REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN BUSINESS SUBJECTS

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in St. Aidan’s Community School. 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 these subjects 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 and subject teachers. The board of management of the school was given an opportunity to comment on the findings and recommendations of the report; the board chose to accept the report without response.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

Business Studies is provided at junior cycle and Business at senior cycle. The time assigned to teaching the subjects at both junior and senior cycle meets the guidelines and the inclusion of one double period at junior cycle is very good as it allows the opportunity to focus on the practical aspects of the syllabus. The teachers are assigned to class groups for the duration of the cycle.

The school’s information and communication technology (ICT) system is very well developed and the school participates in the Connect project with South Dublin County Council and the Department of Education and Skills. The project provides laptops to all class groups throughout the school for use in lessons. This provides excellent access to ICT for both teachers and students as a support for teaching and learning in the classroom setting.

Business Studies is an optional subject and incoming first-years must select the subject prior to the start of the school year. The percentage uptake in the subject is low relative to other optional subjects but the numbers taking the subject for leaving certificate is relatively good. This is achieved through a combination of retention of students from junior to senior cycle and students taking up the subject for the first time in senior cycle. The format of the input in relation to Business Studies for the first-year induction day has recently been reviewed by the team in order to encourage more students to take the subject at junior cycle.

Teachers ICT skills are very strong and effective use is made of the resources available in the school. Also there was evidence that the teachers are keeping up to date with subject knowledge as the provisions of Department of Education and Skills circular 0052/2010 - Business Syllabus - Updating of Legislation had been disseminated to students early in the current academic year.
PLANNING AND PREPARATION

The subject department is co-ordinated on a rotational basis with the co-ordinator in place for a three-year term. A subject plan has been developed and is available through Moodle within the school’s virtual learning environment. The subject plan is presented using the outline framework and headings of the school development planning initiative template. Other resources, including the records of team meetings, are maintained electronically as far as possible using the available technology.

The senior cycle business scheme of work is designed to allow flexibility for the delivery of the syllabus units to alter annually to reflect the sequencing of the units for examination within the Leaving Certificate. This is very good reflective practice and also demonstrates a capacity among the team to adapt schemes to suit the needs and abilities of the students.

At junior cycle there is also evidence that the scheme of work is adapted to meet the needs of class groups. While an overall subject plan including schemes of work for the three years is agreed there is some variance among the team as to the delivery and timing of a number of the learning outcomes over the three years of the programme. To some extent this is as a result of the positive whole-school provision for the subject that ensures that teachers assigned to the class groups are assigned for the duration of the cycle. However, the rationale for the plan has been agreed among the teachers and there should be greater consistency among them in the delivery of the agreed outcomes.

There is evidence within the planning documentation and from the observation of lessons during the evaluation that considerable attention is paid by the teachers to organising students learning in the subjects. All lesson materials and additional equipment are provided, including calculators. This is in part to ensure that lessons are not disrupted by students who attend without appropriate equipment and tools. However, one result of this emphasis on organising students learning is that it leads to over-teaching of specific topics, for example, budgets. Where too much time is spent on mastering specific aspects of the course it results in a reduction in the syllabus outcomes completed. It is recommended that in order to improve the pace of lesson delivery that the sequencing of learning outcomes through the three-years of junior cycle should be reviewed to allow key topics to be revisited regularly during the cycle to maintain students’ interest and skills, while ensuring that all the syllabus outcomes are completed.

Documentation was provided during the inspection indicating that a significant number of students in the school experience literacy and numeracy difficulties. Given this, it is recommended that the first-year scheme of work should be reviewed to strengthen the focus on learning outcomes that contribute to the development of students’ financial literacy skills.

At an individual level teachers have completed extensive work on collating and developing resources for use in lessons, especially electronic resources, to ensure that they exploit the full potential of the available technology as a teaching and learning tool. There is also very good practice among the team in sharing resources and in supporting each other in developing the subjects within the school.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

The overall standard of teaching and learning observed during the evaluation was good. There is a mix of approaches used by teachers among the team, including teacher-led lessons and those
that focused more on the use of active learning methodologies. Overall, the links between lesson content and prior learning were well established in the lessons observed.

