REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN MUSIC

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Ballybay Community College. It presents the findings of an evaluation of the quality of teaching and learning in Music and makes recommendations for the further development of the teaching of this subject 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 teacher. The inspector reviewed school planning documentation and the teacher’s written preparation. Following the evaluation visit, the inspector provided oral feedback on the outcomes of the evaluation to the principal and subject teacher. 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

Ballybay Community College caters for 135 male and 140 female students. Music is available as an optional subject for both the Junior Certificate and the Leaving Certificate examinations. Transition Year (TY) is mandatory for all students and Music is compulsory within this programme. Music in TY is delivered in modular format.

The systems in place for selecting optional subjects for study in both junior cycle and senior cycle offer a high level of choice and flexibility to students. Students entering first year sample all optional subjects for a few weeks. They then make their selections for study from the full range of subjects. Students entering fifth year also select their preferences from a full menu of subjects prior to the commencement of the September term. An information evening is held for parents of third-year students in order to support students in making their choices for the Leaving Certificate. This is complemented by the provision of an information pack.

The music department makes every effort to accommodate students in senior cycle who have not studied this subject before. While it is not a pre-requisite for students to have studied Music in the junior cycle, beginning the study of the subject at this point usually poses particular challenges. It is recommended that management and the music department ensure that appropriate information about the challenges involved prior to making this choice is provided to senior-cycle students who have not taken Music in the junior cycle and their parents. This information should outline the requirements of the syllabuses and emphasise the particular level of commitment required of students who pick up the subject in the senior cycle and who aim to achieve success in the certificate examinations.

Although Music was introduced to this school in 2005, the numbers of students selecting Music have steadily increased evidencing the good work done to promote the subject in the school. It is good to note that this year Music has now progressed into senior cycle. The music department is
staffed by one, fully qualified, specialist music teacher. This teacher had just returned to the school following a period of approved leave of absence shortly before this evaluation took place.

Music has a high profile in the school and is well supported by senior management. Timetable provision for Music is in line with guidelines from the National Council of Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). There is an appropriate spread of contact time throughout the week with a sufficient number of double periods to accommodate practical work.

Overall, a healthy proportion of students opt for Music throughout the school. However, the number of male students selecting Music is lower than the number of female students despite the overall gender balance that currently exists among the general student cohort. It is recommended that the school should explore the reasons for this with a view to increasing the number of boys choosing Music. The music department is making every effort to raise the profile of choral work among male students. This is a good initiative and worthy of much praise. However, these students are currently being withdrawn from Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) lessons in order to attend choir lessons. As SPHE is a mandatory subject for all junior cycle students, this arrangement cannot continue. The music department is strongly encouraged to make alternative arrangements so that this very valuable choral initiative can be sustained.

In addition to the curricular opportunities, a variety of extracurricular musical activities is available for students. These include participation in all liturgical ceremonies, the in-school talent competition *Stars in your Eyes* and trips to the National Concert Hall (NCH). The school has also established links with the local nursing home where students perform every Christmas. In addition, students also perform with the local church choir in their annual carol service. Through all of the activities on offer in the school, all students have access to some form of practical music, which is very good. The music teacher’s commitment to these events and the very good level of support which is provided by the school to facilitate such activities are commended.

Budgetary arrangements in the school are supportive of the subject. Resources for Music are good. All music lessons are held in a spacious classroom which is appropriately equipped with a sound system and computer with music software installed. In order to facilitate the delivery of music technology to a larger number of students, this provision could be enhanced by exploring the range of resources in relation to music technology that is available on the internet. Such resources should then be installed on computers in the computer room and this is recommended. There is an array of musical posters on the music classroom walls both professionally printed and hand-crafted. These are vibrant, relevant to the various aspects of the music curriculum and ensure an attractive and stimulating learning environment for the students.

Ballybay Community College is very supportive of teachers’ continuing professional development (CPD). Attendance at the annual conference hosted by the Post-Primary Music Teachers’ Association (PPMTA) is facilitated by management. This affords the teacher opportunities to keep abreast of all information pertaining to music education at second level and to keep up-to-date with ongoing curricular innovation. All this should pay dividends not just to the overall CPD of the teacher but also to the development of the department. This level of interest in CPD by the teacher is commended.

**Planning and Preparation**

Formal planning time is allocated to all subject departments to meet three times per year. In the past, the music teacher used these planning times to meet with other similarly sized subject
departments. These meetings were very constructive as issues such as planning and differentiation were discussed. Currently, the music teacher works independently at these planning times. Consideration should now be given to resuming these meetings as the outcomes for all concerned could be mutually beneficial.

The quality of planning and co-ordination of Music is very good in this school. In addition to the high level of advance planning that is necessary to ensure the smooth operation of the musical activities that take place, there is very good planning for the timetabled lessons in Music. For example, planning for the module in Music offered in TY was of a very high quality. TY students include those who studied Music for the Junior Certificate and those who have no prior experience of the subject. It is noted that the module taken by each of these groups of students has been differentiated to suit their particular needs. This is very good. The extent and the quality of planning and preparation for all lessons in Music observed were found to be exemplary. The music teacher has devoted much time to the creation of handouts and resources, all of which have been meticulously filed and are readily accessible. Many of these resources have been tailored specifically to suit the students’ needs.

