An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna
Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection of Social, Personal and Health Education
REPORT

Saint Ailbe’s School
Rosanna Road, Tipperary
Roll number: 72480W

Date of inspection: 02 February 2011
REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN SOCIAL, PERSONAL AND HEALTH EDUCATION (SPHE)

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in St Ailbe’s School, Tipperary. It presents the findings of an evaluation of the quality of teaching and learning in SPHE, including Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE), 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 principal and subject teachers. 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.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

Appropriate timetable provision is made for SPHE in accordance with Circular Letter M11/03. RSE is appropriately integrated into the junior cycle SPHE programme, and elements of RSE are provided for all senior cycle students through the religious education programme. The current RSE policy has been identified for review and good progress has been made in this regard. The prompt completion and ratification of this policy is recommended. The revised RSE policy should identify how a comprehensive RSE programme is to be implemented, including at senior cycle, in line with the requirements of Circular Letter 0027/08.

SPHE and RSE are currently delivered by a core team of three interested and committed teachers. The development and deployment of a team of teachers with the relevant knowledge and skills to deliver the programme is commended. Teachers’ have actively engaged in professional development courses, and continuing professional development (CPD) is encouraged and supported by management. The recent engagement by the SPHE team with the SPHE support service has been most beneficial. Consideration should be given to expanding the current team, of all female teachers, to include interested male teachers. This will help to achieve a gender balance within the SPHE department, and further support the delivery of the subject within the co-educational environment. Management endeavours to ensure that teachers remain with their class groups, from first year to third year, and this continuity helps to facilitate teachers and students in establishing positive and trusting relationships, which is important for the effective delivery of the subject.

School policies are appropriately developed through a consultative approach. However, the lapsed status of the student council should be addressed by senior management, to ensure that students have an active and representative forum for their voice and contribution to the life of the school. Policies relevant to SPHE have been developed to support students and the work of the school, including policies on substance use, anti-bullying, pastoral care and dealing with critical
incidents. The Child Protection Guidelines have been adopted in line with the requirements of the Department of Education and Skills. SPHE teachers have their own base classrooms, which were appropriate to accommodation of the range of active learning methodologies. A large and diverse range of resource materials has been gathered and these are easily accessible in teachers’ classrooms. In addition, there are ample storage facilities in each room to securely store students’ work. Information and communication technology (ICT) facilities are of a high quality with a computers and large electronic display units available in all classrooms. These support the use of various multi-media and electronic materials. Management is very supportive of the subject department’s needs to purchase additional resources and materials to support teaching and learning.

The school is proactive in promoting students’ well-being and social learning. The school is involved in the Delivering Equality of Opportunities in Schools (DEIS) initiative and enjoys the benefit of a number of supports. The School Completion Programme (SCP) has a number of qualified teachers who provide additional programmes, initiatives and interventions for students to enhance their personal development and educational attainment. In addition, a healthy eating programme has been established, with breakfast, lunch and snack options provided for students. A number of posters are visible throughout the school corridors that promote positive mental health, anti-bullying and positive nutritional and physical-activity behaviours. The school’s proactivity in this regard is commended.

**Planning and Preparation**

Planning for the organisation and delivery of the SPHE programme is comprehensive and well advanced. Good structures are in place to support subject department planning. A subject co-ordinator has been appointed and time is made available to facilitate formal meetings. Minutes of these meetings are appropriately documented and provide a good record of the broad range of issues discussed by the SPHE team. A highly commendable feature of the subject department is the collegial and collaborative approach taken to the subject planning process. Recent collaboration and engagement with the SPHE support service has supported the SPHE department to develop a comprehensive, well-structured and informative subject plan.

The subject plan documents all aspects related to the provision, organisation and delivery of the subject, including strategies for the inclusion of students with special educational needs. The programmes of work are in line with the syllabus and teacher guidelines. Of particular note is the presentation of the programmes of work for each year group, where the content is aligned with the intended learning outcomes and the resources required to support learning. This is very good practice as it ensures that students’ learning is planned in an incremental and progressive manner. The expansion of this approach, to also include and align with the most suitable methodologies and assessment strategies for each module and topic, is recommended.

It is welcomed that the subject plan also documents the SPHE department’s procedures in relation to visitors and guest speakers to the SPHE and RSE classroom. These should be collated into a policy in line with Circular Letter 23/2010.

The recent development and presentation of the senior cycle RSE programme is commended. Senior students, interviewed as part of the inspection process, expressed a desire for a more comprehensive RSE programme where relevant issues can be discussed in a structured and supportive environment. The availability of the Teaching Relationships Understanding Sexuality Resource (TRUST) will provide valuable assistance and support to the RSE teachers and students in the delivery of the planned programme. It is recommended that a list of all of the available
resources for SPHE and RSE, including electronic materials, be compiled and presented in the subject plan. This list should also indicate the location of the resources to ensure teachers can easily access them.

The recent review and updating of the subject plan and SPHE programme by the SPHE department is good practice. Consideration should now be given to including some element of student review of the topics covered and the resources and methods used as a means of informing the subject planning process. A number of suitable end-of-module review inventories have been developed by the SPHE support service, which may prove useful in this regard. The valuation framework, available in the SPHE co-ordinators handbook, also provides a useful guide for the SPHE department to review its work.

