

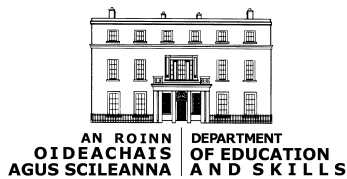
**An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna**

**Department of Education and Skills**

**Subject Inspection of English  
REPORT**

**St Clare's Comprehensive School  
Manorhamilton, County Leitrim  
Roll number: 81013P**

**Date of inspection: 05 February 2010**



**REPORT**  
**ON**  
**THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN ENGLISH**

---

**SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT**

This report has been written following a subject inspection in St Clare's Comprehensive School. It presents the findings of an evaluation of the quality of teaching and learning in English 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, examined students' work, and had discussions with the principal. 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, and the response of the board will be found in the appendix of this report.

**SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT**

St Clare's Comprehensive School has a current enrolment of 485 students. Programmes on offer include the Junior Certificate, an optional Transition Year (TY) programme, the established Leaving Certificate and the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP). Provision for English in the school is excellent. The timetabled allocation to the subject is very good, given that TY students have access to the subject four times a week and students in fourth year and fifth year are allocated six periods per week for English. There is an even distribution of English lessons across the week for all class groups. Concurrency on the timetable facilitates monitoring of students' placement in class groups and allows students to move quite easily if they wish to change levels for English lessons.

Junior-cycle students of English are placed in mixed-ability class groups. This is good practice as it allows teachers to develop an awareness of students' strengths and needs in the subject. At the beginning of second year, students are placed in bands based on teachers' observations and their performance in the school's assessment test. Classes are formed in three bands. The largest of these comprises three mixed-ability class groups who are studying the higher-level course in English. The second band currently comprises one mixed-ability class group and students in this group are studying the ordinary-level course in English. Students in the third band have been identified as needing particular support in the subject. The formation of the single class group in this band is designed to allow for more specialised teaching by teachers with learning support or special educational needs (SEN) qualifications. This arrangement has worked well in the school. Students taking Junior Certificate examinations at ordinary level are particularly successful, achieving excellent grades. Participation in the Junior Certificate examinations at higher level for English is good and is rising. Again, students achieve well at this level.

In fourth year and in fifth year, students are set for English so that separate class groups for higher-level and ordinary-level classes can be facilitated. The very good participation in higher-

level English in the junior cycle has not transferred to Leaving Certificate English and there is scope to achieve improvement in this regard. School management and teachers are aware of this and are actively considering ways to address this issue. Management facilitates concurrency on the timetable for all English class groups in the first and second bands in junior cycle and in senior cycle. This is very good as it allows for students to move class groups quite easily if it is found that they have been misplaced for English lessons.

Teachers of English in the school are suitably qualified to teach the subject to the highest level. There was evidence that teachers are generally allocated to a class group for the duration of a course and of fair rotation of teachers across programmes and levels.

The resources available to support the teaching and learning of English in the school are very good. All classrooms visited were fitted with digital projectors and a computer. A fully furnished information and communications technology (ICT) room is also available for whole-class work in English on a booking system. English teachers are generally based in their own rooms, and they have used this resource well to display students' work and other support materials. In addition to motivating students' efforts in the subject, displays also offer an opportunity for students to experience 'publishing' their work for a known audience.

The school does not have a library. Nevertheless, the English department has put in place a number of very good strategies to facilitate students' access to a range of good-quality reading material. A mobile library, including a range of texts chosen to cater for the interests of students in each year group, has been developed in the school. Teachers of English include time for personal reading in their curriculum plan for junior cycle and students are encouraged to participate in the M.S. Readathon. Links have been established with the local county library and students are facilitated to become members.

The school is supportive of teachers' continuing professional development (CPD). English teachers have been facilitated in attending subject-specific in-career development courses provided by the Teaching English Support Service and the National University of Ireland in Galway. They have also participated in whole-staff in-service courses on a range of important topics including special educational needs, student motivation, and targeting underachievers. There was evidence that useful information and resources from these meetings are disseminated among all English teachers. This is highly commended.

## **PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

There are twelve teachers of English currently in the school. Their work is co-ordinated by a member of the department and this role is rotated among all members of the department. This good practice allows different styles and perspectives to be brought to the co-ordination of the subject. Duties attaching to the co-ordinator's role include coordination of English teachers' schemes of work which are presented to the principal early in the first term of each year. Department meetings are scheduled to coincide with staff meetings and occur every term. In addition, the teachers of English meet frequently though informally. Formal meetings are minuted and it is very good practice that copies of the minutes are forwarded to the principal. This ensures open communication between the subject teachers and school management. Minutes of English meetings show that the department discusses a range of issues, all with the purpose of developing the subject in the school.

