

**An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna**

**Department of Education and Skills**

**Subject Inspection of English  
REPORT**

**Mount Temple Comprehensive School  
Malahide Road, Dublin 5  
Roll number: 81002K**

**Date of inspection: 22 October 2009**



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

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

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**SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT**

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Mount Temple Comprehensive School, carried out as part of a whole-school evaluation. It presents the findings of an evaluation of the quality of teaching and learning in English 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.

**SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT**

Mount Temple Comprehensive is a co-educational school which offers the Junior Certificate, the Leaving Certificate (Established), the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) and the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme to the 849 students currently enrolled. The Transition Year (TY) programme is an optional third year in senior cycle. There is currently no LCA Year 1 class in the school.

There is very good support for the teaching and learning of English in the school. The time allocated to the subject in senior cycle is very good. An additional lesson in English per week is allocated to English in fifth year and there are five classes per week in sixth year. Students on the LCA programme have four periods per week in the subject. However, timetabled provision for junior-cycle class groups is less generous, with students in first and second years having only four lessons per week in the subject. Given the advantages of establishing strong foundations in English for later development in the subject, it is suggested that consideration should be given to allocating the additional time available for English to junior-cycle classes. Overall, lessons are distributed well across students' timetables.

Students are placed in mixed-ability form class groups in each year of the junior cycle and again in TY. Lessons in English for these years are taught to students in their form groups. This is a very good arrangement, facilitating students to aspire to and achieve at higher level in certificate examinations. In the senior cycle, students are set for English at the beginning of fifth year. English lessons are timetabled concurrently for all classes within each year group in senior cycle, other than the TY classes, in order to facilitate students' choice of higher level and ordinary level courses.

The twelve teachers of English each hold a specialist qualification in the subject and management deploys them in line with their skills, knowledge and interests. In keeping with good practice, all teachers of English are allocated class groups across all programmes and levels, thus ensuring the

expertise and experience of the full teaching team. Teachers are generally allocated to a class group for the duration of a course and this facilitates the development and continuity of positive teaching-learning relationships.

There are very good library facilities in the school. The level of parental support for the library is remarkable. The parents' association makes a grant available annually for the purchase of book stock and parents volunteer to act as librarians and to manage this facility daily. Students can access the library during lunch break each school day and they are encouraged to become borrowers. Teachers of English make good use of this very valuable school resource. They take junior cycle and TY class groups regularly to the library to read, to prepare for debates and to do research. Annual participation in the *MS Readathon* has also provided funding for the library as well as encouraging students' reading habits.

Resource provision for the teaching of English is very good. The classrooms visited were equipped with information and communications technology (ICT) and networked for internet access. Good use is made of this resource by the teachers of English, who download material for use in the classroom and to support teaching and learning during lessons. It is suggested that the acquisition of a data projector specifically for the use of the English department should be considered. Audio-visual equipment is also available in classrooms used by the subject teachers. A visually and print-rich environment has been developed in the classrooms, and the display of work generated by students is particularly noted.

The range of co-curricular activities in English available in the school is very good and it illustrates the commitment and enthusiasm of the teachers of English. Participation in public speaking; debating; inter-class writing competitions; theatre trips and poetry recitals all serve to deepen students' understanding of what is being discussed within the English lesson. The establishment of an arts council in the school by the student council is a particularly positive development.

## **PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

Time for subject department planning has been allocated by school management within staff meeting days. In addition, time is set aside on a monthly basis to facilitate a wide range of team planning meetings. On average, the teachers of English meet formally six times a year. Minutes of these meetings are recorded and maintained in the subject department folder. They indicate that discussions address operational issues, including text choices, arrangements for examinations and the deployment of teachers to particular class groups. Good attention is also paid to students' learning at these meetings and the minutes provide a record of discussions focussed on how best to address their needs in the subject. For example, the department was concerned that less able third-year students struggle with English and, following representations to management, an additional teacher will be allocated to that year group from mid-term this year. This will facilitate the teaching of a small support class group for English in third year. The regular review which takes place at subject department meetings is a telling indicator of the professionalism of the teachers of English in this school.

