An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection of Geography
REPORT

Dominican College
Griffith Avenue, Dublin 9
Roll number: 60690R

Date of inspection: 22 September 2010
SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Dominican College. It presents the findings of an evaluation of the quality of teaching and learning in Geography 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, the deputy principal and subject teachers. 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

Dominican College is a voluntary secondary school for girls with a current enrolment of 710 students. The school offers the Junior Certificate, an optional Transition Year (TY) and the established Leaving Certificate.

The planned teaching programme for Geography is very well supported by school management particularly in relation to the provision of information and communications technology (ICT). Rooms used for geography lessons have been provided with ICT resources and this has enabled teachers to achieve one of their stated aims of using these resources to provide rich learning experiences for students. Teachers have registered with the National Council for Technology in Education (NCTE) in relation to Scoilnet Maps. A dedicated geography room and another room used for geography classes have been provided. An annual budget is available and this has been used to develop a wide range of resources to support teaching and learning. An inventory of these resources is included in the subject department plan. The school library has a section with geography resources.

Geography is a core subject in the school’s junior-cycle curriculum. At senior cycle Geography is provided as a module within the optional TY and as an optional subject for the established Leaving Certificate. Time allocation for the subject is in line with syllabus recommendations. Students are provided with an open choice of subjects before subject bands are generated. Parents and students are well supported in making subject choices for the Leaving Certificate and the uptake of the subject is in a very healthy state. There are three class groups studying the subject in the current sixth year. This reflects the very positive experiences of students in the junior cycle. All geography classes are of mixed ability.

Four teachers currently form the geography teaching team in Dominican College and they have availed of continuing professional development (CPD) both in relation to Geography and whole-school issues. Some teachers are pursuing post-graduate studies. CPD is supported by school
management. The members of the geography department provide support for new members of the department and for students taking the Post Graduate Diploma in Education (PGDE).

A notable feature of the geography department is the development of a wide range of resources specifically related to Geography which can be used to support students with additional educational needs. Some of these resources have been produced by teachers and some have been sourced from the English Language Support Project for post-primary schools based in Trinity College Dublin. In line with good practice these resources have been provided to the learning support department.

The school currently displays two Green Flags and hopes to acquire a third flag in the near future. The members of the geography department support this co-curricular activity by displays in the geography room and by teaching lessons on topics such as water and energy. The engagement with the Green School Project is good practice as it gives a practical expression to some of the aims of the geography syllabuses.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

Planning and preparation by teachers for the lessons observed was of a very high quality. All lessons were part of a continuing unit of study and had clear learning objectives. Copies of PowerPoint presentations were provided and these were presented in such a way as to encourage the engagement of students rather than their becoming passive spectators. Other resources used included articles from the print media, satellite images and in one lesson students were provided with laptop computers which were used to complete a specific piece of research assigned by their teacher. This use of ICT by teachers and particularly by students facilitates students’ active participation in the learning process and contributes to individual and collaborative learning.

The geography teachers in Dominican College form a clearly identifiable subject department within the school. They have worked collaboratively and have produced a comprehensive subject department plan for Geography. This plan opens with a mission statement and outlines the organisational arrangements for the subject. It also outlines a long-term curriculum plan for the subject. Two approaches were evident in the presentation of the curriculum plan for each year group. The more comprehensive approach was evident where learning outcomes were linked to syllabus topics, resources, teaching methods and assessment to be delivered within agreed timeframes. The early introduction of Ordnance Survey (OS) maps and aerial photographs and their integration throughout the planned teaching programme is very good practice. The inclusion of some fieldwork in each year of the planned teaching programme is commended as it provides students with an opportunity to explore their local environment and to practise and enhance their geographical skills.

It was evident from reading the curriculum plan for the junior cycle that the order in which topics are covered should be changed so as to provide a more incremental approach to learning. For example, the study of weather and the use of weather instruments by students would provide a solid basis on which to develop the ideas of climate and climatic regions. The study of economic activities before world inequalities would be more manageable for students. It is recommended that the planned junior-cycle teaching programme for Geography be reviewed and that the order in which topics are presented to students take into account the need to provide variety and an incremental approach to learning.

A plan for the geography module in the TY was made available. Four units of study have been prepared by the geography teachers from which two units are chosen for study. One module is a
geographical investigation and this is very good practice as it provides students with an opportunity to engage in out of class activities and to develop key geographical skills. It also facilitates an exploratory approach to the subject. The use of the local environment for this investigation is very good practice. Requiring students to engage in project work, writing reports and making presentations are very appropriate means of assessing students’ progress during TY.

