

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

**Subject Inspection of Business Subjects
REPORT**

**Castlecomer Community School,
Castlecomer, County Kilkenny.
Roll number: 91360T**

Date of inspection: 26th February 2010



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

REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN BUSINESS SUBJECTS

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Castlecomer 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 two days during which the inspector visited classrooms and observed teaching and learning. The inspector interacted with students and teachers 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 on the findings and recommendations of the report; the board chose to accept the report without response.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

In Castlecomer Community School, business education forms an integral part of many of the curriculum programmes. Business Studies is offered to students at junior cycle and there are business-related modules in the Transition Year programme (TY). At senior cycle, Accounting and Business are provided on the Leaving Certificate curriculum. The school also provides the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) at senior cycle and the enterprise module of this programme is mainly taught by business teachers. As part of its involvement with the local community, the school offers a Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) course "Business with Computers", a Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) level 5 accredited course.

As a result of a curriculum review in 2003, Business Studies at junior cycle was changed from a core subject to a choice subject. Prospective first years and their parents receive information about the choice subjects at the school's open night in October. In January, prospective students choose their subjects from the option bands generated from their subject preferences. There has been a marginal decline in the uptake of the subject in recent years. The provision of a taster programme that enables students to make an informed subject choice has proven successful in other schools. It is recommended that an analysis and review of factors influencing subject choice of incoming first years be conducted by senior management and the business subjects department. As part of this review, the provision of a taster programme for incoming first years should be considered.

Students in the school can avail of the optional TY programme. There are three business-related modules on the TY curriculum: Accounting, Enterprise and Accounting Life Skills. The TY business programme provides an opportunity for students who did not avail of Business Studies in the junior cycle to experience business education and to consider a business subject as one of the optional subjects at senior cycle. This is commendable. An exceptionally high percentage of Business Studies students at junior cycle take one or both business subjects at senior cycle. This is

testament to the good teaching and learning that exists in the business department. In Accounting uptake rates and learning outcomes are very good. From discussions with students, the majority had taken Business Studies at higher level in the Junior Certificate (JC) and had taken the Accounting module in TY. It should be noted that contrary to the understanding of students, it is not a requirement to have taken Business Studies in junior cycle in order to study Accounting in senior cycle. Uptake and learning outcomes of Business in senior cycle are good.

Senior management is proactive in the provision of resources to the business subjects department. There is an annual budget allocated to the department which is used to purchase relevant resources such as business journals, visual and teaching aids. The school has three dedicated computer rooms which can be used by business teachers and students when they are available. There are fourteen data projectors available in the school, with all classrooms having access points for broadband internet. Senior management is to be praised for its ongoing commitment to the provision of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in the school.

There are four main business specialist classrooms; two of these have fixed data projectors. The rooms adjoin each other which facilitates the sharing of resources and the use of ICT. Senior management is to be praised for the foresight in the location and provision of these specialist rooms.

Time allocation for the teaching of business subjects in junior and senior cycle is good. At junior cycle, students have one double period and two single periods. In TY, there are two single periods and at senior cycle, students have two double and one single period for business subjects. Teachers rotate within and between the junior and senior cycles and remain with their class group throughout the duration of a curriculum cycle. This is good practice.

Business subjects are taught in mixed-ability settings. From observation of lessons and from examination of student work, it was evident that teachers differentiate their teaching in order to address all ability levels in the classroom. In addressing the needs of students with special educational needs, business teachers liaise with the learning support team to gather information on their competencies. The learning support team advises business teachers on the best teaching strategies that can be employed to address the learning styles of their students with special educational needs. Review of the business subject department plan, indicates that these strategies were recorded and noted for the particular students that were availing of business education. This is good practice.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

Senior management allocates time to the business department for subject planning at the start of the academic year. Teachers in the subject department also meet informally on a needs base. This informal dialogue and communication within the subject department is facilitated by the close proximity of the business specialist rooms to each other. The co-ordinator of the business department meets with the principal near the end of the academic year to discuss issues pertaining to the running of the department. This is good practice.

