Subject Inspection of History
REPORT

St. Farnan’s Post Primary School
Prosperous, Co. Kildare
Roll number: 70720G

Date of inspection: 4 March 2010
SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in St. Farnan’s Post Primary School, Prosperous, Co. Kildare. 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 to the Acting Principal and subject teachers. 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

History is offered as a core subject in St. Farnan’s Post-Primary School at junior cycle and as an optional subject at Leaving Certificate level. There is very satisfactory time allocation for History in the school. Junior cycle students have either three or four periods per week and Leaving Certificate students have five periods of History per week. These periods are, in the main, well spread across the week and between morning and afternoon slots.

There is good support in the school for students having difficulty accessing the subject. Team teaching in History has been made available to some class groups. While classes are mixed ability in first year, the Junior Certificate Schools Programme (JCSP) is followed by one of the class groups studying History in both second and third year.

There are very good arrangements in place for student access to the subject at senior level. Students are offered an open subject choice from the full list of subjects available in the school and option bands are then created to accommodate as many students’ choices as possible. Students are well supported when making their choices. A third-year information night is organised to inform students with regard to senior cycle. Subject teachers also talk to students with regard to their subjects.

Well appointed classrooms were seen during the course of the inspection, all with good storage facilities and many with mounted data projectors. Mobile data projectors are also available to teachers. Good commitment on the part of management to encouraging the use of information and communication technology (ICT) in the classroom is noted and commended. It is suggested that a history notice board, located in a central area of the school, would help to promote History in the school.

It is laudable that history field trips, to places of local and national historical interest, are facilitated. This extracurricular support is a good foundation for historical studies. It is also
commendable that management has facilitated teachers’ attendance at history in-service and encourages teachers to be members of subject associations. The History Teachers’ Association of Ireland (HTAI) offers a good range of continuous professional development activities in the course of the school year and it is suggested that membership of this association would be a good support to history teachers in the school. Teachers are also encouraged to check the web-site of the Second Level Support Service, www.slss.ie, for information about in-service sessions for Leaving Certificate History.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

There are, at present, five teachers in the subject department. The department is ably co-ordinated by one of these teachers. Meetings are held regularly and minutes are available. A good level of informal collaboration between teachers, including the sharing of resources, is noted and commended.

The department folder contains the subject plan and other relevant documentation. Schemes of work have been submitted for all year groups. These are laid out on a termly basis. This good practice facilitates the holding of common examinations. Good awareness of syllabus and programme requirements is evident in subject plans. The department folder also contains subject review forms for each class group which are filled out by teachers at the end of each academic year. These detail work completed and challenges met during the year. This is a good aid to teachers new to the department. It is suggested that dating these forms would bring extra clarity to this worthwhile process.

Good arrangements are in place for the purchase of new resources for the subject. At the start of the year, the department meets to decide which resources would best support teaching and learning in the subject and apply to management for a department budget. It is recommended that existing resources be catalogued and included in the department planning folder and the list updated as new resources are acquired. A central storage area for history resources has been made available. It is suggested that resources be made available electronically in a history folder on the schools’ intranet system.

Good practice is in place in the department with regard to supporting students with additional educational needs. Teachers show good awareness of the needs of students in JCSP classes and routinely adapt content and resources to suit these classes and students. It is recommended that these good practices are shared at department meetings and that schemes of work for JCSP classes are included in the subject plan as well as a section on teaching students with additional educational needs. It is also recommended that the department plan be expanded to include a new section on teaching methodologies for History.

Very good cross-curricular and extracurricular planning was in evidence in the course of the inspection. The collaboration of the history and art departments in preparing classes and resources is worthy of particular note. Good collaboration between the history department and the team supporting students with additional educational needs was also in evidence. Good planning for history field trips was noted. It is a measure of the dedication of members of the department that many teachers routinely offer extra classes outside school time to students sitting state examinations.
TEACHING AND LEARNING

Very good quality teaching and learning was seen in the course of the inspection. In all lessons observed teachers introduced the topic to the students at the start of class. In some instances teachers introduced the intended learning outcomes of the lesson to students on the board or on posters affixed to the board and in one case the teacher made time for review at the end of class. These strategies bring clarity to the learning process and it is suggested that they are extended to all classrooms.

