An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection of Physical Education
REPORT

Kilkenny College
Castlecomer Road, Kilkenny
Roll number: 61570M

Date of inspection: 9 March 2010
REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN PHYSICAL EDUCATION

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Kilkenny College. It presents the findings of an evaluation of the quality of teaching and learning in Physical Education 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 their teachers, examined students’ work, and had discussions with teachers. The inspector reviewed the facilities and resources available for the subject. Subject planning documentation and teachers’ written preparation were not available for inspection. Following the evaluation visit, the inspector provided oral feedback on the outcomes of the evaluation to the principal and deputy 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

Kilkenny College is a co-educational boarding and day school with a current enrolment of 796 students. The school caters for a broad diversity of students and offers the Junior Certificate, a compulsory Transition Year (TY) programme, the Leaving Certificate and the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP). The school operates a fortnightly timetable with nine class periods per day of either thirty-five or forty-minute duration.

Physical Education is a core subject on the curriculum for all students. In addition, the school provides a timetabled games programme for first-year students. First year classes receive one double period per fortnight for Physical Education and an additional double period per week for class games. The total time allocation, over the fortnight for this year group, is in line with the Department of Education and Skills recommendation of two hours of Physical Education per week. Second-year classes receive four periods of Physical Education per fortnight. Third-year students receive two periods of Physical Education per fortnight. TY students receive a double period and a single period per fortnight for Physical Education, and are also offered long and short module courses, many of which include learning in Physical Education. Leaving Certificate students receive one period of Physical Education per week for most of the year. Short modules of computers and Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) are provided for each Leaving Certificate class group for approximately four weeks per year, with classes withdrawn from their physical education time to attend these modules.

The time devoted to the subject and the timetable arrangements require serious attention by management in order to provide appropriate support for the subject. Three main impediments exist within the current time provision and timetable structure that impact on the ability of the
physical education department to implement a comprehensive physical education programme. Firstly, most classes fall significantly short of the two hours of Physical Education per week as recommended in the Department’s *Rules and Programme for Secondary Schools*. This is especially the case for fifth-year and sixth-year classes, who receive a single period per week. Secondly, many of the lessons are provided as a single period. Practical lessons of single-period duration impose significant restrictions on the quality of engagement in the learning experiences within each lesson, due to the time required for changing prior to and after the lesson and also the need to ensure that students engage in purposeful preparatory activities prior to the main development phase of the lessons. Finally, concurrent timetabling of a large number of class groups, in some cases from different year groups, may also have an adverse impact on the quality of students’ learning experiences, as the facilities can become overcrowded and more time is required for organisation, all of which further erodes the time available for quality engagement. It is recommended that management provide all students with a minimum of a double period of Physical Education per week and work towards providing the subject for all students in line with the Department’s *Rules and Programme for Secondary Schools*. Furthermore, the school should avoid timetabling excessive student numbers together and also ensure that any classes so timetabled are from the same year group. Concurrent timetabling of physical education classes is good practice when the numbers involved do not exceed the capacity of the facilities and resources, and when the class groups are appropriately matched to optimise their learning experiences.

The employment of five qualified physical education teachers is exemplary and ensures that the school has sufficient professional capacity to support the delivery of its curricular physical education programme. A small number of classes are taken by teachers who do not possess appropriate qualifications to teach Physical Education. Whilst the deployment of these teachers ensures that students’ physical activity needs are provided for, the range of learning experiences possible in Physical Education is limited. It is acknowledged that these teachers possess some coaching qualifications and are deployed, where possible, alongside the qualified physical education teachers, which may help to offset some of the potential health and safety considerations. However, it is recommended that the school work towards a situation where all lessons in Physical Education are delivered by a teacher who is appropriately qualified in the subject area as recognised by the Department.

Teachers have been proactive in their professional learning and have attended inservice events for the implementation of the revised junior cycle physical education syllabus. The school has recently hosted one inservice event organised by the Junior Cycle Physical Education Support Service (JCPESS). Management encourages continuing professional development (CPD) and is supportive of teachers’ requests to attend relevant courses. In addition, school management generously offers to pay the annual subscription fee for membership of the Physical Education Association of Ireland (PEAI). Consideration should be given by teachers to engaging in the local community of practice (COP) organised through the PEAI to support ongoing professional development.

Excellent facilities are available to support the delivery of the school’s physical education and sports programmes. These include a large sports hall, a weights room, a small aerobics and dance room, two astroturf pitches, two all-weather pitches, a hard-court area and several grass playing pitches. All of these are very well maintained. The subject department is well resourced and good systems are in place to support the procurement of any additional or replacement items of equipment or resources. Access to the school’s broadband facility and network is available in the sports hall and there is access to a range of information and communications technology (ICT)
equipment to support teaching and learning. Good attention is paid to health and safety issues and all facilities and equipment are regularly audited to ensure that they continue to be fit for purpose.