Business teachers in the subject department have a good working relationship which facilitates collaborative planning within the business department. A business subjects plan is in place. The plan is electronically generated which facilitates amendments and additions by business subject teachers. Some of the elements included in the plan are: a scheme of work for each business subject; class organisation; the textbooks used; a list of resources that include web addresses; a

list of methodologies that could be employed; and information pertaining to students with special educational needs. It is recommended that over time planning documentation should include the specific learning outcomes for each topic on the curriculum of business subjects. The plan should take account of the shared experiences of business teachers of the active teaching and learning methodologies that can be employed in the delivery of business education. A list of ICT, visual and print resources that can be used to support teaching and learning of business subjects should also be included in the plan. This will facilitate a similar teaching and learning experience for all class groupings.

All teachers at junior cycle follow the same curriculum plan which facilitates the common assessment of students that takes place in first and second year. This is good practice. The three classes of TY students are timetabled concurrently for two single periods. One class of TY students takes the Accounting module for the entire academic year. The Enterprise and the Accounting for Life modules are completed by the two other TY classes. While acknowledging the successful outcomes the school has in Accounting, it would be desirable if all students in TY could avail of the three modules.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

In all lessons observed, teachers were well prepared. Lessons had a coherent structure, aims and objectives were outlined at the start of the lesson and homework was corrected. On conclusion of each lesson observed, homework was assigned and it served to reinforce learning in the lesson. The resources and teaching aids used were prepared in advance and supplemented the teaching and learning of the lesson. In some of the lessons aimed at senior examination class groups, teachers had prepared handouts which outlined the plan of work for students for the current term. The sharing of learning goals with the student is praiseworthy.

Eight lessons were observed. There was a predominance of book-keeping based topics taught in five of the lessons, three at junior cycle and two at senior cycle. Teachers skilfully taught book-keeping with good integration of the theory elements of the syllabus. This approach is admirable. Business teachers have developed the very good practice of teaching book-keeping to every year group in junior cycle. There was good use and explanation of terminology related to book-keeping. A step-by-step approach was adopted by all teachers in the teaching of book-keeping, which helped students to become familiar with concepts and practice. Teachers modelled good practice in question layout and reminded students of the need for clear labelling and neatness in their work.

Information and Communications Technology (ICT) resources were employed in several lessons, which successfully enhanced the learning for the student. A data projector was used to display source documents and completed answers. In tandem with the data projector, teachers effectively used the whiteboard and visual aids to link up the components of the topic. This provided a good learning experience for the students. In senior cycle lessons, a Power Point presentation was employed to encapsulate the main points of the topic being reviewed. This served as a good revision aid, as students used the information from the presentation to develop a mind map. As two of the business rooms now have a data projector, it is recommended that the teachers in the subject department formalise the process of storing available ICT resources in an electronic medium which can then be accessed by all business teachers in the school.

In business theory lessons, there was good linkage to everyday, local and national business issues and activities and this helps students in the study and understanding of the business environment in which they live. Teachers shared with the students' business-related stories and musings from

their own life experiences. Students enjoyed this approach and were active participants in the lesson. It is valuable to use this methodology on occasion.

As already stated, students in TY have two options, Accounting or the combination of the Enterprise and Financial Accounting for Life modules. From a review of the planning documentation and from discussions with TY students, it is clear that the Enterprise and Financial Accounting for Life modules are taught in the recommended way for the TY programme. While not observed at the time of the inspection, the accounting module gives the student a taste of the subject at senior cycle. The TY plan states that computerised accounts forms part of this module. To give students the experience of computerised accounts is praiseworthy, as the majority of business enterprises use ICT to maintain their account and financial records. The business subject department in its ongoing review of the TY programme should ensure that the teaching methodologies employed by teachers are explorative and interactive.

