

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

**Subject Inspection of English
REPORT**

**Sancta Maria College
Louisburgh, County Mayo
Roll number: 64660F**

Date of inspection: 27 April 2010



**A N R O I N N | D E P A R T M E N T O F
O I D E A C H A I S | E D U C A T I O N
A G U S S C I L E A N N A | A N D S K I L L S**

REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN ENGLISH

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Sancta Maria College, Louisburgh. 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 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 board of management of the school 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

The four English lessons provided for each junior cycle class group each week is adequate but not generous provision. Senior cycle provision is better as Transition Year (TY) class groups have two timetabled lessons each week of English, Drama and Media Studies respectively, and fifth and sixth-year class groups have five English lessons weekly. Management timetables English concurrently in junior cycle and in sixth year and there was evidence that this concurrency is very well used by teachers in first and sixth year in particular for movement of students and for team teaching.

While there are two class groups in each of first, second and third year, management generously provides an extra teacher to create three class groups for English. Two of the class groups in each year are deemed mixed ability although almost all students aim for higher level and the third class group is made up of students with learning-support or special educational needs (SEN) or who have English as an additional language (EAL). This third class group, which contains a small number of students, is established prior to the Halloween mid-term break in first year and generally students remain in it until the end of third year. It is recommended that management, along with the English department, review this arrangement and delay the placement of students in a stand-alone SEN group until at least the beginning of second year. These students, if necessary, could be supported through co-operative teaching in mainstream classes or differentiated instruction. All students, even if they were in the very small class group up to third year, are placed in one of two mixed-ability class groups in fifth year for the entire year and are then divided into higher and ordinary level in sixth year. This situation seems to work very well and the commitment of English teachers to giving all students an opportunity to aim for higher level at this stage is laudable.

Currently, there are seven teachers teaching English in the college, one of whom is studying for the post graduate diploma in education. Two of the seven teachers have just one class group for English. A smaller teaching team with more access to English would be better. It was evident

from minutes of meetings and discussion with teachers that members of the English department support each other very well. There was also evidence of good whole-school support from management. A range of continuing professional development opportunities has been provided to all teachers in the school including in-service on assessment for learning (AfL) and co-operative learning. Teachers also provide students with opportunities to become involved in writing competitions, debating and drama, including the annual school musical. Students are also encouraged by some teachers to write for the school website. Such co-curricular opportunities for students enhance the subject and are commended.

An annual budget is made available to the English department. This allows for the building up of relevant resources. In addition, an effort is being made to create a library of suitable reading material for students. Such efforts are commended. Most teachers have their own base rooms and these are well resourced with necessary equipment including televisions, DVDs and data projectors. Almost all teacher-based rooms were stimulating learning environments for students of English. There were relevant posters, some key word posters and samples of students' work on display. This good practice should be adopted by all teachers so that students are surrounded by key quotations and other key words relevant to English and can take pride in seeing their work on display. Most teachers use their own laptops in lessons, as there is limited access to the school laptops and computers. English teachers are working to share electronic resources and therefore a shared drive on the school network could be established for this purpose.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

There is high quality planning for English and much evidence that this progressive English department works very well together. The subject is well coordinated and English teachers are afforded the opportunity to meet on a termly basis. Minutes of these meetings reflect good discussion on matters including choice of texts, attendance at performances, discussion around teaching techniques and analysis of examination results. Teachers also prepare a diagnostic window on an annual basis in an effort to improve their work. At least one teacher also distributes a questionnaire to students in relation to teaching methods used. This reflective practice is highly commended. Teachers in each year follow common programmes of work which facilitates movement of students, common examinations and similar standards. In senior cycle, some teachers share class groups to teach certain aspects of the course such as poetry and film studies thus maximising their strengths. This is good practice. There is also a strong focus on developing links between other subjects and English.

The range of texts and genres taught to each year group is highly commended. Students study at least one novel and play in each of first, second and third year. It is praiseworthy that those in the lower junior cycle class groups also study an equally wide range of texts. TY students have the opportunity to study drama in detail and also study a novel and film in a comparative manner, as well as other genres. The TY English course is designed in the true spirit of the programme and is commended. It is suggested that each TY student maintain a portfolio of their work in English. A wide range of texts is also studied in senior cycle with four comparative texts being taught from which students are free to choose three. Teachers of English in the school ensure that there is an incremental approach to the acquisition of skills in English and it is to their credit that students are prepared very well not only for success in the state examinations but are also given exposure to developing a long-term interest in reading, drama and the subject in general, in keeping with the overall worthy aims of the English department.

