An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection of Geography
REPORT

St Louis Secondary School
Carrickmacross, County Monaghan
Roll number: 64760J

Date of inspection: 14 December 2010
REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN GEOGRAPHY

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in St Louis Secondary School. 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 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 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

St Louis Secondary School is an all girls’ school with a current enrolment of five hundred and seventy seven students. There is very good whole school support for Geography with the provision of a dedicated geography room, a wide range of resources, which are used to support teaching and learning. An agreed timetable for the use of the dedicated geography room is in place. The school has engaged with the Green School programme and to date has achieved two green flags. It is hoped to gain a third green flag in the current school year. This initiative supports the aims of the geography syllabuses and deserves to be acknowledged.

Geography is a core subject in the school’s curriculum in junior cycle. In first year three single class periods per week are allocated to the subject. Two single class periods per week in second and third year with a third class period on alternate weeks are allocated to Geography. The school is currently reviewing junior cycle provision and as part of this review consideration should be given to increasing the time allocation to Geography in second and third year. At senior cycle students participate in a compulsory Transition Year (TY) programme where Geography is offered as an optional module. It is recommended that the module on Geography included within the TY be delivered to all students on this programme. Students are provided with an open choice of subject for the established Leaving Certificate. There is scope to increase the uptake of Geography for this course. An allocation of three single class periods and one double is in line with syllabus recommendations. All class groups are taught in a mixed-ability class setting in line with best practice. Lessons are well distributed across students’ timetables.

Five teachers currently deliver the geography programme in St Louis. They are all subject specialists and have availed of continuing professional development (CPD) both in relation to Geography and to whole-school issues.
Information and communications technology (ICT) plays an important part in the delivery of the planned teaching programme. ICT was used in some of the lessons observed and teachers use electronic media to share resources. Students have created a website where they can share their resources and students use ICT to make digital presentations.

Teachers are made aware of students with special educational needs and discussions take place with the learning support department. Where appropriate, students are provided with reasonable accommodations in the pre-examinations and this is good practice. The need for differentiated strategies in teaching is recognised by the geography teachers. Students are withdrawn for learning support which focuses on literacy and numeracy. Consideration should be given to the introduction of team teaching as a further means of providing supports for students.

Planning and Preparation

Documentation provided during the evaluation and discussions held with teachers indicated that a culture of collaborative planning exists amongst the members of the geography department. Minutes of department meetings contained evidence of monitoring and review of the planned teaching programme. The planning process is supported by the provision of formal planning time by school management once per term and by the work of a subject co-ordinator. These are very good practices.

The collaborative approach by the geography teachers has resulted in the development of a comprehensive plan for the department. The plan includes the school’s mission statement and a similar statement for the geography department. It outlines the organisational arrangements for the subject. A long-term curriculum plan for all year groups is in place which identifies topics to be taught on a half-yearly basis and makes reference to teaching methods, assessment and homework. The identification and inclusion of learning outcomes linked to these headings would provide a clearer focus on student learning and is recommended as an area for development. Resources provided during the evaluation will support this.

The subject department plan for first year commendably begins with the study of Ordnance Survey (OS) maps before introducing physical geography. It is recommended that the use of large-scale maps of the local area as well as local photographs would make this more interesting and appropriate for students. The introduction of these key geographical skills at an early stage in the planned teaching programme facilitates their integration into other topics. Consideration should also be given to reducing the focus on physical geography in the second half of first year as it presents significant challenges for students in terms of technical vocabulary and understanding complex geomorphic processes. The study of Economic Activities, as outlined in Part C of the Junior Certificate Geography syllabus, merits consideration at this stage by teachers.

A written plan for the geography module within the TY was provided. This plan outlines three units for study within the planned teaching programme. Notable features include an investigative and explorative approach to the study of Geography. Students are required to carry out research on a European country of their choice and to make a group presentation. During the evaluation some students presented the results of their research to the inspector and were impressive both in the geographical knowledge and the ICT skills they had developed. The inclusion of a geographical investigation is most appropriate and being set in a local context is good practice.
All lessons observed were well planned and formed part of a larger unit of study. It was evident that teachers are following the agreed long-term curriculum plan. Teachers had prepared resources which were used to support teaching and learning. These resources included worksheets, digital presentations, revision summaries and sketch maps. Some teachers also made available folders of resources that had been developed over a period of time. The development of such teacher-generated resources is very good practice and provides additional supports to students.

**TEACHING AND LEARNING**

The good practice of sharing the planned learning outcomes with students was evident in the lessons observed. In some instances these could have been more explicit and writing these on the whiteboard and ticking them off when achieved would provide additional motivation for students.

