Subject Inspection of Business Subjects
REPORT

St. Colmcilles’s Community School
Knocklyon, Dublin 16
Roll number: 91510M

Date of inspection: 1 March 2010
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. Colmcille’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 and examined students’ work. 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 deputy principal. 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

In St. Colmcille’s, students can avail of business education through the provision of Business Studies in the junior cycle, business modules in Transition Year (TY) and Accounting, Business and Economics in the senior cycle. Business Studies in junior cycle is part of the eight-week taster programme for first-year students. Senior management is commended on the provision of this programme as it gives students the opportunity to make an informed decision on the choice of optional subjects. Uptake of senior cycle business subjects is good; the majority of students continue with business education from junior cycle, a testament to the positive experience of Business Studies. The school also offers the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) to students, and the Enterprise module of this programme has business education at its core.

The time allocated to the teaching of Business Studies is four periods. The option bands in which the subject is offered contain subjects that require double periods and as a result Business Studies is taught in two double periods. In some year groups the classes are on consecutive days which does not provide an even spread of class contact time or adequate time for completion of homework. Teachers are commended for using a variety of methodologies in these double periods to sustain student engagement. As part of the yearly evaluation conducted within the subject department it would be worthwhile to analyse the effectiveness of timetabling provision in junior cycle. In TY the accounting and economics modules are taught in two single class periods and the mini-company and business module is taught in a double period. In the senior cycle, class time contact consists of two double and one single class period.

Senior management allocates a yearly budget to the subject department, which facilitates the purchase of teaching aids and some resources such as the Consumer Choice magazine. The three specialist business classrooms in the school are located in the same area, thus facilitating the sharing of resources and the maintenance of the good collaborative team spirit that exists within the subject department. There are good teaching aids and resources in each classroom; these include multi media equipment, overhead projectors, data projectors, personal computers,
printers, calculators, notice boards and commercial and student-generated posters. Senior management is highly commended for their ongoing commitment to the provision of these resources.

The school’s information and communication technology (ICT) facilities are very good. Computer suites are available for class and individual student use. All business classrooms have data projectors, ICT equipment and access to the school’s internal e-portal site. The business subject department has a folder on the school’s intranet system and updates the ‘Moodle’ facility with resources, lesson notes, corrected assignments and business-related topics that can be accessed internally and externally by students and teachers. The school has a vibrant and informative website that assists and informs all its stakeholders including business students.

Business teachers are supported in continuing professional development by the school. A bursary is available for teachers who wish to pursue further study and financial support is given towards membership fees for professional associations. Senior management has provided in-service at staff development days and this included Assessment for Learning (AfL) strategies and strategies to support the needs of gifted and talented students. Some business subject department teachers have also availed of “Enterprise” in-service, Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) in-services and subject specific seminars organised by professional associations. Of particular merit is the involvement of some teachers in their subject association at national and local level.

Business subjects are taught in mixed-ability settings. Any additional needs that students may have are identified and business teachers liaise with the special education needs team to provide support for their students. The business subject department is commended on the quality of its own special education needs policy; it is clear, succinct and outlines practical strategies and techniques that business teachers may employ in the classroom.

TY is an optional programme in the school, and almost all students transfer to the programme after junior cycle. There are two business-related modules in the TY programme. The first module has an accounting and economic focus and in the second module students are introduced to the world of business and enterprise. It was observed through the course of the evaluation that students with no experience of business in junior cycle had chosen a business subject in senior cycle and this may have been influenced by their experience of TY. The provision for business education in TY is admirable.

**PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

The business subject department and senior management are commended on the positive and proactive approach to subject development planning. The business subject department has a co-ordinator whose role and duties are defined. The position of co-ordinator rotates among subject department members and this is good practice as it builds expertise and capacity within the department. The subject department meets in a formal capacity once a term and informally as matters arise. The recorded minutes of the formal meetings are indicative of a high level of collaboration and professionalism within the subject department.

