Subject Inspection of Business Subjects
REPORT

Saint Mary’s Secondary School
New Ross, County Wexford
Roll number: 63620L

Date of inspection: 28 February 2011
SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection St. Mary’s New Ross. 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 and subject teachers. 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 St. Mary’s Secondary School, students can avail of business education through the provision of Business Studies in junior cycle, a business module in the optional Transition Year (TY) and all three business subjects at Leaving Certificate. The school also offers the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) and business teachers are involved in its delivery. The school is proactive in the encouragement and support of enterprise as students can take part in enterprise competitions from first year onwards and in fifth year all students complete a six-week enterprise module.

First-year students sample Business Studies for the duration of first year. This good practice allows students to make an informed decision on subject choice for second year. In the latter half of first year, students are asked to indicate their choice of optional subjects and this informs the compilation of subject option bands. Students are well supported in making their subject choices through individual and group meetings with the guidance counsellor, and advice from teachers. Most first years choose to continue with Business Studies to Junior Certificate.

All TY students complete the Business Studies module. At Leaving Certificate students have the option of taking one or a combination of Accounting, Business and Economics. Students’ subject preferences generate the option bands and as in junior cycle students are given guidance and support in making subject choices. Students may also fulfil the criteria and avail of the LCVP, the Enterprise module of which has a strong business focus. The number of students taking business subjects at Leaving Certificate is good, a testament to the experience at junior cycle.

Time allocated for the teaching of Business Studies is good. In first year, students have three single periods of Business studies and a single class period of Information Technology. For the remainder of junior cycle students have two single periods and a double period of Business studies. In Leaving Certificate students have five class periods which consist of a double and three single periods. Classes are evenly spread throughout the week ensuring continuity of contact with business subjects.
Senior management allocates an annual budget to the business subjects department. A sizable folder of good paper-based resources has been compiled by business teachers. An electronic folder is in development. In the school, business teachers have easy access to a dedicated storage room where business and LCVP resources are itemised and can be located on well-labelled shelves.

Classrooms are student based and as a result there is no specialist or *de facto* business classroom. This has not deterred business teachers creating good visual learning environments. There is an informative business notice board in the main body of the school, and attractive and informative visual aids in each room where business education is delivered. It was admirable that in many lessons teachers brought additional visual teaching aids that served as good learning tools. To build on these good practices the provision of at least one specialist business classroom if possible should be considered by senior management.

Information and communication technology (ICT) facilities are good in the school. There are two computer rooms with plans to provide a third room and there is also a trolley of laptops available for use in individual classrooms. ICT is also provided in classrooms.

All business teachers in the school are skilled specialists and are diligent in ensuring that their subject and business knowledge is current. Business teachers are well supported in ongoing professional development. Business teachers are encouraged to join the Business Studies Teachers Association of Ireland (BSTAI), and to attend various in-service courses, subject association meetings and conferences. Senior management is proactive in the provision of whole-school continuing professional development (CPD) in areas pertaining to classroom management and teaching strategies. It was noteworthy that a list of future CPD events is listed in planning documentation. Business teachers are commended for their attendance in their own personal time at business-related courses conducted by external agencies.

**PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

The business subjects department has a rotating coordinator whose responsibility is to monitor the consistent delivery of business education, to foster the sharing of good practice and to manage and lead planning. Senior management affords formal meeting and planning time once a year to all subject departments. In addition business teachers regularly meet in an informal capacity to discuss issues that pertain to the provision of business education in the school. The very good collaborative, organisational and planning practices of the business subjects department were noted. Cross-curricular and co-curricular activities are well supported by business teachers.

The comprehensive business planning folder includes a long-term plan for each business subject. The plan has all the elements of good planning as outlined in the School Development Planning Initiative (SDPI). While each plan has generic headings, the content is specific to each business subject and is tailored to its delivery. The listing of effective strategies that a teacher may use to progress learning for students with special educational needs is particularly good. The process of planning is focused on teaching and learning practices.

In the curriculum plans for each business subject, learning outcomes, teaching methodologies, resources available and class work were aligned to each topic. This ensures that students have a similar classroom experience especially in junior cycle where the good practice of common assessment prevails in first and second year. The layout of the Business plan is good and the use of it as a template should be considered for each business subject. The addition of differentiation strategies and assessment practices to the Business template is recommended.
TEACHING AND LEARNING

The standard of teaching and learning in lessons observed was very good. All of the lessons were well structured and prepared, and followed a logical sequence of activities. In all lessons the learning outcomes were communicated to students, though it is advisable to note these on the whiteboard so that they remain visible for the duration of the lesson. Effective use was made of visual aids, ICT and supplementary resources such as handouts.

Six lessons were observed, at Leaving Certificate a lesson of Accounting, Business and Economics and a lesson from each year of junior cycle Business Studies. In addition the inspector had an informal conversation with TY students. All class groups were of mixed-ability and lessons were appropriately paced and differentiated for the various ability groupings in the class. Students remained on task and were involved in learning throughout the lessons observed.