Subject planning documentation was presented during the evaluation and there are many positive elements in it. The music plan provided detailed information about the organisation of the department including a broad, general list of resources; a broad content plan for each year group; assessment and examination procedures for all class groups and record keeping procedures. It is particularly noteworthy that there is good quality planning for students with special educational needs and this includes information regarding the differentiated strategies that will be used as a further support to them. In keeping with good practice, the music department analyses certificate examination results and compares school achievement to the national norms. This information is also included in the plan. All of this very good work is commended.

There are some shortcomings in the written document which should now be addressed. These relate to the short-term schemes of work. The yearly plan currently provided in the subject planning documentation described above provides some direction for teaching and learning and is flexible enough to accommodate the progress made during the year. However, the planned schemes of work are content focussed and provide insufficient guidance for teaching over the shorter term. On that basis, these recommendations are made. The current schemes of work should be developed to include the following detail. Content should, where appropriate, be linked to the intended learning outcomes, methodologies and modes of assessment which will be used to determine the extent of the learning. Schemes of work should also fully reflect the teaching and learning practices that are happening in music lessons. For instance, it is important to indicate in planning documentation how the three components of music—listening, composing and performing—are being synthesised in lessons.

The programme of work that is currently planned for first-year students may need to be reviewed as it may not be possible for these young students to cover the extensive range of material planned.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Three lessons were observed during the course of the evaluation, two in junior cycle and one in senior cycle. In all lessons observed, there was a warm respectful atmosphere where praise was used effectively to acknowledge their efforts and students’ contributions to class discussions were valued. Good routines were established in all lessons from the outset.
All lessons observed were well structured and suitably paced. The material chosen was very appropriate to the students who were constantly challenged to develop their music vocabulary and use appropriate music language. The learning intention was clearly stated in each lesson. This is good as it provides a focus and a structure for the lesson and encourages students to assume responsibility for what they should understand and be able to do at the end of the lesson. All lessons were stimulating and students’ enjoyment was apparent throughout.

The quality of teaching and learning that was observed during the course of the evaluation was very good. In all lessons, high expectations were set. Teaching and learning strategies were varied, facilitative and placed an appropriate level of emphasis on student participation. Strategies included teacher input, the integration of information and communication technology (ICT) into all lessons, pair and group work activities, questioning, practical performances and games. It was very apparent that a spiral and developmental approach is being taken to the acquisition of students’ knowledge and skills. For instance, in one lesson students were encouraged to analyse music and distinguish between loud music and soft music. Following exercises using innovative games, the correct technical term for the activity was introduced at the appropriate phase of the lesson.

ICT was used very effectively during the evaluation. For instance, in one lesson observed the music teacher displayed photographic images using ICT in order to link the music with the various images which were represented in the composition. This was very good as it enabled students to engage fully with the substance of the music. In all lessons observed, there was a high level of learning. This was evident from the responses which students gave to questions, their participation in practical music-making activities and their responses to written exercises. Students were consistently monitored when they were engaged on tasks and teaching strategies were adapted accordingly when students were experiencing difficulties.

An examination of students’ manuscripts in fifth year showed that to date, no composing has occurred in lessons. It is very important that this is addressed at the earliest opportunity.

ASSESSMENT

Formal house examinations are held for first-year, second-year and fifth-year students at Christmas and before the summer holidays. “Mock” certificate examinations are held for Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate students in the spring. Parents are made aware of students’ progress through the annual parent-teacher meeting and the student journal. Reports are sent home following formal examinations.

The music department has developed an assessment policy which describes a variety of assessment practices currently in use and it is good that peer assessment is one such model. There is an expectation that students will store all materials and resources provided by the teacher in folders. In all cases, this practice is consistent across all class groups. This is good as these materials will function as useful sources for revision. In addition, students are required to maintain a record of all assessment results in their folders. This practice was also consistent among all students and these records illustrated that there is a high level of ongoing assessment.

Students’ homework and class work is monitored and assessed very frequently and this is good. Music students are assessed through the completion of worksheets, homework assignments and
questioning in lessons. Students’ copies and manuscripts are thoroughly corrected and constructive comments indicating strategies for improvement are provided.

The profiles of students’ work that have been maintained by the music department consist of a copy of the individual student result sheet. No record of progress in homework assignments has been maintained in the current year. It is important to keep records of a selection of homework assignments in order to build on these profiles.

Patterns of achievement in certificate examinations are satisfactory but there is scope to explore these trends further to ensure that all students are reaching their full potential. This is recommended.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Music has a high profile in this school.
- The systems in place for selecting optional subjects for study in both junior and senior cycle offer a high level of choice and flexibility to students.
- A healthy proportion of students opt for Music.
- The quality of planning and co-ordination of Music is very good in this school.
- High quality teaching and learning were observed during the course of the evaluation.
- Teaching and learning strategies were facilitative and invited student participation at a high level.
- The music department has developed an assessment policy which describes a variety of assessment practices currently in use.

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

- The practice of withdrawing students from SPHE to attend choir must be discontinued.
- More detailed schemes of work should be developed for short, defined timeframes. They should include the teaching and learning strategies and content should, where appropriate, be linked to the intended learning outcomes, methodologies and modes of assessment which are being used.

A post-evaluation meeting was held with the teacher of Music and with the principal at the conclusion of the evaluation when the draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation were presented and discussed.

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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 Board of Management is very pleased that the excellent work of the Music Department at Ballybay Community College is acknowledged and affirmed in the Music Inspection Report. The report reflects the excellent work accomplished by the Music Department in a relatively short timeframe. The Board of Management would like to express its appreciation for the professional manner in which the inspection was carried out.

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. Students are timetabled for Choir.
2. The recommendations on the schemes of work have already been undertaken.