An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna
Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection of Irish
REPORT

Blessington Community College
Blessington, County Wicklow
Roll number: 70760S

Date of inspection: 2 November 2010
REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN IRISH

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Blessington Community College. It presents the findings of an evaluation of the quality of teaching and learning in Irish 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 the 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

Students are placed in mixed-ability class groups for Irish in first year in the school. At the beginning of second year, they are divided into one higher-level and two ordinary-level class groups, based on the results of the end-of-year tests in first year. One of the ordinary-level class groups in second year is quite small this year, to provide extra support for that group of students. School management is commended for making this arrangement. There is one ordinary-level class group and one higher-level class group in third year. There are two mixed-ability class groups in Transition Year (TY), which is in line with the TY philosophy. Fifth-year students are in two ordinary-level class groups, with a small number of students in one of them attempting higher level and there are two ordinary-level class groups in sixth year. The teachers of Irish and school management recognise the need to focus, as a matter of urgency, on the small number of students who take higher-level Irish in the certificate examinations and on the attainment of students in Irish in general. The school is focussing in particular on this issue with a view to increasing the number of students taking higher level. The increase evident in the junior classes indicates that a good start has been made towards achieving this target. School management and the Irish teachers are commended for their commitment to improving student attainment in Irish.

Four class-periods per week are available for first and second-year students. Five periods per week are available for third-year students. This provision for the junior cycle is satisfactory. Three periods per week are available for TY students and five each per week for fifth and sixth-year students. It is recommended that school management explore the possibilities of providing an extra class period for Irish for TY students. It is difficult to provide an ongoing stimulating programme for TY Irish within the constraints of three periods per week.

There are three teachers of Irish in the school at present. All three are new to the school. Two of these teachers are appropriately qualified and the third has responsibility for one class group. The class groups are rotated between the two teachers who do most of the teaching, so that both gain experience of teaching the different age groups and levels. This is good practice.

Sixty-five of the two hundred and seventy-one students in the school have exemptions from the study of Irish. Twenty-seven students who have come from abroad have an exemption, as do two
students who have re-enrolled having been out of the country for over three years. One student who was educated outside the state until after the age of eleven also has an exemption. Thirty-four students have exemptions due to learning difficulties and there is one other student with an exemption for which no reason is given. School management should ensure that all students who are not entitled to an exemption learn Irish.

The teachers reported that they have started an initiative to raise the profile of Irish in the school. A Lá na Gaeilge was organised during Seachtain na Gaeilge last year and this year they intend to extend the programme of events for Seachtain na Gaeilge over three or four days. Students were also taken to a drama performance in Irish. The teachers of Irish are commended for their work to date on giving students experience of Irish as a living language. Such a programme of enjoyable extra-curricular and cross-curricular activities reinforces teachers’ efforts in the classroom. It is recommended that the teachers of Irish develop this programme of events gradually from year to year, so that an annual programme of enjoyable and stimulating activities is available to the students of the school, which will give them an understanding and an experience of Irish as a modern living language.

One of the rooms used for Irish was decorated most attractively with posters, materials for the teaching and learning of the language and students’ own work. This approach is highly commended. Displays such as this can be a valuable resource for both the student and the teacher.

County Wicklow Vocational Education Committee (VEC) makes three Gaeltacht scholarships available to the school. The department of Irish also gets a grant from the local Credit Union to help send some students to the Gaeltacht. These scholarships are a valuable resource for the school. The teachers reported that they are trying to encourage more students to attend a summer course in Irish. Their diligence in this regard is commended and it is recommended that parents be informed about Irish courses available locally as well as those available further from home.

The Irish teachers will attend the in-service courses provided by the Second Level Support Service for Irish this year which is commended.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

The teachers of Irish meet as a group once a term and they frequently meet informally also. One of the teachers of Irish is nominated as co-ordinator of planning for the teaching and learning of the language on an annual basis. Minutes in Irish of these meetings were made available during the evaluation and it was clear that the teachers discussed a wide range of topics at these meetings. These included Gaeltacht scholarships, common examinations, schemes of work, Lá na Gaeilge, book lists, allocation of teachers to classes, planning matters and a visit to the theatre.

The plan for Irish was made available on the day of the inspection, as well as teachers’ schemes of work. The Irish teachers have done an impressive amount of work to date on planning matters and their work in this area is highly commended. The general plan for Irish includes a description of the department of Irish, the layout of the classes, timetabling, details of Lá na Gaeilge, a homework policy for Irish and information about the Second Level Support Service for Irish and about Comhar na Múinteoirí Gaeilge. In addition to this, the teachers have prepared really comprehensive schemes of work for the various classes and levels. There is a common scheme for first-years and different ones for the other year groups, as these class groups are taught at different levels. The subject-matter in the schemes is set out on an accessible, readable template. The work involved in compiling the schemes of work is commended. It is recommended that the
heading ‘Class-work’ be changed to ‘Methodologies’ and that further resources be mentioned in the column ‘Teaching resources’. The central role of the use of information and communication technology (ICT) in the classroom is given recognition on the template, which is highly commended.

A plan was made available during the evaluation for the teaching and learning of Irish in TY, as well as a detailed scheme of work for up to the mid-term break. The philosophy of the plan is commended and the emphasis placed on the improvement of communication skills in Irish. While acknowledging that this work is at the initial stages only, it is recommended that the teachers continue to develop this TY plan and that they set out the schemes of work on a modular basis, as has been done for the first term. It is suggested that the plan be shared with the students at the beginning of the school-year and that the learning targets set for them by teachers be presented and fully explained.

