An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna
Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection of English
REPORT

Saint Joseph’s Christian Brothers’ School
Nenagh, County Tipperary
Roll number: 65370B

Date of inspection: 16 November 2011
REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN ENGLISH

INFORMATION ON THE INSPECTION

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MAIN FINDINGS

- Overall, teaching was good and learning ranged from adequate to very good in the lessons observed.
- Student learning in the subject is strengthened by mixed-ability classes in first and second year, by a first-year literacy initiative, and by in-school co-curricular activities.
- Strong attention has been invested in supporting students with learning difficulties in a small class setting to date.
- Due to a number of retirements, the core team of teachers of English is in transition. While this change means that subject department schemes and practices now need to be agreed anew, it also means that new energy and ideas will be available to support this ongoing process.

MAIN RECOMMENDATIONS

- The very good practices noted in different classes need to be formally shared and subject department schemes need to be reviewed.
- To promote even higher achievement in the subject, the department should focus on developing students’ writing skills and on developing its own assessment for learning practices.
- A whole-school team needs to be established to develop literacy and numeracy targets and strategies for improvement.
INTRODUCTION
Saint Joseph’s Christian Brothers’ School is a voluntary secondary school with an enrolment of 472. The school offers the following programmes: the Junior Certificate, Transition Year (TY), the established Leaving Certificate, and the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA).

TEACHING AND LEARNING
- Overall, good quality teaching was observed in lessons. All teachers observed were using information and communication technology (ICT) effectively and this was supporting student understanding and engagement.
- Learning ranged from adequate to very good in the lessons visited. Where weaknesses were observed, the emphasis in classes was on content coverage without first attending sufficiently to eliciting students’ personal response and equipping them with strategies to unpack new texts, and there was an inadequate level of challenge for students.
- Students were respectful at all times. Good interpersonal relations exist between teachers and students, with very positive teacher affirmation of students in some classes.
- High expectations are promoted among students by placing them into mixed-ability classes in first and second year and by delaying senior-cycle setting arrangements to encourage as many students as possible to attempt higher level.
- Dedicated, student-centred teaching approaches in a small class setting have been provided to support students with particular learning challenges to date. Some team teaching arrangements were also operated in the past. However, planning now needs to take place for the provision of support to students with learning difficulties within mainstream classes. Re-introducing team teaching arrangements would be a useful mode of support in this regard.
- A literacy-support initiative was embarked on with first years this year, involving consultation with and training from a National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) psychologist. Senior management’s provision of an extra class of English per week to facilitate this is highly commended. However, literacy support across the curriculum also needs to be provided. A whole-school team should be established to develop improvement targets and strategies, as required under the national Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life strategy.
- To promote even higher achievement, teachers should specifically focus on the development of students’ writing skills. Useful methods to incorporate in this regard would be setting comprehension activities based on current affairs materials, explicitly using student feedback to model the writing process using ICT, and possibly including Make-a-Book projects into the first-year scheme of work.
- Homework was being set and monitored and written comments of varying depth were being given in the sample of copies reviewed. To support student learning, it is recommended that criteria for assessment be set for assignments, be used in marking and in giving more detailed formative feedback on lengthy assignments, and that peer and self-assessment practices using those criteria be taught.
SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

- Whole-school supports for English include very good timetable provision for first, fifth and sixth year; ICT equipment in classrooms; and the school’s shared map drive that enables electronic sharing of teaching resources.

- Timetable provision for second and third year English is adequate. If an additional class of English could be allocated for either year, then that could help support even higher achievement in the subject. Moving to a nine-period day could create the possibility of such increased timetable provision.

- Activities organised within the school such as public speaking, trips to dramatic performances, a film studies club, and a planned book club for junior-cycle students commendably foster students’ skills and interest in English.

- There is a strong reserve of individual expertise among the teachers of English. The school psychologist’s inputs have also provided the department with materials and approaches to help progress the assessment and writing recommendations made above. The department is now advised to deepen its understanding of the prior knowledge and skills students should have developed by the end of their primary schooling, to aid planning for first-year English.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

- Teachers had engaged in significant planning for all lessons visited.

- Given recent staff turnover, good progress has been made in subject department planning in compiling schemes of work for all year groups, in comparing students’ certificate examination results in English with national norms, and in recording meeting minutes. However, there is still scope for improvement in this area.

- Subject department planning meetings now need to achieve greater direct impact on teaching and learning. To do this, time should be specifically allocated for a “show and tell” input at the start of meetings, where individuals would be asked to present a resource or strategy they use in their practice or have gained from continuing professional development.

- Subject department schemes of work should be reviewed to ensure clear incremental development of students’ skills from first to third year and in TY, greater balance of textual coverage with skill development, and appropriate planning for movement between levels in relation to senior-cycle text selections. Annual formal self-evaluation and action planning to meet the evolving needs of students is also recommended.

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 was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the report; a response was not received from the board.

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