Subject Inspection of Business Subjects
REPORT

Mercy College,
Woodford, County Galway
Roll number: 631711

Date of inspection: 6 April 2011
REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN BUSINESS SUBJECTS

INFORMATION ON THE INSPECTION

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<th>Dates of inspection</th>
<th>5 &amp; 6 April 2011</th>
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<td>Inspection activities undertaken</td>
<td>Observation of teaching and learning during 10 class periods</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Review of relevant documents</td>
<td>• Examination of students’ work</td>
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<td>• Discussion with principal and teachers</td>
<td>• Feedback to principal and teachers</td>
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<td>• Interaction with students</td>
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MAIN FINDINGS

- Very good lesson routines were observed and these are consistently applied by the teachers of the subjects.
- Students had a considerable amount of their courses completed at the time of the inspection visit and it was evident from their work that they were achieving the planned learning outcomes.
- The use of information and communication technology (ICT) is widespread in the teaching of the subjects. This was observed to be most effective when used interactively and to manage the correction process within lessons.
- During the inspection visit, the questioning strategies observed tended to focus on checking students’ knowledge rather than on the development of higher order skills such as critical thinking.
- The learning aids made available to students in the lessons observed were mainly text-based.
- Although the time allocated for the subject in the junior cycle is low, the schemes of work indicate that all the syllabus outcomes are delivered through the planned programme.

MAIN RECOMMENDATIONS

- Agreement should be reached between the teachers of Mathematics and of the business subjects around a standard approach to the use of calculators for common mathematical operations.
- As part of the school’s whole-school approach to raising literacy standards, strategies for improving students’ literacy skills through their study of the business subjects should be discussed and agreed.
- A range of in-class questioning techniques should be used within all lessons.
- In each class group, the support notes used to aid students’ learning should be sufficiently varied to accommodate the range of learning styles.
INTRODUCTION

In Mercy College Business Studies is included within the school’s core curriculum at junior cycle and Business and Accounting are offered at senior cycle. A business module focused on enterprise is included within the school’s Transition Year (TY) programme. The school serves a rural catchment area. Its current enrolment of 209 students is down on previous years due to a decline in student population within the catchment area.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

• Lesson routines are strong and generally consistent with the strategies documented in the subject plan. In some lessons, students use a variety of approaches when using calculators for mathematical operations.

• In most of the lessons observed there was a good mix of activities for students including opportunities to actively engage with lesson content. Some very good examples of the teacher providing opportunities for co-operative learning and pair work and of the teacher facilitating, group work and discussion were noted.

• In lessons, teachers use questions that test recall and fact effectively. There is scope to broaden the range of questions used, especially those targeted at more able students. The asking of challenging questions that encourage students to interrogate and evaluate lesson content is important in developing their higher-order thinking skills.

• ICT is used frequently and effectively in the teaching of business subjects. The applications used included presentation software and short video clips. Excellent practice was observed in the use of spreadsheets to manage the correction of accounting and bookkeeping exercises.

• Students’ and teachers’ work rates are good. This is particularly evident in the junior cycle where the course coverage is good despite the limitation of only having three periods for the subject in each of first and second year.

• A tendency for support notes to be text-based was observed during the inspection. Students would benefit from guidance on alternative methods of note generation. Increased use of mnemonics and graphic organisers is recommended.

• There is scope for team teaching especially in third-year Business Studies as the classes are concurrently timetabled. It would be beneficial to avail of this.

• A lower proportion of students take the subject at higher level at Junior Certificate than at Leaving Certificate. An ongoing analysis of participation rates should form part of the subject planning process.

• Homework was corrected at the start of each lesson and students were surveyed to check completion rates. However, there were inconsistencies in how non-completion of homework was recorded.

• The inspector’s review of student copybooks and workbooks indicated frequent, uncorrected mistakes in spelling of keywords in the business subjects. It is timely for the business department to develop a consistent approach towards promoting literacy skills within the teaching of the subjects. The development of strategies for the use of keywords and the correction of spellings is advised.
SUBJECT PROVISON AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

- At five periods each week, the provision for the subjects at senior cycle is in accordance with guidelines. Timetable provision at junior cycle is low at three periods in each of first and second year and four periods in third year.
- The number of students taking Accounting has traditionally been low compared to Business and there is currently no class group for Accounting in fifth year. Sustaining class groups for senior cycle Accounting is likely to be dependent upon increasing demand among students for the subject as the small class groups of recent years may not continue to be viable given how resource intensive they are.
- Option bands for senior cycle subjects are based on a survey of students’ preferences. This facilitates very good uptake of the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP).
- It is very positive that business classes are generally grouped on a mixed-ability basis. Until the current school year, third-year business classes were separated into higher and ordinary groups at the start of the academic year. The recent change in the timing of the decision to separate third-year groups is welcome and the practice of streaming groups in third year should be discontinued in future years.
- One base room is provided for the teaching of business subjects and all mainstream classrooms are equipped with a fixed data projector. Currently, teachers use their own laptops. There are proposals to install PCs in each classroom in the near future.
- The school has a whole-school homework policy in place that was ratified in 2009. There is scope to improve how the principles of assessment for learning within that policy are incorporated into the assessment policy for business subjects.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

- A formal department structure exists with meetings taking place on average three times each year. The meeting agenda is set by the department and minutes are recorded using a standard template.
- Minutes of recent department meetings indicate discussions about previous evaluations in the school that have whole-school dimensions. Arising from this process, assessment for learning has been identified by the department as part of its developmental agenda. This should be progressed as a priority within subject planning.
- The school is currently undertaking a curriculum review in which the length of the school week and structure of the curriculum are being discussed. Discussions at subject department level around these issues indicate a capacity among the business team for self evaluation.
- There is scope to alter the sequencing of the units for Business as all students have taken the Business Studies at junior cycle. There should be greater correlation in the sequencing of units and topics with both the link modules of the LCVP and the relevant Applied Business Question (ABQ).
- The presentation of the yearly schemes of work can be improved by consolidating the existing information into more defined schemes where the learning outcomes for each
topic are agreed and the resources, assessment modes and methodologies appropriate to each topic are linked in an easily accessible tabular format.

The draft findings and recommendations arising out of this evaluation were discussed with the principal and subject teachers at the conclusion of the evaluation.

The board of management of the school was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the report, and the response of the board will be found in the appendix of this report.

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Appendix

SCHOOL RESPONSE TO THE REPORT

Submitted by the Board of Management
Area 1  Observations on the content of the inspection report

The uptake of Business Studies at Higher Level for the Junior Certificate is often influenced by direct input from parents. Frequently, parents submit written requests to the Subject Teacher/Principal insisting that their child be allowed take the Ordinary Level Course. This is often contrary to the teachers’ professional opinions that these students are quite capable of taking the Higher Level option.