A member of the department volunteers to act as subject co-ordinator. This position is allocated on a rotational basis every two years. This is good practice as it enables all members of the department to become aware of the issues that arise in organising a subject department and to take a leadership role in the department. The commitment of the teachers of English to their

continuing professional development (CPD) is clear and the English department folder provides information on the many courses attended

The planning documentation presented during the evaluation was of a very high standard. It provided a very good description of the organisation of the department and outlined aims and objectives for the teaching of English in this school. It included yearly plans for the delivery of the subject and these were further developed into schemes of work by each teacher for each class group. The curriculum content of the department plan reflects all aspects of syllabus and programme requirements. It is suggested that, as planning progresses, consideration should be given to a review of the texts studied in the junior cycle, in order to ensure that there is a sufficient level of flexibility in text choice to facilitate the diverse interests and abilities of English class groups. In planning for texts, care should be taken to ensure that all materials chosen should be sufficiently stimulating and challenging across all programmes.

A written programme for the TY was available for inspection. The emphasis on oral skills development in the long-term plan for English in TY is particularly good. In developing their schemes for each of the TY class groups, it is recommended that the teachers of English should adopt a common template, perhaps including a reference to the learning outcomes identified in the long-term plan. Individual schemes should clearly link the planned learning and assessment activities with those outcomes.

The subject plan acknowledges the key role the department plays in supporting students with special educational needs and this is especially commended. The results of pre-entry assessment tests, together with information gathered from the feeder primary schools, are used to determine the education support needs of all in-coming students. Currently, approximately eighteen per cent of the student population is in receipt of additional support classes. School documentation espouses a strong commitment to the full inclusion of all students and learning support co-ordinators have been appointed for each year group. The learning support department provides all subject teachers with very good information on the learning needs of particular students, including advice on appropriate teaching strategies. The information is maintained by the teachers of English, many of whom are involved in the delivery of support classes, in their department folder. In keeping with best practice, clear systems are in place to facilitate good communication about individual students and their support needs.

## **TEACHING AND LEARNING**

Three junior cycle and four senior cycle lessons were observed during the evaluation. A very good standard of teaching and learning was evident. Lessons were well structured and presented in a highly competent manner. The purpose of each lesson was clearly established from the outset. Particularly good practice in this regard was observed in a number of cases where the learning objective was explicitly stated at the beginning of the lesson, and, in two cases, where the scheme of work for the year had been distributed to students at the start of term.

Classroom resources, including the whiteboard, were used very effectively to spark student discussion and provide a focus for the lesson. In one lesson, a PowerPoint presentation was used as a stimulus for class discussion prior to the reading of a poetry text. This provided students with a very manageable way in to the key theme in the text. Later in the lesson, worksheets were used which differentiated at the level of task complexity. This allowed students to engage with the text in accordance with their abilities. The teacher's attention to short-term planning resulted in a

lesson that was well structured and very supportive of this group of students. Similar good planning was noted in other lessons observed, where learning activities were differentiated to support students of differing ability. Teachers had prepared handouts to organise learning or to focus student attention on particular aspects of the texts being studied. This strategy is particularly helpful in a mixed-ability setting, as it directs learning and allows students to work at their own pace.

A variety of teaching and learning strategies was observed. These strategies included a well-judged balance of whole-class and individual activities. Pair work and small group work allowed students to work independently of the teacher while drawing on the support of their peers. In a senior-cycle lesson, groups worked on particular aspects of studied texts, with a view to preparing a class presentation later in the term. The students readily engaged in this activity and were clearly comfortable in advancing their ideas to their peers. In conversation with the inspector, their knowledge and understanding of the texts was evident as was their confidence in supporting their opinions. In another lesson, students were provided with a model text on which to base their own poetry writing. The teacher used questions to the whole-class group very skillfully to help students identify sensory imagery as a key element in the model and to prompt suggestions about how their own writing could mimic this. Both these examples illustrate the effectiveness of teaching approaches which promote the active participation of students in lessons. It is suggested that subject department meetings should provide opportunities for teachers to share these excellent methodologies so that that all students benefit from their use.

Students were confident contributors to class discussions in the majority of lessons observed. The management of discussions provided students with good opportunities to articulate their ideas, seek clarification where needed and extended their knowledge and understanding of the learning activities. They can talk with knowledge and understanding about what they are doing and their responses to questions indicated that they are making very good progress in the subject. In two instances, a high level of learning was indicated by the ease with which students made connections between new material and previously studied texts. In general, students had very little difficulty identifying the language devices used by writers and referencing the relevant texts appropriately. It is recommended that more extensive use should be made of the whiteboard at the closing stage of lessons, to record students' contributions and to reinforce the very good learning achieved through active student involvement in lessons.

