An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection of History
REPORT

Our Lady’s Bower Secondary School
Athlone, Co. Westmeath
Roll number: 63210P

Date of inspection: 2 October 2009
SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Our Lady’s Bower Secondary School. It presents the findings of an evaluation of the quality of teaching and learning in History 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 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.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

Our Lady’s Bower Secondary School offers History as a core subject at junior cycle in accordance with Rules and Programme for Secondary Schools. Classes are of mixed ability across the school which is good practice. At senior cycle the school has recently introduced a history module to Transition Year (TY) to build on students’ experience of History at junior cycle, to introduce a broader and more balanced curriculum and to promote History at senior cycle. This is indicative of a good level of reflective practice. At Leaving Certificate level, students have the unusual option of undertaking either the Early Modern or the Later Modern field of study. This offers students two points of access in relation to the Leaving Certificate History syllabus. The school is to be commended for making this level of choice available to students.

History provision is good in the school at senior cycle. At Leaving Certificate, classes have five class periods a week, one double and three single periods. This is in line with syllabus guidelines. History provision in TY of four periods a week for five weeks is satisfactory. At junior cycle, history provision is low. Third-year classes have three periods of History per week which is satisfactory. However first-year and second-year students have just two periods of History per week. Low provision for a core subject like History creates difficulty in terms of completing the course within three years. It is recommended that management look at ways to increase provision for junior cycle History.

Examination of the school timetable shows a good spread of history lessons across the week and between morning and afternoon in most instances. It is suggested that an occasional tendency to timetable junior cycle History on successive days be avoided if at all possible.

There are very good arrangements in place for student access to History at Leaving Certificate level, with students being offered an open choice from which to pick their subjects. Students are well supported by teachers and management when making their choices. Uptake levels of Leaving Certificate History are very healthy. This is a testament to the high profile that History has in the school.
Teachers, in the main, are classroom-based in a well-equipped new building. The rooms in the new building are bright, well-appointed and have excellent information and communication technology (ICT) facilities. Every classroom is equipped with a data projector and computer and has broadband access. This is highly commended as an excellent support to history teaching and demonstrates a good level of forward planning on the part of the principal and board of management. As the first-year classes are accommodated in the old campus, a short distance from the main campus, these facilities were not available to them at the time of the inspection. Given the stress on visual sources in the Junior Certificate first-year history syllabus, it is recommended that ICT facilities are extended to the first-year students when resources allow. The potential for loss of teaching time in travel by teachers between campuses is a matter for concern and should be taken into account by the board when any review of accommodation takes place.

A good range of resources is available to history teachers, some of which have been purchased by the teachers themselves. A small number of history books are also available in the school library. Teachers store many resources in their individual classrooms which are well decorated with subject-rich materials. Students are encouraged to borrow history books from some classrooms. This is good practice. A fixed budget is available to the history department. It is recommended that the history department ensure that the full budget is spent each year and that a central history resource area, to which all teachers have access, is developed.

The school’s commitment to the provision of co-curricular activities, such as the visit of speakers to the school and the marking of Holocaust Memorial Day, is commended as it raises the profile of History in the school.

The attendance of history teachers in the school at history in-service has been facilitated by management. This is praiseworthy.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

The history department has five teachers, two of whom have shared the co-ordinator role in recent years. This year, one of the teachers has taken on the role. Formal meetings take place at least once a year. Teachers also meet informally throughout the year. A good level of collaboration between teachers is noted and applauded. The sharing of electronic resources in a history folder on the school’s intranet system is highly commended as a valuable support to history teaching. To extend the opportunities provided for teachers to meet as a group and to plan collaboratively, it is recommended that formal meetings are facilitated by management at least once a term.

Considerable work has gone into developing a subject department plan for History. The department plan includes clearly defined aims and objectives, common targets for course coverage, suggested methodologies and assessment practices, as well as a range of other relevant documentation, including suggested strategies to support students with additional educational needs. The department is commended for devising an innovative programme for TY which is still under review. It is recommended that the department plan be expanded to include examples of common examination papers and teaching resources.

In order to further develop the work of the department, it is suggested that some time be given at department meetings to the discussion of teaching and learning for different year groups. This will facilitate teachers in identifying learning outcomes linked to curriculum content, suitable methodologies, resources and assessment strategies.
Individual teacher planning is good with well-prepared classes and good planning for resources, including ICT resources, in evidence. A high level of individual organisation of resources was noted in some instances. The engagement of teachers with professional development sessions with the Second Level Support Service (SLSS) and the Holocaust Educational Trust in their own time is noted and commended.

**TEACHING AND LEARNING**

Very good quality teaching and learning was seen in the course of the inspection. Lessons opened in all instances, as outlined in the department’s policy, with the aims of the lesson being made clear in writing. This is very good practice. Students settled down quickly to work and a purposeful and attentive atmosphere prevailed in all lessons. In most lessons, the topic being taught was linked to prior learning. This is good practice. In a few lessons, the teacher took time at the end of the lesson to review the work done during the lesson. This commendable strategy is a good aid to student learning. It is recommended that this be adopted as department strategy.