A range of teaching methodologies was seen in the course of the inspection. Questioning was a feature of all lessons and was used to good effect to revise material and to invite students to reflect on the material being covered. The use of a good mix of higher-order and lower-order questioning seen in some instances is commended. Teachers are encouraged to ensure that a good spread of questions includes all students in the learning process. The use of active-learning methodologies observed in most lessons observed is commended. For example, in one junior cycle lesson, students were invited at first to individually complete a revision worksheet on Ireland in the 1930s. Later on in the same lesson, students were divided into pairs to do a comparative exercise on the governments of the 1920s and 1930s. This offered students both independent and collaborative learning opportunities. It is recommended that active-learning opportunities like these be created in lessons at every opportunity.

Individual teacher planning was very good, including good planning for resources. Teachers are commended for adapting resources to meet the needs of their students. For example, in one JCSP class, the teacher had produced a cloze test for students. Very good use of visuals was seen in many lessons observed. This is praiseworthy as it caters for students with a visual learning style. In a lesson on the Famine, for example, acetates of a famine ship, evictions and workhouses brought a very good visual element to the lesson. Effective use of information and communication technology (ICT) was also seen in many lessons observed as evidenced, for example, by the showing of a PowerPoint presentation on life in ancient Rome.

Very good development of historical skills was seen in many lessons observed. There was a good focus on local history in some lessons. For example, reference was made in one lesson to a Quaker graveyard in the locality. In a senior cycle classroom, the use of documents allowed the teacher to introduce the idea of author bias. In one lesson observed, a high level of teacher input meant that only one side of a political argument was given. It is recommended that all teachers ensure that they model the skills of the historian and present the historical material to students with balance and objectivity.

Good links to students’ experiences were seen in many lessons. For example, in one lesson the teacher explained the open-field system of farming by referring to the type of farming undertaken on the Curragh, Co. Kildare.

Good behaviour and classroom management were seen in all lessons observed. Teacher-pupil rapport was very good and a good classroom atmosphere prevailed throughout. Teachers dealt with student difficulties in a sensitive manner.
ASSESSMENT

A good range of assessment practices was in evidence over the course of the inspection. A homework policy is in place and homework is given regularly and frequently monitored in all classrooms visited. It is recommended that drawing tasks, based on visuals, be given to students in junior cycle as class work or homework where relevant. In a few classrooms Assessment for Learning (AFL) strategies, where teachers give pointers to students on how to improve their work, were used. It is recommended that AFL strategies be adopted across the department. Common examinations are in place at junior cycle.

Very good preparation for certificate examinations was seen in many lessons observed. The sharing of marking criteria with students in examination classes is suggested as an additional way to support students in these classes. More information on marking schemes and examination criteria can be found at www.examination.ie. Students are encouraged to achieve at a high level. While this is good practice, care should be taken to enter students for examinations at a level commensurate with their ability to achieve at that level.

Teachers keep good records of student progress. Assessment outcomes are shared with students’ homes by means of the student journal, reports home and parent-teacher meetings.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- There is very satisfactory curriculum provision for History in St. Farnan’s Post-Primary School.
- There is good support for students who have difficulty accessing the subject.
- Good commitment on the part of management to encouraging the use of ICT in the classroom is noted.
- Very good cross-curricular and extracurricular planning was in evidence in the course of the inspection.
- Individual teacher planning was very good, including planning for resources.
- Very good quality teaching and learning were seen in the course of the inspection.
- Homework is given regularly and frequently monitored.

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

- It is recommended that schemes of work for JCSP classes are included in the subject plan as well as a section on teaching students with additional educational needs.
- It is recommended that active-learning opportunities be created in lessons at every opportunity.
- It is recommended that AFL strategies be adopted across the department.

A post-evaluation meeting was held with the Acting Principal and teachers 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

We are delighted with the main findings of the report and welcome the recommendations. With regard to the schemes of work for the JCSP classes the policy within the school has been to encourage the JCSP students to access their subjects to as high a level as possible. We try to enable them to do so within their small class groupings and by encouraging the Teachers to use differentiated learning strategies for those that are weakest.

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

AfL is an ongoing project within the school and it is hoped to resume this work as soon as School Development Planning is fully resumed in all schools.