The quality of individual planning was good. There was good preparation for the lessons observed, with the advance readiness of resources and supplementary materials.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

The quality of teaching and learning in the lessons observed was of a good standard. All lessons were well paced and the topics taught were pitched appropriately to suit the age and ability of students. A systematic approach has been developed to ensure the efficient distribution of students’ workbooks and materials for the lesson, which ensured that students settled quickly. Very good use was made of the white board or ICT to display the lesson content and direction, and in some instances to share the intended learning outcomes. In one lesson, the learning outcomes were highlighted very clearly and presented as the key knowledge and skills that students were expected to acquire and develop as a result of their engagement. This approach, which is in keeping with the principles of assessment for learning, should be adopted in all lessons.

Teachers made good efforts to apply an experiential approach to facilitate learning. All lessons had elements of interactive tasks where students were given opportunities to engage in reflective or discursive activities. Good practice was observed in one lesson on communications, where students worked through a series of incremental tasks to identify and develop effective listening skills. The experiences from each of these tasks were well processed and enabled students to apply their learning to improve the quality of their subsequent interactions with their peers. Students thoroughly enjoyed these tasks and learning was of a very high quality in this lesson. Pair work and group work were used in other lessons, which provided students with opportunities to reflect on their knowledge or experiences of the topic and to express their opinions. In some instances, students would have benefited from additional time to explore and discuss the themes of these activities and focused tasks.

Questioning was a common feature of lessons and teachers made good efforts to include all students through carefully directed and differentiated questions. In some instances, prolonged periods of the lesson were devoted to whole-class question-and-answer activities, which resulted in some students being passive in the learning experience. Teachers should ensure an appropriate balance between teacher input and student activity. Many of the very good questions posed by teachers could be incorporated into the reflective and group tasks and also reserved to process and consolidate learning towards the latter stages of the lesson.

In all lessons, a variety of resources was used to support students’ learning. ICT was effectively used to display the class tasks and to provide key relevant points on the focused topic. The work of teachers in developing electronic resources to support teaching and learning is highly
commended. The appropriate use of worksheets, a textbook and workbook and short assignments helped to highlight and reinforce the key words, phrases and themes of the lessons. The white board was well used to record students’ responses to tasks. Consideration should be given to ensuring that students have some mechanism, such as a copybook, to keep a record of this good work.

A range of student-generated art work and topic-specific posters was displayed in the classrooms, which added to the attractiveness of the learning environment. Teachers displayed an excellent knowledge of their students and differentiated their approach to ensure that students continued to engage in the lessons. There was a friendly and caring atmosphere in all lessons and a positive rapport had been developed between students and their teachers.

At the end of lessons, teachers ensured that the key points of the lesson were summarised, which helped to consolidate learning. The practice of providing students with a short period of time to reflect on and record their learning at the end of the lesson is very good practice.

When questioned by the inspector, students demonstrated a good understanding of the material covered in their lessons. Responses to the student questionnaires, and to the focused interview, indicated that students value the subject and feel that it contributes to the development of positive, health-related knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviours.

ASSESSMENT

A range of assessment strategies is used by teachers to determine students’ engagement and progress in SPHE. These include the completion of work sheets and written assignments, in addition to oral questioning. In most cases, students maintain a workbook and folder, which are retained securely in their SPHE classroom.

It is recommended that the SPHE department further develop the assessment process to ensure that there is an agreed and consistent approach to determine students’ engagement and learning. The development of an “assessment toolkit”, and assessment milestones for each year group, should be discussed as part of the subject department’s planning process. Further information on assessment in SPHE is available in the Guidelines for Teachers (pages 59-68).

Communications with parents are well developed. Letters inform parents of the content and delivery of the RSE programme and this is consistent with recommended practice. A comment on students’ engagement and progress in SPHE is included in the school’s reports home to parents twice per year and SPHE teachers are also available at annual parent-teacher meetings.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The school is proactive in promoting and supporting students’ well-being, social learning and personal development.
- SPHE is delivered by a core team of interested and committed teachers. Management encourages and facilitates teachers to attend relevant professional development courses.
- The subject is well co-ordinated. A comprehensive, coherent and informative SPHE subject plan has been developed collaboratively by the SPHE department.
• The quality of teaching and learning in the SPHE lessons observed was of a good standard.
• Lessons were very well planned and a good range of resources was used to support teaching and learning.
• A range of effective methodologies was used to facilitate students’ learning.
• A positive and affirming rapport has been established between students and their teachers.
• A range of assessment strategies is used by teachers to determine students’ engagement and progress.

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

• The prompt completion and ratification of the revised RSE policy is recommended.
• The re-establishment of the student council should be addressed by school management.
• Management should consider the expansion of the current team of teachers to promote the involvement of male teachers with the interest and skills to deliver the SPHE programme.
• Subject planning should be expanded to include aligning the appropriate teaching and learning and assessment strategies with the learning outcomes in the programmes of work, and catalogue all available resources and their location.
• Teachers should discuss and adopt the principles of assessment for learning in all lessons and ensure an appropriate balance between teacher input and student activity.
• The assessment process should be further developed to ensure an agreed and consistent approach.

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

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