Subject Inspection of Business Subjects
REPORT
Castlepollard Community College,
Castlepollard, Co. Westmeath
Roll number: 71420W
Date of inspection: 8 December 2010
REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN BUSINESS SUBJECTS

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Castlepollard Community College. 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 these subjects 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 teacher, examined students’ work, and had discussions with the teacher. The inspector reviewed school planning documentation and teacher’s written preparation. Following the evaluation visit, the inspector provided oral feedback on the outcomes of the evaluation to the principal, deputy principal and subject teacher. The board of management of the school was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the report, and the response of the board will be found in the appendix of this report.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

Business Studies and Business are provided at junior and senior cycle respectively. The timetable allocation for the subject at junior cycle provides for two periods in first year and four periods in each of second and third year. Second and third year include one double period which provides a very good opportunity to focus on the bookkeeping aspects of the junior cycle syllabus. At senior cycle, five periods are provided in each of the two years of the cycle. All senior cycle students complete the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP).

Business Studies is an optional subject at junior cycle and until recently students had to select the option prior to enrolment in first year. Management’s decision to change to a year-long taster programme for first-year students is welcome as it allows students to experience the range of subjects and make an informed choice about their optional subject selection. Traditionally there has been a gender bias in the take-up of optional subjects. The school’s management is cognisant of the need to decrease the gender bias in take-up of the subject at junior cycle and is liaising with the guidance department to develop strategies towards informing students’ opinions on subjects. In line with best practice, senior cycle Business is available to all students including those who have not studied Business Studies at junior cycle.

The school’s senior management team is recently appointed and they have identified a number of key development priorities for the school, including a review of the code of behaviour and improving student attainment. Management indicated that the responsiveness of staff and students to the strategies put in place to achieve these priorities has been very positive. The development of a whole-school continuing professional development (CPD) strategy has also been key to progressing the development opportunities and sessions provided have focused on subject planning, Assessment for Learning (AfL) and teaching for learning. This is a positive approach by the management team towards leading learning at school level.
Senior cycle students have the opportunity to develop their information and communication technology (ICT) skills through completing the ECDL. Business students also have access to the ICT room to complete projects and access on-line resources. This is a very good approach to supporting students’ learning in the subjects. The business base room is well resourced with availability of in-class ICT resources and storage facilities for materials and resources.

**PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

The subject plan and associated schemes of work have been prepared electronically in a manner that facilitates updating and amendment. The plan and schemes include outcome statements matched to curriculum content and give indicative timeframes, which is good practice. Another positive feature of the subject plan is that planning for students with special educational needs (SEN) is included. As the next stage in developing the subject plan, the schemes of work for the individual subjects should be presented using a tabular format that details the methodologies, resources and assessment modes appropriate to the existing learning outcomes.

The current subject plan for junior cycle outlines a sequence for the completion of curriculum outcomes that follows closely the format of the selected textbook. It is advised that the sequencing of the outcomes is reviewed. There is a specific need to review the sequencing and integration of bookkeeping elements of the programme. A greater emphasis on integrating bookkeeping and theory will equip students with a broader range of skills and may encourage greater take up of the subject at higher level in the Junior Certificate examination. There is also scope to align the sequencing of learning outcomes in senior cycle Business with linked activities in the Link Modules of the LCVP.

Individual lesson planning was good and integrated with the subject plan and with schemes of work. Lesson outcomes were recorded in the teacher diary. The teacher’s work rate is good and a wide range of additional materials for use in lessons have been developed.

**TEACHING AND LEARNING**

The quality of teaching and learning was good. Lesson preparation during the inspection was very good and the presentation of material by both the teacher and students was very good.

Of particular merit was the integration of ICT as a presentation tool by the teacher and students. Senior cycle Business students had undertaken a revision project on units completed to date, that integrated both research and ICT presentation skills. This approach works well as an active learning methodology and promotes pair work, as in this case students worked in pairs on the project. The activity also encouraged students to develop their own revision aids for the subject. In order to ensure consistency in approach among the students, and to ensure that students’ critical thinking skills are developed, the activity should be structured so that key outcome verbs and indicators are established that maximise the learning opportunity for students. In addition, students should also use graphic organisers within the activity to ensure that the range of student learning styles is accommodated. Self-directed learning was also evident in the junior cycle lesson observed as students were undertaking a marketing project linked to the lesson outcomes.

