

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

**Subject Inspection of English
REPORT**

**Blackwater Community School
Lismore, County Waterford
Roll number: 91509E**

Date of inspection: 4 May 2012



**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 ENGLISH**

INFORMATION ON THE INSPECTION

Dates of inspection	3 and 4 May 2012
Inspection activities undertaken <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Review of relevant documents• Discussion with principal and teachers• Interaction with students	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Observation of teaching and learning during ten class periods• Examination of students' work• Feedback to principal and teachers

MAIN FINDINGS

- The overall quality of teaching observed was very good, with some exemplary practice, and openness to any suggestions for improvement.
- Students demonstrated a good level of engagement with their learning and participated co-operatively in lesson activities.
- Timetable provision for English is good and there is generally good deployment of teachers to the subject.
- Subject department planning is well established and is moving towards a more qualitative and developmental focus.

MAIN RECOMMENDATIONS

- The basis for class formation should be continually reviewed to ensure that it remains valid and supports student attainment across the spectrum of ability.
 - The shared development of learning outcomes related to reading and writing skills would build on the good planning undertaken and contribute to a whole-school literacy strategy.
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INTRODUCTION

Blackwater Community School was established in 2003 as a co-educational school providing post-primary education for Lismore, Cappoquin and the surrounding area. The school offers a wide range of programmes, including an optional Transition Year (TY) and Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA). Current enrolment is 725, with 369 male and 356 female students.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

- Ten lessons were observed, covering all years, levels and programmes and involving all members of the English department. The quality of teaching observed was very good overall, reflecting an enthusiastic and committed approach to the students and the subject. Some exemplary practice was noted in the teaching of students across the range of ability. Where suggestions for improvement or development were made, teachers were receptive and showed good levels of reflection on their own practice.
- An enabling and affirming approach from teachers was consistently evident, while the expectation that students would apply themselves and give thought and care to their work was also communicated. Lesson pace was generally well judged. The teaching methods observed included both traditional and more innovative approaches. Teachers chose approaches that suited the class group and the learning intention, including the skilful integration of information and communication technology.
- Direct instruction was effective; it was clear, authoritative and well positioned in the context of the students' learning. Pair and group work was also used consistently and was generally very well managed; occasionally, full directions for the task were not given beforehand. Feedback from groups was well handled and did not become diffuse. However, students should always make notes of points made by other groups to maximise the learning potential of group work.
- Reading was a key activity in many lessons and reading comprehension skills received good attention. Where the skill of reading aloud is being developed, students should have an opportunity to practise and prepare. Reading a novel in class has a different purpose and teacher reading or audiobook often works better than student reading.
- There was a very good rapport between teachers and students, although students were perhaps more silent than usual. However, the overall picture that emerged was of a good engagement with their learning and a willingness to co-operate and participate. Indeed, many students contributed very articulately to class discussions, at times with some very witty and perceptive observations. Teachers modelled accurate and sophisticated language use, contributing effectively to the expansion of students' vocabulary.
- Students' copybooks contained a commendable volume of written work, with feedback to affirm and give advice. Most work was substantial and contextualised. Students could be encouraged to evaluate their own work and progress, perhaps being required to review and comment on their work before submitting it. Where teachers have concerns about students' ability to structure substantial written assignments, a greater use of writing frames is recommended.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

- The timetable makes very good provision for English in all programmes. While there are just four lessons per week in first year, the provision of six lessons in second year gives ample time for the development and reinforcement of key skills.
- English is timetabled concurrently except in first year and TY, where classes are of mixed ability. Concurrence is used principally to create ability groups, allowing students to change levels where advisable. The policy of the school and English department is to promote the uptake of higher level and to encourage all students to take English at the highest appropriate level. Outcomes are very good. Uptake and achievement at Junior Certificate higher level in particular is high and on a marked upward trend. Notwithstanding these good outcomes, the basis for class formation should be continually reviewed to ensure that it remains valid and supports student attainment across the spectrum of ability.
- Concurrence also permits whole-year activities and collaborative planning and delivery of the programme for each year, and should be exploited to the full for these purposes. The possibility of limited concurrence in TY could be explored, to allow some modular delivery of the programme.
- Deployment of the teachers of English generally supports the delivery of the subject as a continuum of knowledge and skills development from first year to sixth. Six of the eight teachers teach English to three class groups or more, while four teach both junior and senior cycle. The number teaching in both cycles should be increased if possible.
- English is well resourced. Most teachers of English have a base room and many of these are very well developed learning environments, with excellent visual and print displays. The display of students' current work was noted and commended. Information and communication technology is widely available.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

- Subject department planning is well established in the school. A system of rotating co-ordinator is in place and the role has both organisational and developmental aspects.
- Regular subject department meetings are held and minutes record good reflective practice. The department evaluates the work of the year each May and agrees changes and innovations for the next school year. School management conducts a staff survey each year which supports reflection and self-evaluation by subject departments.
- Subject planning is increasingly a collaborative effort to produce an agreed programme of work. The subject plan reflects good practice in sharing ideas on successful texts and materials. In further developing this practice, it would be useful for teachers to agree on the learning outcomes for each year, differentiating them in terms of what students must, should and could know and be able to do. This approach would generate very clear target statements relating to the attainment of reading and writing skills.
- A cross-disciplinary committee to develop the school's literacy and numeracy strategy has been set up and includes members of the English department. This provides an ideal mechanism for the development of consistent, school-wide practice. The approach to learning outcomes suggested above would provide literacy skills targets that could be

applied to reading and writing across the curriculum, thereby giving students many opportunities to practise and consolidate these skills.

- Planning to enhance students' experience of the subject is evident in initiatives such as Literary Week, increasing the use of the library, and creative writing projects.

The draft findings and recommendations arising out of this evaluation were discussed with the 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.

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