

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

**Subject Inspection of Business Subjects
REPORT**

**Saint Mary's CBS
Enniscorthy, County Wexford
Roll number: 63560T**

Date of inspection: 19 March 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 BUSINESS SUBJECTS

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in business subjects in St Mary's CBS, Enniscorthy. It presents the findings of an evaluation of the quality of teaching and learning 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 teaching and learning. The inspector interacted with students and teachers and examined students' work. The inspector reviewed available school planning documentation. 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 report; a response was not received from the board.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

Business subjects have a high profile on the curriculum in St Mary's CBS. Business Studies is a core subject for all junior cycle students and those in the optional Transition Year (TY) programme complete the 'Enterprise and Business' module. At senior cycle students have the option of taking one or a combination of the business subjects, Accounting, Business and Economics. The school also offers the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) within which the Enterprise module has a strong business focus. The number of students taking business subjects at senior cycle is good, a testament to the junior cycle Business Studies experience. Senior management is commended for its continued commitment to the provision of Business Studies as a core junior cycle subject and of all of the business subjects in senior cycle.

The time allocated to all business subjects is good; four single class periods weekly in junior cycle and one double and three single periods in senior cycle. Lessons are evenly spread throughout the week, ensuring regular contact with business subjects. Nevertheless, consideration should be given to the provision of a double period at some point in the junior cycle as the book-keeping element of the syllabus has a practical focus. Topics such as final accounts may require a double period to ensure adequate completion.

The business subject department receives an annual budget from senior management and this is used to purchase relevant resources such as business journals, visuals and teaching aids. A storage press is provided in the staff work room for shared business resources. It would be prudent to catalogue these resources for inclusion in the subject plan. There are two main *de facto* business classrooms, each with a fixed data projector, television (TV), multi media equipment and overhead projector (OHP). The rooms adjoin each other which allows for the sharing of resources. The business subject department has first preference on the timetable for these rooms and this ensures that their use is maximised for the teaching of business subjects. The school has two dedicated computer rooms which can be used by business teachers and students when they are available. Some business teachers are provided with laptops which can be used in tandem with a data projector. Senior management is to be praised for its ongoing commitment to the provision of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in the school.

All teachers in the department teach Business Studies and teachers remain with their class group throughout the junior cycle. Some junior cycle classes are timetabled concurrently for some class periods. This is admirable as it supports activities such as team teaching and co-operative learning. At senior cycle there is some specialisation in that the allocation of teachers to subjects may be based on their particular interests and skill set.

Business teachers are supported in continuing professional development; senior management facilitates attendance at in-service courses when they are provided. Teachers have attended some LCVP in-service and Business Studies Teachers Association of Ireland (BSTAI) meetings and conferences. Teachers have also availed of whole school in-service on topics such as teaching mixed ability classes, assessment for learning, and positive behaviour management.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

The business department has a co-ordinator in place whose role is to chair meetings and forward reports to the principal. It was noted that this post rotates within the business department, and this is good practice as it allows for capacity building in the department. The business teachers meet for ninety minutes formally once per term and the outcomes of these meetings are recorded and filed. It was reported that business teachers also meet informally regarding matters pertaining to the business department. Communication within the department is enabled by the close proximity of the two main business classrooms.

There are no formal written plans for the provision of business education in the school, with the exception of the TY Enterprise and Business module. It has the required elements of good planning and notes the teaching methodologies, the student activities and assessments that constitute the module. It is evident from the TY business module plan that the business department has the capacity to engage in constructive subject development planning, and this capacity should be fully exploited.

While it was observed from minutes of meetings that teachers have agreed common schemes of work for junior cycle, no written documentation pertaining to this was evident. In conversations with senior management it was noted that the development of all subject plans in the school is a priority area on the board of management's agenda. It is strongly recommended that a developmental subject plan be put in place for teaching and learning in all business subjects provided in the school. The curricular section of the plan should incorporate the learning outcomes, the resources available and the range of assessment and teaching methodologies that can be employed for each topic. The contextual factors pertaining to student access to business education and the strategies to be used to differentiate teaching should also be noted. A collaborative team approach to compiling the plan is desirable. This will facilitate the sharing of best practice and knowledge and will ensure that students will receive a consistent teaching and learning experience at the various stages of their business education.

It is recommended that the compilation and development of the business subject plan should incorporate a three-year action plan. The specific action targets should be agreed by the members of the subject teaching team. The plan should be reviewed on a yearly basis. Resources that may assist in this planning process are available on the School Development Planning Initiative website at www.sdpi.ie.

In lessons visited the level of individual teacher planning and lesson preparation was good. All materials and resources used in lessons such as handouts, ICT presentations and OHP presentations were organised and prepared in advance.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

During the course of the inspection nine lessons were observed. Each of these lessons had a good clear structure. Lessons followed a logical sequence that included roll call, correction of previous homework, introduction of new material and setting of new homework. It was laudable that in some lessons the aims were outlined and shared with students at the outset. In one instance the teacher checked with students at the end of the lesson to gauge coverage of the intended aims. This good practice should be extended throughout the business subject department.

Students are taught in mixed ability settings and the pace of the lessons was satisfactory for most ability groupings in the class. Teachers used methodologies that included teacher input, use of ICT, pair work and questioning which led to class discussions in some lessons. Overall the standard of teaching and learning was good. In most lessons observed, traditional teaching methodologies were used. To enhance the learning experience for the students, it is recommended that a wider variety of active learning approaches be incorporated into teachers' repertoire of methodologies.