In all lessons observed, there was good use of teacher questioning to elicit knowledge, to check student progression and to develop class discussions. Teachers looked for global and student targeted answers. Targeted questions were good; they were mainly higher-order and served to differentiate learning in the lesson. Teachers affirmed student responses, which reflected good use of business terminology and knowledge.

The range of methodologies used across the business subject department to support teaching and learning included teacher led discussions and instructions, pair work, student input, use of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) and graphic organisers. The business teachers in the school are all subject specialists with their own individual skill set that they successfully deploy in the classroom. The business department plan has a list of teaching methodologies that can be used; they include chalk and talk, note taking, discussion, repetition, sharing of ideas and team work. To maximise the learning experience for the students, it is recommended that a wider variety of active learning methodologies be included in each subject plan for use in the classroom. To ensure that students in each year receive a similar learning experience, the business subject department should agree on some common teaching approaches that can be utilised in each year.

Classroom management was good in all lessons observed and there was good rapport between teachers and students. The positive classroom atmosphere created a positive learning environment. Seating arrangements in classrooms facilitated group work and ease of movement for the teacher to give individual support and guidance to students. The dedicated business classrooms displayed commercially produced and student generated posters that were attractive, informative and actively used as learning aids in some of the lessons visited.

ASSESSMENT

In all lessons observed, homework was assigned to students. Correction of homework was by means of oral answers by teacher and student, written answers on the board and in some cases, teachers collected the students' work for correction outside of the classroom. In each lesson observed, a sample of copybooks was inspected. While most of the assignments were marked with a cursory tick, there were in some instances, notably at senior cycle, a small number of evaluative comments. This practice should be extended within the business department. The school was one of the fifteen schools that participated in the "Learning Anew" research and development project that focussed on "Teaching and Learning for the 21st century" (TL21). The project endorsed the virtues of assessment for learning (AfL). In some of lessons observed, AfL

was seen in practice. It would be laudable to extend this practice throughout the business subject department.

Examination of a sample of homework journals from each class group indicated that not all students were recording their homework. It is recommended that school management and business teachers put strategies in place to address this.

Common formal assessments are administered to students in first and second year. Formal tests are administered twice a year and the results are communicated in a written report to parents. Students' progression in business subjects is discussed with parents at parent-teacher meetings. Teachers administer regular informal tests throughout the year and the results of these are often recorded in the student's 'green book'. This book is used to record teacher comments, student awards, achievements and test results. The use of the book is another means of communication between parents and school. This practice is very good and school management is to be commended for its introduction.

Students are encouraged to achieve to their highest potential and the majority of students take business subjects at higher level in certificate examinations. Outcomes are good in certificate examinations. A review of these outcomes is conducted by the principal and is communicated to the board of management and the teachers in the business department.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Senior management is to be commended in its provision of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in the school.
- Senior management is to be praised for their foresight in the location and provision of adjoining business specialist rooms.
- The teaching of the book-keeping is firmly integrated with the theory elements of the syllabus at junior cycle.
- An exceptionally high percentage of Business Studies students at junior cycle take one or both business subjects at senior cycle. This is testament to the good teaching and learning that exists in the business department.
- The use of the student's 'green book' to record comments, awards, achievements and test results is a very good practice.
- Teachers successfully deploy their own individual skills and specialist knowledge in the classroom.
- Outcomes are good in certificate examinations.

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

- It is recommended that an analysis and review of factors influencing subject choice in first year be conducted. As part of this review, the provision of a taster programme for incoming first years should be considered.
- It is recommended that over time that subject planning should include: the specific learning outcomes for each curriculum topic, the range of teaching and learning

- methodologies to be used for each curriculum topic and the list of resources that can be used to support teaching and learning of business subjects.
- It is recommended that the teachers in the subject department formalise the process of storing available ICT resources in an electronic medium which can then be accessed by all business teachers in the school.
 - To maximise the learning experience for the student, it is recommended that a wider variety of active learning methodologies be included in each subject plan for use in the classroom.
 - It is recommended that school management and subject teachers put strategies in place to ensure the use of homework journals to record homework.

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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