

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna
Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection in English

REPORT

Ainm na scoile / School name	Alexandra College
Seoladh na scoile / School address	Milltown Dublin 6
Uimhir rolla / Roll number	60910F

Date of Inspection: 27-09-2016



WHAT IS A SUBJECT INSPECTION?

Subject Inspections report on the quality of work in individual curriculum areas within a school. They affirm good practice and make recommendations, where appropriate, to aid the further development of the subject in the school.

HOW TO READ THIS REPORT

During this inspection, the inspector evaluated learning and teaching in [English](#) under the following headings:

1. Learning, teaching and assessment
2. Subject provision and whole-school support
3. Planning and preparation

Inspectors describe the quality of each of these areas using the Inspectorate's quality continuum which is shown on the final page of this report. The quality continuum provides examples of the language used by inspectors when evaluating and describing the quality of the school's provision in each area.

The board of management of the school 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 Inspection

INSPECTION ACTIVITIES DURING THIS INSPECTION

Dates of inspection	26 and 27 September 2016
Inspection activities undertaken <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Review of relevant documents• Discussion with principal and deputy principal, subject co-ordinator and teachers of English• Interaction with students	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Observation of teaching and learning during 8 class periods• Examination of students' work• Feedback to principal, deputy principal and teachers of English

SCHOOL CONTEXT

Alexandra College is a school for girls, some of whom are boarders from Ireland and abroad. The school is in the trusteeship of the Council of Alexandra College and is fee-charging. It offers Junior Cycle and Junior Certificate, a compulsory Transition Year, and the established Leaving Certificate. Current enrolment is 541.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS:

FINDINGS

- A high quality of teaching was observed in the English classrooms visited.
- The overall quality of learning observed was very good.
- Assessment practices are effective, although not all aspects of Junior Cycle assessment have yet been incorporated.
- English is very well supported and resourced.
- Subject department and individual teacher planning is of good quality, with some scope for development.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The English department should develop, where necessary, more structured step-by-step approaches to support students' acquisition of new skills and concepts.
- The English department should further develop its Junior Cycle plan to support greater integration of oral communication skills, and to incorporate the full range of assessment practices.

DETAILED FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. TEACHING AND LEARNING

- The eight lessons observed covered all years and programmes, and involved all members of the subject department who have a substantial English timetable.
- Overall a high quality of teaching was observed in the English classrooms visited. Instances of exemplary practice were noted in a number of lessons. Where practice could be further developed, teachers were very open to recommended approaches for extending or improving students' understanding and skills.
- Highly effective practice was noted where lessons were carefully structured, learning activities were planned and managed so as to optimise learning opportunities, and teachers through their classroom practice modelled high levels of engagement, enquiry, and enjoyment.
- Lessons were very well prepared. Teachers had thought through in advance the approaches they would take and the resources that would support students in achieving the learning intentions.
- In general, lessons were very well sequenced and transitions from one stage to the next were very well managed. In a few instances, students would have benefited from clearer sequencing and a more gradual step-by-step approach to new skills or concepts. Where this need is evident, a greater level of structuring and scaffolding of learning activities is recommended.
- In almost all of the lessons observed, teachers provided students with opportunities to engage in well-structured and purposeful pair or group work. Feedback from the groups and the consequent sharing of learning was generally very well managed. The willingness of students to work together and their ability to do so productively are considerable strengths that teachers should continue to use to the full.
- Overall the quality of learning in the lessons observed was very good. Students were engaged and purposeful, enjoyed their work, and undertook classroom and homework tasks diligently and responsibly. They were lively but focused, and conveyed a desire to make progress and to achieve at a high level.
- The prevailing classroom atmosphere was supportive and at the same time high expectations were communicated. While some class groups were more reticent than others, students were generally confident in their contributions, willing to offer responses, and commendably ready to listen to their peers.
- The English department has established effective assessment practices to support learning. Students complete substantial and challenging homework assignments on a regular basis and receive constructive developmental feedback. Students are encouraged to take a responsible attitude to their work, and are expected to address areas for improvement that have been identified.
- Teachers have conducted the Classroom Based Assessments (CBAs) with third-year classes as part of the new English specification for Junior Cycle. However, subject learning and assessment review meetings have not been held. The reason for this was reported to be industrial action. Teachers should engage in these meetings on completion of the CBAs in order to build a common understanding of the quality of student learning and to quality assure the assessment of students' work as outlined in the *Framework for Junior Cycle 2015*.

2. SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

- Timetable provision for English is very good in both junior and senior cycle. Unusually, English is not timetabled concurrently in either cycle. This arrangement appears to be working satisfactorily, and the small number of students taking ordinary level are accommodated within what are effectively higher level class groups. It should be kept under review, however, to ensure that appropriate arrangements are in place to support students in succeeding at the level best suited to them.
- The pattern of deployment of teachers of English, all of whom are subject specialists, gives them a varied experience of teaching a range of years and programmes, thus building capacity. In some cases, teachers have not carried the same class group from one year to the next within a cycle. Teacher deployment should support continuity to the greatest extent possible.
- The subject is very well supported and resourced. Most teachers have their own base classrooms, which have been developed as stimulating learning environments for English. Given the admirable level of group work observed, seating arrangements that would more readily facilitate this work could be considered.
- The school has an excellent library which students are introduced to at an early stage; its use is central to a number of reading initiatives in the school. All classrooms visited had teacher computers and data projectors, which were well used, and students' digital skills are developed through the integrated use of tablet devices.

