Subject Inspection of Geography
REPORT

St Ciaran’s Community School
Kells, County Meath
Roll number: 91456J

Date of inspection: 15 October 2010
REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN GEOGRAPHY

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Geography. It presents the findings of an evaluation of the quality of teaching and learning in Geography 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 and teachers’ written preparation. Following the evaluation visit, the inspector provided oral feedback on the outcomes of the evaluation to the principal and subject teachers. 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 Ciarán’s Community School is a co-educational school which offers the Junior Certificate, the established Leaving Certificate, the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) and the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA). Current enrolment is 593 students, 502 boys and 91 girls.

The delivery of the planned teaching programme for Geography is very well supported by school management. Teachers have been assigned base classrooms and a wide range of resources is available to support teaching and learning. Information and communications technology (ICT) is currently being developed for use by the teachers of Geography. There are plans for teachers to share their resources using the school’s intranet and this is good practice. The members of the geography teaching team are encouraged to develop a policy in relation to the use of ICT and resources provided during the evaluation will facilitate this work. It is suggested that all teachers register with the National Centre for Technology in Education (NCTE) in relation to the use of Scoilnet Maps, a valuable resource for teaching and learning in Geography.

Seven teachers, who are all subject specialists, form a clearly identifiable subject department within the school. They have availed of continuing professional development (CPD) in relation to Geography, whole school issues and some are members of the professional body the Association of Geography Teachers of Ireland (AGTI).

In the junior cycle Geography is a core subject in the school’s curriculum and is allocated four single class periods per week in each of the three years. Currently students in first year are taught in a mixed-ability class setting and streaming is in place for second and third year. Consideration should be given to delivering the planned teaching programme for Geography in a mixed-ability class setting for all years.
At senior cycle Geography is an optional subject and is allocated three single and one double class periods per week. In line with good practice students are provided with an open choice of subject before option bands are generated. The uptake of the subject is in a very healthy state with three class groups in each of the senior-cycle years. This reflects the positive experiences of students in the junior cycle. Classes in the senior cycle are taught in a mixed-ability class setting. The profile of the subject within the school could be further enhanced by the school’s engagement with the Green-Schools education programme. Information is available on the website www.greenschoolsireland.org

Teachers have access to information on students’ educational needs via the school’s intranet and this information was included in teachers’ planning documentation. Discussions with teachers confirmed that they are aware of the needs of students in their classes. Support materials have been obtained from the English Language Support Project for post-primary schools based in Trinity College Dublin. It is recommended that the members of the geography teaching team develop formal links with the learning support and mathematics departments in relation to implementing strategies that will support the development of students’ literacy and numeracy skills.

**Planning and Preparation**

There was clear evidence of collaborative planning within the geography department and this has resulted in a comprehensive long-term plan for the subject. A member of the department acts as subject co-ordinator and in line with good practice this position is rotated. Discussions have taken place in relation to the development and sharing of resources, and the subject department plan has been monitored, reviewed and amended. Formal planning time is provided by school management once per term and informal discussions take place on an ongoing basis. Minutes of formal meetings are included in the subject department plan. It is suggested that part of the formal planning time be used by teachers to discuss teaching and learning and to share their professional expertise.

Individual teachers had thoroughly prepared for the lessons observed and this included the preparation of appropriate resources. The range of resources used included: rock samples, Ordnance Survey (OS) maps, weather instruments and PowerPoint presentations. These resources were very effectively used to stimulate students’ interest and to support teaching and learning. All of the lessons observed were part of a larger unit of work and had very specific learning objectives. Documentation provided by some individual teachers also indicated that teachers are engaged in medium-term planning by having in place a planned teaching programme for each term of the school year. In some instances individual lesson plans were provided.

