

**An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna**

**Department of Education and Skills**

**Subject Inspection of Religious Education  
REPORT**

**Finn Valley College  
Stranorlar, Co. Donegal  
Roll number: 71240U**

**Date of inspection: 21 October 2010**



**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 RELIGIOUS EDUCATION**

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**SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT**

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Finn Valley College. It presents the findings of an evaluation of the quality of teaching and learning in Religious Education 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 the teacher, examined students' work, and had a discussion with the subject co-ordinator. The inspector reviewed school planning documentation and the teacher's written preparation. Following the evaluation visit, the inspector provided oral feedback on the outcomes of the evaluation to the principal and the subject teacher. 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.

**SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT**

Finn Valley College is a co-educational post-primary school under the management of County Donegal Vocational Education Committee (VEC). The school offers the following programmes: the Junior Certificate, the Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP), The Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA), the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) and the established Leaving Certificate. In addition post-Leaving Certificate (PLC) courses are offered. At the time of this evaluation, 277 students were enrolled in the post-primary school. The school participates in the Department of Education and Skills Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) initiative. The school has identified literacy and numeracy development as a key emphasis across all subjects taught in the school and achievement goals in each of these areas have been set.

Students are placed in ability-based class groups following enrolment. One small group of students follow the JCSP programme; a second group comprises students who will study the ordinary-level courses in their subjects. The third class group is prepared for higher-level examinations in some subjects. Placement of students in class groups is determined by the results of pre-entry assessment tests and information received from primary schools. Student placement is very carefully monitored. Following the first eight weeks of term, the progress made by students is reviewed and necessary changes are made. This careful attention to the educational needs of students is designed to ensure that all students in Finn Valley College are appropriately supported and are working to their potential. Religious Education (RE) is a core subject on the timetable for all students in junior cycle. The option to study the religious education syllabus prepared by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) for the Junior Certificate examination was introduced recently in this school. It is made available only to those students in the third class group. At the time of this inspection, one class group in each of the three years of junior cycle was taking the NCCA course. All other students in the school study a school-designed religious education programme. This evaluation is concerned with the implementation of the NCCA syllabus and the progress made by students studying that syllabus.

The timetable allocation of two periods a week for RE is less than is recommended by the syllabus and is less than is commonly available to students taking this subject in other schools. Given the context of this school, it is recommended that consideration be given to allocating a third lesson to the subject each week. While the constraints of timetabling are acknowledged, this level of provision is unsatisfactory, particularly in third year given the workload associated with preparation for certificate examinations, when students are required to complete journal work assignments for the certificate examination.

Resource provision to support the teaching and learning of RE is very good. The RE teacher has been allocated a classroom and it is a vibrant environment for learning. Visual displays include subject-related projects completed by students as well as commercially produced posters. A small TV and DVD player is available in the room. A new school building is at an advanced stage and it is envisaged that information and communications technology (ICT) will be available to the RE department in a dedicated classroom. In the meantime, access to the school's two computer suites can be arranged as requested. A book rental scheme is operated in the school and all students are provided with a relevant textbook.

The RE department is operated by one, fully qualified, specialist teacher who is also the coordinator of Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) and the JCSP in the school. Management encourages continuing professional development (CPD) for teachers and has facilitated whole-school in-service on a range of topics, including assessment for learning and positive mental health. The RE teacher is currently engaged in post-graduate studies in chaplaincy. The department has participated in subject-specific in-service provided by the local diocesan advisor and has attended courses provided by the Religious Education Support Service. It is noted that the RE teacher is a member of the professional association for religious education teachers and has attended courses provided by it from time to time.

## **PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

Subject department structures are well established in the school and time is provided by management to support planning. The RE department generally uses this time to evaluate progress made through the planned programme. From time to time, the department also meets with the principal to discuss the work of the department. The following recommendation is made to school management and the VEC to support this single-teacher department: within the context of the VEC's training and development policy. Consideration should be given to contacting other RE teachers working within the VEC scheme in order to establish a professional support network. Such an initiative would provide support to the RE department in addressing the recommendations made below.