In lessons observed, teachers used a good blend of methodologies that included teacher-led input, questioning, pair work, group work, linkage to real-life experiences, ICT, graphic organisers and class discussions. In all lessons teachers gave individual student assistance when required in a kind and affirming manner.

In each lesson observed teachers used good co-operative learning activities. In a lesson that looked at international trade, each group of students had to find answers to listed questions in posters displayed in the classroom. The groups were then re-configured and the information found had to be explained within this new group. It was an effective learning activity. Students in another lesson were involved in the correction of homework and as they completed the work on the board they explained it to their peers.

In lessons that had a book-keeping focus, homework was corrected and new material was presented using visual aids such as a data projector. The good preparation of material in advance of lessons ensured that lesson time was effectively managed. A good step-by-step approach was used with teachers ensuring that each step was understood by students before moving on to new learning. The teachers’ presentation of material was good and this was mirrored in students’ presentation of work in account books. Teachers visually checked on students’ progress and tendered individual support and good advice.

In most lessons teachers made very good references to local, national and international business people, organisations and topical business issues. The good references made to school activities such as involvement in Fairtrade Week and mini-company competitions linked classroom learning to real-life situations and encouraged student involvement in these good activities. In Leaving Certificate, teachers encouraged students to look at relevant television programmes and keep abreast of business developments.

Good questioning techniques were used by teachers in most lessons. However in a small number of lessons, higher-order questioning should have been used more often. Students displayed good subject knowledge and their responses to higher-order questioning were reasoned and succinct. It was evident from student interactions with the inspector that they had a good understanding of business.

In all lessons observed ICT was used effectively. Good visual PowerPoint presentations were used to display facts templates and the learning outcomes of a lesson. Excel was used to provide a template for book-keeping. In a lesson that looked at consumer education the website of the National Consumer Agency provided a quiz that students clearly enjoyed and teachers developed
its content to progress understanding. In another lesson a clip from YouTube provided a good setting for the lesson content. The development of ICT facilities in the school was used as a good example of how managers in business have to plan and manage change in a lesson at Leaving Certificate.

Effective classroom management and good rapport was observed in all lessons. Students responded positively and courteously to teachers’ instructions and they were in turn positively affirmed. The classroom atmosphere created a positive learning environment where students were enthused about their learning.

ASSESSMENT

Business teachers operate an agreed homework and assessment approach in line with the whole-school policy for homework and assessment. Formal assessments are administered twice a year. In addition students are also assessed at the end of each topic. Students’ outcomes in tests and progress are communicated in a written twice-yearly report to parents and at the annual parent-teacher meeting.

In planning documentation business teachers have noted that students should receive homework in each lesson that is compatible with lesson learning outcomes and that written work is encouraged. In all observed lessons this was the case. An examination of a sample of student copybooks and journals indicated that a substantial body of work had been completed. Students’ account books, copybooks, folders and journals were neat and well maintained. Students and teachers are commended for the high standards demonstrated in this important aspect of school work.

Homework was corrected by oral answers tendered by teacher or student, written correction on the board and on occasion collection by teacher to assess content and quality of work. Where written solutions were required, teachers modelled good practice in neatness and labelling of answers. A review of a sample of students’ homework copybooks revealed some good evaluative guiding comments; this practice should be expanded within the business subjects department, particularly in Leaving Certificate.

Students are encouraged to achieve to their highest potential. Students in examination classes are provided with a revision matrix that they complete. Outcomes are good in certificate examinations. A review of these outcomes is conducted by the principal and is communicated to business teachers who compare them with national norms as part of their reflective practice.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- There is good provision for business education as Business Studies is a core subject in first year, all fifth-years take an enterprise module and all three business subjects are available in Leaving Certificate. Uptake is very good in all these subjects.
- The organisational, professional planning and collaborative practices of the business subjects department are very good. The focus of planning has the learning needs of students at its core.
- Very good teaching and learning was observed in classrooms. In lessons the variety and use of active and co-operative methodologies, the linkage to real-life business events, the
effective use of ICT and higher-order questioning all served to engage the students in their own learning.

- Teachers used visuals and resources effectively despite classrooms being student based.
- Teachers have very good subject knowledge and participate in professional teaching organisations and are willing to avail of continuing professional development.
- Teachers regard homework as a valuable student learning tool.
- Students are encouraged to achieve to their highest potential and 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:

- The provision of at least one specialist business classroom should be considered by senior management.
- The addition of differentiation strategies and assessment practices to each topic in the Business curricular plan is recommended. The business plan should be used as a template for all business subjects plans.

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

*Published October 2011*
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 of St Mary’s Secondary School are very happy with the results of the Business Subjects Report. We wish to thank the teaching staff for their competence and commitment which made this result possible.

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

The provision of a specialist business classroom is one of our aspirations. Its realisation will depend on capital funding becoming available.

We will endeavour to improve differentiation strategies and assessment practices.