

**An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna**

**Department of Education and Skills**

**Subject Inspection of History  
REPORT**

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

**Date of inspection: 20 September 2010**



**A N R O I N N | D E P A R T M E N T O F  
O I D E A C H A I S | E D U C A T I O N  
A G U S S C I L E A N N A | A N D S K I L L S**

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

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**SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT**

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Hartstown Community School, conducted as part of a whole-school evaluation. It presents the findings of an evaluation of the quality of teaching and learning in History 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**

Provision for History in Hartstown Community School is generally good. In the junior cycle, History is a core subject taken by all students up to the Junior Certificate. While three class periods per week are allocated in second and third year, the somewhat limiting provision of just two periods a week in first year makes syllabus coverage difficult in that year. This is exemplified by some second-year classes still completing first-year syllabus topics.

In senior cycle, there is good time provision for Leaving Certificate classes, with five periods per week in both fifth and sixth years. Transition Year (TY) is an optional programme and there are two class groups at present. TY students take History as a core subject, but the allocation of just two class periods per week limits what can be achieved, especially as, in the nature of TY, other activities can reduce this to one period per week on occasion.

While the school system for the placement of students comprises three bands in each year, and there is further banding within those groupings, it is policy to encourage students to take higher level in History, with a substantial number of students availing of that opportunity. This is to be encouraged.

School management has appointed a subject co-ordinator for History as a post of responsibility and this greatly enhances organisation and support for the subject and its teachers. The history team is given time to meet frequently, usually monthly in term time, and this greatly facilitates cooperation at all levels in the subject.

The provision, over the past year, of computers and digital projectors for all classrooms greatly enhances opportunities for multi-media methodology in the teaching and learning of History, and is to be applauded as a positive step forward in support for the subject.

Classrooms are allocated on a subject teacher basis, which has encouraged the provision and display of history-related material and resources in those rooms. This adds greatly to the positive teaching and learning environment for the subject, and provides good opportunities for teachers to utilise historical material in their preparation and teaching.

While there is a room designated as the school library, it has in recent times become a classroom-cum-general-purposes area, which effectively means that students are without a school library to aid their studies. This is a drawback particularly in relation to Leaving Certificate class groups where the emphasis on research and a documentary approach to history topics is a central tenet of the revised history syllabus. It is understood that an application for an extension to include a new school library has been made to the Department of Education and Skills. In the meantime, it is recommended that the history and geography subject library, located in the history and geography storeroom, continues to be used by teachers, with expansion if possible to use by students to assist them in their history work.

### **PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

A history plan has been generated by the history department and is available in electronic format. All courses and years are covered in the plan, which is quite detailed and includes approaches, syllabus material to be covered, appropriate methods and guidelines for each year. The frequent meetings of the history team means that all teachers are aware of the plan and they cooperate in their planning for the subject. The plan is well constructed, with clearly defined sections covering aims and objectives, options structure, grouping of students, effective teaching methodologies, differentiation, planning for students with special educational needs, subject planning for a culturally diverse society, range of resources including ICT facilities, and a large and detailed section on curriculum content. It concludes with sections on assessment and teacher in-career development.

In a separate document, history work schedules are detailed for each course and year, with targets to aim at for each term. This planning procedure and documentation contributes strongly to the collegiate nature of the history department, where there is much common work done regarding class planning and assessment procedures. There is also detailed information on cross-curricular, co-curricular and extracurricular activities, which encourages contact with other teachers and subject areas. This is very good practice and was in evidence in many of the classes inspected.

Apart from these documents, the history department has also developed lesson plans, preparation notes, examination records, and lists of available resources for the subject. This equips each teacher very well for the task of planning and preparing for teaching history classes.

Individual lessons were well planned, showed evidence of careful preparation and collation of useful and relevant material for teaching and learning. Integration of different methodologies demonstrated that planning and meeting time was well spent in preparing history lessons. This can also be seen in the print-rich environment created in classrooms by the creation of good history stimulus material on walls and boards, including maps, documents, pictures, posters and charts. These are utilised in the teaching and learning process, which prove the effectiveness of good planning and preparation by the teachers of the history department.

Future plans for developing history modules in the TY were shown to and discussed with the inspector. Interesting and well-researched options were being considered, which demonstrates enthusiasm and commitment both to the subject and to the TY concept.

There is good uptake in senior cycle history and the student subject option system is well developed and balanced. This allows for the creation of three separate class groups in both fifth and sixth years, and the operation of both ordinary and higher-level classes which are to a degree interchangeable. Looking to the future of the subject, there is potential for the history team to explore new directions and ways of encouraging students to consider the study of the subject for their Leaving Certificate.

If there is an area for improvement and development in the planning and preparation process, it is in strategic and future planning for the subject. The current year's plans are very good, and well articulated, but plans for the subject in future years need to be considered by the history team, including syllabus change (and choice of syllabus elements within Leaving Certificate), access to resources within the school, external continuing professional development (CPD) courses for teachers of history, and provision for the subject.

### **TEACHING AND LEARNING**

Almost every lesson inspected started with the topic being prominently displayed on the board or the screen. Learning objectives for the lesson were clearly explained to the students who were taken through the class plan briefly before the lesson progressed further. A variety of methodologies was used to commence lessons, with recapitulation and question-and-answer sessions figuring prominently. In the case of the latter, questions were asked generally, and of individual students, followed by some higher-order questioning. Students responded well to this approach. Although it was early in the school year, teachers knew the names of their students and used them throughout the lessons. This is good practice and led to the immediate response and engagement of the students individually and as a group.

