Subject Inspection of Business Subjects
REPORT

Stella Maris Secondary School,
Tramore, County Waterford
Roll number: 64922J

Date of inspection: 14 April 2010
REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN BUSINESS SUBJECTS

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Stella Maris Secondary School, Tramore. It presents the findings of an evaluation of the quality of teaching and learning in business subjects and makes recommendations for the further development of the teaching of this subject in the school. The evaluation was conducted over one day during which the inspector visited classrooms and observed 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. The board of management was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the evaluation, and the response of the board will be found in the appendix to this report.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

In Stella Maris Secondary School Business Studies was a core subject on the junior cycle curriculum up to 2007. It is now an optional subject for students. First-year students are offered an eight-week taster programme of all optional subjects including Business Studies. This is good practice as it provides students with an opportunity to make an informed decision on subject choice. Students in the Transition Year programme (TY) are provided with business education in their curriculum.

Accounting, Business and Economics are offered on the Leaving Certificate curriculum. The option bands in senior cycle are generated from students’ subject preferences. Currently, there is strong uptake of Economics and it is part of the senior cycle curriculum. There is a low uptake of Business but as a result of good curriculum co-operation and timetable co-ordination with the neighbouring boys’ school, students from Stella Maris can avail of the subject there. Likewise, boys from the neighbouring school can avail of Economics in Stella Maris. This practice is commended, as it facilitates students of both schools in their curriculum choices and it is a good use of available resources. In the current senior cycle, there is no Accounting class as it was not the favoured option of students. An analysis and review of factors influencing subject choice in senior cycle could usefully be conducted by senior management and the business subject department with the aim of increasing interest and uptake in all business subjects. The school also provides the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP); the Enterprise module is currently delivered by a business teacher. Senior management is commended for its commitment to the provision of the full range of business subjects for students.

Time allocation for the teaching of business subjects is good. At junior cycle Business Studies is timetabled for one double period and two single periods. In TY Business is timetabled for a double and single class period and at senior cycle the subject has a double and three single periods. Teachers in the business subject department all experience teaching in senior and junior cycles. This is good practice.
Classrooms are student based and as a result there is no specialist or de facto business classroom. Business specialist rooms can be valuable learning environments for students in which business awards, project work and visual print resources can be displayed. The business subject department is allocated a yearly budget which facilitates the purchase of teaching aids such as posters and DVDs. However, there is no one storage area for business resources or teaching aids. It is therefore recommended that senior management consider the provision of at least one classroom that can serve as a specialist business room and in the interim that a secure accessible location be sourced for the storage of shared business resources.

The provision of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) equipment is good. The school has a dedicated computer room which can be accessed by business teachers and students when it is available. The business subject department has its own laptop and it is used effectively by business teachers. Most classrooms have fixed data projectors and access points for broadband internet. Senior management is praised for its ongoing commitment to the provision of ICT in the school.

All teachers of the business subjects are subject specialists and are members of the Business Studies Teachers Association of Ireland (BSTAI). Senior management facilitates attendance at available in-service as a means of updating skills and knowledge and supports continuing professional development activities, as required.

**Planning and Preparation**

The business subject department has a co-ordinator in place, whose responsibility is to monitor student progress in business subjects and to manage and lead planning. Senior management affords all subject departments planning time once a year. In addition, to this business teachers also meet informally to discuss issues that pertain to the provision of business education in the school.

A business subject plan has been developed collaboratively as per the School Development Planning Initiative (SDPI) template and contains all the elements of good planning. Of particular merit is the work in progress linking the curriculum learning outcomes with the resources and the methodologies to be employed in the delivery of each topic in the classroom. This allows each class group to have a consistent teaching and learning experience. There are curriculum plans for each business subject offered in the school. A review of the curriculum plan for Business Studies indicated that the learning outcomes related to book-keeping may need to be reviewed. Currently many of the book-keeping related topics are included in the third-year scheme of work. The introduction of book-keeping elements earlier in the cycle will facilitate the integration of these elements with the theory aspects of the curriculum. It is recommended that the curriculum topics taught in each year in junior cycle be re-assessed as part of a yearly review of subject plans with the aim of rebalancing the book-keeping elements.

The written plan in place for the TY business module gives students a taste of the three business subjects in senior cycle. Students can savour Economics through an Economics for Life programme. Accounting is experienced by the conjecture of a fictitious business for which students have to produce final accounts. Business is explored through student participation in mini company, and students and teachers deserve praise for their recent endeavours in the competition. The module conforms to the ethos of the TY programme and interactive, co-operative and explorative methodologies are used in the teaching of the module.
Teachers’ short-term and medium-term planning is also very good. All handouts, ICT and supplementary paper-based resources were prepared in advance of lessons. In a lesson observed where students were preparing for state examinations a very good student revision handout was prepared. It covered the topics to be revised, with details on what the student should know and the past examination questions that students could practise. From an observation of a sample of students’ copybooks and folders it was noted that some of the handouts were not securely stored. It would be worthwhile for the business subject department to decide on a strategy to ensure that students store additional paper resources. The business department’s laptop is effectively used for lesson planning, preparation and storage of lesson resources and tracking of student’s coverage of topics. It was observed in a senior cycle lesson that the teacher emailed class notes and lesson content to students; this is an efficient use of class time and ensures that an absent student can avail of class notes. Teachers are commended for these good practices.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

The overall standard of teaching and learning in all business subjects was good. Each lesson observed had a good structure, which ensured student learning outcomes were maximised. Lessons opened with a roll call and this was followed by a monitoring of homework. Good practice in time management was observed in a senior lesson. While roll-call was taking place, students were set a question that engaged and challenged students to use critical thinking skills. In the majority of lessons, previous learning material was revised and the new learning outcomes were then outlined. This is good practice and conforms to one of the principles of assessment for learning (AfL).

