REPORT ON THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN HOME ECONOMICS

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in St Oliver Post-Primary School, Oldcastle, Co. Meath. It presents the findings of an evaluation of the quality of teaching and learning in Home Economics 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 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. Following the evaluation visit, the inspector provided oral feedback on the outcomes of the evaluation to the principal and home economics team. The board of management 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.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

St Oliver Post-Primary School provides a broad curriculum, including a Transition Year (TY) programme and the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP). At present, its enrolment stands at 231 males and 218 females. Home Economics is included as a subject in all of the school’s curriculum programmes.

Good efforts are being made to promote Home Economics. In-coming first-year students select their optional subjects prior to entry. Information regarding subject choice is provided to students and parents on the morning of the entrance assessment tests. This year, as an additional support when students visited the specialist room, the home economics teacher made a PowerPoint presentation on the subject to parents and students. It is praiseworthy that option pools are generated based on student preferences and that very good efforts are made to accommodate as many students as possible in their subject choices. Home Economics is available on two junior-cycle option lines and, where feasible, students may change options during the early part of first year. This provides good flexibility for students.

There is scope to increase student uptake of Home Economics, particularly at Leaving Certificate level. Evidence would suggest that the subject is traditionally chosen mainly by girls. It is recommended that strategies be explored to promote the study of Home Economics as a realistic option for all students. The introduction of a subject-specific notice board on the corridor adjacent to the home economics room, as well as the potential of a vibrant co-curricular programme could be considered as a means of positively promoting quality learning experiences in Home Economics. At whole-school level, it is suggested that consideration be given to providing a short sampling programme that would allow first-year students access to each optional subject before final decisions are made in relation to subject choice.
The deployment of staff to Home Economics needs to be reviewed. A qualified teacher of Home Economics has not been employed in a full-time capacity in the school for many years. At the time of the evaluation one qualified home economics teacher was employed in a substitute capacity. However, there remains a shortage of specialist home economics hours available to support the recently-introduced TY programme. This has resulted in a second teacher, who is not a subject specialist, being deployed to teach Home Economics in TY. While the commitment, professionalism and generosity of all staff involved in the delivery of Home Economics over many years is fully acknowledged, the current arrangements are not in keeping with good practice and they curtail the breadth of learning experiences offered in Home Economics.

The training for teaching of Home Economics is a specialist four-year degree programme, or its equivalent. This provides teachers with the full range of key competencies in all of the core disciplines necessary for the teaching of Home Economics. High quality teaching of the subject also requires the integrated application of theoretical, practical and procedural skills, particularly in the areas of practical textiles and food studies. Therefore, it is strongly recommended that the board of management, in collaboration with County Meath Vocational Education Committee (VEC), takes steps to recruit suitably qualified teachers of Home Economics in a wholetime capacity. For pedagogic and practical reasons, it is essential that only those who hold a recognised teaching qualification in Home Economics be deployed to teach the subject on all of the curriculum programmes.

The desire of senior management and staff to include Home Economics in the newly-established TY programme is praiseworthy. However, in the absence of sufficient specialist teaching hours being available in the school for Home Economics, the school’s capacity to offer the subject in the TY programme needs to be reviewed. Until additional specialist teaching hours in Home Economics become available, an alternative subject that more closely matches available teachers’ expertise should be considered.

A strong commitment to continuing professional development (CPD) is evident among the home economics staff. This very good practice provides a forum where expertise and experiences can be shared to support good classroom practices.

Home Economics benefits from a good level of timetabled provision. The arrangement of lessons into double and single periods in almost all instances facilitates very good continuity in teaching and learning. It was noted that the number of class periods allocated to some Junior Certificate classes is generous while the allocation of only one double period to Home Economics in TY presents challenges in supporting effective continuity in teaching and learning. This should be borne in mind in planning future timetables.

Senior management is very supportive of requests made for specialist equipment and additional resources to support classroom learning. The home economics room is well equipped for the delivery of practical food studies lessons. Members of the senior management team proactively address maintenance issues when they are brought to their attention. This is good practice. However, it was noted during the evaluation that there was a complete absence of the necessary equipment to support the mandatory practical coursework in the area of core textiles. This has impacted negatively on the breadth of learning experiences available to date in Home Economics. It was noted positively that the subject specialist and senior management are proactively addressing this matter. It is recommended that the board of management, in collaboration with the VEC, takes the necessary steps to resolve this significant resource deficit.
Very good work has been carried out by the school’s health and safety co-ordinator in devising a subject-specific policy for Home Economics. The policy includes a hazard identification and risk assessment for the subject. This list should now be reviewed in collaboration with the subject specialist. The policy should also include a record of the maintenance schedule for equipment. This would support systematic resource management and assist in smooth transitions in the event of staff changeover. As the specialist room is a dual-purpose room it is recommended that specific health and safety procedures be devised to support practical lessons in textiles as well as food studies and that appropriate safety notices be displayed at locations around the room.