There is a comprehensive subject plan in place for the provision of business education in the school; it has all the elements of good planning as outlined by the School Development Planning Initiative (SDPI). The plan is written in terms of what is the best teaching and learning experience that the subject department can give to its students. All junior cycle students in each year follow a similar curriculum path and are commonly assessed. Every topic in the curriculum plans is linked
to the resources that are available in the classroom and notes how the teaching of the topic can be differentiated. This is good practice. To further enhance planning, it is recommended that the lesson resources that are on the shared intranet folder be referenced to each topic listed in business subject plans and that the range of methodologies appropriate to each topic be also noted.

A review and evaluation of the operation of the business subject department takes place within the subject department on an annual basis. Each year the subject department focuses on a different area which is subjected to a ‘SWOT’ analysis. An agreed action plan is put in place with timed strategies to target the perceived area for development. The business subject department is supported in this process by the school development planning co-ordinator. Teachers also review and evaluate the TY business programme annually, and changes are made if needed. The students in TY are part of this process as they engage in a written evaluation of the business-related modules on their completion and this forms part of the overall evaluation of the business modules. This is a very worthwhile process as it facilitates incremental development of subject areas.

Teachers’ short-term and lesson planning was excellent and in each lesson visited the inspector was given the daily typed lesson plan. Where additional resources such as worksheets, graphic organisers, blank business documents, business games, and software were used, they were prepared in advance of lessons and appropriately included within the lesson. On the school’s intranet each business subject has its own folder that is subdivided into year groups. It is common practice for business teachers to include their prepared notes, presentations, solutions to questions and other resources in these folders for all business teachers to access and use. It is evident that business teachers share resources and their use of the intranet for storage and retrieval of resources is commendable.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

The overall standard of teaching and learning was very good. Each lesson observed had a clear structure. Most lessons began with teachers sharing the aims and objectives of the lesson with students, followed by correction of homework, which served as a link to previous learning, introduction of new material and setting of homework based on lesson content. The pace of the lessons was appropriate to each student cohort. A range of methodologies was used to engage the student in learning, and included project work, student research, pair work, ICT, mnemonics, group work, graphic organisers, class discussions and teacher-led input. Of particular merit was the use of a variety of methodologies in a double lesson. This practice engaged students in learning activities and sought to address the various learning styles of students. Teachers are commended on the high standard of planning and the range of learning activities provided in lessons.

Good examples of project work were observed at junior and senior cycle. In a junior cycle lesson, students worked in pairs to conduct research on euro zone countries under pre-selected headings. The information was then displayed on posters and presented orally to the class group. A senior cycle research topic looked at economic facts and variables in a range of developed and developing countries. The posters from the projects were displayed in classrooms and served as learning aids for all business students.

In planning documentation for Business Studies it was observed that teachers include book-keeping in each year group in junior cycle. This is good practice. In lessons observed that had a
book-keeping focus there was good use and explanation of accounting terminology. 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. There was good use of ICT to display solutions to questions.

Students in TY can sample the three business subjects in senior cycle and can partake in mini-company. The content of the accounting module relates to attainment of effective budgeting skills that can be employed in the home and in business. While the module employs active methodologies, it is recommended that the merits of the inclusion of a project in the accounting module be discussed in the end-of-year evaluation of the TY business modules. The business and mini-company module seeks to develop students’ entrepreneurial and business management skills. The economics module aims to give students an understanding of the economics of the society we live in. From an evaluation of planning documentation and a visit to some TY lessons it is evident that the programme is delivered to students in a way that befits the ethos and aims of the TY programme.