A variety of teaching methodologies was seen during the course of the inspection, with a good pace and smooth transitions evident throughout. Storytelling was a feature of many lessons and served well to engage students’ interest. For example, in a senior cycle lesson, the teacher gradually built up a lively picture of the personality, Meiler Magrath, by the use of storytelling, drawing from notes that the teacher had prepared on the board. The use of the enquiry-focused methodology was seen in another senior cycle lesson where a series of lessons was focused on the one question ‘What steps did the Nazis take to establish state control over the mass media?’ This gave a focus and a sense of direction to the lesson. In many classrooms, the teachers used pair work or group work to give the students an opportunity to work collaboratively on the lesson topic. These strategies are commended as they promote active learning. In some instances group work lacked focus and direction. It is recommended that clear directions are given when group work is used. In some lessons there was an imbalance between teacher talk and student activity. To encourage students to be active in their own learning, it is recommended that the use of active learning methodologies, including individual, pair, or group work, be extended to these lessons.

A wide variety of resources was used in the course of the lessons observed, including the textbook, worksheets, hand-outs and documents. Where lesson structure allowed, teachers employed good reinforcement strategies through the use of the classroom whiteboard. For example, in one junior cycle lesson, the lesson was gradually developed by reference to a spider diagram that students were invited to take down in their copies. This is good practice. Where the textbook was used, it was used judiciously to develop a point and not overused. Good use of documents was seen in many senior cycle classrooms.

Some very good use of ICT was observed during the course of the inspection. This is highly commended as a very good support to history teaching. In some lessons, teachers used PowerPoint presentations to develop the main points of the lesson. At times, teachers made use of the broadband facility in the school to show visuals from relevant websites. For example, in a junior cycle lesson, the teacher linked to a website to show photographs related to the Treaty negotiations in London in 1921. The use of an epidiascope to project visuals and text from books or teacher notes was seen in another classroom visited. All teachers are to be commended for embracing the excellent facilities available to them in the new school building.

There was a good emphasis on differentiated methodologies in many classrooms visited. In some lessons, there was a commendable emphasis on the use of keywords and, in some instances,
students were invited to take these down in their copybooks. It is recommended that this good practice should be extended to all lessons. The use of a writing frame was seen in one lesson. This is a very good aid to getting students to structure pieces of extended writing and is to be commended. The use of visuals was seen in many lessons. This strategy helps to cater for those students with a visual learning style. Teachers are reminded that the textbooks contain some very good visuals and maps that can be used to bring a visual emphasis to the lesson. It is recommended that the use of visuals be extended to all lessons, where practicable.

A very good atmosphere prevailed in all classrooms visited, with very good teacher-student rapport evident. Students were engaged with their teachers, interested in the topics being taught and knowledgeable about their courses.

**ASSESSMENT**

Good quality assessment modes were seen in the course of the inspection. Assessment modes observed included questioning, homework, end-of-topic tests, project work and house examinations. The subject plan contains a homework policy which reflects the school’s homework policy. This is good practice. Homework is given frequently and monitored regularly, sometimes by a tick and date, but more often by teacher comments. In some instances, teachers gave students constructive feedback on their homework tasks. This gives students helpful guidelines as to how to improve their work. It is recommended that this strategy be extended to all classes. In a minority of lessons students had been given the homework task of reading forward in their textbooks for the next lesson. This can create difficulty for some students, especially those for whom English is an additional language. It is recommended that when reading tasks are given to students for homework, they should involve the work that has already been covered rather than the work that has yet to be covered and that students be provided with a few short questions to focus them on the reading task.

Common examinations are held at junior cycle. This is good practice. It is recommended that visuals and short answer questions be used when preparing these common papers, as well as questions that require a longer answer. The preparation of students for the state examinations was well addressed in many lessons.

Project work also featured as an assessment mode across the school. A structured approach to student project work in TY and at Leaving Certificate level is noted and commended. Student project work of a high quality was on display in the first-year classrooms visited, as well as in some of the teacher-based classrooms visited. This is praiseworthy.

Good quality work was in evidence in copybooks and folders inspected. In some instances students were encouraged to keep their work from year to year in hard-back copies or folders. It is recommended that this good practice be extended to all classes.

The school communicates with parents through parent-teacher meetings, the school journal and reports to students’ homes twice a year.
SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Uptake levels of Leaving Certificate History are very healthy. This is a testament to the high profile that History has in the school.
- The ICT resources in the new school building are excellent and the sharing of electronic resources in History on the school’s intranet system is highly commended as a valuable support to history teaching.
- Individual teacher planning was good, with well prepared classes and good planning for resources, including some very good use of ICT, in evidence.
- Very good quality teaching and learning was seen in the lessons observed.
- The preparation of students for the state examinations was well addressed in many lessons.

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

- It is recommended that management examine ways of increasing the provision of class periods for junior cycle History.
- To extend the opportunities provided for teachers to meet as a group and to plan collaboratively, it is recommended that formal subject-department meetings are facilitated at least once a term.
- It is recommended that the use of active learning methodologies and visual sources is extended to all classes.
- It is recommended that the strategy of giving students constructive feedback on their written work is extended to all classes.

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

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