REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN BUSINESS SUBJECTS

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Blessington Community College, conducted as part of a whole school evaluation. It presents the findings of an evaluation of the quality of teaching and learning in Blessington Community School 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, 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, deputy principal and subject teachers.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

In Blessington Community College, business education is an optional subject for students. In junior cycle students may choose Business Studies; in the compulsory Transition Year (TY) programme students can complete the mini-company module; and Business is offered for the Leaving Certificate. Students in senior cycle also have the option of completing the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) of which the Enterprise module is taught by business teachers.

Incoming first-year students partake in a two-week taster module of all optional subjects including Business Studies. Before students make their subject choice they are given further information on all optional subjects and there is also an information evening for parents. Senior management arranges the best possible option groupings and students then choose their subjects. The uptake rate in Business Studies is below national norms and thus provides a low base from which to encourage students to take Business in the Leaving Certificate. The business subjects department is relatively successful in maintaining a high level of progression to business from TY to the Leaving Certificate. Therefore, it is recommended that the department and school management review first-year students’ access to, and uptake of Business Studies so as to ensure that students have the widest possible subject choice and that their needs are being met.

Students in TY choose either the mini-company module or the Young Social Innovator (YSI) programme. Approximately half of TY students avail of the mini-company module which gives students new to business a good practical introduction to business education. Business is an optional subject provided on the Leaving Certificate curriculum. The option bands in senior cycle are generated from student subject preferences. In the past number of years there has been a good uptake of Business as students choose to continue with business education from junior cycle and TY. While there is no current sixth-year group, there are twenty-two students taking Business in fifth year. Eight of these students had taken Business Studies in the junior cycle. A further nine students had some experience of business from the TY programme and the remainder chose the subject as it was the next best option choice. Senior management is commended for the provision
of Business in the Leaving Certificate curriculum as are teachers for the encouragement and expertise that they give to students.

The time allocated to teaching of Business Studies in junior cycle is satisfactory. Business Studies is offered in an option band wherein the other subjects require double periods and as a result Business Studies is taught in two double periods. In some year groups lessons are on consecutive days which militates against adequate time for completion of homework and an even spread of class contact time between students and teachers. In this context, it is recommended that class periods should be evenly spread and distributed across the school week. TY students have one double period and for Leaving Certificate students five class periods per week are provided, made up of two double-class periods and one single-class period.

All business teachers are subject specialists who are diligent in keeping their subject knowledge up-to-date. They are members of the Business Studies Teachers Association of Ireland (BSTAI) and regularly attend meetings and conferences. Business teachers have participated in whole school continuing professional development in relation to assessment for learning (AfL), computer applications for use in the classroom, behavioural management, special educational needs training and collaborative learning methodologies. In addition to this good provision a member of the business subjects department has undertaken a specialised course pertaining to the teaching of business subjects in the classroom.

Only one business teacher has a base classroom from which that teacher also teaches other subjects. This is unfortunate as teacher-based or specialist business classrooms can provide an opportunity to develop a resource base for the teaching of business subjects. It is advisable to maximise the use of at least one classroom by utilising a notice board for business news stories, business posters and student projects. While no annual budget exists for business subjects in the school, requests for resources are generally met with a positive response.

The school’s information and communications technology (ICT) facilities are very good. In the school there is a computer suite available for whole class use. All business classrooms have data projectors and ICT equipment and are broadband enabled. TY students are based in the computer room and have immediate access to ICT if required. School management is commended on this good provision and their ongoing support for its use in the classroom.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

The business subjects department has a co-ordinator and this position rotates among department members. The subject department meet in a formal capacity once a term. The recorded minutes of the formal meetings are indicative of a department that works in a collaborative manner as it evaluates its work and promotes best practice.

A comprehensive plan for the provision of business education has been developed by the business teachers in the school. The plan has all the elements of good planning as outlined in the School Development Planning Initiative (SDPI). The plan includes some exemplary practices in relation to students with special educational needs and curriculum planning. In the planning documentation there is a summary diagnosis of each business student that has a special education need. It is laudable that the possible teaching strategies that could be employed in the classroom to progress learning for these students are also listed. Linked to each topic in the curriculum plan are the intended learning outcomes, the teaching and learning activities and the resources available for use. Also listed with each topic is how AfL and ICT could be integrated into the
students’ experience of the topic in the classroom. The plan contains a list of some of the resources available to the business subjects department. However, as business education is provided in at least four different locations it is recommended that all the available resources and teaching aids and their location be catalogued and included in the business plan so as to facilitate their shared use within the business subjects department. The department and senior management are commended for their positive and proactive approach to subject developmental planning.

From a review of the curriculum plan for TY it is noted that the business module is in keeping with the aims and ethos of the TY programme. While a TY lesson was not available on the day of the evaluation, it is evident from a review of planning documentation that the programme is delivered in an interactive and engaging manner. The focus of the module is enterprise with students entering mini-company competitions. By early May most of the mini-company competitions have concluded and, depending on the nature of the developed product or service, the life-cycle of the business may have also ended at this point. It is recommended that the subject department develop a short business module that can be completed before the year end. This module could be as a taster for senior business and might include valuable life skills such as financial planning.