Formal planning time is provided by school management three times per year and teachers engage in ongoing informal discussions. A subject co-ordinator is in place and in line with good practice this role is rotated amongst the members of the geography teaching team. Minutes of meetings were included in the subject plan. The development of ICT resources and the creation of a common pool of resources which will be available to both teachers and students has been a focus for the geography teachers in the last two years. A department e-mail account has been set up and considerable progress has been made in achieving this important aim. Continuing to set goals and action plans will further enhance the development of the subject in Dominican College. Teachers are encouraged to use part of the time allocated for planning to discuss teaching and learning and to share good practice.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Classroom management was very effective in all of the lessons observed. An encouraging, affirming and mutually respectful atmosphere was evident in the classrooms visited. Teachers have established clear classroom routines in relation to the start and conclusion of lessons. This linked the lessons to previously studied subject matter and created a secure environment where teaching and learning could take place. Students were invited by their teachers to engage actively in the learning process by asking questions, participating in discussions and sharing their personal experiences. References to local examples and examples drawn from students’ own experiences were particularly effective in engaging students. For example, in one lesson observed students were provided with images of objects familiar to them as an introduction to the topic ‘Globalisation’.

Very high quality teaching was observed in the classrooms visited. Strategies used encouraged the active participation of students in the planned learning activities. The creation of a mind-map at the start of a lesson engaged the students and provided a useful framework for the rest of the lesson. ICT which involved the use of PowerPoint presentations, satellite images and short video clips helped to ensure the continued interest of students in lessons These strategies included brainstorming, question and answer sessions, the completion of short written tasks, teacher-student discussions and some pair work. In some lessons teachers allowed time for students to copy notes from the whiteboard or screen. This provided a record of the lesson content and a ‘quiet time’ for students to reflect on the subject matter being studied. Students were also encouraged to make their own notes in some lessons by being provided with writing frames. Where these related to examination preparation the writing frame contained an outline of the requirements of the examination and a possible marking scheme. This is good practice as it encourages students to become independent learners in a supportive environment and its wider use is encouraged. The further use of a strategy of ‘think-pair-share’ is also encouraged as a means of encouraging co-operative learning. Teachers’ explanations were very clear and key terms were appropriately introduced and clearly explained. Lessons were appropriately paced and teachers’ interest and enthusiasm for Geography were evident.

Teachers shared the learning objectives with students at the start of lessons. There was scope to make these learning objectives more concrete and explicit in some instances. Good practice
obtains when these are written on the board and ticked off during the lesson when successfully achieved.

In the lessons observed there was a very good focus on skills development. Particularly evident was the use of questioning strategies by teachers that got students to develop their critical thinking when they were challenged to offer explanations or to develop their answers further. Best practice was evident when a ‘wait time’ allowed students to formulate their answers. Students in one lesson accessed Google Earth and in pairs worked on a research project thereby developing their research and teamwork skills.

Students enthusiastically engaged in the planned learning activities and are making very good progress in their studies. During review of previous lessons students displayed a good knowledge of previously learned subject matter. They showed a good grasp of the language of Geography and could use geographical terms appropriately. During a review of the lessons taught it was evident from students’ answers that the planned learning outcomes had been achieved. Work in students’ copybooks also indicated that students are learning.

All the classrooms visited were map-rich and print-rich and provided stimulating learning environments. A display referred to as a ‘Tectonic Wall’ contained key words and images and provided appropriate support and interest for students. The display of key words supports students’ literacy development and is praiseworthy. A display on Iceland outside the geography room helped to provide a very visible profile for the subject within the school.

**ASSESSMENT**

Students in Dominican College are achieving very well in the certificate examinations and are encouraged to pursue their studies at the higher level. This reflects the high expectations of their teachers. Students in sixth year have been provided with revision plans and marking schemes used in the certificate examinations. When students answer past-examination questions teachers have used ‘comment only’ marking as a means of focusing on their strengths and of providing clear guidelines for improvement. This use of Assessment for Learning principles is very good practice.

During the evaluation a sample of students’ copybooks was viewed. The standard of students’ written work was very good. Work was kept in a logical order, neatly presented and diagrams were accurately drawn. Monitoring of this written work by teachers varied from constructive feedback to light touch ‘tick marking’ with date and signature. It is recommended that an agreed policy on Assessment for Learning be developed by the geography teaching team and then included in the subject department plan.

Students’ progress is assessed by teachers in a variety of ways. These include ongoing assessment during lessons, the regular setting and correction of homework and holding class tests on a regular basis. A school homework policy is in place and students record homework in their journals. Arrangements are in place for the formal assessment of students during the school year. Student progress is reported on at parent-teacher meetings and by the issuing of reports following formal assessments. The good practice of returning test papers and having students make corrections was evident in a number of the classrooms visited.
SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The planned teaching programme for Geography is very well supported by school management particularly in relation to the provision of ICT resources.
- Planning and preparation by teachers for the lessons observed was of a very high quality.
- The planned teaching programme provides students with opportunities to engage in out of class learning.
- Very high quality teaching was observed in the classrooms visited.
- An encouraging, affirming and mutually respectful atmosphere was evident in the classrooms visited.
- Students engaged in the planned learning activities and are making very good progress in their studies.
- Students are achieving very well in the certificate examinations and are encouraged to pursue their studies at the higher level.

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

- It is recommended that the planned junior-cycle teaching programme for Geography be reviewed and that the order in which topics are presented to students take into account the need to provide variety and an incremental approach to learning.
- It is recommended that an agreed policy on Assessment for Learning be developed by the geography teaching team and then included in the subject department plan.

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

Published March 2011