A subject department folder was presented during the inspection. This outlined a mission statement for RE within the school and clearly situated RE within the student care structures in the school. In revising the mission statement, the inclusion of the phrase 'respect for' is recommended as an alternative to 'acceptance of' cultural diversity. This would more accurately reflect the syllabus aims and objectives. The NCCA course seeks to promote an understanding and appreciation of why people believe, as well as tolerance and respect for the beliefs and values of all. In its design, the course is inclusive of students from all faith backgrounds and from none. The school reported that, whilst it traditionally enrolled students from a variety of Christian traditions, currently approximately ninety per cent of students come from Roman Catholic homes. In order to better reflect the openness and concern for students from all faith backgrounds that

was expressed in the school, it is suggested that a statement on how the school's RE programme accommodates students from other Christian denominations and those who hold non-Christian and/or non-religious viewpoints should be agreed by school management, in consultation with the school community. This should then be included in the RE policy for the school.

An outline curriculum plan for RE was provided for inspection. This described learning objectives for each section of the course and suggested that it was delivered on a linear basis, such that each section is taught consecutively. Observation of teaching in the classroom and discussion with the teacher indicated that this is not the case, however. It is recommended that the teaching plan be revised to reflect the current practice of the department and to provide clear information about the delivery of the subject. The plan should provide information on teaching and learning methods as well as possible resources, homework tasks and opportunities for assessment, linked with the learning outcomes identified in the curriculum plan. Further advice on subject planning is provided in the Religious Education Guidelines For Teachers publication, available on the Religious Education Support Service website, [www.ress.ie](http://www.ress.ie)

It is acknowledged that planning for the non-examination course in RE is also the responsibility of the department and it is suggested that clear delineation is needed between the programmes in RE offered in the school. In this way, students' achievement of the specific outcomes of the NCCA syllabus can be planned for more thoroughly and best use can be made of the limited time available for study of the course. Currently, for example, the second-year group preparing for certificate examinations have also been given responsibility to act as the liturgical planning group in the school. This means that one of the two lessons available for RE each week is used for another purpose. This should not continue as the students cannot be expected to satisfactorily explore all the necessary concepts specified in syllabus documents in these circumstances.

It was evident that a great deal of work has been done by the RE department to develop a range of resources to support teaching in the subject. The teacher's planning and preparation for the lessons observed was very good. The school's emphasis on literacy skills development was evident in both the resources created and the lessons observed.

## **TEACHING AND LEARNING**

The lessons observed were very well structured and carefully planned. Very effective use was made of the whiteboard to open the lesson in one classroom visited. A step-by-step outline of the structure of the lesson was clearly presented on the whiteboard so that all students were aware of what was happening throughout the lesson period. The same approach was taken in the second lesson observed, though here the outline was presented orally. This is a very good way to support students in a mixed-ability context. The inclusion of a clear statement of the intended learning outcomes at this stage of lessons is recommended. It can be re-visited at the end of the lesson to measure the learning achieved.

Very careful attention was paid to religious language development in the lessons observed. This took the form of spelling tests and pre-teaching new vocabulary. The good practice of requiring students to consider what each word meant and to give examples was noted. However, it was also clear that, while many students can comfortably spell key words in RE, they are less able to provide explanations of the concepts they describe. This was evident both in their contributions to class and in their written work. The strategies adopted by the teacher in one of the lessons observed have the potential to address this difficulty. For example, in this lesson on 'covenant',

students first recalled what they knew about Abraham and Moses. The teacher then provided them with a worksheet and, working in pairs, the students identified common and distinct elements in the covenants reached by both men with God. The addition of an opportunity to discuss the impact of the covenants in Old Testament times or to consider what 'covenant' could mean in students' own lives would have enhanced this lesson. The approach adopted asked students to re-present what they already knew in a new format. By encouraging them to think about the meaning of that knowledge their understanding can be deepened.

The second lesson observed focussed on preparation for an upcoming liturgy. Students were introduced to the words 'sign', 'symbol' and 'ritual' and recorded these in their spelling journals. It was clear that a cross-curricular approach was being adopted, as the proposed theme for the upcoming liturgy was taken from the SPHE programme. This is a very good approach and one that supports students, connecting their learning across different subject areas. However, the lack of a clear, syllabus-related, learning objective meant that opportunities to explore the role of liturgy in the life of a faith community, a key concept in the syllabus, were not taken. Instead, the emphasis was on organisational issues, such as choice of texts and music. Action on the recommendation made earlier regarding the development of a teaching plan for RE would identify appropriate learning objectives and direct teaching. In discussion with the subject co-ordinator, it was evident that the RE department is committed to achieving all the aims of the NCCA syllabus, including the spiritual and moral development of the students. It should be borne in mind that this is achieved through the provision of opportunities to develop an informed and critical understanding of their own, and other, faith traditions. Preparation for, and participation in, liturgies and other RE-related activities should be accompanied by opportunities for students to reflect on the meaning and relevance of these activities in their lives and the life of faith communities.

