An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna
Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection of Music
REPORT

St Mary’s Secondary School
Nenagh, County Tipperary
Roll number: 65380E

Date of inspection: 19 October 2011
REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN MUSIC

INFORMATION ON THE INSPECTION

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MAIN FINDINGS

- All lessons observed encompassed a variety of active music-making methodologies underpinned by an effective collaborative and cooperative learning environment.
- There are good standards of musical performance at both curricular and extracurricular levels.
- Music has a very good profile in the school with a healthy uptake and high achievement in the certificate examinations.
- There is a well-resourced music department which is benefiting from the recent investment in information and communication technology (ICT).
- Good subject department planning has been undertaken.
- Some effective use of assessment for learning (AfL) was observed in lessons.

MAIN RECOMMENDATIONS

- Opportunities to integrate performing, composing and listening should be expanded in all lessons.
- Strategies which would facilitate independent learning and would allow students to take ownership of their own learning should be explored.
- An electronic stock of adaptable student-friendly resources could be developed by using the available ICT resources to digitise the existing valuable handwritten materials.
INTRODUCTION

St Mary’s Secondary School is a girls’ voluntary secondary school under the trusteeship of the Catholic Education, An Irish Schools Trust (CEIST). The school has a current enrolment of 563 students. Music is available as an optional subject for both the Junior and Leaving Certificate examinations. All students study Music in the optional Transition Year (TY) programme.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

- The quality of teaching and learning was good. Examples of appropriate music methodological practice were observed in all lessons visited with well-prepared materials, a consistent aural focus and teaching that was supportive of all students. The teacher used skilful techniques to elicit ideas from the students and provided a highly stimulating and challenging music-learning environment. Student engagement with practical music-making activities indicated a good standard of experiential learning.

- Effective questioning, which ascertained the level of student retention in terms of the more cognitive areas of musical understanding, was observed. This, in turn, led to interesting and productive student discussion.

- Incidences of very successful lessons involving purposeful peer-peer interaction and a high degree of collaborative learning were also witnessed. They contributed to the high-functioning learning environment evident in the classroom and ensured that students achieved successful outcomes.

- Throughout the lessons, student knowledge and experience were used to support learning wherever possible, and this was broadened and expanded through detailed questioning, explanation, clarification and encouragement from the teacher. Student performances and demonstrations observed were of a high standard, and contributed to the collaborative learning environment evident in the classroom and ensured that students achieved successful outcomes. This is good practice. Facilitating student contributions in this manner should be extended as it allows them to take responsibility for their own learning and increases understanding.

- Strategies linking aspects of the curriculum were utilised to very good effect with the areas of performing, composing and listening often integrated in a musically-focussed way. Frequently, theoretical aspects were reinforced and consolidated through practical activities and listening exercises. It would be worthwhile if these strategies were extended to all lessons to ensure a thorough integration of performing, composing and listening.

- Aspects of AfL were used to support learning wherever possible. Students’ work is checked regularly by the teacher, both to monitor standards of work completed and to ensure that all relevant work is filed and stored appropriately. The good practice of providing constructive comments to enable better learning and improvement was evident.

- All first-year students maintain a diary in order to keep track of what they learned in lessons. This is very good practice. It is recommended that this practice be expanded to include students in all year groups. This would aid the students in building up a profile of their own musical competencies and allow them to take ownership for their own learning.
SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

- There is a good spread of classes throughout the week with sufficient double periods to facilitate practical work. Regret was expressed by school personnel at the loss of timetabled choir and the reduction of allocated time for TY this year.

- Access to the subject is very good. All first-year and TY students study Music. To facilitate subject choice, option bands are generated from student preference for both the junior and senior cycle. It was good to note that students could opt for Music at Leaving Certificate even if they had not studied it for Junior Certificate.

- There is a wide range of resources available to the music department, including very good ICT facilities. Although the room assigned for music lessons is an attractive learning environment, space is tight. As the room is used for other lessons also, it must retain a traditional classroom layout leaving little flexibility for the range of music teaching and learning settings available to the teacher and students.

- An attractive print rich environment exists in the music room with a particular emphasis on student learning. One notice board entitled Music Room News has space for student contributions. Students can affix notices and information about aspects of Music they have discovered for themselves. This further supports the collaborative learning environment and strengthens the spirit of co-operative learning in the department.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

- There is effective and thorough planning for Music. Planning documents presented during the evaluation showed flexibility and evidence of continuous informal review. Future planning could also include consideration of student learning strategies and of ways of encouraging students to reflect on their learning.

- Planning for resources was good with a wide range of teacher-generated handouts and worksheets available.

- Given the range of ICT available, it is recommended that the department would work towards digitising the wide range of valuable handwritten resources. Not only could ICT be used to produce more student-friendly resources and handouts, but combined with the data projector would also reduce photocopying as a high proportion of the material could be displayed rather than distributed. Furthermore, an electronic stock of such resources would allow for a more efficient use of teacher time in the long term and could easily be adapted according to the ability and needs of the students.

The draft findings and recommendations arising out of this evaluation were discussed with the principal and subject teacher at the conclusion of the evaluation. 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.

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