Subject Inspection of Home Economics
REPORT

Saint Louis Secondary School
Carrickmacross, County Monaghan
Roll number: 64760J

Date of inspection: 16 March 2010
REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN HOME ECONOMICS

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in St Louis Secondary School, Carrickmacross, Co. Monaghan. It presents the findings of an evaluation of the quality of teaching and learning in Home Economics 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, examined students’ work, and had discussions with the principal. The inspector reviewed 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

Home Economics enjoys a high profile in St Louis Secondary School. The subject is a vibrant component of all of the curriculum programmes available in the school.

There is very good access to Home Economics. All first-year students study the subject for the equivalent of three class periods per week for the full year. This practice supports informed decision-making regarding the final choice of optional subjects for the Junior Certificate examination. In the context of the curriculum review currently underway in the school, consideration should be given to providing a shorter sampling programme for just part of first year. A shorter sampling programme would still assist students in making subject choices. However, they would then not be required to continue to study for a full school year a subject that they will not present for the Junior Certificate examination. In second year Home Economics is available on two option bands. This provides good flexibility for students who want to access the subject. Uptake of Junior Certificate Home Economics, in particular, is very good.

The home economics department makes a significant contribution to the Transition Year (TY) programme. Modules in Home Economics, Cake Artistry, Hostess Cookery, Costume Design and Production as well as Carrickmacross Lace are all provided by the home economics team.

Leaving Certificate option bands are generated from an initial survey of students’ preferences and good efforts are made to support and accommodate all students during this process. While Leaving Certificate Home Economics remains popular the home economics team should explore strategies to promote the subject as a realistic option for students of all abilities.

Timetabled provision for Home Economics is generally in line with syllabus guidelines. First-year students have only the equivalent of three class periods of Home Economics where four is the norm. However this shortfall is redressed by the extra timetabled provision in third year. The
arrangement of class time into single and double periods is particularly good in facilitating effective continuity in teaching and learning.

The home economics team has experienced considerable change in recent years due to a number of staff retirements and replacements. Good procedures are in place at whole-school and subject-department level to induct new staff and support effective continuity with Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate classes. At the time of the evaluation the core teaching team comprised one subject specialist teacher who was employed in a permanent capacity and two other home economics teachers who were employed in a part-time capacity. Two additional home economics teachers were employed in a part-time capacity exclusively to teach some of the home economics modules planned as part of the TY programme.

A high level of commitment and collective experience is evident within the home economics department. There has been very good engagement with continuing professional development (CPD) both at whole-school and subject department levels. It is clear that the home economics teachers use this learning in a manner that impacts very positively on the quality of student learning. It was also noted that the principal sets part of the agenda for subject planning meetings. This practice has proved effective in facilitating good follow-through from CPD sessions by the home economics teachers.

Three specialist rooms comprising two kitchens and one textiles room are available. These rooms are being upgraded on a phased basis as resources permit. A very good range of specialist equipment is available to support the teaching and learning of Home Economics. The teachers have prioritised integration of information and communications technology (ICT) into lessons. To support this process management has recently provided a dedicated laptop and data projector for the department. A home economics assistant is employed as part of the team. The assistant makes a significant contribution in assisting teachers in the organisation and maintenance of the kitchens for practical lessons and in the purchasing of ingredients.

High priority is given to health and safety in home economics lessons. The subject-specific health and safety policy includes a list of possible hazards and the preventative measures that are in place. It is recommended that this list be extended to include the key pieces of specialist equipment used in textiles and food studies lessons. Visual images are well used in the design of the health and safety notices. This very good practice enhances student understanding.

As all first-year students study Home Economics students remain in their base class groups for the subject. This can result in there being a mis-match between the number of students in the class and the design specification and layout of the home economics rooms. Management is conscious of the challenges that this presents to teaching and learning. It was reported that the home economics assistant plays a role in the supervision of practical lessons in instances where this is the case. However, bearing in mind the health and safety implications for practical lessons it is important that this issue is kept under close review. An arrangement whereby home economics classes are organised by forming discreet class groups, rather than students remaining in their base class groups could be considered as an alternative means of managing large class sizes.

