

**An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna**

**Department of Education and Skills**

**Subject Inspection of Irish  
REPORT**

**St Jarlath's College  
Tuam, Co. Galway  
Roll number: 68074M**

**Date of inspection: 5 November 2010**



**AN ROINN OIDEACHAIS  
AGUS EOLAÍOCHTA | DEPARTMENT OF  
EDUCATION  
AND SCIENCE**

**This is a translation of the original report which was written in Irish**

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

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**SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT**

This report has been written following a subject inspection in St Jarlath's College, Tuam, Co. Galway. It presents the findings of an evaluation of the quality of the teaching and learning in Irish 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 the 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 to the subject teachers. 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 PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT**

St Jarlath's College and St Patrick's College were amalgamated in September 2009, with four teachers from St Jarlath's College and three from Coláiste Phádraig now in the school's Irish department. A subject inspection in Irish was carried out as part of a whole school evaluation (WSE) in St Jarlath's College in March 2004. A number of recommendations made as part of that inspection are also reiterated in this report and should be implemented without delay.

The number of class periods provided for the teaching and learning of Irish is satisfactory. In the senior cycle there are six class periods per week for each year group. First-year students have five class periods each week and four periods per week for second and third years. It is recommended that every effort be made to provide for daily input for the teaching of Irish. Students take entrance exams for admission to the school and all classes are streamed for all subjects according to the results of those exams. It is recommended that this arrangement be reviewed and replaced by allocation of students to mixed-ability class groups in first year. From second year through to Leaving Certificate, students are organised according to levels in the State exams. These classes are timetabled concurrently, a provision which facilitates movement between the various examination levels, as appropriate.

All Irish teachers are graduates in the subject and the majority are afforded the opportunity to teach classes in both Junior and Senior Cycles, at the various exam levels and all programmes available in the school. The same approach is recommended for all staff members, to ensure that every teacher in the department gets appropriate experience. The staff members have wide-ranging experience of marking certificate examinations and acting as assistant examiners for the oral examinations. All Irish teachers are members of *Comhar na Múinteoirí Gaeilge*. The

attendance of all the teachers at in-service courses run by the Second Level Support Service (SLSS) has been very good.

The teachers of Irish have their own classrooms and while the teaching and learning of Irish is supported by some access to CD and DVD players, the availability of information and communication technology in classes is very limited. This deficit should be addressed as the school's resources allow. Available Irish texts are not being used at present to support the teaching and learning of the language and reference in the Irish subject plan to the uses of supplementary resources to support the learning and teaching of Irish are limited. A central storage area should be developed for resources for Irish. Reference should be made to the website of the SLSS for Irish and on the website [www.cogg.ie](http://www.cogg.ie) in this regard, as was recommended in the 2004 Irish report.

Approximately thirteen per cent of the total enrolment has exemptions from the study of Irish, according to the provisions of Circular M10/94. It was also reported that every encouragement and support is given to exempted students to study the language and to take part in cultural events organised in the school. The school is strongly congratulated on this approach. Although the school management makes every effort to identify students with 'unofficial' exemptions, nonetheless, there are some students who neither take Irish as part of their study programme, nor hold an official exemption from Irish. It is recommended that a question about an official exemption be included in the application form for entry to the school for new students, in order to avoid such situations in future.

The Irish teachers are committed to enhancing the status of Irish and of Irish culture among the students of the school. Events are organised for *Seachtain na Gaeilge* every year, including quizzes and various other competitions. Charity events and outings to Irish plays are also organised. The teachers who arrange co-curricular and extracurricular events for their students are congratulated on their work. It is recommended that the *Conradh na Gaeilge* website [www.snag.ie](http://www.snag.ie) be used when developing *Seachtain na Gaeilge*. There is very little Irish evident in the school environment. It is recommended that this be addressed to raise the status of the language among all the partners involved in the school.

## **PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

The Irish department has a subject co-ordinator. The department has decided that the responsibility of co-ordinator be rotated among the staff, by agreement. Action plans should be drawn up to address the collective priorities of the department and the main recommendations of the report should be included in this plan of action. This would provide a framework for the strategic development of Irish.

The teachers meet formally at the beginning and end of the school year. Minutes of these meetings have been kept since September 2009. The school management has not allowed sufficient time for formal planning; therefore the planning process depends heavily on informal communication. It is recommended that the school's department of Irish be put on a more formal basis and that the teachers of Irish hold formal meetings more regularly.

Good curriculum plans for the teaching and learning of Irish in the two cycles are set out on a term-by-term basis. The best planning was evident in the plans for senior classes. It is commendable that this planning has been carried out to teach the language functions and various topics in an integrated way across all language skills, as recommended in the syllabuses. It would

be advisable for the teachers to use an integrated approach, worked out on a term-by-term basis, in curriculum planning for every year group. It is also recommended that the department initiate joint planning to agree common programmes and exams for classes taking the subject at the same level.