Individual planning and lesson preparation by teachers was good. All materials were prepared in advance of class. It was commendable that some business teachers had their own comprehensive subject folders that contained lessons plans, records of perceived ability of students and a copy of the subject department’s plan.

**TEACHING AND LEARNING**

Lessons were well prepared. Each had a coherent structure with learning outcomes outlined at the start of the lesson, homework was corrected and new material was introduced. Lessons were paced to suit the mixed-ability nature of the class. The lessons observed were all double periods and teachers successfully used a variety of methodologies such as role play, group or pair work to sustain and engage students in their learning. Tasks were well planned, executed well and fitted seamlessly with the other learning activities of the lesson. On conclusion of each lesson observed, homework was assigned and it served to reinforce learning from the lesson.

In the lessons observed the standard of teaching was good. Teachers used methodologies such as ICT usage, role play, class discussions, teacher-led input, pair and group work. In senior cycle lessons teachers dedicated time for students to discuss “what is in the news”. This practice is praiseworthy as it encourages students to link their learning with topical issues and to deepen their business acumen. In all lessons teachers successfully engaged students in discourse related to the learning outcomes of lessons. Teachers’ use of business language and terminology was good and where students were introduced to new terminology it was explained thoroughly. This was particularly effective in a fifth-year lesson where a number of students were new to business.

The use of ICT in lessons was effective as it successfully enhanced learning for the student. In lessons a data projector was used to display solutions to student homework assignments and to display the learning outcomes and key points of the lesson. The use of the ICT in this manner helped to manage lesson time effectively. However, in some lessons students were transcribing notes from the whiteboard while a class discussion was taking place on the topic and as a result they were not fully engaged in the lesson. It is advisable that teachers agree and implement a strategy to overcome this situation. In the subject department’s planning documentation it is stated that the use of ICT in teaching is a priority area for development this year. Within the
business department there is scope for teachers and students to use ICT for research purposes and to access relevant news stories, current affairs programmes and case studies and to include the relevant resources in the curriculum plan as outlined above.

Teachers used questioning to review, clarify and elicit information from students. However, questions were often addressed to the whole class and the more confident students responded more readily. It is advisable to have a balance between individual and whole-class questions as targeted questioning can be used effectively to differentiate between ability levels and is an effective practice for mixed-ability class groups. This good practice should be promoted in all lessons to check basic understanding and recall, and to develop higher-order thinking skills.

Classroom management and atmosphere was good in all lessons and helped to create the observed effective learning environment. The seating arrangements were conducive to group and pair work and facilitated teacher movement throughout the classroom as they tendered individual support to students. In all lessons observed there was a good rapport between students and teacher and where individual help, clarifications or explanations were required such support was provided in an affirming manner.

**ASSESSMENT**

The business teachers have an agreed approach to homework and assessment in line with whole-school policy. Teachers regularly administer informal tests at the conclusion of each topic. There are formal assessments for students not taking state examinations at Christmas and the end of the academic year. State examination classes sit ‘pre-mock’ examinations in November and ‘mock’ examinations in February. TY students are assessed informally by subject teachers through the use of class tests, written work and the evaluation of projects. Teachers maintain records of all assessment outcomes and these along with student progress in business subjects are communicated to parents by written reports and at parent teacher meetings.

In all of the lessons visited homework was assigned and it is evident from a review of a sample of homework journals that this is a regular practice. Homework was corrected by oral answers tendered by teacher or student and written correction on the board. On inspection of a sample of homework copybooks there were some good evaluative comments on students’ work. The use of evaluative comments to guide and encourage students in their learning is beneficial to students and its use should be maximised where possible.

On inspection of a sample of past examination papers, homework and notes copybooks in lessons, it was found that most students were completing assigned homework. In some instances, however, neatness, layout and labelling required attention. As presentation skills are important in business subjects it is advisable that the subject department devise strategies that will improve students’ presentation of work. In classes where students maintained a copybook for class notes there was a considerable amount of work therein. It may be advisable to review this practice and look to a rebalancing of note-taking in the classroom in favour of more student homework, as this would allow a more efficient use of class time.

Outcomes in certificate examinations are reviewed and compared to national norms by the senior management and subject teachers and are then communicated to the board of management. Good practice was observed in teachers’ individual planning documents. Teachers maintained a ‘pupil potential record’ where a record of all tests was amassed and a grade was given to the student indicating what they are capable of achieving based on their abilities.
SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- There is good provision of ICT and teachers are supported in their use of it by senior management.
- Subject development planning is very good. The area of curriculum planning and planning for students with special educational needs is exemplary with teaching and learning practices at its core. The business subjects department works in a collaborative manner and regularly evaluates its own work.
- There is good uptake of Business at senior cycle.
- The business teachers are skilled professionals who seek to progress learning by using active and traditional methodologies, by incorporating ICT into lessons and by developing business acumen in their students.

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

- Senior management and the business subjects department should review first-year students’ access to and uptake of Business Studies with a view to widening access.
- Lesson periods should be evenly spread and distributed across the school week as students in junior cycle only have two class contact times in the week.
- An inventory of all business related resources should be compiled and their location noted for inclusion in school planning documentation.
- A business resource classroom with print rich resources and student projects should be developed.
- The subject department should develop a short business module that can be completed in TY after the end of mini-company activity.

Post-evaluation meetings were held with the teachers of Business subjects and 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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