Student activity was very individual without significant opportunities for pair or group work being provided. This was because the teachers paid considerable attention to managing student input in lessons. Though students were very passive during the lessons observed, they became animated when encouraged to contribute to discussions centred on the development of applied aspects of the lesson content. Examples used to explain business theory were linked to students own experience and local environment.

Classroom management strategies were consistent among the teachers. This reflected the whole-school approach that exists in relation to behaviour management and students were well behaved in the lessons observed. This whole-school approach has been developed in association with the National Behavioural Support Service (NBSS). Among the strategies observed that were effective in managing students contributions in lessons were the use of flash cards by students to indicate answers and the use of ‘one-voice’ and ‘hands-up’ requirements to individual targeted questions. In one lesson very good practice was observed in this respect where the use of global questions was minimised and the alternative strategies were used. There is further scope to build on this approach as a technique for differentiation, where questions asked are more closely matched to students’ ability levels including a higher degree of difficulty for more able students.

The teachers provided examples of students work for all class groups including those not inspected during the inspection visit. The inspector’s review of the student copybooks and assessments indicated that a lot of work has been completed under the direction of the teachers. There is good practice among the team with respect to sharing resources including question sheets, question banks and lesson material.

Students are very well supported in their learning through the provision of learning aids and notes developed by the teachers for use in business lessons. On occasion there was an overuse of transcription of text-based notes by students as a means of generating support notes in junior cycle lessons. This is not entirely appropriate given that there are a number of students experiencing literacy difficulties included among the class groups. However, there were many other examples of the use of graphic organisers and tabular formats in generating learning aids for students.

Excellent use was made of the student laptops to support students learning in the junior cycle lessons observed. Students used a variety of applications to complete the lesson outcomes including MSWord to generate students’ curriculum vitae (CVs) and employment worksheets, and an interactive web-based lesson on banking from www.skool.ie.

**Assessment**

Record keeping practices among the teachers in the department are very strong and there is awareness among the teachers of the importance of record-keeping in ensuring accountability to the students and their parents. The teachers’ journals in addition to the students’ journals indicate difficulties in the attendance pattern among a significant proportion of students within class groups.

The maintenance of student journals is good but there was significant evidence of inconsistencies in the type and duration of homework assigned to students. Given the students’ literacy levels it is
advised that the format of homework assigned in the subjects is reviewed to match the range of ability levels within the class groups. Less emphasis should be placed on learning notes as a homework mode and homework assigned should always include a written or computational activity as appropriate to the lesson outcomes. When written work was assigned there was evidence that teachers monitored and evaluated the work.

There is some evidence of the use of short class tests, to assess students recall, within the subjects. However, practice within the department is inconsistent. Consideration should be given to the use of short tests to assess knowledge that will provide immediate feedback on progress to both teachers and students.

The team monitors student attainment in the state examinations and informally measures it against key indicators including student reading age and attainment in other subjects. However, there is scope to improve student attainment in business subjects at ordinary level.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Time allocated for the teaching of the subjects is good and includes double periods that allow for teaching the practical aspects of the junior cycle curriculum.
- The availability of ICT resources to support teaching and learning is excellent and the teachers’ capacity to use ICT is very good.
- A subject plan has been developed that is content focused.
- The teachers are committed to supporting and organising student learning within their lessons.
- There is good practice among the team with respect to sharing resources including question sheets, question banks and lesson material.
- In most lessons emphasis is placed on the use of active learning methodologies to support students learning.
- Examples used to explain business theory are linked to students own experience and local environment.
- Whole-school strategies for inclusion and supporting students’ behaviour are being implemented in the business lessons.
- Record-keeping and teachers’ evaluation of students’ written work when it is assigned are key strengths in the teaching of the subjects.

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

- The first-year scheme of work should be reviewed to strengthen the focus on learning outcomes that contribute to the development of students’ financial literacy skills.
- The sequencing of learning outcomes through the three-years of junior cycle should be reviewed to allow key topics to be revisited regularly during the cycle to maintain students’ interest and skills.
- Homework should be regularly assigned in all lessons and should include a written component.
A post-evaluation meeting was held with the teachers of business subjects and 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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