Very good procedures are in place to support students who have additional educational needs. The learning support department provides a very good level of advice to mainstream teachers to support lesson planning. In instances where students have individual educational plans it is very good practice that all relevant mainstream teachers are consulted as part of the review process. CPD in the area of differentiation is a main priority area for senior management. This will further
assist in cultivating a whole-school approach to supporting students who have additional educational needs.

**PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

Subject department structures are well established in the school. The position of subject co-ordinator rotates among the core teaching team. This good practice shares the workload and builds capacity among team members. Senior management allocates time to facilitate one formal meeting per term. Minutes are recorded to provide good continuity between meetings.

There is a long tradition of subject planning within the home economics department. A well-developed subject department plan supports the planning process. The home economics team has developed a mission statement for the subject. The values espoused in the statement provide the basis for all subject-specific policy development and underpin the pedagogic practices agreed by the team. The planning documentation reviewed during the evaluation indicates that very good levels of collaboration exist among the core teaching team and that a culture of self-evaluation and reflective practice is evident. These are very good practices.

Programme plans for TY as well as the Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate syllabuses have been evolving over many years. The Junior Certificate programme plan provides very good levels of information on the topics to be covered in each year. Specific teaching and assessment strategies are also included. In keeping with the rationale of the Junior Certificate syllabus, a very good range of active teaching methodologies supports the programme plan. The next stage of development of this plan should focus on the development of learning outcomes for each lesson. The agreed learning outcomes should optimise opportunities for integrating topics from within and across core areas of the syllabus.

In keeping with good practice practical coursework is planned as an integral component of the Junior Certificate programme plan. To support a spiral approach to student learning it is recommended that the range of practical coursework completed by students be reviewed. The range of dishes completed in first and second year should be re-examined to promote a more balanced and incremental approach to the development of procedural and manipulative skills. The very good recipe resource book devised recently by the home economics core team should inform this review. Planning for the core textiles also merits particular attention. It is recommended that the items made be reviewed to support the development of a wider range of manipulative textiles skills in line with syllabus recommendations.

The Leaving Certificate programme plan needs to be readjusted so that it is more in keeping with the rationale and teaching approaches underpinning the revised home economics syllabus. The revised sequence of lessons should promote an integrated and incremental approach to learning. To promote a student-centred approach to the food studies practical coursework, the assignments should be spread evenly throughout the programme plan. Particular attention should be paid to the integration of theoretical knowledge with the relevant coursework assignment. Lessons explaining the routines for recording assignments into the coursework journals should also be included from time to time, particularly as progress is made from one area of practice to another. The balance of class time that is currently spent on completing work associated with the mandatory coursework assignments needs to be re-examined and carefully monitored.
To progress this work the home economics team should use the current Leaving Certificate plan as a working document. Records should be kept of the actual time taken to complete topics and coursework, the planned learning outcomes and any resources or teaching strategies that worked well. This information should be shared at team meetings and used to inform the development of a revised plan.

The role of Home Economics in TY needs to be re-examined. The home economics modules are delivered as stand-alone subjects. If the potential of TY Home Economics is to be fully realised it is very important that some of these modules are collaboratively planned and possible synergies explored. The large number of home economics teachers involved in the delivery of these modules does present challenges in facilitating this level of cohesive and collaborative planning. A review of TY module plans indicates that there are significant synergies that can be explored between Hostess Cookery, Cake Artistry and the Home Economics modules. It is recommended therefore that a revised TY home economics plan be developed. The plan should support the integrated application of all the related core disciplines as well as the integrated delivery and application of relevant practical coursework components. The revised plan should be underpinned by a set of learning outcomes that identify key theoretical knowledge as well as practical and procedural skills that students will develop. The learning outcomes should be appropriately differentiated to support the learning needs of students who may not have studied Home Economics for their Junior Certificate while at the same time challenging those who have previous experience of the subject. Assessment criteria and performance indicators should then be devised. These criteria should be shared with students and form the basis of the marks awarded and feedback provided.

A very good range of additional resources has been collected by the teaching team. Deliberate efforts are being made to integrate ICT into home economics lessons. It was evident that the training undertaken by the core teaching team is impacting very positively on the range of strategies used to embed the use of ICT into classroom learning.