In most lessons observed ICT was used seamlessly as a teaching and learning tool. Computer generated presentations were used to display the rules of a trade game, the presentation of facts, banking documents and the learning outcomes of a lesson. A spread-sheet was used to show the workings of a budget and a club account question. A word-processing package was used to prepare handouts and information sheets for use in lessons. The internet was used for research inside and outside class. Effective use was made of ICT as it sustained student interest and allowed for the efficient use of class time. All ICT materials were prepared in advance of lessons and saved in the business subject folder on the intranet site; this facilitated easy retrieval and sharing of resources. Very good practice was observed in a senior cycle subject, where all class notes were typed and uploaded to ‘Moodle’, and each student could then access them, saving time and paper. Although the use of ‘Moodle’ is in its infancy, the business subject teachers have plans to extend it to all subjects and they are commended on their foresight.

Questioning was often used as a tool to differentiate learning in the mixed ability classes. Teachers used questioning as a means of accessing student knowledge and developing class discussions. In some lessons where global questioning was used to access student knowledge, it was often only the more confident student who tendered answers, and teachers should be mindful of this when employing this technique. Higher-order questioning was successfully employed by teachers to initiate class discussions and enable students to apply critical thinking skills to lesson content. During lessons students made good links to prior learning, and were proficient in articulating and sharing views which helped to deepen business acumen.

Classroom environments were very good, and seating arrangements facilitated group work. Teachers had ease of movement when giving individual student support in the classrooms. Print-rich environments were created in rooms where a selection of commercially produced posters, students’ posters, displays of students’ projects and notice boards with relevant business newspaper and magazine articles were displayed.

Classroom management and atmosphere was very good in all lessons observed. There was a cordial, respectful and positive rapport between teachers and students. Students were positively affirmed and supported in all their interactions. Students displayed good subject knowledge and an ability to apply this knowledge to everyday situations. The good class management strategies observed created a positive learning environment for students.
ASSESSMENT

In each lesson observed, homework was assigned to students. Teachers and students have only two contact periods in junior cycle and three contact periods in senior cycle and as a result the setting of an appropriate range and amount of homework is an important part of the learning process. Correction of homework was by means of oral answers by teachers and students with solutions to questions displayed on data projector and whiteboard. From an evaluation of a sample of copybooks there is some use of evaluative comments on homework assignments and class tests. This practice is good and should be extended as far as possible within the business department. Most copybooks were maintained to a high standard and were dated and labelled. However, in some instances students could take more care with presentation of written work.

Teachers administer informal tests at the conclusion of each topic. All junior cycle students take common formal assessments in November, February and June of each year. This is good practice as it ensures that each year group follows the same curriculum plan and that student expectations are maintained at the highest level throughout the three-year cycle. TY students are assessed by a mixture of in-class tests that form a continuous assessment of work, participation and completion of project work and an evaluation of their folders of work.

On inspection of student journals it was observed that some teachers were proactive in their use to communicate students’ progress to parents. This good practice should be extended. Formal test results are communicated in a written report to parents. Students’ progression in business subjects is discussed with parents at parent-teacher meetings.

Students are clearly encouraged to achieve to their highest potential, as the majority of students take business subjects at higher level in certificate examinations. Outcomes are good in certificate examinations. Reviews of these outcomes are conducted by the management in the school and are communicated to the board of management and the teachers in the business department. The analysis of outcomes includes a comparison with national norms in state examinations and this is presented in accessible bar chart format, and then filed in the business subject folder. The analysis forms part of the yearly evaluation of the workings of the business subject department, and this practice is commended.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Senior management is highly commended on the provision of a taster programme for first years, and the provision of teaching aids, ICT and teaching resources.
- The business subject department works in a highly collaborative manner, and engages in high-quality planning that is student centred and reflective.
- The variety of methodologies and the effective use of ICT in lessons served to engage students in good learning activities and sought to address the various learning styles of students.
- The very good class management strategies observed created a positive learning and caring environment for students.
- Students are encouraged to achieve to their highest potential and the majority of students take business subjects at higher level 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 the lesson resources on the shared intranet folder be referenced to each topic listed in the business subject plan and that the teaching methodologies for each curriculum topic be also noted.
- While the TY module employs active methodologies, the inclusion of a project in the accounting module should be considered.

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

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