## TEACHING AND LEARNING

Good short-term planning had been done for all the lessons observed and in those lessons for which very good planning had been carried out; there was developmental order in the content of the lessons. The lessons progressed at a good pace and were well linked with previous lessons and with those to come. Clear teaching and learning objectives characterised these lessons and it is commendable that the teachers shared the learning objectives with the students. Each teaching and learning objective was completed before progressing to the next, as is appropriate. It is recommended that these short-term planning practices be used by all Irish teachers. Two general recommendations should be taken into account by all teachers when carrying out short-term planning: they should differentiate the learning objectives to include students for whom language learning is not easy as well as offering a challenge to the more able students. They should also summarise with students what they have achieved in terms of learning objectives, as this fosters independence in learners. Very good preparation had been made for all classes evaluated in the form of worksheets, film clips, PowerPoint slides and listening excerpt of a poem. It is praiseworthy that, in about half of the classes observed, authentic pictures were used which linked the lesson content to the students' own life experience, thus enhancing their understanding and learning. It is recommended that every member of the Irish department consider the aids and resources they use for teaching and learning, to ensure that they are catering for the range of learning styles in all class.

Teacher-student questioning was the main teaching and learning method in use. Best practice was observed where the difficulty level of the questions was differentiated and targeted at particular students. This approach encouraged participation according to different levels of ability. It is recommended that wider use be made of such questions during lessons for every class group. In general, questioning techniques were more successful in those classes where pair work or individual work was used as an activity to reinforce whole-class presentation of content. Opportunities were created for students to engage with the learning objectives of the classes by completing the assigned tasks. The vast majority of the teachers catered very effectively for students' learning needs in fulfilling set tasks, as appropriate. Best practice was observed in those cases where the teachers agreed an allocation of time for the task with the students beforehand, gave a clear explanation or idea of the task to be completed, and provided an opportunity for the students to present what they had learned. Teachers are warmly congratulated on these practices. It is suggested as general practice that teachers should not embark on teaching any new skill or any new aspect of the course without carrying out the necessary pre-skill work on the text beforehand. It would be worthwhile to conduct a debriefing session with the students on the knowledge they already have, before beginning a new topic or a new aspect of the syllabuses.

In general, the teachers used the board and transparencies effectively to illustrate the structure of the lesson, to record new vocabulary and answers to homework clearly. It is recommended that the board be used to write new words which arise during lessons, as a reinforcement to spelling words orally. The board can also be used to link new words with those the students already know, an approach being used orally at present in the case of examples like *te* and *teocht*, *lá* and *lae*. Such recording would also place a visual emphasis on points of grammar also, approaches which would be helpful especially to learners whose preferred learning style is visual.

Irish was used as the normal language of communication in all the lessons observed, but it was evident in some classes that this was not the norm for all the students. It was obvious also in copybooks and some textbooks that the translation method was being used with certain class groups. It is recommended that the effectiveness of these practices in relation to language acquisition for learners be reviewed. All teachers had good competence in language grading. In one class, the language of the text was simplified in an exemplary way and the students were encouraged to offer a simpler word or phrase, or one of equivalent difficulty, as an alternative to the vocabulary used in the text. These approaches are far more effective than over-dependence on the translation method. Certain teachers directed students' attention to points of grammar in the context of the extract being studied and in one class the teacher offered an explanation for the etymology of a word. These teachers are highly commended for having high expectations for student learning. In general, the students had a good command of Irish and, in the majority of classes, were willing to express themselves. Students in certain class groups used with ease the transactional vocabulary needed to express themselves, to indicate misunderstandings, and to express their opinions. The teachers are warmly congratulated on all this work on helping their students to acquire the target language and it is recommended that the good practices mentioned above be used with all the year groups in the school.

There was a respectful, diligent learning atmosphere in all the classes observed during the evaluation. All teachers had good class management skills. The teachers knew their students well, which greatly enhanced the learning and teaching contact. They set high learning and behavioural expectations for their students in the vast majority of classes and always offered encouraging affirmation on the quality of the efforts made and the opinions offered by the students. The teachers deserve credit also for their efforts to create a stimulating environment in the classrooms where Irish is taught. There were grammar charts on display, as well as posters, illustrations, students' own stories and posters relating to current Irish-language events.

## **ASSESSMENT**

All students are comprehensively assessed three times a year, apart from certificate students who take state exams in the summer. Reports are sent home twice during the school year, based on the results of these tests. The inspector was given to understand that common tests are set for all first years and also for fifth-year students. It is recommended that this approach be further developed and that common tests be agreed for classes taking the subject at the same level. Meetings between parents or guardians and teachers are held once a year for each year group. It is recommended that the four main language skills be part of the assessment experience of students in the summative assessments conducted and that parents be informed of students' achievements across these skills. Initial steps have been made on assessment modules with students in Leaving Certificate, Year 1, to further emphasise oral skills. This practice is commendable, as are the department's plans to extend this approach to the other year groups.