Very good short-term planning was evident for all of the lessons observed. Teachers prepared thoroughly for each lesson with some very creative approaches to teaching and learning noted. Best practice in lesson planning was in instances where the teaching strategies chosen adequately supported the wide range of student learning styles present.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Very good quality teaching and learning was evident in the lessons observed. All lessons had a clear focus and were well structured. In some instances the lesson began with a discussion of the key learning intentions. This strategy proved very effective in focusing students’ attention and in ensuring that students understood the relevance of the content being studied. It is recommended that time be taken towards the end of each lesson to revisit the planned learning intentions. This would provide an opportunity to assess students’ learning, affirm effort and to offer further clarifications where needed.

In all cases the home economics teacher displayed excellent subject knowledge and attended carefully to detail in the explanations given and in the visual images used during each lesson. Explanations were very clear and accurate, with very good links being established with previous learning. In a number of lessons ICT was used very effectively through the use of video clips, PowerPoint presentations and relevant websites to support student learning. These strategies
provided effective visual stimulation which was very well received by the students and resulted in
good quality learning outcomes. It was noted positively that some of the PowerPoint
presentations were cleverly designed in a manner that actively engaged students in the learning
process. This is very good practice. Best practice in the use of ICT presentations was in instances
where the slide content was clearly visible and when students were given a copy of the
presentation to allow them to make additional notes arising from the class discussion.

Some very good practice was noted in supporting students’ literacy skills. In one senior-cycle
lesson observed a well-designed handout helped to clarify the technical definitions linked to the
concept of poverty. In a junior-cycle lesson, very good use was made of a teacher-designed
crossword to assist students in understanding and spelling the technical terms used in a craftwork
lesson. On other occasions there was scope to use the class board or text boxes on PowerPoint
slides to assist in highlighting or checking understanding of key terminology. This should be
borne in mind in planning future lessons.

Some very good practice in encouraging learner autonomy and peer collaboration was noted. In
one lesson where junior-cycle students were preparing for an upcoming practical examination
particularly good practice was evident. During the lesson students worked in pairs where one
student completed their task while the second student shadowed the work and filled out an
observation sheet which noted what worked very well and where improvements were needed.
Throughout the lesson sound examination advice was relayed to students via a continuous
PowerPoint slide show. Very good levels of teacher monitoring refined students’ culinary skills
where needed. Towards the end of the lesson each pair of students evaluated how the task was
undertaken with the assistance of the teacher. Students remained highly engaged in the learning
process and very good outcomes were achieved. This strategy proved very effective as a means of
getting students ready for their Junior Certificate practical examination.

Very good routines were evident in all of the practical lessons observed. There was an appropriate
balance of whole-class teaching, spot demonstrations to model key skills, and individual attention
to support learning. Students displayed a very good level of practical culinary and craft skills.
However interaction with students and observation of their written work indicated that they find
writing up the analysis, implementation and evaluation of a food studies assignment and tasks
challenging and a high level of teacher support is necessary. Therefore, in developing the Junior
Certificate programme plan it is recommended that strategies be explored to integrate the stages
of the design brief process into planning for food studies practicals from first year through to third
year. The agreed strategies should support the incremental development of students’ skills in the
areas of task analysis, writing up time plans and carrying out evaluations from first year. Such
strategies should be further developed in the context of the revised TY plan to support students
who chose to study Leaving Certificate Home Economics.

High expectations are set for home economics students. Very good progress and practices are
evident in the maintenance and organisation of students’ notebooks. From the range of student
notebooks reviewed it is evident that students are provided with a good range of activities to
support their active engagement in the learning process. Student originality and creativity is
fostered through the completion of the design and craftwork option. In one lesson observed where
students were working on the optional study it was noted that students completed the design
folder in tandem with the item made. This is very good practice.

It is clear that students in St Louis Secondary School enjoy Home Economics. There was a very
good rapport evident between students and teachers. Students’ efforts were affirmed and
encouraged at all times. The displays of up-to-date information on notice boards and the use of
appropriate educational posters in the specialist rooms visited created an environment that was both stimulating and supportive of learning. Student achievement is celebrated through the displays of project work and photographs of student work. Such practices are highly praiseworthy.