The subject department plan sets out very clearly the organisational arrangements for the subject. Notable features of this plan include the detailed list of resources available in the school, the links established with the learning support department and guidelines in relation to setting appropriate homework for students with additional educational needs. In line with good practice the long-term curriculum plan for Geography is set out with a clear focus on learning outcomes linked to curriculum content which will be delivered within an agreed timeframe. This agreed long-term curriculum plan was being delivered in the lessons observed. There is also a clear focus on developing students’ geographical skills in line with syllabus guidelines. The inclusion of reference to resources, teaching methodologies and assessment as part of this plan would be in line with recommendations from the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA).
The planned teaching programme for first-year students commendably includes a focus on developing students’ OS map and photograph interpretation skills. Students will also study topics from economic and physical geography. In the first term in first year there is an exclusive focus on topics from physical geography. This can present significant challenges for students in terms of understanding complex geomorphic processes and using technical vocabulary. The planned teaching programme for first-year students should be reviewed. The development of students’ geographical skills using large-scale maps and photographs of the local area would be a useful starting point. These key skills could be practised and developed by being integrated throughout the rest of the planned teaching programme as appropriate.

**TEACHING AND LEARNING**

Very high quality teaching was observed in the classrooms visited. All lessons began with a clear statement of the intended learning outcomes and in most instances these were written on the whiteboard. This good practice provided a clear focus for students’ attention and linked the topic to previously taught subject matter. It would be useful to revisit the learning outcomes as they are achieved during the lesson and to use them to review as the lesson ends. Teacher exposition was very clear and lessons were delivered at an appropriate pace for the ability of students. The use of rock samples and weather instruments provided students with first-hand experience and this facilitated their understanding. The use of the overhead projector and PowerPoint presentations catered very effectively for visual learners and resulted in their engagement with the subject matter of the lesson. For example, the gradual development of a diagram showing the rock cycle in one lesson allowed students to understand the individual elements of the cycle. As the lesson continued a more complete diagram was developed showing the relationships between these individual elements and the processes taking place between them. As resources become available all teachers are encouraged to use ICT in enriching lesson planning and delivery.

Teachers used a variety of teaching strategies to ensure the continued engagement of students and there was generally a good balance between teacher input, student-teacher interaction and student activity. The completion of short student tasks dispersed throughout the lesson, in some instances, was every effective in ensuring the continued engagement of students. For example, when students in one lesson were writing a report on their geographical investigation they were afforded time to write up their report after a discussion of each investigative method used in their study. This ensured that students were supported in completing the set task and allowed the teacher move around the classroom offering appropriate support to individual students. The use of photographs taken during the field study ensured the effective engagement and enjoyment of the lesson by students. The wider use of such short tasks during lessons is encouraged and is particularly appropriate where map or photograph skills are being taught. There is scope for the greater use of small group or pair-work in some lessons, for example students could complete a worksheet with an appropriate set of questions while analysing a geological map of Ireland or could have a set of questions which would test their knowledge of weather instruments.

Through their questioning styles teachers were encouraging students to develop higher-order thinking skills and this was very appropriate for the study of Geography. When images were presented students were encouraged to describe what they saw before moving on to suggest possible explanations for geographic phenomena. Questions were also used to elicit students’ prior knowledge before developing the topic further. The integration of OS map skills into a lesson on chemical weathering in the Burren provided an example of good practice where skills
are practised and developed throughout lessons rather than being taught exclusively as a stand-alone unit. Teachers were also supportive of developing students’ literacy skills by introducing key geographical terms. These were clearly explained and students were encouraged to use these when answering questions. The display of these key terms in some classrooms was noted and the wider use of this good practice is encouraged.

Reference by teachers to recent world events, local examples and students’ own experiences were noted in a number of lessons. Students were also encouraged to appropriately use the internet and to watch news and weather forecasts on television as a means of extending their geographical knowledge. These are very good practices as they link the study of Geography to the world outside the classroom.

Classroom management was very effective in all of the classrooms visited. Lessons were delivered in a secure atmosphere which encouraged students to participate in the learning activities. Teachers have established clear classroom routines and students and teachers exchanged greetings as students entered and left the classrooms. Students were invited to contribute to all lessons, were encouraged to seek clarification if necessary and they responded positively to their teachers. Students were frequently affirmed for their contributions to class discussions and when they had successfully completed a set task.