The subject documentation includes relevant syllabuses, EAL and SEN resources and plans for each year and topic. These topic-specific plans outline in detail what is to be taught, to what purpose, suitable teaching methods, time allowed for the topic and evaluation of the topic. They are a very good guide for all teachers working to a common purpose.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

There was a high quality of teaching and learning in evidence in Sancta Maria College. The hard work of the English department was in evidence throughout the evaluation as seen from very good students' learning, the amount of students' written work and the success of students in state examinations in English. In addition, the high expectations of teachers for their students could be seen in all lessons and in the numbers of students taking higher level in state examinations in English.

A range of different teaching styles was in evidence varying from the more traditional teacher-dominant lesson to lessons where students were encouraged to become full participants in the lesson through discussion, answering questions and independent learning opportunities. In a couple of lessons the teachers were inclined to tell or give their opinion on texts rather than inviting the students to comment. Better practice would be to invite student contributions first. All lessons were effective, although lessons where students actively participate and are encouraged to explore and discuss are better for independent learning skills, which will serve them throughout life. Pair work, when seen, was very effective as students were given clear instructions about the task and the reporting back procedures during the plenary session. Opportunities for students to work independently or in groups in lessons also facilitated individual attention where necessary. Other effective strategies included brainstorming, prediction, dramatisation and focusing on key moments. Effective resources used during lessons included handouts, the board and information and communication technology. Lively teaching led to interesting and purposeful lessons.

In almost all lessons, a range of very good questions was asked to elicit student response as a pre-reading exercise or during the body of the lesson. These questions ranged from lower to higher order and covered all students, catering for different abilities in the classroom. Such questioning led and challenged students to develop a better understanding of their work. Good work on vocabulary development and on descriptive writing was noted in a number of lessons. The pace of almost all lessons was appropriate and there was a good break-up of tasks and sections of the lessons. Students had covered an appropriate range of work for the time of year and examination classes were doing effective revision work.

A feature of all lessons was the very good teacher explanations. Many teachers linked the topic of the lesson with the students' own world or with other texts or subjects which put learning in context. This practice is one that could be adopted by all teachers to make learning relevant. In addition, the opportunities that students have to practise writing in a range of genres is clearly paying off. It was evident that the four key skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening are being developed in most lessons. Very good practice was seen when the teaching of language and literature was integrated. In this regard, functional writing exercises were generated from the study of the novel, and the language of the novel was examined at times for examples of good descriptive writing.

Students were consistently focused on their learning and a respectful but friendly relationship was in evidence throughout so that there was a pleasant atmosphere in all lessons. Students

impressively discussed their work with the inspector and demonstrated in their lessons that they were able to analyse and compare texts.

ASSESSMENT

Students are tested on a regular basis in the school, with reports sent home three times each year based on continuous assessment and in-house tests in October, formal examinations in February and class-based tests in the summer. Common examinations are given where appropriate and examination classes sit 'mock' examinations in February.

English teachers are clearly implementing AfL strategies and English copy work was well corrected with very good formative comments made. Students' copies were generally of a very good standard and contained a range of relevant work, including many examples of longer pieces of writing. This is very good practice.

The draft English homework policy is very good and stipulates, among other things, the amount of homework students in each year should get on a weekly basis and the minimum amount of essays per year. It is suggested that teachers also include an expectation for the need to redraft work if not of a certain standard.

As noted already, the examination results in English are commended as seen from the large uptake of higher level and the high attainment rate each year. Very good practice also takes place in that these results are analysed by management and the subject department with a view to constant improvement. Results of in-house examinations are also monitored throughout the year.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- There is high quality planning for English and much evidence that this is a reflective, collaborative and progressive English department.
- The range of texts and genres taught to each year group is highly commended so that students are prepared very well for success in the state examinations and are also given exposure to developing a long-term interest in reading, drama and the subject in general.
- There was a high quality of teaching and learning in evidence as seen from very good students' learning, the amount of students' written work and the success of students in state examinations in English.
- Teachers have appropriately high expectations of their students and students have frequent opportunities to practise writing in a range of genres. This work is very well corrected.

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 along with the English department, review the current arrangement of forming a small stand-alone lower stream for first-year students and delay the placement of students in such a stand-alone group until at least the beginning of second year.
- Opportunities for more active learning could be explored in some lessons.

A post-evaluation meeting were held with the 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

The Board of Management is delighted with the content of the report. The Board joins with the inspectorate in commending the English Department on its professionalism and achievements.

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 Management had already commenced the training and implementation of team teaching to promote inclusion in the mainstream classroom. This is working successfully to date and provides opportunities for active learning in all English classes.