An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection of Geography
REPORT

Presentation Secondary School
Ballingarry, County Tipperary
Roll number: 65240L

Date of inspection: 30 September 2011
REPORT ON THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN GEOGRAPHY

INFORMATION ON THE INSPECTION

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<td>• Observation of teaching and learning during five class periods</td>
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• Review of relevant documents
• Discussion with principal and teachers
• Interaction with students

MAIN FINDINGS

• The quality of teaching and learning was very good in all the geography lessons observed.
• Uptake of higher level Geography is very good but levels of achievement at higher level Leaving Certificate are uneven.
• An effective geography department has been developed.
• Provision for Geography is very good.
• Individual and collaborative planning, including planning for Transition Year (TY) Geography, represents very good practice.

MAIN RECOMMENDATIONS

• The geography department and school management should focus on strategies to improve achievement at higher level in Leaving Certificate Geography.
• Collaborative planning for Geography should now be progressed based on agreed priorities set within an action planning cycle.
INTRODUCTION

Presentation Secondary School, Ballingarry is co-educational school with a current enrolment of 260 students. The school serves the educational needs of a largely rural hinterland in south Tipperary. Junior Certificate, the Transition Year (TY) programme, the Leaving Certificate, the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme and the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) are offered to students. The school continues the heritage of an older and now closed girls’ boarding school established by the Presentation Sisters in 1871.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

- The quality of teaching and learning was very good in all the geography lessons observed. Lessons had been well planned and were paced at a level that was appropriate to the mixed-ability nature of the class groups. Students responded well to the variety of stimuli that were used to engage them in the syllabus topics for study. There was an appropriate level of challenge provided in the lessons within caring and supportive classroom environments. It was also clear that students were learning in these lessons.
- Routines had been clearly established including lining up in the corridor, roll call, attention to homework and its recording in the students’ journals. Base classrooms for teachers that contained maps, posters and students’ projects provided a very good visual and map-rich environment that enhanced students’ learning.
- The range of methodologies employed by teachers succeeded in engaging students in active and participative lessons. Questioning, discussion and brainstorming were the primary methodologies in most lessons. Questioning was of good quality and students were named, encouraged and affirmed for their responses. Tasks were also appropriately interspersed to vary the approach and to give students individual responsibility for their own learning. While students completed tasks, teachers used these occasions to address individual needs and to monitor students’ progress. Literacy and numeracy development was integrated appropriately into these lessons.
- Very effective examples of co-operative learning were particularly effective in two lessons observed. A simple table quiz in a first-year lesson actively engaged students in a very enjoyable and effective review of previous learning. A third-year class was also observed in a very well-organised group work revision task. Students formulated their own questions on the revision topics and then posed these to the other groups in class. All students fully participated in this activity that contained significant elements of both learning and enjoyment.
- The performance and application of key geographical skills that are tested in certificate examinations were integrated into a number of lessons. Ordnance survey (OS) map skills were applied very effectively in understanding the concept of settlement in one lesson while in another, the creation of a sketch map was very well scaffolded using graph paper, clear instructions, individual attention and the overlaying of elements of the sketch on acetate transparencies. In another lesson, the students interpreted and graphed data sets as an aspect of their geographical investigation. In all cases, these skills were significant in advancing students’ learning.
- Assessment strategies and procedures relating to homework were well established. The quality of students’ work in their copybooks was good with some very good examples of formative comment from their teachers. Greater use of formative comment is recommended.
The geography teaching team share a concern in relation to levels of achievement at higher level in Leaving Certificate geography. Uptake of higher level is very good and teachers have high expectations for their students however, achievement at higher level has been uneven. While context factors and the range of abilities in particular class groups can be seen as significant variables, both school management and the geography teachers were aware of, and concerned about, these patterns. The school principal and the teaching team are committed to focusing on improving achievement at higher level.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

- Provision for Geography on the school timetable reflects normal trends for both junior and senior cycles. Two single class periods are allocated for the subject for the full school year within the TY programme. Senior management allocates geography teachers to a class group and the teacher normally continues to teach that group into senior cycle. The allocation of good quality classrooms to teachers also enhances provision for Geography.

- A geography department has been established. Systems include the appointment of a subject co-ordinator and the clear and effective recording of decisions and actions points towards effective practice. Meeting records illustrate the range of topics for discussion at subject meetings and the attention to detail within the department over time. Resources for teaching and learning have been catalogued and are stored in different classrooms but are available and shared by teachers.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

- Planning and preparation for lessons by individual teachers was of a very high standard. The very good practice observed in lessons was supported by resources and visual materials gathered by teachers to support syllabus topics. These materials included maps, visual materials and information relating to local settings.

- Collaborative planning has also been significantly advanced. Common programmes of work have been developed and a very good quality plan guides the work of the TY geography class. To build on current achievements, the geography department should now identify a number of key and time-bound priorities as a focus to develop their collaborative planning within an action planning cycle. Key among these priorities should be a detailed analysis of students’ grades in Geography in junior and senior cycle and a comparison with their achievement in other subjects and with national norms. This process of self-evaluation combined with reflection on examination technique at senior cycle should provide some guidance towards improvement. The choice of a local setting for the Leaving Certificate geographical investigation should also be considered.

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 on the findings and recommendations of the report; the board chose to accept the report without response.