The provision of an extensive extracurricular sports and physical activity programme is central to life in Kilkenny College, especially as a large percentage of students are boarders. Students are provided with a broad range of activities to suit their interests and an elaborate timetable is constructed for each term to optimise the use of all of the available facilities and expertise of teachers and coaching staff. The primary focus of the sports and physical activity programme is to promote students’ regular involvement and participation. This is highly commended as it ensures that those who may not be competitively orientated are also catered for within the programme. A large number of teams are prepared and entered into various competitive events at a level commensurate with their ability. The principal sports are athletics, badminton, hockey, rugby and tennis. Basketball, camógie, cricket, soccer and table tennis are also provided for students to participate in at a recreational level. Students are also facilitated to represent the school at equestrian and golf events, while other activities, such as canoeing, are often organised for students with a particular interest or talent in these sports. The involvement and support of parents in these programmes is good practice. The provision of structured activity sessions, such as circuit-training, aerobics and hip-hop dance, along with self-directed activities, such as resistance training in the school gym, and swimming provide extensive opportunities for students to exercise, to improve their physical fitness and to enjoy these activities in a positive social setting. Both the achievements of the school in its competitive and recreational endeavours are highly commended.

A wealth of photographs of past college sports teams and athletes are displayed along the walls and corridors of the school, in addition to a number of representative jerseys. This visual historical record serves to maintain the sporting tradition and ethos of the school, along with recognising and affirming the efforts of current students. This good practice also enhances students’ affinity for and identity with their school. The proactive and positive support by school management, teachers and coaches to provide the structures that supports the extensive range of extracurricular activities and to ensure that each activity is provided to the best possible standard is to be applauded.

**PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

Formal structures have recently been established to further support the subject department planning process. The availability of a dedicated weekly time period to support a collaborative approach to subject department planning is exemplary. These regular opportunities ensure that all aspects of programme design, content, organisation and pedagogy can be discussed, implemented and reviewed.

It was reported that a subject department plan for Physical Education has been developed but this was not made available to the inspector during the evaluation. However, there was evidence of a high level of planning for resources to support the delivery of each of the strands of the syllabus. Evidence from a range of other sources, such as the inspection of class folders for work completed, the development of a range of topic-specific worksheets and task cards, in addition to observation of individual teacher planning, also supports the finding that the programmes of work are well planned. Additionally, a copy of a letter to the board of management indicates that the physical education department is actively seeking appropriate timetable provision to implement the physical education programme.
It was reported that senior cycle students are given a choice of activity modules to suit their interests and needs. This is good practice as it affirms their maturity and also enhances the level of ownership students feel over their programme of learning. The involvement of TY students in the Gaisce awards programme and the completion of certified coaching courses are also good practice as they further promote the core values of personal development and leadership skills.

A wide range of resources have been developed and collated to support teaching and learning, including texts, videos, DVDs, a range of fitness testing equipment, specialised equipment to promote motor-skill development in the areas of co-ordination and agility, along with a large bank of task cards and worksheets.

**TEACHING AND LEARNING**

There was a good standard, and in some instances an excellent standard of teaching and learning in the physical education lessons observed. Students changed quickly for their lessons and also assisted with any class organisation that was required. This ensured that lessons began promptly. Questioning was effectively used in most lessons to revise previous learning and to link with the topic of the lesson. This good practice helped to contextualise the learning for students and create a sense of continuity in their learning experiences. In most cases, teachers shared the intended learning outcomes with their students, which were expressed in terms of the specific knowledge and skills students should develop as a result of their learning. Good use was made of the whiteboard to display the learning outcomes, which were then visible to students throughout their lesson. This assessment-for-learning (AFL) approach should be extended to all lessons.

In the lessons observed, the topics taught were adventure activities and health-related fitness. Following the introduction phase, lessons began with warm-up activities. Best practice was observed when these activities began with basic mobility drills and progressively increased in intensity. In some instances the initial activities were performed at a high intensity. Care should be taken to ensure that the initial pace of the warm-up activities is controlled and progresses gradually in intensity. This is particularly important for those students with poor levels of physical fitness or motor development as it affords them more opportunities to rehearse the basic patterns of movement and body management skills without the early onset of fatigue. It also ensures that all students are in an appropriate state of physiological readiness to engage in the developmental class activities.

There was very good integration of the principles of physical development into each of the lessons observed. Teachers identified the key underlying concepts that influence performance or learning in each of the lessons. For example, the concept of hydration was introduced to enhance students’ understanding of endurance. This included recognising the symptoms of dehydration and how to make an energy drink to prevent dehydration and enhance performance. In another lesson core muscle strength was introduced to enhance students’ understanding of the influence of functional stability as part of the kinetic chain during physical activity and performance. This is exemplary practice as students are cognitively and physically involved in the tasks and can readily apply their learning to their everyday activities.