Students are making very good progress in the completion of the Leaving Certificate coursework journal. However, current practice regarding the completion of coursework assignments merits review. Current practice results in a considerable proportion of time being devoted to this aspect of the course. This needs to be addressed in the context of the programme review recommended earlier in the report. The proportion of class time spent on this area should be more in keeping with its syllabus weighting.

**ASSESSMENT**

In all of the lessons observed very good use was made of questioning strategies to assess students’ learning. A commendable emphasis was placed on attention to detail in the answers elicited from students. At times when students sought clarification in lessons, higher-order questioning techniques were used to very good effect to encourage students to establish links with previous learning as well as to analyse and apply the information taught in the lesson. This very good practice encouraged students to think for themselves and to solve problems in a manner that avoided an over-reliance on teacher-led answers.

Homework is regularly assigned in lessons and some very good practice is evident in the quality of teacher monitoring. In a number of copybooks teachers had provided high quality constructive written feedback to students that affirmed good practice and highlighted areas that required further attention. However, a review of students’ notebooks indicated that in the case of some class groups there was an over-reliance on lower-order or short-answer style questioning when assigning homework activities. It is recommended therefore that the home economics team reviews the range of homework assigned to all class groups to ensure that students are provided with an adequate range of long-answer, short-answer and activity-based questions. In addition to assessing recall and understanding of information, the work assigned to all classes should support the incremental development of the higher-order thinking skills such as the analysis, synthesis and critical appraisal of information. As part of this review the team should also consider how best to balance the amount of homework assigned with strategies that would monitor and provide appropriate levels of feedback to all students.

Some good summative assessment practice is evident. Where appropriate, common papers are set and students are awarded an aggregated mark for a written examination and an assessment of the relevant coursework components. This provides a good indicator of students’ performance in the subject. A review of a sample of in-house examination papers indicates that in some instances there is scope to review the range of questions set. It is recommended that when setting in-house examinations that the papers are in keeping with the pitch and format of the relevant certificate examination papers.

It was noted that students preparing for the certificate examinations are supported through the provision of a structured revision programme. Regular revision tests support this programme. Consideration could be given to supporting students’ revision by the use of graphic organisers such as mind-maps as a revision strategy. This could prove useful in enabling students to note the main points from each topic and highlight any inter-relationships between topics.
Students are encouraged to reach their full potential in Home Economics. Participation rates at higher level in the certificate examinations are very good with some very good overall levels of attainment achieved. While the home economics team is aware of student outcomes in the certificate examinations there is scope to carry out a more in-depth analysis at subject department level in comparing these outcomes against national norms while at the same time bearing in mind school context factors. The analysis should encompass teacher reflection on where and why issues arise. Positive trends and good practice, as well as areas for development identified as a result of this exercise should be recorded and used to inform planning and extend good practice as appropriate. It is worth noting that the chief examiners reports and associated marking schemes published by the State Examinations Commission (www.examinations.ie) are useful in informing strategies to support teaching and learning.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- There is very good student access to Home Economics.
- A high level of commitment and collective experience is evident within the home economics team.
- Very good procedures are in place to support students with additional educational needs.
- There is a long tradition of subject planning within the home economics department. A culture of self-evaluation and reflective practice is evident.
- Teachers prepared thoroughly for lessons with some very creative approaches to teaching and learning noted.
- Deliberate efforts are being made to integrate ICT into home economics lessons.
- Very good quality teaching and learning was evident in the lessons observed.
- Learner autonomy and peer collaboration were actively promoted in lessons.
- High expectations are set for home economics students. Very good progress and practices are evident in the maintenance and organisation of students’ notebooks.
- Students are encouraged to reach their full potential in Home Economics.

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

- The role of Home Economics in TY should be re-examined and a revised programme plan developed.
- The Leaving Certificate programme plan should be reviewed in line with the rationale underpinning the revised home economics syllabus.
- The range of homework assigned and monitored for students in each class group should be reviewed.
- The home economics team should conduct a detailed analysis of student outcomes in the certificate examinations to inform ongoing planning for Home Economics.

A post-evaluation meeting was 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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