

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

**Subject Inspection of English
REPORT**

**St Columba's College
Stranorlar, Co Donegal
Roll number: 62861F**

Date of inspection: 19 October 2010



**AN ROINN | DEPARTMENT
OIDEACHAIS | OF EDUCATION
AGUS SCILEANNA | AND SKILLS**

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

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in St Columba's College. 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 a discussion with the subject co-ordinator. 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 and the 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

St Columba's College is a co-educational voluntary secondary school. Currently, its enrolment is 843 students, of whom almost half are female. The school offers the following programmes: the Junior Certificate, the Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP), an optional Transition Year (TY), the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) and the established Leaving Certificate.

Whilst the timetable allocation of four periods a week for English to classes in junior cycle is satisfactory, it is noted that for one class group these lessons are offered on only three days. Students in TY are timetabled for English three times a week. However, one of the TY classes has English on two days only. These arrangements should be revised, as absence on a particular day may mean that a student can miss fifty per cent or more of the English lessons taught that week. It is also suggested that additional English lessons should be available to students on the JCSP in order to address their particular needs. Good practice is that students should have contact with the language on at least four of the five days available. The timetable allocation for English, with five lessons in fourth year and fifth year is very good.

In 2008, the school introduced mixed-ability class groups for all subjects in junior cycle. The changes to class arrangements in English mean that students are assigned to mixed-ability class groups in first year and this is good practice. This allows students to settle into post-primary school and to develop their skills and knowledge in the subject. In second year, students are placed in class groups within two ability-based bands and good practice is again evident here. In the first band, three mixed-ability class groups are formed. In the second band, two mixed-ability and one ordinary-level class groups are formed. Generally, this arrangement allows decisions in relation to the level at which a student may take the certificate examinations in English to be delayed as long as possible. This is very good practice and, as a result, uptake of the subject at

higher level in junior cycle is particularly good. Separate timetabling arrangements are in place for the JCSP class groups in second year and in third year. In senior cycle, separate class groups for higher-level and ordinary-level English are formed. The uptake of higher-level English for the Leaving Certificate and the achievements of students at this level are very good.

Resource provision to support the teaching and learning of English is very good. Generally, teachers of English have been allocated a classroom and very good use is made of this resource. In the classrooms visited, the teachers had created a motivational, print-rich, environment with students' own work, displays of subject-specific terminology, supportive mind-maps and posters, and other visual learning aids. Information and communications technology (ICT), including fixed data-projectors, and audio-visual equipment were available in some classrooms visited. There is a school library available, although it is currently used as a classroom. Development of the school's facilities is ongoing and the re-establishment of a dedicated library space is planned for early 2011. In the interim, student library prefects facilitate students' access to the books. This has also provided valuable opportunities for students to develop their leadership skills. A book club is operated on a voluntary basis by one of the teachers of English and it was noted that some members of the English department also include time for personal reading in their plans for junior-cycle English. The school also allocates a budget on an annual basis to the subject team and resources needed are purchased as required. It is suggested that the English department consider using some of this budget to purchase additional book stock for the library on an ongoing basis.

Deployment of teachers is in line with their qualifications, skills, knowledge and interests. Management encourages and facilitates continuing professional development (CPD) for teachers and has facilitated whole-school in-service on differentiation and mixed-ability teaching. Teachers are generally allocated to a class group for the duration of a course and this facilitates the development and continuity of positive teaching-learning relationships.

Students are encouraged to participate in a variety of co-curricular activities in English. A particular strength of the range of activities available is the emphasis on students' own creativity. Poetry and creative writing are encouraged and many of the classroom displays included samples of students' own work. In addition, examination classes are brought to see professional productions of studied texts. Through the provision of these activities, teachers extend learning beyond the classroom and students' understanding of what is being learned within English class is deepened.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

Subject department structures are well established in the school. Two of the teachers of English share responsibility for co-ordinating the work of the department. It is suggested that rotating this role between all members of the English team is good practice. It would allow each teacher to contribute to the management of the department and to develop their leadership skills. Formal meetings of the department are facilitated at least three times during the school year. Minutes of these meetings and the department's records indicate that self-evaluation takes place. At the end of each school year, the department collectively reviews its work for example, through the analysis of examination results, and reviews have led to change in the practices of the department. One such outcome is the identification by the English department of the need to develop a literacy strategy. This is a very positive approach to subject planning and it is suggested that, as part of

this self-evaluation process, the department might consider tracking the achievement of the JCSP students in order to inform targeted planning.