An examination of students' folders and copies revealed that a significant amount of work has been covered by them. Their folders included a range of contemporary articles, worksheets and notes on aspects of the course, all of which had been supplied by the teacher. It was noted that the vocabulary and concepts in some of this material were quite sophisticated. It is suggested that greater differentiation of the level of challenge posed by support material is needed in order to meet the needs of all students in mixed-ability class groups. In their own written work, the relative abilities of students were evident. Generally, the quality of their responses to questions taken from the textbook was good, though less-able students relied heavily on transcribing from the text to compose an answer. It was good to observe that students are enthusiastic about the subject and motivated to complete the tasks set for them. The RE department sets high expectations for students and makes very good efforts to achieve the goals set. Participation in the higher-level RE course is very good and student achievement in certificate examinations is also very good.

In summary, the quality of teaching and learning in RE was good.

## **ASSESSMENT**

The school is implementing an assessment for learning policy and there was evidence that this approach is taken in RE. During the lessons observed, the teacher used questioning very well to ensure that students were comfortable with the material being explored and to identify areas which needed to be re-visited. The teacher warmly affirmed all students' answers and, where appropriate, used those answers to develop the lesson.

Homework tasks, which are set at least weekly, were based primarily on the textbook which provided short-answer questions designed to check students' recall of what was learned in class. Questions from past examination papers are assigned for third-year students in order to teach them how to interpret questions. This is a very good way to help them become familiar with the answering of various styles of examination questions. The RE teacher corrects work promptly and the teacher comments made provide positive affirmation of students' work. It is suggested that the more frequent setting of imaginative homework exercises, like a witness account of Jesus' death and students' own prayers or parables is a practical way to encourage students to 'enter into' the events being studied and to gain greater insight. Exercises which move beyond checking students' knowledge or recall of information allow them to reflect on their own religious experience or the experiences of others, a key aim of the junior-cycle syllabus.

Summative house examinations are held at Christmas and at the end of the last term for second-year class groups. Students in first year and in third year have three summative assessments during the year. The school actively monitors students' academic progress across all subject areas and an action team has been established to ensure that realistic achievement targets are set and met. This speaks well of the school's commitment to supporting all students to achieve to their potential.

School reports are issued to parents twice annually for all class groups. Parents are also informed of how their children are progressing through the students' journal and at parent-teacher meetings.

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

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The arrangements in place to support teaching and learning in RE are good. Resources are available to the RE department, and the school encourages continuing professional development for teachers.
- A good subject department folder has been developed. This included a mission statement for RE and an outline curriculum plan for the subject.
- A great deal of work has been done by the RE department to develop a range of resources to support teaching and learning.
- The lessons observed were very well structured and carefully planned.
- A cross-curricular approach is adopted in lesson planning and this is very supportive of students' learning.
- Students are enthusiastic about the subject and are motivated to learn.
- The RE department sets high expectations of students and makes very good efforts to achieve the goals set.
- The school is implementing an assessment for learning policy and there was evidence that this approach is taken in RE.
- Very good questioning strategies are used to check understanding during lessons and additional explanation is provided as needed.

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

- Consideration should be given to allocating a third lesson to RE each week.
- Within the context of the VEC's training and development policy, consideration should be given to contacting other RE teachers working within the VEC scheme in order to establish a professional support network.
- The RE department plan should provide clear information about the delivery of the subject. The two RE programmes offered in the school in junior cycle should be clearly distinguished.
- A statement on how the school's RE programme accommodates students from other Christian denominations and those who hold non-Christian and/or non-religious viewpoints should be agreed by school management, in consultation with the school community. This should then be included in the RE policy for the school.

Post-evaluation meetings were held with the principal and with the teacher at the conclusion of the evaluation when the draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation were presented and discussed.