The work done by the teachers of Irish in the area of planning in general is praiseworthy indeed. The two main teachers of Irish are not long on the school staff, but have done remarkable work. It was clear that hard work and effort had been invested in the documents made available. Good preparation had been carried out for all the lessons observed. *PowerPoint* slides had been prepared as well as other materials for distribution to the students in all the lessons visited during the evaluation.

**TEACHING AND LEARNING**

The use of Irish as the language of management, communication and teaching was very good in all the lessons observed. Teachers made certain efforts to avoid translation from Irish to English, but translation was sometimes used unnecessarily. It is recommended that the teachers of Irish discuss this question and agree a policy concerning it and that the policy be clearly part of the general plan for Irish. The teachers’ overall commitment to using the target language is highly commended.

The use of ICT in all the lessons observed was very impressive and the work of the teachers in preparing slides, games and other materials for the classes is praiseworthy indeed. The use of ICT added greatly to students’ interest in the work and it also gave considerable support to their learning. The inspector observed the use of ICT with a small class, which was not very competent in the language, and it was a great help to the students in absorbing and learning the subject-matter. Effective use was made of the interactive white board in some Irish lessons observed. This work is highly commended.

Pair-work was used effectively, in some of the lessons observed, to encourage students to talk and communicate with each other through the medium of Irish. This strategy was successful with most of the students with some exceptions. The use of such a strategy is highly commended. One case was observed, however, where pair-work was used to get students talking, without sufficient preparation to ensure that students would be able to undertake the work effectively. It is necessary to make appropriate preparation for classroom activities to ensure that every student benefits from them. It is also necessary to prepare worksheets and other materials to help students, especially those with language-acquisition problems. It is recommended that the number of strategies to encourage students to speak the language be increased gradually, as students’ self-confidence in speaking Irish grows. Role-play, group-work and various games can also be used as ways of encouraging students to use Irish in class.
Although the teachers did their best to use the target language with the students, the students made little effort to use Irish in addressing the teachers, except in relation to answering questions. Clearly some strategies should be agreed to establish and promote, as a recognised approach, the use of Irish as the normal language of classroom communication. It is recommended that the teachers discuss this problem and provide appropriate material for the students to enable them to ask simple questions in Irish and undertake basic communication with the teacher.

In the lessons observed, the teachers made genuine efforts to develop the four language skills, listening, speaking, reading and writing. It was felt, however, that in a couple of lessons observed, there was an overemphasis on writing, to the detriment of the other skills. It is recommended that teachers focus on keeping an appropriate balance in their work, across the development of all four skills, including speaking.

Reading and repetition were used to help students acquire both vocabulary and pronunciation in Irish. This approach is commended. In a few lessons, there was insufficient emphasis on correcting errors of pronunciation and it is recommended that this be rectified.

Teachers circulated around their classrooms during lessons, helping the students and ensuring that the aims of the lessons were being achieved. Students who made honest efforts in class were continually praised and discipline was excellent. Some classes ended with a game, an effective strategy to conclude a lesson and revise material covered during the lesson.

**ASSESSMENT**

In-house examinations are organised twice a year, at Christmas and in the summer. Reports are sent home to the parents after those examinations. As well as these tests, mid-term examinations are also held and continuous assessment is used also.

Parent-teacher meetings are organised for the different year groups and parents are also kept informed of their children’s progress through the use of the school diary.

It was reported that ‘mock’ oral examinations are organised for fifth and sixth-year students and external examiners were brought to the school last year to conduct those tests. This approach is commended. It is recommended, however, that that every student in the school should take oral examinations from first year onwards, to let them realise from the start the importance of speaking Irish. It is recommended that the marks awarded for the oral examination be indicated as a separate item in the school report sent home to parents. The department of Irish has sent a letter to the parents of all students in the school, to inform them about the new marking system for state examinations and the extra emphasis to be placed on oral Irish as a result. This approach is highly commended.

It was evident from the copybooks and school diaries examined that homework is regularly set. The department of Irish has a homework policy and the provision of this policy is commended. Some of the copybooks inspected were carefully corrected, with the teacher’s signature and date included. There were other copies, however, where it was difficult to see any teacher’s corrections. It is recommended that a common policy be adopted regarding the correction of homework and strategies to ensure that students learn from their mistakes. It is also recommended that the corrected work include comments on the standard of that work, on the student’s progress and on those parts of the work which need to be improved.
The achievements in Irish of the students in this school have not been entirely satisfactory in recent years and, as mentioned earlier in this report, the number of students taking higher-level Irish in the state examinations was too low. The teachers of Irish and school management are now focused on this issue and the work done to date on encouraging students in the junior classes to persevere with the higher-level course is commended.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The commitment of the teachers of Irish and of the school management to raising students’ achievement in Irish and increasing the number of students taking higher level in the certificate examinations is commended.
- The work of the teachers in raising the profile of Irish as a living language outside the classroom is commended.
- Very good planning documentation for Irish was examined during the evaluation.
- The use of Irish as the language of management, communication and teaching was very satisfactory in all the lessons observed.
- The effective use of ICT in all the lessons observed is highly commended.
- Genuine efforts were made to develop all the language skills during the majority of the lessons observed.

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

- The teachers should build on the work already carried out in organising a programme of enjoyable activities for Irish and gradually develop a programme of extra-curricular and cross-curricular events.
- Teachers should continue to develop an enjoyable stimulating programme for TY and the number of class periods for Irish in TY should be increased, if possible.
- Strategies should be developed to encourage students to use Irish as a normal medium of communication in class.
- It is recommended that ‘mock’ oral examinations be organised for all year-groups, from first year onwards.
- The teachers should agree a common approach to correcting copybooks and providing feedback to the students on the standard of their work.

Post-evaluation meetings were held with the teachers of Irish and with the principal at the conclusion of the evaluation, to present and discuss the findings and recommendations of the evaluation.

Published June 2011