Tasks set were very well structured, purposeful and progressive. Demonstrations and explanations of all tasks were of a high standard. Task cards were excellently used to support students’ understanding and skill acquisition in the health-related fitness lessons. These contained diagrams of each exercise and the key performance indicators for each stage of the exercise. The use of this stimulus material was further enhanced through the organisation of peer-teaching activities,
where students were required to work in pairs or small groups to complete specific exercise circuits. To further develop this exemplary practice, it is recommended that students are encouraged to provide formative feedback to their peers. This will further engage students in movement-analysis activities that will deepen their knowledge and understanding.

Cross-curricular learning was evident in the adventure activities lesson that supported students’ geographical and literacy development. Opportunities were provided to students to apply their map-reading skills and knowledge of cardinal points, scale and symbol recognition through completing an orienteering event around the school grounds. The clues provided a series of anagrams that, once solved, highlighted keywords related to hydration. This is a very good approach to further support students’ literacy development. These efforts to integrate learning across the curriculum are highly commended.

Lessons were well structured and paced. There was an appropriate balance between physical activity and time spent on instruction. Whilst the quality of engagement and learning was very high, students would have benefited from additional time in lessons of single-period duration as there was insufficient time to provide meaningful opportunities to apply their learning. Questioning was very effectively used at the end of the lessons to consolidate students’ learning. Teachers also indicated the topic of the next lesson, which further reinforces students’ sense of continuity in their learning. This is good practice.

Students were most co-operative, attentive and fully engaged in all of the planned activities. Teachers have established a positive rapport with their students and were affirming of all efforts made during the lesson.

**ASSESSMENT**

The quality of assessment in Physical Education is good. Teachers maintain detailed records of students’ attendance and participation in their lessons. Reporting takes place through the school reports system twice per year and includes an appropriate formative comment on the engagement and progress of each student in Physical Education.

Practical performance and theoretical knowledge is assessed continuously through teacher observation and questioning and also through the completion of class assignments. Opportunities which are provided for self assessment and task completion are a good aid to maintaining records of students’ achievements and progress. It is commendable that a folder system is also used to store work completed by students. Consideration should be given to expanding the class folder system to individual student files, which may contribute to the overall assessment process.

It is recommended that the assessment system be further developed. A common approach should be taken to the assessment process whereby students’ learning can be assessed based on the attainment of key learning outcomes for each year. This may include elements of the formative process already in place, along with a practical performance at least once per year and the completion of key assignments such as project work, rich-tasks and evidence of other relevant experience such as officiating or coaching competencies. The measurement of movement-analysis ability, as currently used during peer-teaching tasks, could also be incorporated into the assessment process. The assessment of practical performance should involve the physical education department in formulating performance descriptors appropriate to particular levels in specific activities. The weighting assigned to each element of the assessment process for each year group should also be decided by physical education department. The communication of these
descriptors to students should help in providing a focus for learning as well as making the assessment criteria open and transparent.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Physical Education is a core subject on the curriculum for all students.
- Excellent facilities, which are very well maintained and presented, are available to support the delivery of the school’s physical education and sports programmes.
- The subject department is well resourced.
- Management actively supports teachers’ continuing professional development. Exemplary structures are in place to support the formal subject department planning process.
- There was evidence of a high quality of individual planning and preparation for all of the lessons observed.
- The quality of teaching and learning in Physical Education was good and in some instances excellent practice was observed. Lessons were characterised by a high level of student engagement, both physically and cognitively.
- Lessons were well organised and appropriately paced, and tasks set were well structured, purposeful and progressive.
- Good progress has been made in developing the assessment process.
- Students are afforded extensive opportunities to participate in a well-organised extracurricular sport and physical activity programme.

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

- Management should review the time provision for Physical Education in accordance with Department recommendations.
- When arranging the concurrent timetabling of physical education classes, management should ensure that the numbers involved do not exceed the capacity of the facilities and resources, and also ensure that the class groups are appropriately matched to facilitate organisation, programme design and to optimise students’ learning experiences.
- All physical education lessons should be delivered by teachers who are appropriately qualified in the subject.
- The continued development of a common approach to the assessment of students is recommended, whereby students’ learning can be assessed, based on the attainment of key learning outcomes for each year.

Post-evaluation meetings were held 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.

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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

Kilkenny College followed the ASTI directive with regard to subject inspection. Subject planning documents and teachers’ written preparation though complete, were not available to the Department of Education and Skills Inspector.

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 school is committed to eliminating concurrent timetabling of pupils, especially of different year groups. The Board of Management is attempting to get a better timetable fit and structure for Physical Education.