Very high quality teaching was evident in almost all of the classrooms visited. Best practice was evident where there was a good balance between teacher input, teacher-student interaction and student activity. Students were particularly engaged when pair work was used. There was also a very creative approach to the presentation of a topic on Geocology by the use of visualisation. This method of presentation effectively engaged students and encouraged them to become independent learners and not just become ‘note takers’. Teaching was less effective when teacher input was the main medium of instruction and where there was an over-reliance on the use of the textbook.

The geography room provided a rich and stimulating learning environment. Maps, charts, photographs and students’ projects were displayed. Key terms relating to climate were displayed and this is good practice. It is suggested that lists of key words relating to topics in Geography be developed and displayed as a means of supporting the development of students’ literacy. This could form part of a policy on literacy and numeracy which it is recommended that the geography teaching team develop. These key terms could then be shared with the learning support department.

A notable feature of some lessons was the invitational style of questioning used by the teachers. Students were encouraged to offer explanations and to suggest ideas in relation to the topics under discussion. This very good approach encourages students to develop their critical thinking skills rather than simply recalling factual information. The wider use of this approach is encouraged. Teachers affirmed students for their contributions to class discussions.

Teachers have adopted a visual approach to the teaching of Geography. The use of digital presentations, the overhead projector and the recording of the main points in some lessons on the whiteboard catered for the visual learners in classrooms. The use of students’ own experiences helped to clarify geographic concepts and facilitated understanding. Very good practice was also evident as students were discussing chemical weathering when OS maps and aerial photographs from the textbook were used to develop the topic. The integration of these key geographical skills into lessons is commendable.

Students are making good progress in their study of Geography. During lessons and in discussions with the inspector students displayed a good knowledge of the language and concepts of the subject. They were also competent when using their map and photograph skills.
ASSESSMENT

Students’ progress is assessed in a variety of ways by teachers in St Louis Secondary School. These include ongoing assessment during lessons, the regular setting and monitoring of homework, table quizzes and holding class tests when sections of the planned teaching programme have been completed. A homework policy has been developed and students record homework in their journals. There is need to ensure that all students follow this good practice. Arrangements are in place for the formal assessment of students’ progress. The setting of common test papers for class groups is commended.

Formal assessment at the end of the first term is by way of continuous assessment. However, the format of that assessment process and the number of assessments to be used in arriving at a final assessment mark were not standardised across the department. Agreed procedures need to be developed and implemented in relation to the process of continuous assessment used in the first term so as to ensure a consistent and accurate assessment of students’ progress. Teachers maintain records of attendance, homework and class tests. Parents receive progress reports following formal assessments and student progress is also reported on at formal parent-teacher meetings held annually for each year group.

During the evaluation a sample of students’ copybooks was viewed. The good practice of having two copybooks was noted, one for homework and the other is used by students to retain a record of their work. The standard of students’ written work was good. However, some students would benefit from having their work more closely monitored by teachers. It was noted that where students had written answers to past examination questions they had received feedback from their teachers. The use of assessment for learning principles can make a significant contribution to improving the quality of students’ written answers. However, this would be most effective when feedback is very specific.

Significant numbers of students take higher-level papers in the certificate examinations and students’ achievement is very good. It is suggested that the geography teaching team analyse the results from the certificate examinations as a means of identifying strengths and to inform future planning for the long-term curriculum plan for Geography.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- There is very good whole school support for Geography with the provision of a dedicated geography room and a wide range of resources, which are used to support teaching and learning.
- Members of the geography department have worked collaboratively and this has resulted in the sharing of resources and in the development of a comprehensive subject department plan.
- ICT is being used very effectively to enable teachers to share resources, and to support teaching, and students can access resources via a dedicated website. Students use ICT for research and for presentation purposes.
- All lessons observed were well planned and teachers had prepared resources which were used to support teaching and learning.
• Very high quality teaching was observed in almost all of the lessons observed.
• Students are making good progress in their study of Geography and displayed a good knowledge of the language and concepts of the subject.
• A homework policy has been developed and students’ progress is assessed in a variety of ways.
• Significant numbers of students take higher-level papers in the certificate examinations and students’ achievement is very good.

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

• Consideration should be given to increasing the time allocation to Geography in second and third year.
• It is recommended that the module on Geography included within the TY be delivered to all students on this programme.
• The first-year teaching plan should be reviewed and should include the development of key OS map and photograph skills preferably using large-scale maps and photographs of the local area.
• Agreed procedures need to be developed and implemented in relation to the process of continuous assessment used in the first term so as to ensure a consistent and accurate assessment of students’ progress.

A post-evaluation meeting was held with the teachers of Geography and 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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