A subject department folder has been developed and the department plan is updated annually. Good use has been made of the templates provided by the School Development Planning Initiative (SDPI) to describe the organisational and curriculum arrangements for the subject. The department plan is quite prescriptive in terms of the genres to be explored with students in each year. However, individual teachers' planning documents indicate that there is sufficient flexibility to choose texts based on the abilities and interests of each class group and this is good practice. Currently, students in junior cycle study two novels and one play and a selection of poetry and short stories across the three years of the programme. It is recommended that the department consider a skills-based approach to curriculum planning, rather than the very content-oriented plan currently in place. By identifying sets of skills to be achieved in each year, study of additional drama and poetry would be possible. Such an approach would also facilitate the delivery of the literacy strategy identified as a need by the department. The draft rebalanced English syllabus for the Junior Certificate, available on the website of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, www.ncca.ie, and section four of the Leaving Certificate syllabus provide guidance on the appropriate learning outcomes for each course.

Teachers' individual planning and preparation for the lessons observed was in line with the schedules of work agreed at department level. Those schemes examined indicate that teachers interpret the general plan to suit the needs of their own students. This is good practice. It is recommended that a copy of their schemes of work should be included in the subject folder.

There are good links between the English department and the learning-support department. Information on the needs of individual students is provided to teachers and students may also be supported in smaller class groups during Irish time when they have an exemption from the study of Irish.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

A very good learning atmosphere was firmly established in the classrooms visited. This was supported by lessons which were well planned and appropriately challenging. Teachers had identified clear objectives for each lesson and prepared relevant and helpful resources. In one lesson observed, intended learning outcomes were written on the whiteboard; in other lessons, the topics to be explored were presented orally. It is suggested that providing a general outline of the structure of the lesson at the start of each class would be a good support to students in the predominantly mixed-ability class groups in junior cycle. Such an approach would ensure that all students would be aware of the focus for each lesson and of what would be expected of them throughout the lesson period. As the lesson progresses, reference can be made to the intended learning outcomes in order to check students' progress. In managing the pacing of lessons, care should be taken to ensure that students have ample time to assimilate new ideas before moving from one phase of a lesson to the next.

Each of the seven lessons observed was well structured and competently delivered. A range of teaching methodologies was observed, ranging from whole-class instruction to activities which required students to work independently of the teacher. However, students were not always sufficiently challenged to support their opinions or think through the ideas they expressed. In a lesson on advertising and in another on an unseen poem, for example, the link between techniques

used by writers and their intended purposes was un-explored. Students should be challenged to move beyond recognition of what writers are doing with words to an understanding of the effect achieved.

The differing needs of students in mixed-ability class groups were attended to well. In a lesson on letter writing, for example, students were asked to reconstruct letters as a means of revising correct layout. Two letters were used so that different levels of challenge were posed and a past examination question requiring students to compose a letter was set as an extension exercise. This lesson was very successful as the work planned was sufficiently differentiated, both in terms of challenge and task requirement, that it engaged all students. In many of the lessons, students were encouraged to work in pairs, or in small groups, to support each other's learning. In these instances, teachers circulated and were able to offer specific support where it was needed.

A focus on vocabulary building and language learning was evident in three of the lessons observed. In two, regular attention is paid to spelling and students are required to learn a list of new and commonly encountered words each week. In the third, students were asked to identify challenging words in a new text and to use the dictionary to help them understand them. This is very good work. In other lessons, the teachers had carefully planned the learning activity so that students' writing was well supported by the use of sentence starters and writing frames. It was good to note that, while notes and other supporting reference material are supplied to students, it is carefully balanced by an emphasis on students' own note-making.

In those lessons which focused on the study of literature, it was good to note that students were encouraged to formulate their own responses to texts and/or questions before teachers supplied them with information. In a senior-cycle poetry lesson, students brainstormed the title of a poem as a pre-reading exercise. This was followed by a group task on the text which stimulated their thinking about the structure of the poem and the ideas it explored. It was only in the latter half of the lesson period that the original poetry text was read and the ensuing whole-class discussion was lively and informed. This is good teaching. In other lessons observed, teachers encouraged students to engage creatively with texts. In a junior-cycle lesson, students prepared closing statements for prosecution and defence, based on the text being read. It was also evident that links were created between texts and personal writing so that students were asked to write reviews of texts they were studying and diary entries from a character's point of view. This thematic approach to English, linking themes across genre, is good practice. It works well to deepen students' understanding of the themes and concepts explored in their texts while simultaneously reinforcing the language lessons learned.