**Planning and Preparation**

Senior management facilitates collaborative planning. It is noteworthy that the teachers of Home Economics, Art and the technological subjects are afforded an opportunity to meet in plenary session. This is an ideal forum where the collective expertise of the group can support and advise each other on areas of common interest.

In the current academic year very good progress has been made in the development of a subject department plan for Home Economics. This plan provides details of the organisation of the subject in the school. This document should now be used as the basis for a self-evaluative instrument to identify the strengths, challenges and opportunities for the subject in the school. Short-term action plans to systematically addresses priority issues should then be devised. This will ensure that an informed and pro-active approach is taken to the continued development of the subject.

Action planning to enhance teaching and learning is becoming a feature of subject planning in Home Economics. This is very good practice. Strategies to support literacy development in Home Economics were agreed at a recent planning meeting. To date good progress has been made in implementing these strategies. For instance the physical environment of the home economics room has been enhanced through the use of illustrated labels itemising equipment in presses.

Junior and Leaving Certificate programme planning is at a very early stage of development. Planning for home economics classes has primarily been the remit of individual teachers. The programme plans reviewed during the evaluation demonstrate significant scope for further development. Plans for each year of the Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate programme provide details on the topic to be covered each week with some relevant links highlighted. No specific details of the type of practical coursework to be completed are included. To support high quality student-centred learning it is recommended that the programme plans for Junior and Leaving Certificate Home Economics be further developed.

Each revised programme plan should demonstrate that a balanced, coherent, integrated and incremental approach is evident in the development of students’ theoretical, practical and procedural knowledge. Each plan should outline students’ knowledge and understanding for each topic in terms of expected learning outcomes. Particular attention should focus on ensuring that the lesson content of all plans is sequenced in a manner that reflects the integrated approach recommended in all home economics syllabuses. The practical coursework completed over the duration of the programme should be documented to ensure that there is a balanced and incremental approach to the development of procedural and manipulative skills. Information on suitable teaching and learning strategies for each unit of work, assessment activities and resources...
should also be included. Each teacher should use the plans as working documents and share experiences on effective practice to inform ongoing review at each subject planning meeting.

As part of the school’s engagement with curricular planning, procedures should be put in place to ensure that a summarised copy of each current programme plan is available in the school at all times. This facilitates efficient continuity with classes in the event of staff changeover.

It was noted during the evaluation that Junior Certificate students have not been completing the practical coursework in the area of core textiles. This limits the breadth of learning experiences in Home Economics and narrows the range of possible options that could be completed as part of students’ Junior Certificate Home Economics examination. It is recommended therefore that planning for the completion of practical coursework in the areas of core textiles be included in the revised programme plan. To optimise learning, consideration should be given to the completion of a simple design brief in tandem with the items made. This would enable students to develop essential knowledge and skills over time, in the areas of task investigation, problem solving, planning and evaluation. These are key skills underpinning some of the assessment objectives of the certificate examinations in Home Economics.

The TY home economics plan is based on two externally-designed programmes entitled the Safe Food and Cook It programmes. A good range of external and internal assessment components is planned as part of the TY programme. However it was noted that the lesson sequence alternates each week between the Safe Food and Cook It programmes. It is acknowledged by staff that this sequence is presenting challenges in supporting quality learning. If Home Economics is to have a continued role in TY, it is recommended that a revised plan be devised by the home economics teacher. The rationale for Home Economics in TY should be underpinned by a set of learning outcomes that identify key knowledge and skills that students will develop. The learning outcomes should be appropriately differentiated to support the learning needs of students who may not have studied Home Economics for their Junior Certificate while at the same time challenge those who have previous experience of the subject. Assessment criteria and performance indicators should then be devised. The exemplar transition units available on the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment website (www.ncca.ie) might prove useful in supporting further planning for TY.

Good levels of individual teacher planning were evident during the evaluation. Current initiatives being developed to support students with additional learning needs will prove very useful. It is praiseworthy that teachers are building up a bank of additional resources to support lessons.

There is considerable interest in the potential of information and communications technology (ICT) to enhance the teaching and learning of Home Economics. It is noteworthy that the home economics room is equipped with a data projector, computer and printer. Some very good planning for the use of information and communications technology (ICT) in lesson delivery was evident during the evaluation.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

The quality of short-term planning for the lessons observed was good. Best practice was in instances where the lesson content was fully in keeping with the aims of the relevant programme. In some instances there was scope to adjust the pace or pitch of the lessons to optimise learning. It is recommended therefore that careful attention is paid to ensuring that the content of lessons is
planned in a manner that facilitates an incremental and integrated approach to the acquisition of knowledge and the development of procedural and practical skills.

