Subject Inspection of Business Subjects
REPORT

New Ross Vocational College
New Ross, County Wexford
Roll number: 71660T

Date of inspection: 14 October 2010
REPORT ON THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN BUSINESS SUBJECTS

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in New Ross Vocational College. It presents the findings of an evaluation of the quality of teaching and learning in Business subjects and makes recommendations for the further development of the teaching of this subject in the school. The evaluation was conducted over one day 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, deputy principal and subject teachers. The board of management was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the evaluation; a response was not received from the board.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

New Ross Vocational College participates in the Department of Education and Skills DEIS initiative (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) including the School Completion Programme. It is a small school with small class sizes; nevertheless, it provides a range of curricular programmes including the Junior Certificate Schools Programme (JSCP) and Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA). Business education is provided in junior cycle, senior cycle and in the various Post-Leaving Certificate (PLC) courses offered in the school.

Business Studies is one of the ten optional subjects for the junior cycle. An information night is held in May for prospective first-year students and their parents, at which subject teachers and the guidance counsellor outline the optional subjects available. Students, on enrolling in the school, may choose Business Studies or Technical Graphics. There is a flexible approach to student movement between optional subjects up to the end of September. Considering the range of subjects offered to students in this small school, the uptake rate for Business Studies is good; however, the actual number taking the subject is small, with a correspondingly small number taking Business in the Leaving Certificate.

Business is an optional subject on the Leaving Certificate curriculum, and students choose their subjects in consultation with subject teachers, parents and guidance counsellor. Senior management has endeavoured to maintain the subject as an option for students and in doing so has had to amalgamate the current fifth-year and sixth-year class groups. Senior management and subject teachers are commended in their endeavours to maintain Business at senior cycle. It is praiseworthy that each fifth-year student in the school is given a class period of Enterprise to develop entrepreneurial skills. To build on this good provision it may be worthwhile to consider the introduction of the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme as a curricular option.

The time allocated to teaching all business subjects is very good. Students in junior cycle have four class periods in first year and five thereafter and senior cycle students have five class
periods. There is a good mix of double and single class periods and these are evenly spread throughout the week.

Currently, there is some access to information and communication technology (ICT) through the provision of a mobile data projector and laptop for use in classrooms, and through access to three computer rooms or other classrooms with data projectors when they are available. It would be prudent to maximise the use of these resources by ensuring that business teachers have formal access to these facilities. Business teachers are generally classroom based but, due to a current building programme, some share a classroom with other subject teachers. While there are some business-related posters in classrooms, there is scope to further develop classrooms as stimulating environments for business education.

Business teachers are supported in ongoing continuing professional development; senior management facilitates attendance at in-service courses. Teachers have attended some Enterprise workshops and Business Studies Teachers Association of Ireland (BSTAI) meetings and conferences. Business teachers have also availed of whole school in-service on topics such as a whole school approach to literacy, the code of behaviour and the self-evaluating school. During the inspection a teacher from the business department was pursuing a four-week course in learning strategies for students with special educational needs. The substitute was a newly qualified business teacher.

**PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

Co-ordination of the department’s activities has been the responsibility of one business teacher for a number of years. It is advisable to rotate the post of co-ordinator so as to facilitate the building of capacity and development of leadership roles. The business teachers formally meet for ninety minutes at the start of the year. No formal minutes of these meetings are recorded and this situation should be remedied.

There are subject plans for all of the business subjects taught in the school at second level. These plans encompass most of the elements of good planning as defined by the School Development Planning Initiative (SDPI). However, they need to be expanded and developed into a business subjects plan that will serve as a manual of how business education is provided and taught in the school.

The yearly curricular schemes of work articulate the topics to be taught to each year group. These were developed by the individual teachers of each year group and can vary from year to year depending on the teacher. In some of these yearly schemes of work the learning outcomes and assessment procedures were aligned to each topic. To build on this good planning practice, it is recommended that the addition of effective methodologies, resources used and assessment modes for each curriculum topic be included. Teachers should work collaboratively to agree and document the sequencing of topics to be taught to each year group. The sequencing of topics in Business in Leaving Certificate will require extra attention as two different year groups share the same lessons.

The business subjects plan contains a list of resources used to support teaching and learning. Their location should also be noted as should the ICT resources available to business teachers.

**TEACHING AND LEARNING**

Most lessons observed were well prepared and had a good structure. In some lessons objectives were clearly stated at the beginning and reviewed as the lesson concluded. The pace of lessons
was good. In all lessons homework was planned in advance and clearly linked to the lesson content and learning outcomes.

In the lessons observed the standard of teaching and learning was good. Teachers used methodologies such as class discussions, teacher-led input and pair work. In all lessons teachers successfully engaged students in discourse related to the learning outcomes of lessons. Teachers’ use of business language and terminology was good and where students were introduced to new terminology it was explained thoroughly.

