

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

**Subject Inspection of Geography**  
**REPORT**

**Terence MacSwiney Community College**  
**Knocknaheeny, Cork City**  
**Roll number: 71123Q**

**Date of inspection: 5 March 2015**



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

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

---

**INFORMATION ON THE INSPECTION**

<b>Date of inspection</b>	5 March 2015
<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 three class periods</li><li>• Examination of students' work</li><li>• Feedback to principal and teachers</li></ul>

**MAIN FINDINGS**

- Teaching of very good quality and very effective displays of student learning were evident in the lessons observed.
- Senior cycle students demonstrated the ability to engage in discussion beyond factual recall by analysing and synthesising issues towards recognising key geographical interrelationships.
- The very effective use of tablet computer devices by students in junior cycle enhanced their learning in Geography.
- Ongoing assessment of learning underpins geography lessons.
- Uptake of higher level geography at senior cycle is a key challenge for the geography department.

**MAIN RECOMMENDATIONS**

- Uptake of higher level by senior cycle geography students should be prioritised through review and reflection on teaching approaches and examination technique, so as to create a greater challenge and raise expectations for some students within the mixed-ability class contexts.
- Teachers should use a self-evaluation cycle to reflect upon and share their experiences and their learning based on the observed outcomes of the use of tablet computer devices as a learning tool for geography students.
- A plan for Transition Year (TY) geography should be developed, based on key geographical skills and local settings, to build students' capacity towards uptake of higher level at Leaving Certificate.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Terence MacSwiney College is a co-educational post-primary school managed under the auspices of Cork Education and Training Board (ETB). It has a current enrolment of 142 students. The school is part of the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) action plan for educational inclusion. Students are offered the JCSP, a compulsory TY programme, the established Leaving Certificate and the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme.

## **TEACHING AND LEARNING**

- Teaching of very good quality and very effective displays of student learning were evident in the lessons observed.
- These lessons were very well planned and prepared. They were structured and paced with a clear awareness of the learning needs of individual students and of the challenges posed by the significant range of abilities within the class groups. Lessons were characterised by behaviours and actions that demonstrated well-established routines, positive relationships, and evident mutual respect between students, their teachers and special needs assistants (SNAs).
- Students' displayed their learning in lessons through their responses to questions, through their engagement with tasks, and by their achievement in 'learning check' reviews, particularly at junior cycle.
- The small size of the geography class at fifth-year facilitated students to sit around a large table and therefore to engage at close quarters with rock samples, maps, diagrams, key words and a simple experiment to demonstrate sedimentation. All students were included in this intimate learning setting that facilitated them to discuss, engage and enjoy the lessons.
- A large-scale poster, in the form of a jigsaw that was placed on the table in front of students, illustrated the geological timeline and associated geological events and geomorphological features. By arranging and re-arranging the jigsaw pieces, a very clear overview of the rock cycle and of the interacting forces that shape the earth emerged for students. This was very effective teaching practice as the students collaboratively, and with prompting by their teacher, discussed and then pieced together the geological time line that reflected their learning thus far in physical geography.
- In these fifth-year lessons, it became clear from observation and engagement with the students, that some were capable of engaging with the topics under discussion at a high level. They engaged in discussion beyond factual recall by analysing and synthesising issues towards recognising key geographical interrelationships. Some of these students, who are currently pursuing the ordinary level course, should now, as a priority, be challenged with higher expectations towards higher level Geography for Leaving Certificate.
- A rebalancing between the concern for students to display understanding of complex terminology and the concern to develop wider understanding of geographical concepts and processes, should be considered. A focus on the key learning points, as outlined in the syllabus, and a strategic review of the detail and depth demanded by Leaving Certificate examination questions, rather than the detail of the textbook, should be used to provide differentiated strategies to assist students' learning and achievement.

- At junior cycle, a very well-structured lesson, relating to settlement patterns, engaged students through a range of strategies. Local settlement patterns were used as an entry point to the topic through zooming in on the local school area using aerial photographs sourced on the Internet. Following engagement with the key terminology, the settlement patterns in the area were identified and mapped using an overlay sketch on the local map that was projected on the screen. Using their tablet computers, the students then completed this exercise using a tablet application to create and complete their own sketch map, with legend and labels, using the correct terminology. These methods were observed to be very effective in engaging students, who display a range of attention spans, in achieving very well defined and achievable planned learning outcomes.
- Tablet computers were observed to be very effective in enhancing students' learning. Their use was planned to allow students to apply their learning following engagement with the overall concept and the details of settlement patterns. Individual students could then express their individual understanding on the sketch map that they generated on the device and then assess their own learning based on the outcome. Over time, the geography department should use a self-evaluation cycle to reflect upon and share these valuable experiences and their own learning based on the observed outcomes of the use of tablet computer devices as a learning tool for geography students.
- The ongoing assessment of students' learning underpinned all the lessons observed. This was achieved in all cases by detailed questioning and prompting by teachers. In junior cycle, assessment of learning was enhanced by the use of a rapid revision tool linked to the learning intention using the tablet computer. At senior cycle, assessment of learning was achieved through the very detailed, individualised and sensitive questioning by the teacher within the very positive atmosphere of the round-table classroom setting.

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

- Currently, a module of Geography is offered to first-year students for one half of the school year, within a subject-sampling process. Provision of Geography on the curriculum for second year and therefore onwards into senior cycle is dependent on students' preferences following a subject-choice process in advance of second year. The provision and viability of Geography, and other optional subjects, is therefore challenged by the small but increasing cohort of first-year students enrolling in the school. The recent introduction of a TY programme that includes a module for Geography, with a time allocation of three class periods per week, is a very positive step in providing a supportive progression route to senior cycle for Geography for students.
- The ordered and very well-maintained school building, and the very well-furnished and visually-stimulating classrooms provide very positive learning environments for students. These have been enhanced by the provision of information and communication technology (ICT) in classrooms and the provision of the aforementioned tablet computer devices, initially for junior cycle students.

#### **PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

- Very good and long-established collaborative planning structures are in place. The development of a curricular planning template that links DEIS targets and literacy and numeracy integration opportunities with detailed planning for Geography is very good practice. Increased uptake of higher-level geography in senior cycle based on review and

reflection on teaching approaches and examination technique should now become a key planning priority.

- A detailed plan for Transition Year (TY) geography should also be developed. This plan should focus on developing key geographical skills within the study of local settings to build students' capacity towards increased uptake of higher level geography at Leaving Certificate.

---

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 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.

# **Appendix**

**SCHOOL RESPONSE TO THE REPORT**

**Submitted by the Board of Management**

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

- The Geography teachers wish to acknowledge the positive comments about the quality of teaching and learning observed in lessons.
- They also acknowledge the challenge of increasing the number of students who could take higher level at senior cycle.
- The content of the TY Geography plan needs to incorporate more local settings and focus on basic practical skills out in the field.

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

- Under our DEIS Plan (2015-16), planned measures include: 1) increasing the uptake of after-school study; 2) continuing with individual education planning (IEP) for each senior cycle student, 3) continuing with the mentoring programme. It is envisaged that these measures will increase the percentage of students taking higher level Geography.
- With regards to subject planning, the geography department will draft a specific plan for TY in 2015-16 which will enhance students' mapping and practical fieldwork skills in our local area.
- An attitudinal survey of staff and students of the tablet computer device usage as a learning tool in the classroom is ongoing. Currently, all junior cycle students and staff have a tablet computer device.