All lessons began by sharing the learning intention with students. This strategy proved very effective in providing a focus for students. To support learning time should also be allocated towards the end of a lesson to re-visit the planned learning intentions. This provides opportunities to assess students’ learning, affirm effort and further clarify points of information.

Good strategies were used to introduce new topics. One very good example was observed in a lesson on menu planning. The lesson began by asking students what they thought the topic was about. This activity allowed the teacher to gauge students’ previous knowledge and experience of the topic and encouraged them to think about why the topic might be important. Questioning strategies at this point proved very effective in drawing out key points of information. This provided a good structure for the remainder of the lesson.

Deliberate efforts were made to link lesson content to the everyday experience of students. This practice promoted a deeper understanding of the topic effectively. Teacher explanations were clear and the factual information provided was correct in most cases. A good emphasis was placed on explaining the technical language or key terminology associated with the topics being taught. To support a whole-school approach to literacy and numeracy, consideration should be given to incorporating additional strategies into home economics lessons that would support students’ literacy skills. Further information is available from the Second Level Support Service (www.slss.ie).

Some good use was made of additional resources such as PowerPoint slides, student handouts and exemplar food products to support learning. Good use was also made of the classroom board to summarise key points of information. However, some further consideration should be given to ensuring that the range of teaching strategies used in lessons is sufficient to accommodate the various student learning styles. For instance consideration could be given to the use of illustrations to clarify concepts and consolidate learning. Students should also be encouraged to copy the main points of information from the board into their notebooks or highlight key points of information from their textbooks to support learning.

In a number of lessons observed group work proved effective in supporting learner autonomy and facilitating co-operative learning. This strategy proved most effective in supporting high quality learning in instances where students had a sufficient understanding of the key concepts underpinning the task prior to undertaking the activity, and where sufficient time was allocated to a plenary session.

In the practical food studies lesson observed students demonstrated a high level of ability to work on their own and in pairs. There was some good integration and application of relevant food preparation theory during the lesson. However there was scope to integrate nutritional concepts to ensure that the lesson was fully in keeping with the programme plan. Some good use was made of spot demonstrations to demonstrate correct food preparation procedures, with effective use of questioning to check students’ understanding. Some students demonstrated a good level of practical food preparation skills. However the manner in which the task was sequenced during the lesson did not support good procedural practices. It is recommended that planning for practical lessons be reviewed to support the development of high quality learning. The sequencing of the tasks carried out in practical lessons should be carefully planned to support the development of high quality procedural skills with an appropriate focus on health and safety issues. Further use should be made of spot demonstrations to refine students’ food preparation, cooking, serving and
evaluative skills, and to provide additional opportunities to integrate relevant theoretical knowledge throughout the lesson. To support high quality analysis and evaluative skills, students should be given the opportunity to begin completing the evaluation sheets during the lesson.

The atmosphere in all of the lessons observed was very good. A very good rapport and a high level of mutual respect and co-operation were evident between students and teachers. Students displayed a sense of security in seeking additional clarification and good use was made of praise to affirm students’ efforts. The learning environment was enhanced by displays of educational posters. This good practice results in the creation of a stimulating text-rich environment that reinforces learning and engages student interest.

Some good practice was evident in the standard of maintenance and organisation of student notebooks. However it is recommended that the home economics department establishes agreed procedures and routines for the maintenance, organisation and use of notebooks for all classes. It should be routine practice that students bring their notebooks into class. Students should be encouraged to retain the same notebook throughout the programme so that key points of information covered in theoretical and practical lessons and related handouts and worksheets can be accessed for ease of reference.

Some very good use of ICT was evident in the presentation of child care project work and in the analysis of data from questionnaires. Projects that demonstrated a clear link to child development utilised a variety of research methods, displayed originality and incorporated well-developed conclusions were illustrative of very good practice. It is worth noting that the chief examiners’ reports and associated marking schemes issued by the State Examinations Commission (www.examinations.ie) are very useful for further guidance and advice on the coursework component.

Students are making good progress in completing the Leaving Certificate coursework assignments. However, current practice, regarding the recording of coursework assignments into the official journal issued by the State Examinations Commission, merits review. The current procedures result in considerable duplication of work. To enhance students’ progress and avoid unnecessary duplication of work for both the teacher and the student it is recommended that routines be reviewed to ensure that students record their completed task into the official journal on completion of each assignment.

