. However, longer term planning should be flexible enough to accommodate the progress made in the implementation of the plan and consequently it should be less detailed and broader in nature. All members of the subject department should now develop short-term schemes of work.

While short-term planning, consideration should be given to linking each topic with the methodologies, resources and modes of assessment that will be deployed. The manner in which the three disciplines of Music—listening, composing and performing—are being synthesised should also be included. This information should be shared amongst the team as this would be mutually beneficial for all concerned and would ensure that the many good practices that are happening in individual lessons are shared. This is recommended.

Planning and preparation for all lessons observed was found to be very good. Lessons included the integration of resources including ICT, handouts and musical excerpts all of which were very appropriate to the students. In general, there was a very good balance between teacher input and participative strategies for the students but there is scope for improvement in this regard.

## **TEACHING AND LEARNING**

Six classes were visited during the course of the evaluation, four in junior cycle and two in senior cycle. In all lessons observed, the music teachers created a positive learning environment through effective organisation and a good use of humour. There was a very good rapport between the students and the teachers. Students' contributions to class discussions were valued and praise was used effectively to acknowledge their efforts. Throughout, a comfortable and warm atmosphere was maintained. High expectations of attainment and behaviour were set.

All lessons were well structured and the pace of learning was commensurate with the ability of the students who were constantly and adequately challenged to develop their music vocabulary and use appropriate music language. Where suitable, teachers adopted a systematic approach to reviewing the content taught in previous lessons. Good questioning, which ascertained the ability of students to retain information and to apply this knowledge was observed.

In some lessons, the *Sound before Symbol* approach was adopted from the outset. For instance, in one lesson, the objective was to equip students with the necessary aural skills so that they could distinguish between major and minor tonality in music. This was achieved first through teacher demonstration and followed by a focused activity. Students were required to listen to and differentiate between a variety of different musical excerpts in major and minor tonalities and record their answers. This exercise was designed to assess their understanding of this particular technical aspect of Music. It was very evident that students had acquired the necessary expertise to tackle this task successfully. In a second class visited, the objective was to enhance students' understanding of melody writing and in particular, advance their knowledge of rhythm. This was achieved through various performing activities. These lessons are examples of sound methodological practices regarding the *Sound before Symbol* approach to music education. The

balance between student and teacher participation was good. These strategies should be used where possible when planning any music lesson.

Differentiated teaching was observed in one lesson where individuals or groups of students practised with the teacher while others worked on coursework. A collaborative atmosphere ensued, where through refinement, performance, assessment and encouragement, students prepared for their practical examinations. The level of students' attainment was appropriate at this stage of their course. This focus on examination performance as well as sound advice from the teacher on the nature of performing ensures that students are well prepared for their practical examinations and are familiar with the process. In other lessons, individual help was also provided to students by the teacher and where appropriate, the more able students were challenged further.

An appropriate range of teaching strategies to promote students' self-learning skills was seen. In a junior lesson, a collaborative learning environment allowing constructive peer interaction was observed, where the teacher guided students through various stages and facilitated a stimulating and challenging learning atmosphere. This lesson revolved around the performance of *Do they Know it's Christmas* followed by an analysis of the music using a succession of skilful questioning strategies. The level of information provided by students was impressive and indicated their ability to apply their knowledge of technical music language easily.

Cross-curricular links were expertly made between Music and Geography in a senior lesson observed. The topic-at-hand was an introduction to the music of the Andes. Using ICT, the teacher showed students various photographs of the location, people and music instruments from this area. Students were very interested and asked a good range of questions to further their knowledge. The teacher then showed students a sample of instruments and showed them how to play each one. In the second half of this lesson, students, in small groups, were given the opportunity to continue their work on a project about their choice of solo musician or band. The initial research had already been undertaken by students at home prior to the lesson. The level of enthusiasm for the task was apparent and those students questioned by the inspector displayed very good levels of confidence and competence when talking about their chosen topic. Allowing students to work in this way is very good practice as it fosters their ability to work independently from the teacher.

In some lessons, students who were proficient on their practical instruments were encouraged to perform a part of the music being studied. Optimising the skills of students in this way is good practice and one that should be used where possible.

## **ASSESSMENT**

In addition to regular in-house examinations at Christmas and summer and the "mock" certificate examinations for Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate students in the spring, formative assessment takes place in a variety of ways. Assessment strategies include questioning in class, completion of worksheets and practical assessments. Practical music elements are continuously assessed in the classroom. This process includes assessment under examination conditions at appropriate stages throughout the year. These methods allow for careful monitoring of students' progress and provide a solid basis to inform preparation for the certificate examinations.

Some students store materials which have been provided by the teacher in folders. These materials generally take the form of listening and composing assignments. However, during the evaluation this was not found to be consistent practice among all students. It is essential that students be given clear direction regarding the appropriate storage of materials, that expectations be established and that regular checking takes place. This is recommended.

Attention has been given to the systematic monitoring of students' work in all music classes. In some instances, a comment indicating strategies for improvement is provided. This is in keeping with good practice regarding assessment for learning strategies (AFL). However, an examination of students' written work indicated that in some cases, the teacher's comments did not accurately reflect the standard of this work. Care should be taken to ensure that the comment is appropriate to the quality of the work. It is good to note that peer assessment and self-assessment strategies were used in some lessons observed.

Reports issue after each set of formal examinations and annual parent-teacher meetings take place for all class groups. Patterns of achievement in certificate examinations are good but there is scope to explore these trends further to ensure that all students are reaching their full potential. This is recommended.

#### **SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Music is available as an optional subject in all year groups and in all curricular programmes.
- The school is very supportive of teachers' continuing professional development and attendance at conferences hosted by the PPMTA is facilitated.
- A wide variety of additional musical activities is available for the students.
- The music plans for TY and LCA are creative and innovative and they expose students to a wide breadth of music experiences.
- In all lessons observed, the music teachers created a positive learning environment through effective organisation and a good use of humour.
- Good questioning, which ascertained the ability of students to retain information and to apply this knowledge, was observed.
- Differentiated teaching was observed in lessons.
- Attention has been given to the systematic monitoring of students' work in all music classes.

As a means of building on these strengths and to address areas for development, the following key recommendations are made:

- The level of classroom displays should be increased and they should be updated on a regular basis. More student project work should be displayed in all music rooms.
- It is essential that students be given clear direction regarding the appropriate storage of completed assignments and handouts, that expectations be established and that regular checking takes place.
- When providing feedback on students' work, it is important that all the comments made are appropriate to the quality of the work.

A post-evaluation meeting was held with the music department and with the principal at the conclusion of the evaluation when the draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation were presented and discussed.

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# **Appendix**

**SCHOOL RESPONSE TO THE REPORT**

**Submitted by the Board of Management**

**Area 1: Observations on the content of the inspection report**

The Board thanks the Inspector for her visit and welcomes the report. The Board is particularly pleased with the positive observations on planning and preparation, teaching and learning, the learning environment, teacher methodology and student-teacher rapport.

**Area 2: Follow-up actions planned or undertaken since the completion of the inspection activity to implement the findings and recommendations of the inspection**

Issues relating to the storage of completed assignments, with a view to adopting best practice, will be reviewed by all subject Departments over the coming year.