Classrooms were enriched by displays of maps, charts and notably by the display of students’ project work. The use of small-scale project work is very good practice as it encourages students to become independent learners. The display of students’ work is important in supporting and affirming their work.

Students are making good progress in their study of Geography. In the lessons observed students achieved the intended learning intentions. They could recall previously-studied subject matter, used appropriately geographical terminology and had successfully completed homework tasks. When they discussed methods used in the geographical investigation completed as the second assessment component for the Leaving Certificate they showed a good grasp of the skills involved. In their interactions with the inspector students displayed a good knowledge of topics being studied and could apply their knowledge in new settings.

ASSESSMENT

Assessment and homework policies are in place in St Ciaran’s Community School and these are used to support students’ learning. A sample of students’ journals was viewed during the evaluation and these indicate that homework is regularly set. Teachers are encouraged to provide appropriate challenges and variety in setting homework, for example by using crosswords, word searches or by providing structured worksheets rather than simply copying diagrams or summarising the textbook. The written work in students’ copybooks was generally of high quality and this was facilitated by teachers providing clear guidance during lessons as to the high standards expected. In some instances students require careful monitoring and greater support in this area. It would prove useful for the geography teaching team to agree and standardise arrangements for students to maintain a record of their written work, for example having separate copybooks for notes and homework.

Students’ progress is assessed during lessons, by setting homework and by holding class tests on completion of topics from the planned teaching programme. Common tests are set for all first
year students. This good practice should be extended to other years where a common teaching programme has been followed. Teachers maintain records of attendance, homework and test results. These are used to report on students’ progress at formal parent-teacher meetings held annually for each year group. Arrangements are in place for the formal assessment of students’ progress at set stages in the school year.

Students are achieving very well in the certificate examinations and significant numbers take higher level papers. Results obtained in these examinations are analysed and inform review and future planning. In classes where students answered past examination questions they have received constructive feedback from their teachers. This is good practice. Teachers should ensure that this feedback provides very clear and specific guidelines for students. The geography teaching team should develop a policy in relation to Assessment for Learning and include this in the subject department plan for Geography. The use of ‘comment only’ marking, marking schemes and reports of chief examiners could also be used to support students in preparing for certificate examinations.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The delivery of the planned teaching programme for Geography is very well supported by school management.
- Time allocation for the subject is in line with syllabus recommendations and the uptake of the subject in the senior cycle is in a very healthy state.
- There was clear evidence of collaborative planning within the geography department and this has resulted in a comprehensive long-term plan for Geography.
- Individual teachers had thoroughly prepared for the lessons observed and this included the preparation of appropriate resources which were effectively used to support teaching and learning.
- Very high quality teaching was observed in the classrooms visited and this ensured the active engagement of students in the learning process.
- Lessons were delivered in a secure atmosphere which encouraged students to participate in the learning activities and students were affirmed for their efforts.
- Classrooms were enriched by displays of maps, charts and notably by the display of students’ project work.
- Students are making good progress in their study of Geography.
- Assessment and homework policies are in place and students receive constructive feedback on their written work.

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

- Consideration should be given to delivering the planned teaching programme for Geography in a mixed-ability class setting for all years.
- It is recommended that the members of the geography teaching team develop formal links with the learning support and mathematics departments in relation to implementing strategies that will support the development of students’ literacy and numeracy skills.
• The planned teaching programme for first-year students should be reviewed.
• The geography teaching team should develop a policy in relation to Assessment for Learning and include this in the subject department plan for Geography.

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

Published March 2011
Appendix

School response to the report

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

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

Following the recommendation from the Geography Inspection Draft Report which we received on the 10th January 2011 the Geography department have decided to make the following updates to our Geography Plan.

- To amend our First Year programme to start the new term with Local Map work and Aerial Photographs and to complete physical geography during the second term.
- We have discussed the learning outcome recommendation and as a department have undertaken to implement these changes during follow up subject meetings.
- A list of key terms has been completed and given to the resource department to aid them in the teaching of geography to the students that they work with individually.
- A list of overlapping mathematical tasks/areas has been given to the Maths department to make sure that we overlap in the methods we use in our teaching of the skills required.