An examination of students' notebooks and copies indicated that a range of notes, researched and prepared by the teachers, are provided to students to supplement classroom teaching. Material is drawn from a number of sources to supplement work done in class and students are encouraged to keep this information in folders. In some cases, students' homework assignments, once corrected, were also included in the folders. However, this practice does vary from student to student and it is suggested that folders should be monitored from time to time to address this.

The relative abilities of students in the subject were evident in the difficulties experienced with written work. Well-focussed and developed responses to questions were written by the majority of students taking the higher-level courses. These students wrote well-constructed critical analyses of studied texts and demonstrated mastery of appropriate register and sensitivity to audience in their personal writing. Where there were weaknesses at this level, particularly in the work of senior-cycle students, these related to the use of complex sentence structures and difficulties in finding their own 'voice' when discussing texts. Examples of under-developed arguments were also evident in some instances. The written work of less-able students is generally good. In many cases, a very thorough knowledge of their studied texts, together with the ability to quote freely, and relevantly, was evident. In some cases, however, clumsy phrasing

and weak expression marred their work. Some of these students struggle to manage the forward momentum of their writing and lapse into summary or paraphrasing of texts and notes. It is suggested that a stronger emphasis on pre-writing work, including planning and first-draft work, would be a helpful addition to the work currently done to support students' writing. Overall, the standards achieved in their work by students in Mount Temple Comprehensive School reflected the full range of ability in the subject.

## **ASSESSMENT**

Teachers made extensive use of oral questioning to motivate students and assess learning during the lessons observed. Questions provided students with very good opportunities to extend their thinking and to refine their answers and opinions. Where it was needed, teachers revisited elements of the lessons taught to ensure all students were confident.

The school's homework policy is written as a guide to students to support their management of this important aspect of teaching and learning. The very positive tone of this document is noted as is the clear expectation that work assigned should be completed by students and corrected by teachers. There was ample evidence in the classes visited of the regular assigning of homework in English. The homework set in English contributes to the development of independent learning, through requiring students to evaluate, to propose and support an argument and to write imaginatively. Teachers have been creative in the design of the tasks set. For example, intervention exercises are set which require students to adopt the persona of a character in a studied text. Writing a character's blog, diary entries, letters and other such exercises motivate and support learning. This good work is commended.

Teachers mark work promptly, with good feedback being given to students. This was best where it provided students with information about their strengths and identified areas for attention. In these cases, good developmental advice was provided to students. In some instances, however, the completion of homework was acknowledged only by a date and a tick mark. A common policy on the provision of feedback on substantial pieces of writing should be developed to ensure consistency of experience for all students of English. More extensive use of comment-based feedback is suggested. It would provide students with clear information so that they can acquire an understanding of their strengths and weaknesses in English.

In-house examinations are held in December and the end of the summer term for students in first year, second year and fifth year. The setting of common papers for junior cycle class groups in English is good practice. Third-year students and sixth-year students also sit December assessment tests and these are followed in the spring term by pre-certificate examinations. TY students complete a number of assignments throughout the year and the assessment of their progress is based on these. It is good to note that the assignment tasks set by the teachers of English reflect the programme aims as outlined in the subject department plan.

Teachers keep careful records of student achievement on homework and class assignments. This good practice provides teachers with a clear and objective measure of students' progress in English and informs reports to parents. A progress report issues to parents three times annually. The first, sent in late October, records the effort and behaviour of students, whilst the second and third report on academic progress, based on the formal in-house examinations.

## **SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The formation of class groups in the school facilitates and encourages achievement in English. Uptake of the subject at higher level in junior cycle is significantly high and is good for the Leaving Certificate.
- The timetabled provision for the teaching of English is very good and the subject is well resourced.
- A wide variety of co-curricular activities in English provides invaluable learning opportunities for the students.
- Subject department planning is well-organised and informed by good attention to students' learning. The emphasis on oral skills development in the long-term plan for English in TY is particularly good.
- A very good standard of teaching and learning was evident.
- Teachers have been creative in the design of the homework tasks set to motivate and support learning.
- Teachers keep careful records of student achievement on homework and class assignments.

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

- Consideration should be given to allocating the additional time available for English to junior-cycle classes.
- A common template for planning individual schemes should be adopted. Schemes should clearly link learning and assessment activities with the intended learning outcomes identified in the department plan.
- A common policy on the provision of formative feedback to students on substantial pieces of writing should be developed.

A post-evaluation meeting was held with the teachers of English and with the principal at the conclusion of the evaluation when the draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation were presented and discussed.