Teachers used a good conversational and class discussion approach to impart knowledge and engage the student in the learning process. Teachers linked business theory with current, topical real-life economic practices and events. Teachers skilfully drew on students’ own knowledge to develop learning in the lesson. Students exhibited understanding of business topics and were competent in their application of their knowledge to real-life examples. Students were encouraged to take an interest in current news items and economic affairs.

In lessons that had a book-keeping focus a good sequential approach was used with teachers ensuring that each step was understood by students before moving on to new learning. The teachers’ presentation of material was good and this was mirrored in students’ presentation of work in account books. Students were reminded to be neat and encouraged to use rulers and red pens. Teachers visually checked on students’ progress and tendered individual support and good advice in a calm and affirming manner. Good practice was observed in a lesson where a student that had successfully completed a question helped another student.

In a lesson at senior cycle students were given a current newspaper article to read which directly related to the learning outcomes of the lesson. This is a good learning activity as students used keywords in the article as a link to previous learning and were able to expand current learning. Students are encouraged to take an interest in business in their own locality. Business teachers are commended for their organisation of visits to local enterprises and visits to the school by local business people as this will help the students gain a good real-life appreciation of business.

Questioning was used in lessons; it was differentiated and targeted to individual students, ensuring that students of all ability levels were encouraged to participate. Teachers positively affirmed student’s answers.

In lessons where teaching aids such as handouts, keyword charts and newspaper articles were used they were effective in progressing learning as was the use of overhead projectors in some lessons. The use of visual aids should be expanded especially in relation to the display of corrected homework and solutions to book-keeping questions. During the course of the evaluation no ICT or multimedia was used in any lesson. Since there are specific ICT objectives on the Business Studies syllabus ICT should be used in the delivery of all business subjects to access case studies and other resources. It is recommended that ICT and multimedia be incorporated into the delivery of all business subjects. The available ICT should be fully utilised. The Department-sponsored website www.businessandenterprise.slss.ie provides ICT resources that can be used in business education.

In the classrooms visited, seating arrangements facilitated group work and allowed the teacher to circulate to support students and observe their work. Good practice was observed in a lesson where a small number of students worked as a group in a semi-circle configuration.
ASSessment

Formal tests are held twice yearly and teachers also administer class tests throughout the school year. The results are communicated to students and parents through written reports at the end of each term. Parent-teacher meetings provide an additional opportunity to discuss students’ progress. Students’ copybooks were found to be neat and well labelled. Teachers are proactive in ensuring that students maintain good standards of neatness.

In all lessons observed homework was assigned to students. Teachers generally communicated this orally. It is advisable to write the assigned homework on the board and ensure that students record it in their journal. As evidenced from a sample of homework journals from each lesson very little homework was recorded therein and students’ copybooks did not contain a lot of written work. While there was some evidence of a ‘tick’ system of correction in the copybooks that were viewed, there were no evaluative comments. In this context, it is recommended that the subject department review its homework policy so that all students receive regular well-monitored homework that adds to the learning experience in the classroom. It is advisable to include Assessment for Learning (AfL) techniques for use in the business subject department. The website of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment www.ncca.ie provides information on AfL that may be helpful to the business subjects department.

Each year the business teachers review student outcomes in the State examinations in the context of the specific student cohort. This is good practice as it permits teachers to reflect on future needs based on past experiences. There is a low failure rate in examinations, which is consistent with the approaches within teaching that affirm and encourage student progress and examination level potential across the ability range. However, teachers should ensure that their expectations for students are appropriately high and that the recommended AfL techniques challenge students as well as affirming them.

Summary of Main Findings and Recommendations

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Senior management aims to provide the widest possible range of subjects for students.
- Teachers willingly engage in continuing professional development.
- All senior cycle students complete a module of enterprise.
- Business teachers provide a supportive and affirming learning environment for their students.
- Lessons had a good pace and the methodologies used engaged students in their learning.
- Students gain a real-life understanding of business through contact with business enterprises and classroom discussions.

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

- The business subjects plan should be a manual for how business education is provided in the school. Teachers should follow similar programmes in which learning outcomes are aligned to teaching methodologies and available resources.
- The outcomes of business subject department meetings should be recorded and filed.
• Teachers should ensure that students are exposed to ICT and multimedia resources so as to keep the subject dynamic and engaging, and to fulfil the syllabus aims.
• The business department’s homework policy should be reviewed to ensure that students receive a suitable quantity of recorded homework. The use of assessment for learning techniques should be expanded in lessons and in correction of students’ work.

Post-evaluation meetings were held with the business subjects teachers and with the principal and deputy principal at the conclusion of the evaluation when the draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation were presented and discussed.

Published November 2011