

**An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna**  
**Department of Education and Skills**

**Subject Inspection of English**  
**REPORT**

**Finn Valley College**  
**Stranorlar, County Donegal**  
**Roll number: 71240U**

**Date of inspection: 17 May 2012**



AN ROINN | DEPARTMENT OF  
OIDEACHAIS | EDUCATION  
AGUS SCILEANNA | AND SKILLS

**REPORT  
ON  
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN ENGLISH**

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**INFORMATION ON THE INSPECTION**

<b>Dates of inspection</b>	16 and 17 May
<b>Inspection activities undertaken</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Review of relevant documents</li><li>• Discussion with principal and teachers</li><li>• Interaction with students</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Observation of teaching and learning during seven periods</li><li>• Examination of students' work</li><li>• Feedback to principal and teachers</li><li>• Meeting with subject co-ordinators</li></ul>

**MAIN FINDINGS**

- The quality of teaching and learning ranged from good overall to exemplary in a small minority of cases.
- A student-centred approach informed the use of resources and the teaching methods deployed.
- Assessment practice has many positive features.
- Students are encouraged to achieve but there is scope for target setting to increase uptake of higher-level English.
- The school has a well-qualified and very committed teaching team; just under half of the English teachers have very limited timetabling commitment to English.
- Departmental planning is very good and there is evidence of reflective practice and a capacity for self-evaluation and action planning.

**MAIN RECOMMENDATIONS**

- Learning outcomes should be revisited at the end of lessons to establish if these have been achieved and to inform planning for learning.
- To help the school meet its obligation to plan for improvement in the area of examination attainment under the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) action plan, the English department should set targets for increasing uptake of higher-level English in both the Leaving Certificate and Junior Certificate programmes.
- While acknowledging competing demands in the area of deployment, every effort should be made to ensure that all teachers have sufficient contact with the subject across all programmes and levels to deepen and enrich experience and to build capacity.
- Timetabling for Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) English should be reviewed.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Finn Valley College is a co-educational post-primary school under the management of County Donegal Vocational Education Committee (VEC). It has a current enrolment of 303 students. The school participates in the DEIS action plan. English is compulsory in the Junior Certificate, the Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP), the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) and the established Leaving Certificate. In the LCA programme, English and Communications is provided. Twenty-five students are enrolled in Post-Leaving Certificate (PLC) courses.

## **TEACHING AND LEARNING**

- The quality of teaching and learning ranged from good overall to exemplary in a small minority of cases.
- Lessons were well planned. Learning intentions were clearly conveyed to students at the outset. In the best lessons, expected learning outcomes were written on the board.
- A good range of resources was used to engage students in learning. It is commendable that an audio reading of a play was used to enrich students' experience and understanding. Information and communication technology (ICT) was used effectively, for example, for revision purposes.
- Pre-reading strategies such as the introduction of keywords are appropriately in line with the school's plans to improve literacy. There is a good focus on the development of reading skills such as comprehension and analysis. Good reinforcement of genre was observed in one lesson. There was a positive emphasis on creative writing in another and this good practice should be extended.
- Students receive a very good level of teacher support and this builds confidence. There is a very warm rapport between teachers and students and they are encouraged to achieve.
- Questioning strategy was good and maintained a balance between lower-order and higher-order questions and between global and targeted questioning. To build on this good practice, strategies such as use of "traffic lights" and student self-assessment should be considered to give teachers further feedback on the effectiveness of their teaching practice.
- Collaborative learning was encouraged. In one exemplary lesson, group work was used very well to develop a range of skills, including social skills. This is highly commended. It is suggested that peer observation of such effective practice would contribute significantly to the professional development of staff in this and other subject areas.
- Assessment practice had many good features. In the best examples, written teacher feedback in copybooks directed student learning. Learning was monitored through teacher observation and questioning and through individual support as students worked in groups. In one instance, there was good use of peer-assessment and this strategy could be more widely used. At the end of lessons, learning outcomes shared at the start should be revisited to assess if these have been achieved and to inform future planning based on evidence gathered.
- A range of co-curricular and extra-curricular activities support and enrich students' experience of English.

## **SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT**

- Timetabling provision for Junior Certificate is satisfactory with five lessons in years one and two, and four in year three. Three lessons are provided for LCA, years one and two. This is adequate but distribution is poor and not conducive to continuity of learning. It is recommended that four lessons, distributed evenly over the week, be provided throughout the LCA programme to create optimal learning conditions and to improve literacy outcomes. Five lessons in each year of the established Leaving Certificate programme is adequate provision to meet syllabus requirements.
- The school has identified literacy as a key emphasis. Students with significant difficulties are allocated additional lessons.
- The school does not have a pre-entrance test. After an initial, intensive eight-week course in English, summative assessment outcomes are used to assign first-year students to higher-level and ordinary-level classes. This is an innovative strategy and has the merit of creating equality of opportunity. It is encouraging to note that the numbers taking foundation level in the junior cycle have been falling. In co-operation with management, the subject department should explore ways to improve uptake of higher-level English in both the Leaving Certificate and Junior Certificate programmes. Targets should be set in line with examination attainment targets documented in the school's DEIS plan.
- The subject is well resourced. It has a very well stocked library with a range of reading material to cater for a variety of interests and ability range. The library is availed of by class groups and individuals.
- The school has a well-qualified and committed teaching team. Just under half of the teachers have one mainstream class group for the subject. In line with the Department of Education and Skills report, *Looking at English*, and notwithstanding competing demands in other subject areas, every effort should be made to deploy teachers across programmes and levels to deepen and enrich experience and to build capacity

## **PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

- A comprehensive plan for the subject was presented during the evaluation and was of good quality with commendable documentation of aims, objectives, resources and methods.
  - Planning for learning to improve students' competencies in the syllabus areas of speaking and listening is an area for development.
  - The team is conscious of the need to review junior cycle texts.
  - The teaching team, led by two subject co-ordinators, demonstrated a capacity for reflection and self-evaluation. Statistics have been gathered on examination outcomes and there has also been an evaluation of the reading strategy, Drop Everything and Read. The team engaged very positively with the inspector during the evaluation by commencing work on assessment linked to learning outcomes and on a reading policy as these were areas identified for development. Further work will need to be done on an ongoing basis in consultation with the teaching team. The teachers and co-ordinators are highly commended for their work to date.
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The draft findings and recommendations arising out of this evaluation were discussed with the principal and subject teachers at the conclusion of the evaluation. 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.