Subject Inspection of Civic, Social and Political Education
REPORT

Saint Tiernan’s College
Crossmolina, County Mayo
Roll number: 72100J

Date of inspection: 12 April 2010
REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN CIVIC, SOCIAL AND
POLITICAL EDUCATION (CSPE)

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in St. Tiernan’s College. It presents the findings of an evaluation of the quality of teaching and learning in Civic, Social and Political Education (CSPE) 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 examined students’ work. The inspector reviewed school planning documentation. Following the evaluation visit, the inspector provided oral feedback on the outcomes of the evaluation to the principal. 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

In St. Tiernan’s College CSPE is a compulsory subject in junior cycle in line with Department of Education and Science regulations. All class groups have one period of thirty-five or forty minutes duration per week for CSPE. This provision is broadly in line with syllabus recommendations. It was noted that fifty per cent of CSPE lessons are timetabled on a Monday. It is recommended that timetabling CSPE lessons on a Monday be avoided if possible as losing lessons due to interruptions in the school calendar is more probable on this day. The protection of class periods is important given that CSPE is the only certificate-examination subject which is offered nationally in one period per week. Management tries to ensure that classes retain the same teacher throughout the junior cycle. This is good practice and is particularly important for second year and third year so as to allow continuity in programme planning. In line with Circular Letter M13/05 it is recommended that teachers assigned to teaching CSPE should also have that class group for another subject. This provision would enable teachers to arrange flexible contact time with their respective class groups when undertaking and reporting on the action project. Management is open to addressing this issue.

Two teachers are currently involved in the teaching of CSPE. One of the teachers has considerable experience in teaching CSPE and has been facilitated by management to avail of professional development in the subject. It is recommended that teachers new to the subject attend induction courses offered by the Citizenship Education Support Service. Teachers should also consult the website of the support service at http://cspe.slss.ie which provides extensive information on the subject and relevant resource materials.

School management is supportive of the subject. CSPE is included in formal in-house examinations and students’ progress in the subject is communicated to parents on school reports and at parent-teacher meetings. As CSPE is frequently a subject that parents are not so familiar with information on the subject should be provided at an open evening for parents of prospective first-year students and should also be included in the school’s prospectus. The fact sheet developed by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment could be used for this
purpose. This enhanced awareness among parents should impact positively on the co-operation and motivation of students especially around the time the report on the action project is due for submission in third year.

It was reported that a range of CSPE resources is available in the school. However it was not clear what these resources are or the extent to which they are available to the current CSPE teaching team. It is recommended that an inventory be developed of the resources received by the school from the Citizenship Education Support Service, the Department of Education and Science, and voluntary and non-governmental agencies. These resources should then be stored in a central area accessible to the teachers of CSPE at all times such as the staff room rather than in a classroom. The subject plan should include a copy of the resource inventory so that teachers can readily identify suitable resources available to support the teaching of the CSPE curriculum.

Teachers have access to information and communication technology (ICT) facilities but to date there has been very limited use of ICT in the classroom to support teaching and learning in CSPE. Some links have been established between the CSPE department and the IT teacher when students are required to carry out research on the internet. Teachers should increase the use of ICT in the classroom and make use of the wide range of electronic resources to enhance students learning and experience of citizenship education.

In first year students are taught CSPE in a mixed-ability setting in line with good practice. In second and third year streamed groupings are in place. As CSPE is a common syllabus this form of class organisation should be reviewed and mixed-ability class groupings should be continued from first year.

**Planning and Preparation**

Planning for CSPE is at an early stage of development. To support the future delivery of the subject in the school it is recommended that one of the CSPE teaching team acts as co-ordinator of the subject. The co-ordinator should have a key role in leading a collaborative approach to subject planning. Support for subject-department organisation and planning can be accessed through the in-service training provided for in-school co-ordinators of CSPE. It was reported that subject-department meetings are held each term. Records of all these meetings should be kept and filed in the subject-department plan to track developments and progress in planning.

During the evaluation teachers made available individual plans based on the SDPI template. One comprehensive plan should be collaboratively developed by the CSPE teaching team. This plan should set out in appropriate detail information on the organisation of the department, reporting and assessment procedures, a catalogue of resources, participation in in-career development, procedures for the induction of new staff, provision for student with additional educational needs, a list of action projects undertaken, minutes of planning meetings and an annual analysis of students’ performance in certificate examinations. This document will then provide a comprehensive overview of the department’s practices and procedures.

The long-term curricular plans in place for CSPE were essentially lists of topics taught to each year group. As part of the collaborative planning process, common programmes of work should be agreed for each year group. This will facilitate standardisation of provision across the department and the implementation of common assessment. The agreed curricular plans should outline for each concept an appropriate timeframe for its delivery, the main learning outcomes,
the skills to be developed and the methodologies used to achieve these. The assessment modes and procedures should also be included in planning for syllabus delivery.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

There was some evidence of effective short-term planning for the lessons observed. Teachers had prepared resource materials to support the development of topics which included worksheet activities and supplementary textual materials in the form of handouts. The preparation of such resources is commended as they enhance the learning experiences of students.

In the lessons observed the topics under study were communicated to students and were appropriately set within the relevant syllabus concept. This is good practice as it links student learning in an integrated manner. In the interests of creating a greater focus on the planned learning activity and encouraging students to become more responsible for their own learning the proposed learning outcomes should be clearly outlined to students at the start of the lesson. The use of “what I can expect to learn” statements is encouraged in this regard in addition to a brief recap session at the end of the lesson so that students can evaluate their own learning. There were some instances where parts of lessons tended to be repetitive and the pace was slow. The identification of clear learning objectives should also serve to guide the structure and pace of lessons in a purposeful manner.