There was evidence of very good collegiality and collaboration among the English teachers in the school. Subject department guidelines for teaching and learning in English have been developed and these were presented during the evaluation. The quality of planning which this evidenced is of a very high standard. The identification of “promoting interest in personal reading” as a specific teaching and learning focus for English in junior-cycle classes is particularly noted. This has resulted in the integration of time for reading into the plans for each of the three years. Students read a range of novels, including reading for pleasure. There is, however, scope to offer them more challenging titles for study at both higher and ordinary levels. The very good advice already provided by the subject department’s own guidelines on readability measures to be used when choosing texts can guide this selection. There was a similar level of variety evident in the list of texts chosen for study for the Leaving Certificate, within syllabus constraints. This is positive, allowing teachers to suit text choice to class context and interest.

The department folder demonstrated that teaching and learning is the principal focus of subject planning. For example, the teachers of English have committed to incorporating the principles of assessment for learning into their teaching methods. They have been supported in this by whole-staff in-service training provided by the Second-Level Support Service.

The progress made by the English department in addressing recommendations made in an earlier, unpublished, subject inspection report is acknowledged. The general advice provided in the department’s subject plan to teachers of junior-cycle classes is very good. It provides direction for teachers’ work while remaining flexible enough to accommodate the range of interests of teachers and students. When revising this section of the department plan, a shift in emphasis from the work to be completed by teachers to student-centred outcomes is recommended. For example, a list of the learning outcomes that students should achieve from their study of each aspect of the junior-cycle course should be developed. Examples of such a list can be found in the recently published *Draft Rebalanced English Syllabus* for junior cycle which may be accessed through the website of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) at [www.ncca.ie](http://www.ncca.ie) It is also suggested that a thematic approach could be adopted for planning some aspects of the junior-cycle programme rather than teaching each genre in isolation.

The aims of the TY English programme reflect the overall emphasis on providing students with a broad experience of literature evident in the subject department plan. The identification of particular cognitive skills for development during TY is particularly noteworthy. Through planned encounters with a range of literary genre, the department aims to provide a solid foundation for the Leaving Certificate courses. The integration of language skills development in this programme is good practice. Consideration might be given to including a public-speaking or another oral skills development module in the plan in the future.

There is very good liaison between the SEN department and the English department. Information on students’ needs is provided by the learning support co-ordinator and, where applicable, teachers are consulted regarding individual learning plans for students with low-incidence special educational needs. A group education plan for English has been developed for each of the support class groups in the third band in junior cycle. The inclusion of these plans in the subject department folder, together with a copy of the learning support policy, is indicative of the good communication between both departments.

Language learning support is provided to a small number of students for whom English is not their first language. It is noted that this has, from time to time, been scheduled against Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE). Given that all junior-cycle students should have access to

SPHE in line with the requirements of Circular Letter M11/03, this practice should be avoided in future.

## **TEACHING AND LEARNING**

As the inspection visit coincided with “mock” examinations, seven lessons for non-examination class groups were observed. In keeping with the principles of assessment for learning, the purpose of each lesson was clearly established from the beginning. In the best examples of this, specific learning outcomes went beyond describing the topic to be studied to identify the learning intentions for the lesson. In a senior-cycle lesson on the novel, for example, specific learning outcomes for the lesson were written on the whiteboard. This strategy was also used in a junior-cycle lesson on media studies. In both cases, it was clear exactly what knowledge and skills students were expected to have mastered by the conclusion of the lessons. It is suggested that, in developing their practice, teachers of English should use this strategy in every lesson.

A range of student abilities was apparent in all lessons and teachers differentiated their teaching to cater for this. A variety of teaching methods, for example, was used to encourage active student engagement in lessons. Group work was used effectively in a senior-cycle lesson on character development in fiction. Each group was assigned one character from a novel which the class had read previously. The task was to identify an important personality trait and to provide an accurate description of how that trait was revealed in the text. In a junior-cycle lesson, students working in groups were asked to analyse the front page of a newspaper. They were supported by an ‘inspection grid’ which provided prompts on what to look out for. These lessons were successful, as evidenced by the contributions of students during the plenary phase of each lesson. The careful composition of the groups, so that each reflected the ability range in the class, and clear, time-bound tasks, enabled students to support one another in their learning.

The outcomes of very good planning were clear to see in the lessons observed. Teaching resources were well chosen and prepared leading to well-structured and appropriately paced lessons. Good links were made between prior learning and the new material introduced in each lesson. In many instances, particular efforts were made to link the concepts being explored to students’ own experiences. Active learning strategies were used in all lessons so that a creative, student-centred, learning environment was established. Students prepared and presented two versions of a scene from a text in one lesson. In another lesson, they worked with a range of props to represent specific images in a poetry text. In a third, ‘show me’ boards were used to demonstrate understanding of concepts being explored in a lesson on media studies. The commitment of the teachers of English to support students’ learning in these ways is noted. Students were stimulated by a variety of activities that required them to make contributions and think for themselves and, as a result, the quality of learning achieved in the lessons observed was very high.