Students' oral work and contributions in class were confident and appropriate. Though they were somewhat reticent in the presence of the inspector, students demonstrated a very good knowledge of their texts. A range of writing tasks was tackled in class, from simple note-taking to lengthier, more challenging, assignments. These were attempted with enthusiasm by students and, where the closing phase of the lesson facilitated it, students read their work aloud. Again, text-based tasks were successfully completed and those that required students to write creatively resulted in engaging pieces.

An examination of students' copies indicated that generally, students' work accurately reflects their ability in the subject. In many instances, students produced fluent, well-structured pieces of writing. In the majority of cases, students composed strong, relevant arguments in response to questions on their studied texts. They were able to use appropriate reference and knowledge of their texts well in order to advance their opinions of characters and themes. The opportunities provided through participation in a variety of creative writing competitions had clearly benefitted

some students' personal writing. Their work was well composed and demonstrated a good awareness of register and audience. In many cases, students' writing was supported by pre-writing activities which required them to carefully plan their work. Where evidence of first and second draft writing was found, the work completed by students was of a very good standard. The relative abilities of students in the subject were evident in the difficulties experienced with written work. Better-able students should pay closer attention to accurate spelling and paragraphing in order to improve their work. In the copies provided by less-able students of English, it was clear that some struggle to compose coherent, developed responses to texts. However, the teaching plans presented indicate that these difficulties will be addressed. Continued practise in composing well-developed, coherent work is planned. It is recommended that teachers should work with students to identify the success criteria for writing tasks in advance. This will provide them with guidance during the writing process.

In summary, the quality of teaching and learning in English was very good.

ASSESSMENT

A range of assessment modes is used to assess students' competence and progress in English. Students' learning during lessons was monitored and developed by questioning. In many instances, questions were addressed to the full class group and either a chorus of answers was received or a small number of vocal students responded. The potential of chorus answering is that it can facilitate repetition and rote learning of material, whilst formative assessment of how individual students are progressing can be achieved by the latter. To support formative assessment it is recommended that teachers direct questions to particular named students in order to gauge the level of learning achieved across the full class group. It is also recommended that when a question is asked, either by a student or the teacher, encouraging them to engage with one another in either finding the answer or discussing it is a better way to promote learning than having the teacher supply the answer. Teachers warmly affirmed all students' answers and, where appropriate, encouraged them to develop their arguments by reference to the texts being studied.

Homework is identified as a 'vital reinforcement tool' in the English subject department plan and exercises are regularly set to extend classroom learning. The tasks set provide opportunities for students to practice newly acquired skills and to work creatively with language to communicate their ideas. In general, work completed is acknowledged and, in some cases, quite detailed feedback is provided. Teachers' written comments include suggestions which indicated how the student might improve and positive remarks which encourage student effort. This is good practice as it develops students' understanding and skills and is an important teaching technique. In other cases, tick marking predominates. It is recommended that the English department devise an agreed assessment policy so that a balance is achieved between the volume of homework set and the facility to provide good quality feedback. For example, action on a suggestion made earlier in this report to identify success criteria for written tasks would facilitate greater use of self- and peer-review. In turn, this can encourage students to learn from each other and to develop their critical evaluative skills.

Summative house examinations are held at Christmas and at the end of the last term for first-year, second-year and fourth-year class groups. TY students are assessed on a continuous basis throughout the year. Students in third year and in fifth year have summative examinations at Christmas and 'mock' certificate examinations in the spring term. In developing their assessment policy, consideration should be given to the setting of common papers where possible for in-

house examinations. This good practice allows for comparison of students' progress across the mixed-ability class groups and provides a strong basis for recommendations regarding choice of course for examination. In taking this approach, differentiated marking schemes should be devised to facilitate the mixed-ability class groups in junior cycle.

School reports are issued to parents twice annually for all class groups. Parents are also informed of how their children are progressing through the students' journal and at parent-teacher meetings.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The arrangements in place to support teaching and learning in English are good. These include the timetable allocation, the resources available and the deployment of the teaching team.
- The emphasis on students' own creativity is a strength of the wide variety of co-curricular activities available to students of English in this school.
- A culture of self-review, which influences department planning, has been established. A very good subject department plan provides guidance to teachers in the classroom.
- The quality of teaching and learning in English was very good. Students were able to use appropriate reference and knowledge of their texts well to compose strong, relevant arguments.
- Students' progress is appropriately monitored and reported to parents.

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

- The English department should consider a skills-based approach to curriculum planning.
- A general outline of the structure of the lesson should be provided at the start of each lesson in order to further support students in the predominantly mixed-ability class groups in junior cycle.
- The English department should devise an agreed assessment policy which addresses both homework and in-house examinations.

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

Published June 2011