The methodologies used to impart learning were a good blend of active and traditional, and suited the pace of the mixed-ability setting. The methodologies used in the four lessons observed included pair work, use of graphic organisers, questioning, teacher-led discussions and use of ICT. At the end of some lessons teachers recapped the learning outcomes before they set and explained the designated homework. This good practice should be followed in all lessons.

There was judicious and effective use of ICT in several lessons. In a lesson observed, a data projector was used to display solutions to student homework assignments and new lesson material was presented in graphic and note form. In a junior cycle class, students had worked in groups to make computer-generated graphic presentations of the topics they encountered during the year. This served as a good learning experience and revision aid for students. In senior and junior cycle lessons, students were encouraged to use the internet as a research tool for homework assignments. The use of ICT by teachers in this manner is laudable.

In the business subject plan “teaching for understanding” was noted as an effective pedagogical approach for the teaching of business subjects. This good practice was observed in almost all lessons through the good use of business language and terminology by students and teachers and by activities such as the use of ICT for research, use of current newspaper articles and case studies of national and local entrepreneurs. Of particular merit was the recent class visit to the local credit union. This served as a good learning experience; students experienced first hand the workings of a financial institution and interviewed the manager. After the visit students applied the business skill of report writing to summarise their findings. The experience sought to deepen business acumen. It was reported that the business subject department has invited local entrepreneurs and guest speakers into their business classes. Such praiseworthy initiatives give students an understanding and appreciation of real-life business situations.
In all lessons observed good questioning techniques were used to deepen understanding, determine student progress and advance learning of the material being taught. A range of global, targeted, higher-order and lower-order questions were employed by teachers and this practice often served as a means to differentiate learning in the lesson. Of merit was the use of higher-order questioning in all lessons, where students were asked to critically apply their knowledge to a range of topics.

Classroom management and atmosphere was very good in all lessons and helped to create the good teaching and learning environment observed. Seating arrangements were conducive to group and pair work and facilitated teacher movement throughout the classroom as they tendered individual support to students. In all lessons observed there was a good rapport between students and teacher. Where individual help, clarifications or explanations were required, such support was provided in an affirming manner.

ASSESSMENT

In all the lessons visited homework was assigned, and it was evident from a review of homework journals that this is a regular practice. Homework was corrected by oral answers tendered by teacher or student, written correction on the board and collection of work by the teacher to assess content and quality of work. However, a sample of homework copybooks revealed very few evaluative comments on students’ work. The use of evaluative comments to guide and encourage students in their learning is a principle of AfL and it is beneficial to students. Therefore it is recommended that AfL practices be expanded within the business subject department.

Each class group sits formal assessments at Christmas and the end of the academic year. Students in all years are also informally assessed on the completion of each curriculum topic. Attainment in TY is measured by the subject teacher and includes an evaluation of projects completed during the year. Teachers maintain records of all assessment outcomes and these, along with student progression in business subjects, are communicated to parents by written reports and at parent teacher meetings.

Student outcomes in state examinations are good. Results in state certificate examinations are analysed by the business subjects department, which communicates the results of this analysis to the board of management and the relevant business students in the school. The analysis of results is used to inform teaching and learning practices.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Business education is supported through the provision of a taster programme for first year students and the range of business subjects offered.
- Information and communication technology (ICT) provision in the school supports the work of the business education.
- Short, medium and long term planning by business teachers is good.
- All classroom learning activities observed were effective, with judicious use of appropriate methodologies, ICT and time management strategies.
• Teachers are proactive in making business a real-life experience for students through activities such as visits to enterprises, participation in mini-company competitions and presentations from guest speakers and local entrepreneurs.

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

• Senior management should consider the provision of at least one classroom that can serve as a specialist business room and in the interim a secure accessible location should be sourced for the storage of shared business resources.
• The Business Studies curriculum should be re-balanced with the introduction of bookkeeping elements earlier in the cycle.
• Assessment for learning practices should be used throughout the business subject department.

Post-evaluation meetings were held with the principal at the conclusion of the evaluation when 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 is very pleased to have the excellent work of the business teaching team of Stella Maris be affirmed in such a positive manner.

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

Recommendations re the re-balancing of the Business Studies curriculum and the incorporating of assessment for learning practices are already being implemented.

Due to serious space constraints it is not possible in the short term to provide a dedicated business classroom. The issue of storage will be addressed.

Stella Maris is scheduled to amalgamate with C.B.S. Tramore in September 2013 and a business classroom is on the schedule of accommodation for the new PPP co-ed school.