The main methodologies employed by teachers included question-and-answer sessions, teacher exposition and the completion of student tasks. There was some good use of individual worksheet activities which actively engaged students with the lesson material. Whilst the students were challenged by the tasks they engaged diligently in the work. This approach is commended as student participation and active-learning strategies should form a core element in CSPE lessons. In other lessons there was an over-emphasis on teacher exposition and while there was some questioning of students their engagement in the lesson was limited. It is recommended that student-based tasks including pair or group work activities should be incorporated into all lessons. Such active methods will ensure the participation of all students and thus enhance their learning. Overall individual teacher planning for lessons should facilitate a good balance between student activity and teacher input. This will ensure that an adequate amount of syllabus content is covered and that good quality active learning takes place.

Questioning of students was used in all lessons and there were some good examples of higher order questions which lead students to reflect on the material under study. However there was a tendency in lessons for global questioning to dominate with particular students opting to respond. Greater use should be made of targeted questioning strategies requiring responses from named individuals. This approach will ensure the increased participation of all students and will also be an important technique for assessing individual students’ knowledge.

In some lessons differentiated strategies were well deployed to support the range of abilities in the classes. The worksheet activities given to students included tasks of varying levels of difficulty. This is good practice. Students were questioned on subject-specific terms and these were explained and clarified as necessary. As a further support to students’ learning new subject vocabulary encountered in the lesson should be written on the whiteboard. Under the direction of the teacher the students should be required to maintain a list of key words related to the core concepts of the subject in their copybooks.

A positive atmosphere was evident in the classrooms visited. In all lessons the students applied themselves willingly to the tasks given. The majority of students engaged well in the learning
process. In instances where students were less well engaged the increased use of student-based tasks and alternative seating arrangements are recommended to address this issue.

The current school building does not facilitate the allocation of teacher-based classrooms. Notwithstanding this rooms in which CSPE is taught should display some charts and posters on the different syllabus concepts and photographs of prominent political and international figures. It is suggested that some responsibility for the creation of a subject-related environment in classrooms could be assigned to students. In this regard students could source relevant photographs and develop posters pertinent to the seven concepts of the CSPE curriculum.

**ASSESSMENT**

CSPE is included within the school’s formal assessment structures in line with other subjects. Formal assessments take place at Christmas and summer while third-year students sit pre-examinations in the second term. Student progress is reported to parents following these formal assessments and at parent-teacher meetings held annually for each year group. It was reported that the results obtained by students in the Junior Certificate examination are analysed by teachers. This is good practice as it enables teachers to monitor achievement in CSPE from year to year and informs subject planning.

A variety of informal assessment modes is used to monitor student progress including questioning in class, homework, in-class exercises and class tests. The use of project work is encouraged as an additional assessment instrument as it facilitates activity-based learning which is central to the CSPE syllabus. This work could then be displayed in classrooms to enhance the learning environment and be integrated as a valuable resource to both teaching and learning. In one lesson students had copies with exercises set and corrected. It is important that there is good variety in the homework tasks assigned so that the broad range of skills identified in the syllabus can be developed. In some lessons students were working on examination papers and completing the ‘Report on the Action Project’ (RAP) and did not have copies with them in class. A sample of RAPs was viewed by the inspector. The action project is a fundamental part of formal assessment in third year and is allocated sixty percent of the marks in the Junior Certificate examination. In this context it is recommended that teachers should provide comprehensive feedback to students on their RAPs to further support them in improving the quality of their work. Students’ amendments to the draft report based on their teacher’s feedback should be checked before the final report is written up by students. A policy in relation to homework and assessment should be developed and formalised by the CSPE teaching team. This policy should outline agreed practices on the frequency and types of homework set, the feedback provided to students and procedures in relation to the completion of RAPs.

In line with syllabus recommendations the students should complete two action projects over the three years of the junior cycle. This provision should be factored into programme planning as it is necessary that students are aware of the importance of active participatory citizenship from an early stage. Appropriate arrangements for the secure storage of RAPs are in place.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:
• Teachers’ professional development is facilitated by school management.
• School management is supportive of CSPE by its inclusion in formal in-house examinations, school reports and parent-teacher meetings.
• There was some good use of active learning methodologies and differentiated strategies to support the range of students’ abilities.
• A positive attitude prevailed in the classrooms visited.

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

• CSPE should be taught in mixed-ability class groupings throughout the junior cycle and CSPE teachers should also have their CSPE class for another subject.
• Teachers new to the subject should attend induction courses provided by the Citizenship Education Support Service and an inventory of CSPE teaching resources should be compiled and stored in a central area that is accessible to the teachers of CSPE.
• Subject planning should be further supported by the appointment of a CSPE co-ordinator, the compilation of one comprehensive department plan and the development of programmes of work which provide a focus on learning outcomes and citizenship skills.
• Planning for lessons should be such as to facilitate a good balance between student activity and teacher input.
• The CSPE teaching team should develop a policy in relation to homework and procedures for the completion of the ‘Report on the Action Project’.
• Students should be required to complete two action projects over the three years of the CSPE programme.

A post-evaluation meeting was held 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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Appendix

School response to the report

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

All junior cycle CSPE classes will be taught in mixed ability classes by the commencement of the school year 2011/2012