

**An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna**  
**Department of Education and Skills**

**Subject Inspection of English**  
**REPORT**

**St Mary's Diocesan School**  
**Drogheda, Co Louth**  
**Roll number: 63841E**

**Date of inspection: 28 February 2013**



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

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

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**INFORMATION ON THE INSPECTION**

<b>Dates of inspection</b>	27, 28 February 2013
<b>Inspection activities undertaken</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Review of relevant documents</li><li>• Discussion with principal and teachers</li><li>• Interaction with students</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Observation of teaching and learning during nine class periods</li><li>• Examination of students' work</li><li>• Interview with subject co-ordinator</li><li>• Feedback to principal, deputy principal and teachers</li></ul>

**MAIN FINDINGS**

- The overall quality of teaching observed was good with some very good practice and some instances where there is scope for improvement and greater emphasis on skills development.
- Active learning was observed in the majority of lessons.
- Effective questioning strategies helped students to reflect on their own learning.
- Timetable provision for English is very good with excellent provision for English in the senior cycle.
- Higher-level uptake has increased and attainment is good.
- Student questionnaires and analysis of state examination results are used to inform subject planning decisions.

**MAIN RECOMMENDATIONS**

- Opportunities for independent and active learning should be extended.
  - A common approach for setting and grading of homework should be agreed and implemented by the English department.
  - The subject department plan should be further developed to specify learning outcomes, methodologies, resources and assessment strategies for each topic or content area.
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## **INTRODUCTION**

St Mary's Diocesan School, Drogheda, is a voluntary secondary school for boys with a current enrolment of 760. The school offers the Junior Certificate, Leaving Certificate and an optional Transition Year (TY) programme.

## **TEACHING AND LEARNING**

- Nine lessons were observed during the evaluation. In the majority of lessons, the quality of teaching and learning was good. In some lessons, the development and consolidation of students' skills did not receive adequate attention.
- In most lessons, the teacher shared the lesson objective with the students. This good practice should be further developed by focusing on skills development and expressing learning outcomes in terms of what the student should know, or will be able to do, by the end of the lesson. The attainment of the stated outcome should be assessed at the conclusion of the lesson.
- Active learning methodologies, including pair and group work, were used in the majority of lessons. In a significant minority of the lessons observed, there were few independent or active learning opportunities. A broad range of methodologies should be utilised to cater for all learning styles and to ensure greater participation by all students. Some innovative approaches to group work were observed and will provide a very good foundation for further development.
- A positive atmosphere and good interpersonal relationships were evident in the lessons observed. Students were co-operative and engaged willingly in classroom activities.
- The majority of teachers have assigned classrooms. Some of these contained very attractive displays, including samples of students' work. The use of the classroom environment as a learning resource should be developed further.
- Very effective questioning strategies were used in most lessons. Teachers used both closed and open questions to encourage students to demonstrate knowledge and to probe their understanding. In one lesson, students were asked to reflect on the elements of a good answer; in another, students were asked to focus specifically on "how" and "why" questions. This good practice could be developed further by encouraging students to develop their own questioning skills.
- Formative assessment is being implemented, with teachers providing affirmative and constructive feedback in many cases. This is commendable. To further develop assessment for learning (AfL) practices, teachers should develop strategies to encourage students to reflect on feedback.
- In a small minority of lessons, written homework was not being monitored regularly. A common approach for homework assignment and assessment that will support student learning and skills development should be agreed and implemented by the English department.
- All English teachers are working to develop students' literacy. A collaborative approach to literacy development should be adopted by the English department. This would strengthen individual efforts and could either derive from, or contribute to, the whole school literacy strategy.

## **SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT**

- There is good whole-school support for English.
- The school library, which is staffed every day at lunch-time, has recently been upgraded as part of a whole-school initiative and is a bright and welcoming space.
- Timetabling for English is optimal, with at least one English lesson per day for each class group, other than TY students, who have four lessons each week. Sixth-year students are timetabled for six periods, including one double period. This level of timetabling commitment to the subject is highly commendable.
- Currently first and second-year English classes are organised in mixed-ability groups, while third year classes are set for levels. The school is committed to continuing and extending the provision of mixed ability class groups throughout junior cycle. Students are encouraged by their teachers to take the highest appropriate level. An analysis of uptake at higher level shows a positive trend and attainment is good.
- Senior cycle classes are organised into higher and ordinary-level groups. Teacher recommendation and junior cycle attainment, including results from mock and actual Junior Certificate examinations, are used to inform class group formation. The students' wishes are also taken into account.
- There are ten teachers in the English department. However, not all teachers have specialist qualifications in English. This should be borne in mind, to the extent possible, in the deployment of staff to the English department.
- Teachers have access to very good information and communications technology. A range of co-curricular and extracurricular activities, including drama, theatre trips and debating, is provided.
- The learning support team provides for students with special education needs through withdrawal. Efforts are made to minimise the impact on mainstream subjects as far as possible. Students' needs are identified through assessment, teacher referral and communication with feeder primary schools. At senior cycle, subject-specific supports are provided wherever possible. Informal structures to ensure that learning support activities are integrated with whole-class learning are in place.
- The school supports teachers' continuing professional development. Teachers should consider joining the Irish National Organisation for Teachers of English (INOTE), the professional network for teachers of English.

## **PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

- Comprehensive subject plans for junior and senior cycle were observed. Student questionnaires and analysis of state examination results are used to inform planning decisions. The English department should further develop the plans to identify the learning outcomes, methodologies, resources and assessment strategies that are associated with each topic or content area. Particular reference should be made to personal, social and cultural literacy as defined in the junior cycle syllabus. The TY programme should be similarly developed to ensure continuity.
- In some lessons observed, teachers used a range of well-planned resources. However, in a significant minority of lessons, resources were limited. Teachers should consider using a variety of visual and aural resources to support all learning styles.

- Teachers have developed and acquired a comprehensive range of teaching resources and have made them available to colleagues. An agreed strategy for sharing both electronic and hard copy resources should be put in place.
- The role of subject co-ordinator is voluntary, rotates annually and is largely administrative in nature. Research on methodologies, such as AfL, has also been led by the subject co-ordinator. The definition of the role could be broadened to include leadership of learning and teaching.

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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. The board of management was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the report; a response was not received from the board.