ASSESSMENT

All home economics classes are of mixed ability. It is praiseworthy that students are encouraged to take the certificate examination at the highest level possible. Participation rates at higher level in the certificate examinations are good, with good overall levels of student attainment evident.

A good range of summative assessment modes is used as part of the in-house examinations. Where appropriate, students are awarded an aggregated mark for a written examination and an assessment of the relevant coursework components. This praiseworthy practice provides a good indicator of students’ performance in the subject. When setting the written papers for in-house examinations, it is important to be mindful of the format and question styles typical of the relevant certificate examination paper. The pitch of written papers should aim to challenge the complete range of student abilities typical of a mixed-ability setting. Therefore, attention should
focus on the inclusion of some questions that assess higher-order thinking skills such as the analysis, synthesis, application and evaluation of information.

It is praiseworthy that revision plans are been devised for students preparing for the certificate examinations. Regular revision tests will support this programme. This is very good practice. The use of flash cards, graphic organisers and guided mind maps could be considered as a means of assisting students to make summary notes and reinforce learning.

Student progress is assessed through in-class questioning, short tests and the monitoring of practical coursework. Observation of copybooks indicated some good practice in the assignment of homework. However there is significant scope to review the range of homework activities assigned and the procedures for monitoring completed work. It is recommended that a homework policy be devised. As part of this process, the range of activities assigned in each year group should be reviewed to ensure that students complete a range of long-answer and short-answer questions as well as research activities. In addition to assessing recall and understanding of information, the development of the higher-order thinking skills should also be promoted.

A review of students’ copy books indicated that some work was monitored by teachers with some very good written feedback provided to students completing practical coursework. However, to support high quality learning, it is important all assigned homework be monitored. It is recommended that, when devising the homework policy, the home economics team also considers how best to balance the amount of homework assigned with the provision of constructive feedback to individual students. Further Assessment for Learning (AfL) strategies (www.ncca.ie) could be explored with a view to including them as routine classroom practice.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation

- There is good access to Home Economics.
- A strong commitment to CPD is evident among staff.
- Home Economics benefits from a good level of timetabled provision.
- Senior management is very supportive of requests made for specialist equipment and additional resources to support classroom learning.
- Action planning to enhance teaching and learning is becoming a feature of subject planning in Home Economics.
- Some good planning for the use of information and communications technology (ICT) is evident in supporting the teaching and learning of Home Economics.
- Good levels of individual teacher planning were evident during the evaluation.
- In the lessons observed, some good use was made of additional resources to support learning.
- A very good rapport and a high level of mutual respect and co-operation were evident between students and teachers in all of the lessons observed.
- Some very good use of ICT was evident in the presentation of child care project work and in the analysis of data from questionnaires.
- Students are encouraged to take the certificate examination in Home Economics at the highest level possible.
• A good range of summative assessment modes is used as part of the in-house examinations.

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

• The board of management, in collaboration with Meath VEC must take steps to ensure that only those who hold a recognised teaching qualification in Home Economics be deployed to teach the subject on all curriculum programmes.
• Practical coursework in the area of core textiles must be planned as an integral component of the Junior Certificate programme. School authorities need to provide the necessary specialist textiles equipment.
• As the home economics room is a dual-purpose room, specific health and safety procedures should be devised to support practical lessons in textiles as well as food studies. Appropriate safety notices should be displayed at locations around the room.
• Programme plans that demonstrate a balanced, coherent, integrated and incremental approach to the teaching and learning of Home Economics should be developed.
• Planning for practical lessons should be reviewed to support the development of high quality procedural and practical skills.
• Student routines in relation to their notebooks and coursework journals need to be reviewed.
• Procedures for the assignation and monitoring of homework should be revised and enhanced.

A post-evaluation meeting was held with the teachers of Home Economics and with the principal at the conclusion of the evaluation when the draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation were presented and discussed.
Appendix

School Response to the Report

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

School enrolment has now increased to 483 students.

Area 2: Follow-up actions planned or undertaken since the completion of the inspection activity to implement the findings and recommendations of the inspection

1. Fully qualified Home Economics Teacher has been employed by County Meath VEC.

2. Core textiles has been provided with the necessary equipment and all Junior Certificate students now take core textiles as part of their studies.

3. Specific safety procedures are now in place to cater for the use of the room as a dual cookery and textile learning space.

4. A coherent plan for the teaching of Home Economics is now in place across all programmes.

5. The planning for the TY practical classes as examined by the inspector has been revised to support high quality procedures and practical skills.

6. Student routines in relation to their notebooks have been revised from the start of this year.

7. Procedures for the assignation and monitoring of homework have been enhanced.