Subject Inspection of
Social, Personal and Health Education
REPORT

Mercy Secondary School,
Mounthawk, Tralee, County Kerry
Roll number: 68070E

Date of inspection: 6 May 2011
REPORT ON THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN SOCIAL, PERSONAL & HEALTH EDUCATION (SPHE) INCLUDING RELATIONSHIPS & SEXUALITY EDUCATION (RSE)

INFORMATION ON THE INSPECTION

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<td>• Review of relevant documents</td>
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<td>• Discussion with principal, one of the deputy principals, and teachers</td>
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MAIN FINDINGS

- The overall quality of teaching and learning in SPHE is good, with some very good practice observed.
- The school’s readiness to participate in student-focused, skills-enhancing initiatives indicates its commitment to the affective education of its students.
- Appropriate provision is made for SPHE and RSE at junior cycle.
- The school’s policy in relation to the delivery of SPHE and RSE has been documented, and is being reviewed currently.
- A well-developed subject plan contains detailed programmes of work.

MAIN RECOMMENDATIONS

- In order to raise the already good overall quality of teaching and learning to very good or excellent, consideration ought to be given to providing for the following: collaborative planning by teams of year-group teachers, focusing on the sharing of resource expertise and experience; additional training for teachers through attendance at centrally organised workshops; and a reduction in the overall number of SPHE teachers.
INTRODUCTION
Mercy Secondary School is a Catholic, voluntary, co-educational secondary school, with a current enrolment of 1,171 students.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

- The overall quality of teaching and learning in SPHE is good, with some very good practice observed.
- Overall, individual teacher planning for lessons was also good and, at times, very good. This resulted in lessons that incorporated carefully chosen resources, and that were purposeful, well structured and appropriately paced. On occasion, over-ambitious planning left little time for the facilitation of lesson summary. As relevant, this should be addressed at lesson planning and delivery stages.
- Teachers demonstrated high levels of competence in the use of information communication technologies.
- Best practice was observed where teachers made distinct references to module and topic at lesson outset. Coupled with this, these teachers also shared with students the planned learning for the lesson, revisiting this at lesson conclusion in order to evaluate students’ understanding and learning. This approach is highly recommended.
- In a number of lessons, teachers sought to establish continuity for students by referencing topics previously explored and by sharing, at lesson conclusion, the plan for the following lesson. This is very good practice in SPHE, where students contact with the subject is limited to once a week. This approach is further encouraged.
- Lessons were generally student-centred, requiring the active participation of students in their own learning. This, very often, offered opportunities for collaborative learning. In almost all instances, student activity was well organised and managed.
- Provision for the first phase of the experiential learning method, namely the experiencing or ‘activity’ phase, was good. In some lessons, too much time was spent on this phase, leaving insufficient time for the reflection, analysis and evaluation that is associated with the ‘processing’ and ‘generalising’ phases of this learning method. At times, teachers tended to draw conclusions for students, as opposed to facilitating students to do this for themselves.
- Of all four phases, the ‘applying’ phase, which is linked to assessment, and which can support teachers in the evaluation of student learning, was least well accommodated. Teachers are referred to the revised Health Service Executive (HSE) West publications, namely Healthy Living, Healthy Times and Healthy Choices, as these publications illustrate how all four phases can be provided for within lessons.
- Classroom atmosphere was very good. Students responded well to teacher direction, with some teachers demonstrating high levels of proficiency in the management of the more challenging student. The rapport between teachers and students was very positive.
**SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT**

- The whole-school climate is most supportive of the aims of the SPHE syllabus. This is evident in the many student-focused, skills-enhancing initiatives in which the school participates. The contribution of the voluntary, parents’ pastoral committee to this aspect of school life is significant. The school also avails of the support of external agencies such as Jigsaw Kerry, Kerry Life Education and Kerry Youth Diocesan Services.
- Appropriate provision is made for SPHE at junior cycle. The value that the school places on providing for the affective education of its students is also evident in senior cycle. Fifth year students, for example, can participate in a Positive Psychology course.
- RSE is appropriately delivered as a module within junior cycle SPHE. While management and staff provided assurances, as well as supporting documentation, that senior cycle RSE is delivered within Religious Education, students interviewed as part of the evaluation were less clear in relation to such provision. This suggests that teachers may need to make explicit reference to themes and topics when delivering senior cycle RSE. Consideration might also be given to providing students with a copy of the school’s senior cycle RSE programme.
- The school’s SPHE and RSE policy is under review. Prior to finalising the review, attention should be given to the Department of Education and Skills sample policy. It is suggested that outline SPHE and RSE programmes of work be appended to the policy.
- The SPHE team is quite large. However, it is good that a good percentage of teachers are experienced in SPHE, having been deployed to teach the subject for a number of years. Other positive deployment practices are the provision for continuity of teacher from second to third year and, as practicable, the timetabling of first-year SPHE teachers for another subject with their respective classes. In the interest of enhancing the already good quality of teaching and learning observed in the subject, it is suggested that it would be worthwhile to reduce the overall number of teachers involved. Provision for greater gender balance in team composition should also be a consideration.
- In the main, the professional development needs of the SPHE team have been catered for through school visits of the SPHE Support Service. It is recommended that teachers’ attendance at centrally organised workshops also be accommodated. It is also suggested that an audit of teachers’ needs be completed, the outcomes of which should inform a more systematic and incremental approach to teachers’ continuing professional development.

**PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

- There are many positive findings relating to planning and preparation for teaching and learning in SPHE including, for example, the existence of a core planning team, the organisation and minuting of meetings of this team, and the existence of a well-developed subject plan which contains detailed programmes of work.
- There is clear evidence of teachers providing individual guidance to each other. However, the relatively large number of SPHE teachers is impacting on teachers’ capacity to plan collaboratively as a team. Due to the fact that it is not feasible for all teachers to attend a meeting at one time, it is recommended that consideration be given to the organisation of meetings for groups of year-group teachers. The members of the core team could lead the work of these year-group teams.
It is suggested that, initially, these year-group teams focus on the following: updating existing programmes of work to reflect current classroom practice; facilitating discussions around resources for each module; and agreeing a list of possible resources for each module. This work should be informed by module aims and learning outcomes.

The draft findings and recommendations arising out of this evaluation were discussed with the principal, one of the deputy principals and subject teachers at the conclusion of the evaluation.

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.

Published, February 2012
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 of Mercy Secondary School Mounthawk welcomes the report on the quality of teaching and learning in SPHE. While the report focused on SPHE classroom provision and recognised the quality of teaching in the classroom, we are pleased that the report also acknowledged that “the whole-school climate is most supportive of the aims of SPHE syllabus”. This recognition is important since Mercy Mounthawk is fundamentally committed to the affective education of our students as a key feature of the holistic ethos of the school. This is practically realised through the Health Promotion Initiatives, the morning assemblies, the involvement of a voluntary parents committee and our engagement with several local and community organisations in the area of physical, emotional and mental health promotion. It is the educational philosophy of the school that class based SPHE provision is only one component of our whole school approach to holistic education. The overall culture of the school is of central importance in effectively promoting the SPHE agenda.

Area 2  Follow-up actions planned or undertaken since the completion of the inspection activity to implement the findings and recommendations of the inspection.

School management has begun implementing the main recommendations.

Collaborative planning, which existed across the SPHE department as a whole, has been restructured by the establishment of year based teaching teams which allows for the sharing of resources specific to that year group, as recommended.

Additional training for teachers at centrally organised workshops has been facilitated in the first term of 2011, as recommended, to complement the significant in-house CPD already provided through visits by the SPHE support team and independently sourced facilitators. CPD is ongoing.