Teachers frequently used the practice of writing key words, names, ideas and developments on the board or screen so that students were able to refer to them during the lesson and also write them in their notebooks as basic information for the topic being studied. In many instances this was followed up by information-sheets and work-sheets, either used directly in class or set as homework. Where work-sheets were in use, they reinforced the teaching and learning of the lesson, whether delivered in ICT, board or discussion format. In some cases, the text-book was used in class, but usually to underline a point or to refer to a map or diagram. Reading the text-book aloud in class was only sparingly used as a teaching method.

Most teachers used the newly-installed ICT equipment in their lessons, using PowerPoint presentations and video-clips to illustrate and develop the theme of the class. In several instances, this method was reinforced by pausing the presentation and involving students in discussion and cause-and-effect exercises. This assisted students in learning about difficult or complex issues and concepts in history.

It was evident in the lessons observed that teachers were adept in their use of timing material and also in differentiation in their delivery and questioning techniques. One of the strong teaching and learning points observed was the manner in which teachers sought to bring the whole class with them in exploring and developing new syllabus material. Any questions raised by students were responded to, often by the teacher asking for the contribution of other students in clarifying points. This positive practice aided the class dynamic and contributed to the sense of the whole class moving forward together during the lesson.

There was an obvious enthusiasm among the teachers for the subject and this was transferred in many instances to the students, who responded well to questions and entered willingly into conversation with the inspector during interaction sessions at the end of lessons. The practices described above ensured that students were focused in their work and kept up to date with the development of the class topic. This was made more amenable to the students by the frequent use of contemporary examples and parallels from their own lives and experience. In some cases, their comments were extrapolated to make the lesson more meaningful for the whole class group.

Focus and reinforcement were also achieved by the integration of classroom displays, typically globes, maps, pictures and sometimes cartoons into the discussions in the lesson. Comprehension and understanding were aided by this method. The existence of such materials in the classrooms was a key point in expanding the learning process. In many instances, students asked questions based on this material which helped to put historical information in context for the class as a whole.

Where appropriate, and particularly in senior cycle classes, discussion among the students was encouraged. This led to many interesting contributions and interventions by students, whose own experience and understanding were thus brought to bear on sometimes complex issues and theories. There certainly was scope to develop pair and group work in some of the classes, and role-play could have played its part in some of the lessons inspected. It is recommended that teachers place more emphasis on these methods in developing their range of activities for their classes.

Learning outcomes were discussed at the end of some lessons, and this practice reinforces learning objectives established at the beginning of class. This is good practice and should be applied across the board. The students have achieved good outcomes in school and certificate examinations over the years, and it is noted that each year the results of certificate examinations are analysed and discussed with coordinators and teachers. This is a positive policy and assists in putting the subject and the students' achievements in context in the school.

## **ASSESSMENT**

Classroom assessment was observed in each of the lessons inspected. There is verbal questioning in all classes, and regular homework is set, and corrected. The school has a homework policy and this is implemented in the history department. Work allocated by teachers varies from simple questions to paragraph-writing and longer pieces of written work, depending on class and level. Written homework is monitored and corrected, with annotations common in many instances. There is evidence of formative assessment techniques being employed in several classes, and it is recommended that this, and other aspects of assessment for learning (AfL), be practised across all classes and programmes by teachers, in their assessment of students' work.

There are frequent topic and term tests, as well as more formal school in-house examinations. Teachers keep class progress and attendance records, and students are asked for work which may be overdue or is being amended. There is a journal system in place whereby teachers and parents can communicate about students' work and progress. There are also information meetings for parents and annual parent-teacher meetings at which students' progress is discussed.

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

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- There is good support and provision for History in Hartstown Community School.
- History is a core subject in junior cycle and in TY and there is a strong uptake in the subject for the Leaving Certificate.
- There is a well-established history department, with a co-ordinator who leads the frequent planning meetings, and which produces well-developed history plans and schedules.
- Information and communications technology provision is very good in every classroom, and is well-utilised in the preparation and delivery of history lessons.
- Teaching and learning in History is of a high standard, with well-prepared and planned lessons in which learning objectives are clearly defined.
- Classrooms, which are teacher-based, are well equipped and have been provided with historical material, creating an attractive print-rich environment.
- There is an enthusiasm for the teaching of History, enhanced by an inclusive and well-differentiated approach to lessons.
- Written homework is well organised and monitored with evidence of formative assessment in several instances.

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

- It is recommended that three class periods per week be timetabled for first-year history, as the two periods currently provided make syllabus coverage difficult.
- Greater use of pair and group work in classes would enhance the integration of students in history lessons and develop student-centred learning.
- Planning for History is good and well-organised, but would benefit from greater attention to future strategic planning for the subject.
- In the monitoring of students' written work, emphasis on formative assessment and assessment for learning is recommended for all classes and programmes.

A post-evaluation meeting was held with teachers of History and 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 welcomes the positive findings of the report in relation to subject planning and co-ordination, the provision for and use of ICT, and teaching and learning.

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

The weekly timetable has been adjusted to allow for the provision of a third period for History in first year.

We will continue to advance formative assessment, assessment for learning and student-centred learning through our staff development programme.