3. PLANNING AND PREPARATION

- The English department has drawn up a comprehensive subject plan, which is followed closely and amended as necessary. It reflects a collaborative and collegial approach to the choosing of texts and the preparation of resources and materials. The classroom practice observed also demonstrated a commendable level of professional discussion when preparing the approaches likely to work best when dealing with specific writers and texts.
- The Junior Cycle English plan incorporates the learning outcomes from the subject specification, with an appropriate selection of texts and teaching and learning approaches to support the achievement of the learning outcomes. Some further development of this plan is recommended, however, as it places too little emphasis at present on the integrated development of students' oral communication skills, a significant component of the new specification.
- The Transition Year (TY) English plan is based on modules which allow teachers and students to work on areas of particular interest and relevance, including a survey of Shakespearean drama; speech writing; and journalism of different kinds. The broader TY programme also includes areas that relate to English, and more explicit reference to these cross-curricular areas could be included in the TY English plan.
- Comprehensive plans for Leaving Certificate English have been drawn up, and it is evident that the course is covered in breadth and depth.
- Teachers' individual plans are based on the subject plan and are admirably detailed.

The draft findings and recommendations arising out of this evaluation were discussed with the principal, deputy principal and subject teachers at the conclusion of the evaluation.

Appendix

SCHOOL RESPONSE TO THE REPORT

Submitted by the Board of Management

Part A Observations on the content of the inspection report

The Board of Management considers this report to be an endorsement of teachers' hard work and commitment and congratulates the English department. The comments in relation to Teaching and Learning, Subject and Whole School Support and Planning and Preparation are extremely positive and affirming.

Part B Follow-up actions planned or undertaken since the completion of the inspection activity to implement the findings and recommendations of the inspection.

The school has endeavoured to implement fully the recommendations contained in this report.

"The English Department should develop, where necessary, more structured step by step approaches to support students' acquisition of new skills and concepts".

- English teachers continue to use Assessment for Learning techniques, in particular an increased level of structuring and scaffolding in relation to learning activities in the classroom
- Consideration will be given to include more strategies to support differentiated learning in the class groups.

"The English department should further develop its Junior Cycle plan to support greater integration of oral communication skills, and to incorporate the full range of assessment practices".

English teachers continue to improve their subject plan by placing increased emphasis on oral communication.

The full range of assessment practices will be fully included and implemented as soon as the ASTI teachers' union lifts its ban.

THE INSPECTORATE'S QUALITY CONTINUUM

Inspectors describe the quality of provision in the school using the Inspectorate's quality continuum which is shown below. The quality continuum provides examples of the language used by inspectors when evaluating and describing the quality the school's provision of each area.

Level	Description	Example of descriptive terms
Very Good	Very good applies where the quality of the areas evaluated is of a very high standard. The very few areas for improvement that exist do not significantly impact on the overall quality of provision. For some schools in this category the quality of what is evaluated is outstanding and provides an example for other schools of exceptionally high standards of provision.	Very good; of a very high quality; very effective practice; highly commendable; very successful; few areas for improvement; notable; of a very high standard. Excellent; outstanding; exceptionally high standard, with very significant strengths; exemplary
Good	Good applies where the strengths in the areas evaluated clearly outweigh the areas in need of improvement. The areas requiring improvement impact on the quality of pupils' learning. The school needs to build on its strengths and take action to address the areas identified as requiring improvement in order to achieve a <i>very good</i> standard.	Good; good quality; valuable; effective practice; competent; useful; commendable; good standard; some areas for improvement
Satisfactory	Satisfactory applies where the quality of provision is adequate. The strengths in what is being evaluated just outweigh the shortcomings. While the shortcomings do not have a significant negative impact they constrain the quality of the learning experiences and should be addressed in order to achieve a better standard.	Satisfactory; adequate; appropriate provision although some possibilities for improvement exist; acceptable level of quality; improvement needed in some areas
Fair	Fair applies where, although there are some strengths in the areas evaluated, deficiencies or shortcomings that outweigh those strengths also exist. The school will have to address certain deficiencies without delay in order to ensure that provision is satisfactory or better.	Fair; evident weaknesses that are impacting on pupils' learning; less than satisfactory; experiencing difficulty; must improve in specified areas; action required to improve
Weak	Weak applies where there are serious deficiencies in the areas evaluated. Immediate and coordinated whole-school action is required to address the areas of concern. In some cases, the intervention of other agencies may be required to support improvements.	Weak; unsatisfactory; insufficient; ineffective; poor; requiring significant change, development or improvement; experiencing significant difficulties;