A particular strength in the teaching of the subjects was the teacher’s use of subject-specific language and current business exemplars. Students’ use of appropriate subject terminology was also good. The mix of lesson activities and the questioning style used allowed students to respond
positively within the lessons. The teacher was observant of student progress within the lessons and when necessary adapted lesson pace to ensure that all students were able to engage with the lesson outcomes.

In the junior and senior cycle lessons inspected, worksheets, developed either by the teacher or students, were used to summarise lesson content and check on students’ learning. This is a good technique but at times the questions asked were not sufficiently challenging. The future development of this technique should ensure that higher-order outcome verbs are included in the questions used. Worksheets and question sheets should be structured to include long-answer and short-answer questions which are appropriate to the mixed-ability structure of the class groups.

Class sizes are small and the learning environment observed was disciplined and orderly. This provides an opportunity to provide additional support to students towards improving attainment. Lesson delivery and the design of learning aids should ensure that higher-order outcomes are integrated into the teaching and learning strategies to ensure that students’ potential is fully achieved.

**ASSESSMENT**

Record keeping is very good. Attendance is monitored and recorded in each lesson and the teachers’ journal is used to record assessment outcomes and homework assigned to students. It is also important to note that individual records of daily lesson delivery and homework assigned are kept. This practice is very good. It assists in smooth lesson delivery and maintains good classroom discipline and atmosphere.

There was strong evidence that the draft whole-school assessment policy is being implemented in the teaching of the subjects. The policy outlines strategies for both assessment of and assessment for learning. It sets out the timing and number of continuous assessments that should be assigned and this is being adhered to. The draft policy also includes AfL strategies including comment only marking for homework, which is incorporated within the teaching of business subjects. The draft policy also emphasises alternating the format of homework assigned and, during the inspection, examples were observed of the homework assigned that included research and written components.

The new management team has identified improving student attainment as a whole-school development priority. To support this aim, a number of projects have been initiated including the promotion of AfL and the analysis of outcomes in the state examinations. This analysis is undertaken at management level and discussed with individual departments. The analysis also includes the higher-level and ordinary-level uptake in the subjects. This is good practice as it is led by management and discussed at subject department meetings. In advancing this objective of improving student attainment within the department, it is advised that the design of formal assessment instruments used for the subjects is structured to include a mix of short-answer and long-answer questions, as this will encourage the development of students’ higher-order thinking skills.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Timetable provision for the subjects is satisfactory.
• Good progress is being made to provide students with additional opportunities and support to make informed choices about optional subject selection.
• The subject plan provides a good overview of the subjects and includes appropriate detail on strategies for students with SEN.
• Individual lesson planning and the pace of lessons observed were good.
• Engagement of students with lesson content was promoted through the use of active teaching methodologies.
• Teachers’ use of subject-specific terminology was very good.
• There is good practice with respect to the application of AfL to assessment strategies and very good application of the whole-school draft assessment policy in the teaching of the subjects.

As a means of building on these strengths and to address areas for development, the following key recommendations are made:
• The junior cycle subject plan should be reviewed to promote the integration of bookkeeping and theory outcomes.
• Co-curricular links between Business and the Link Modules of the LCVP should be refined in the subject plan.
• Lesson delivery and the structure of learning aids should ensure that higher-order outcomes are integrated into the teaching and learning strategies to ensure that students’ potential is fully achieved.

A post-evaluation meeting was held with the principal, deputy principal and subject teacher at the conclusion of the evaluation when the draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation were presented and discussed.

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Appendix

SCHOOL RESPONSE TO THE REPORT

Submitted by the Board of Management
Area 1  Observations on the content of the inspection report

The report is a fair and accurate reflection of the quality of learning and teaching in the Business Subjects.

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 Management and Staff welcome the findings and recommendation of the inspection. In keeping with our mission statement to “continuously improve our school” we will work to implement the key recommendations made. In particular we will:

Review our subject planning methodology to ensure the recommendations stated are implemented

Include in our teaching and learning, the strategies recommended in the report