Subject Inspection of Geography
REPORT

Mount St Michael Secondary School
Rosscarbery, County Cork
Roll number: 62470N

Date of inspection: 16 September 2011
REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN GEOGRAPHY

INFORMATION ON THE INSPECTION

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MAIN FINDINGS

• Very good quality teaching and learning was observed in geography lessons.
• Uptake of higher level Geography is significantly good.
• Outcomes for students in certificate examinations are very good.
• Integration of information and communications technology (ICT) in Geography has been advanced.
• Individual planning and preparation for lessons was excellent, but there is scope for further development in collaborative planning for Geography.

MAIN RECOMMENDATIONS

• The geography teaching team should develop a plan for Transition Year (TY) Geography that will provide a significantly different experience of the subject for students.
• Collaborative planning should be advanced based on key priorities for the development of the subject as identified by the geography teachers.
INTRODUCTION
Mount St Michael is a co-educational voluntary secondary school, with an enrolment of 411 students. It is situated in Rosscarbery, West Cork and serves the educational needs of its surrounding hinterland. It offers Junior Certificate, the TY programme, the Leaving Certificate and the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) to its student cohort.

TEACHING AND LEARNING
• Teaching and learning was uniformly of a very high standard in all the geography lessons observed during the evaluation. Geography class groups were of mixed ability. Planning for lessons and the experience provided to students in these lessons reflected a deep understanding of students’ learning needs by their teachers. Individual teachers, through their planning, provided engaging learning experiences for their students that combined both individual and group activities. The lessons observed were particularly focused on the appropriate syllabus and the agreed curricular programme. The students were actively engaged in their own learning.

• Positive relationships were observed between the students and their teachers. The purposeful classroom atmosphere facilitated active and productive geography lessons. Very good quality questioning that challenged students characterised all lessons. Questioning was focused on completed homework tasks, previous learning, local settings and new topics. In all cases students were named, encouraged to develop their answers and affirmed for their responses.

• Student tasks, diagram drawing, surveys of the class, and prompt cards were among the range of other teaching strategies that engaged students in the planned learning. These activities were introduced at a pace that suited the mixed-ability context of the classes, and were significant in advancing the learning. In a first-year lesson, students were tasked to find the answers to key questions by moving around the classroom to ask each of their fellow students a particular question. In the same lesson, students completed a short survey based on the water supply to their homes and then completed a graph of the results that emerged. In this and in all other lessons, student-centred strategies were observed to be very effective.

• The practice and application of geographical skills were also to the fore in lessons. Students completed and labelled diagrams, located study settings on a European map, completed a table of results and engaged in individual report writing for the Leaving Certificate geographical investigation. These activities further complemented the very effective geography lessons.

• Assessment was integrated into all lessons through attention to completed homework, questioning and feedback from tasks. The quality of work in students’ copybooks reflected this focus on assessment. The further development of formative feedback on students’ work would complement the focus on assessment in some lessons.

• Attention was paid to literacy and numeracy in all lessons. A focus on key terminology and correct spelling relating to migration and the labelling of diagrams in physical geography were particularly effective examples. The emphasis placed on the careful individual completion of the investigation report at Leaving Certificate was another. All aspects of the survey completed in the aforementioned first-year lesson integrated a range of numeracy skills that particularly enhanced students’ learning in Geography.
SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

- Uptake of higher level geography at both Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate is significantly high. Achievement in certificate examinations is also very good. Teachers have high expectations for their students. The focus on uptake of higher level and the attention paid to the analysis of outcomes for students in certificate examinations reflects the very professional approach of the geography teachers.

- Students choose their subjects for Leaving Certificate in advance of entering the TY programme. This negates the subject sampling aspect offered by TY and results in students purchasing Leaving Certificate textbooks for Geography for use in TY. School management should ensure that students have a significantly different and enriching experience of Geography in TY from that of the examination-focused approach taken in fifth and sixth year. A plan for TY geography should be developed as a matter of urgency to outline this revised approach to Geography in the programme.

- The integration of ICT has been advanced at whole-school level through the provision of laptop computers for teachers and the installation of data projectors in classrooms. ICT was integrated very effectively into geography lessons through the use of maps and other visual stimulus materials. Further integration is encouraged through the use of Scoilnet Maps, a web-based application provided to schools by the National Centre for Technology in Education (NCTE) to support the teaching of geographical skills. This resource could also be usefully integrated into TY Geography.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

- The very positive experiences for students in geography classrooms arose from the excellent and detailed individual planning observed. Teachers engaged in detailed planning and preparation for their lessons and programmes of work. The teaching files examined contained detailed notes, research on particular topics and settings, and a range of visual stimulus materials relating to syllabus topics.

- There is scope for development in relation to collaborative planning for Geography. A subject department structure is established, meetings are organised and a subject co-ordinator is in place for the current school year. A programme of work for each year group is also in place as are procedures for common assessment in Geography. To advance collaborative planning, the teachers should identify a small number of key planning priorities for Geography. The achievement of these priorities should be framed within time bound and achievable targets. A revised approach to TY Geography and the further integration ICT could be considered as initial planning priorities.

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.

Published, February 2012