It was evident from a random sample of copybooks inspected that a wide range of work had been done which complied with the requirements of the syllabuses. It was clear from one set of leaving certificate copybooks examined that the proportion of the syllabus covered in fifth year was insufficient, which meant that the bulk of the course had to be done in the actual year of the leaving certificate examination. It is recommended that such practice is not employed in the future. The copybooks also indicated that the courses were not always being taught in an integrated, thematic way. Corrections of grammar or spelling mistakes had been made on the students' work, but the majority of these did not give the students clear directions for learning. It

is recommended that this be reviewed. Further information on assessment for learning is available on the NCCA website at [www.ncca.ie](http://www.ncca.ie). In other copybooks, the students' work was merely being monitored. It is recommended that the Irish department discuss the learning value of the corrections, developmental corrections included. There were copybooks, worksheets and textbooks also which had long passages in English and it is recommended that the overuse of translation be reviewed. Although the school has not developed a whole-school assessment policy or a homework policy, there are guidelines for assessment and homework in the plan for Irish. It is recommended that this be reviewed at a whole-school level and that the approaches of the department of Irish to collecting and correcting students' work be further developed.

All students use a system of homework diaries, as is appropriate. Tutors and year heads manage the homework diaries and a parent signs the diary every week. Both parents and teachers use the diaries as a means of communication also. These approaches are praiseworthy. The random sample of diaries examined indicated that homework was being regularly set, but that there was particular emphasis on writing, on memorisation and on revision. It is recommended that a variety of homework tasks be set to take account of all the language skills. This approach would reinforce the student's competence in all the skills, instead of giving priority to one skill.

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

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- There was good short-term planning and very good preparation had been carried out for all the lessons observed during the evaluation.
- Good teaching and learning methods were used in all classes and in some classes very good methodologies were observed during the evaluation.
- Those teachers who were using very good practice to help their students to acquire the target language are warmly congratulated on their efforts.

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

- The resources and aids available to support the teaching and learning of Irish, in particular ICT resources, should be significantly developed.
- It is recommended that the department of Irish be put on a more formal footing and that formal meetings of the teachers of Irish be held more regularly.
- It is recommended that an integrated, thematic approach be used in curriculum planning for every year group. It is also recommended that the department embark on joint planning, to agree common programmes and exams for classes taking the subject at the same level.
- It is recommended that cognisance be taken of all the language skills, in homework and assessment, and in the reports sent to parents or guardians. This initiative would be most worthwhile within the context of the development of a whole-school assessment policy.

Post-evaluation meetings were held with the teachers of Irish and with the principal at the conclusion of the evaluation, meetings at which 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 of Management, Principal and involved staff welcome this report and consider it to be fair. The inspection occurred at an important juncture, during the first term of our second year as an amalgamated school, and has proved of great benefit.

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

Shortly after the inspection the school invested approximately Eur 85,000.00 in IT equipment, furnishing each classroom with a fixed, short-throw digital projector and equipping each teacher with a school laptop. The monies invested originated mainly from DES grants but approximately Eur 10,000.00 of school savings was also spent. After discussion among staff a number of subject departments pioneered common assessments for the 2010 Christmas house tests and all departments conducted common assessment, within appropriate parameters of level etc, for the 2011 Summer tests. A move to cross-correcting of house tests within subject departments is being planned. The format and status of these tests has been further changed by our adopting a formal, centrally planned approach to house tests, replacing the older class-based approach. This has given more time for each test and has underlined the importance of such testing, which is now to take place four times a year with reports going home for two of these. It is planned to enable parents soon to have access on the internet to grades in respect of the other two tests, using the new Eportal system.

In September 2011, for the first time, St. Jarlath's moved from streaming at Junior level and divided the new first years on the basis of mixed ability. This has gone very well and is the subject of continued discussion and planning. As part of this development, the old entrance examination was abolished and replaced by standardised testing.

In terms of policy development, a new homework policy has since been developed and put in place and a new assessment policy is almost ready. Transition Year is to be introduced in 2012.

The Irish department has fully participated in these developments and is benefitting from them. It is developing an integrated approach, conducting joint planning for both common schemes of work and assessment. Recognition of all the language skills is being integrated into assessment, the issue of signage throughout the school is being addressed and the location of resources in a central storage area is a part of the overall school plan for the development and use of our buildings during this year. A Special Duties Post of Irish Language Officer has been created after a recent review. It is intended to gradually raise the presence and status of the language in the school generally. The introduction of Transition Year will help in this regard, with an opportunity to devote more time and effort to an emphasis on the spoken word, which will also accord well with DES policy.