Students spoke with confidence during the lessons observed. They were able to articulate their points in a thoughtful way that was beyond the simple recall of facts and represented more critical analysis. It is suggested that better use could have been made of the whiteboard in some lessons, particularly during the closing stages. Recording students’ contributions during plenary discussions both focuses attention and affirms their efforts. It would provide a helpful record of the very good outcomes of their group discussions. This was done to very good effect in some lessons where, for example, the teacher created a ‘mind map’ to support diary writing or modelled how to attack a home-work task using suggestions proffered by students. In both cases, students

transcribed the notes from the board so that these notes had the potential to support students' independent work.

Students' written work was examined in all classes. In the majority of cases, copies and notebooks are well organised and presented, reflecting the high standards expected by the English department. A good range of writing tasks has been assigned to students. Short-answer work which facilitates the creation of summaries of texts or develops students' comprehension and understanding is evident in junior-cycle copies. This is balanced by opportunities for students to write creatively and the quality of the short stories and drama scripts in their copies was generally good. In the main, students at this level demonstrated a good appreciation for tension in plot-making and, in the best examples, good management of suspense. A tighter focus on character development in fiction writing would add to the quality already achieved. The influence of the reading programme, noted in earlier sections of this report, on students' writing is clearly evident. Reading provides students with access to a range of writing models and the benefit of this is evident in their own work. Where there were weaknesses, these generally occurred where the ambition of the young writers was greater than their mastery of the syntactical elements of language. The quality of junior-cycle students' writing on studied texts was good.

In the senior-cycle copies examined, exercises which required students to engage critically with the studied texts dominated. The level of personal response to texts which features in students' writing is a strength of the work done. Generally, students think deeply about their texts and are confident expressing personal opinions about characters and events. Generally, their work is tightly focussed on the specific task set, though a small minority of able students neglect addressing all task requirements, writing incomplete answers. In some instances, students rely heavily on the question asked to provide sentence and paragraph stems for their own work. Less-able students struggle to move beyond a literal interpretation of their texts and their arguments are under-developed. Explicit instruction and further practise would address these difficulties.

In the context of school development planning in St Clare's, the school has identified improving uptake of and success in higher-level courses in both the junior cycle and the senior cycle as a developmental aim. In English, very good progress has been made towards achieving this goal. Students work in class and in their copies suggests that there is still a minority of students on the ordinary-level courses who should be challenged further. The ongoing efforts of the English teachers to ensure that students achieve to their full potential are encouraged.

## **ASSESSMENT**

Students' understanding of lesson content was regularly assessed in class through questioning, the setting of short tasks and teacher observation. In all classrooms visited, teachers made good use of their knowledge about students' progress to set work that suitably matches their abilities. Assessment for learning strategies, such as 'show me' boards and peer-review, were also evident in some lessons. These strategies work best when students understand clearly what they are trying to learn, and what is expected of them. This was achieved by explicit sharing of marking criteria, which students applied to their own and others' work. The teachers are commended for providing these opportunities for students to discuss and reflect on their progress towards success in English. Negotiating criteria with students could also be considered as a way of advancing this work.

Homework is set regularly and corrected promptly. In the lessons observed, teachers prepared students for their homework by discussing it first in class and, where it was appropriate, by commencing the homework task in class. In all the copies examined, very thorough and affirming feedback was provided to students. Marking schemes and codes are explained to students so that they can readily identify areas on which they need to work.

A programme of continuous assessment is operated in the school, such that in-class tests are administered at regular intervals and these, together with students' work during the year, inform reports on students' progress which are sent home twice a year. Formal examinations are held for all non-examination year groups at the end of the summer term. Third-year and sixth-year students are assessed by pre-certificate examinations in February/March. Teachers are available at parent-teacher meetings or by appointment to discuss a student's progress.

### **SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The formation of class groups in the school facilitates and encourages achievement in English. Uptake of the subject at higher level in junior cycle is good and is satisfactory for the Leaving Certificate.
- The timetabled provision for the teaching of English is very good and the subject is well resourced.
- There was evidence of very good collegiality and collaboration among the English teachers in the school. Teaching and learning is the principal focus of subject planning.
- The integration of the principles of assessment for learning in teaching and assessment strategies was evident in all lessons observed. Active learning strategies were used in all lessons so that a creative, student-centred, learning environment was established.
- Students' understanding of lesson content was regularly assessed in class. Homework is set regularly and corrected promptly.

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

- The teachers of English should develop the current junior-cycle subject plans by adding a list of the learning outcomes that students should achieve from their study of each aspect of the course.
- Junior-cycle students should be offered more challenging titles for study at both higher and ordinary levels.

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.

# **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 feel the positive nature of the report is a true reflection of the hard work and commitment given by the English Department. We will endeavour to sustain this level of commitment to our students and we will reflect on the recommendations and in due course implement them.

We would like to thank the inspectorate for the nature of the inspection. It was friendly, supportive and informative.

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