Where ICT was used in lessons, it was effective as a teaching and learning aid. In a lesson based in the computer room students worked on a well structured personal borrowing and budgeting research assignment. Students worked in earnest as individuals yet they shared information and knowledge among the class group. The lesson provided students with valuable financial, life and co-operative work skills. In another lesson a computer-generated presentation served students well as a revision aid. It is advisable to discuss and document teacher and student experiences in the use of ICT in business education as part of the subject planning processes.

In lessons that had a book-keeping focus a very good step-by-step approach was adopted. This ensured that students understood concepts before moving to the next step in the accounting process. While board work was good, there was scope in some lessons to use OHP or data projector to display prepared solutions to questions. This will lead to greater efficiencies in lesson time-management.

In the majority of lessons student participation was mainly a result of the questioning techniques employed by teachers. In some lessons, notably at junior cycle, there was an over-reliance on global questioning. In lessons where targeted and differentiated questioning was used, it effectively engaged students in the learning process. This good practice should be adopted throughout the department.

Students exhibited a good understanding of business topics and were competent in the application of their knowledge to real life situations. In some lessons teachers made references to local and national business enterprises, entrepreneurs and topical economic issues. This is good practice as it allows students to develop their business acumen. Nevertheless, within the business department there is scope to use ICT to access relevant news stories, current affairs programmes and case studies. The judicious use of ICT and multi media as teaching aids will help to engage all the various student learning styles in the classroom. The website of the BSTAI, www.bstai.ie, has useful resources and links which teachers and students may find of benefit both in and out of the classroom.

From a review of TY planning documentation and observation of a lesson it is evident that the TY programme is delivered in a manner that befits the ethos of the programme. Students were also involved in mini-company competitions and these served as a very good vehicle for the delivery of enterprise education.

As Business Studies is a core subject in junior cycle, it is advisable that the business subject department agree on some common teaching approaches for use in each year. This will ensure that effective practices are identified and shared so that students receive a consistent and stimulating teaching and learning experience. The Enterprise pillar of the Second Level Support Service website, www.slss.ie, is a good resource to access. It contains information and details of courses that pertain to the use of active methodologies in business education.

In all lessons observed teachers' presentation of material on whiteboards was good and in some instances very good use was made of coloured markers to display work and solutions to questions. From observation of a sample of copybooks, students mirrored this good practice as most work was neat, labelled and presentable.

In all lessons observed classroom management was good. There was good rapport and positive interactions between teachers and students in lessons and students' efforts were positively affirmed. From conversations with students they clearly appreciated and valued the provision of business education in the school.

Seating arrangements in classrooms facilitated group work and ease of movement for the teacher to give individual support and guidance to students. The dedicated business classrooms displayed some student-generated posters that were attractive and had the potential to be used as teaching and learning aids. This print-rich environment could be further developed with displays of student project work.

ASSESSMENT

In each lesson observed homework from previous lessons was corrected and homework based on current learning was assigned. Student homework assignments were generally corrected in class with some teacher annotations. In some lessons, notably at junior cycle, teachers checked carefully that all students had completed their homework. However, there was very little evaluative comment on students' work. As this is a valuable student learning tool, its use should be expanded within the business department.

Journals were used to record assigned homework and as a means of communication between teacher and parent. It was noted that not all students are recording homework in these journals. Also noted were the inconsistencies in the amount and type of homework assigned to students in the same year groups. It is desirable that all students experience an appropriately challenging level of assignments and this requires agreed practices in the allocation of homework within the business department. Therefore it is recommended that the business subject department discuss and decide on what is best practice for the assigning of homework, for each subject, in each year. This can then form the basis of a business homework policy. Information can be assessed on the website of the National Council for Curriculum development (www.ncca.ie) that pertains to assessment for learning. For resources on differentiated learning techniques the website of the Special Education Support Service website, www.sess.ie, may provide assistance.

Students are formally assessed three times a year. There is common assessment in first and second year. This is good practice. There are also informal class tests of which teachers maintain records. Students' outcomes in tests and progression in business subjects are communicated three times a year via a written report to parents. Each year group has a parent-teacher meeting which facilitates discussion on student's progress in the subject.

Student attainment in state examinations is good at all levels. Results achieved in certificate examinations are analysed by the principal and deputy principal and communicated to subject teachers. It is advisable that the business subject department conduct its own analysis and review of state examinations outcomes, as this will assist the business subject department in its own self evaluation.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Senior management is commended for the provision of Business Studies as a core subject at junior cycle, and the provision of all available business subjects in senior cycle.
- Senior management is praised for its ongoing commitment to the provision of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in the school.
- Teachers as skilled practitioners enabled students to exhibit good understanding of business topics and were competent in their application of their knowledge to real life examples.
- Classroom management observed was effective, and there was good rapport and positive, affirming interactions between teachers and students. From conversations with students they clearly appreciated the provision of business education in the school.
- Student outcomes in state examinations are good.

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

- A developmental subject plan should be put in place for the teaching and learning of all business subjects offered in the school.
- To enhance the learning experience for the students, a blend of traditional and active learning approaches, which includes the use of ICT, should be incorporated into teachers' repertoire of methodologies.
- A homework policy for business subjects that incorporates assessment for learning practices should be devised collaboratively by business teachers.

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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