

An Roinn Oideachais agus Eolaíochta

Department of Education and Skills

**Subject Inspection of Home Economics
REPORT**

**Saint Patrick's Cathedral Grammar School
Saint Patrick's Close, Dublin 8
Roll number: 60660I**

Date of inspection: 23 March 2010



**AN ROINN | DEPARTMENT
OIDEACHAIS | OF EDUCATION
AGUS SCILEANNA | A N D S K I L L S**

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 Patrick's Cathedral Grammar School, Dublin 8, conducted as part of a whole-school evaluation. 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 one day during which the inspector visited classrooms and observed teaching and learning. The inspector interacted with students and examined students' work. The inspector reviewed school planning documentation. Following the evaluation visit, the inspector provided oral feedback on the outcomes of the evaluation to the principal.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

St Patrick's Cathedral Grammar School is a small co-educational school that is committed to providing a holistic education programme for students. Significant efforts are made to provide as broad a range of subjects as is feasible within the confines of the resources available. As evidenced by the levels of student uptake, Home Economics is a popular optional subject in junior and senior cycle.

A taster programme operates to enable students to study the four optional subjects available in the school for the duration of first year. This practice has been instrumental in reducing gender bias in informing subject choice. However, the duration of the taster programme merits review. In its current format, first-year students have only one double home economics lesson each week. Best practice in the timetabling of Home Economics is where students have the equivalent of four single lessons per week in each of the three years of the Junior Certificate programme. The significant shortfall currently in first year is impacting negatively on the implementation of the Junior Certificate Home Economics syllabus. It is recommended therefore that consideration be given to the provision of a shorter taster programme for just part of first year. The final arrangement of option bands should then be informed by students' preferences whilst at the same time bearing in mind school context factors.

Leaving Certificate Home Economics was traditionally offered in a pre-set band against Physics. In the current academic year option bands were generated from an initial survey of students' preferences. While the bands remained unchanged this year, it is recommended that this revised practice continue. It is always preferable that students' preferences are taken into account in the formation of option bands. An information evening for students and their parents should also be organised as a further support when making decisions on senior cycle programme and subject choices. Four Leaving Certificate option bands are created and students must choose one subject from at least three of the four bands. It was reported that the Home Economics and Physics option has not always been a popular option block. This should be borne in mind in the final generation of bands.

Timetabled provision for Home Economics, with the exception of first year, is in line with syllabus guidelines. Double lessons are scheduled to accommodate the completion of practical coursework. In instances where Junior Certificate classes have a weekly allocation of two double

periods, care should be taken to avoid scheduling the lessons over two consecutive days, as has happened. This practice results in a gap of almost one week between lessons, which impacts negatively on effective continuity in teaching and learning.

Staff is deployed to Home Economics in line with qualifications. School management is supportive of teachers wishing to attend relevant continuing professional development (CPD) courses. There has been a good level of past engagement with relevant in-service courses. A very good level of contact is also maintained with the Home Economics Teachers Association. These good practices provide opportunities to share expertise and build capacity. In the context of planning for future CPD, the home economics department should continue to access relevant courses to support the delivery of home economics syllabuses. Information on in-service schedules can be accessed at www.slss.ie

There is one specialist home economics room. This room acts as a dual-purpose room for practical lessons in the areas of food studies and textiles, as well as theoretical lessons. A good range of resources is evident and senior management is supportive of requests made for additional equipment. However, some maintenance issues were noted during the evaluation that need to be addressed. In the interest of health and safety, particular attention should be given to the replacement of the cracked table tops and to the servicing of cookers. It is recommended that these issues be addressed by school management in collaboration with the home economics staff as soon as is practicable. At whole-school level, teachers are requested to submit an annual risk-assessment report for each subject area. This good practice should support school management in the ongoing maintenance of the room.

Health and safety routines are in place for home economics lessons. Classroom safety procedures for practical lessons are distributed to students and are displayed at the top of the home economics room. To build on these good practices it is recommended that the health and safety policy for Home Economics be further developed to include a hazard analysis, risk assessment and control procedures for the key pieces of specialist equipment used in the areas of textiles and food studies. As the specialist room is a dual-purpose room, safety notices to support practical lessons in textiles as well as food studies should be displayed at appropriate locations around the room. It was also noted that sixth-year students use the home economics room as a base classroom at lunch time. In the interests of health and safety it is recommended that this room be used only when students are fully supervised.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

In the current academic year senior management made good efforts to support formal subject department planning. Formal planning time was provided as part of a staff meeting held at the beginning of this year. This is good practice. To maintain a momentum in subject planning, some additional formal time should be routinely allocated as part of the calendar of staff meetings.

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 department and how Home Economics is provided throughout the school. Some very good levels of collaboration are evident between the home economics department and other subject areas. For instance, the home economics and music departments have agreed routines for the maintenance and organisation of first-year student notebooks. This agreed approach has already proved effective in supporting learning. In the context of one-teacher departments it is recommended that senior management give consideration to multi-disciplinary planning meetings. This would provide a forum for the

group to use its collective expertise to support and advise each other in areas of common interest such as teaching strategies, planning for differentiation, and supporting students with additional educational needs.

Programme plans to support the implementation of Junior and Leaving Certificate Home Economics are at a very early stage of development. The programme plans reviewed during the evaluation provide a schedule for the delivery of topics with some generic teaching methodologies listed. However the topics are not sequenced in a manner that supports the incremental and integrated approach that underpins the teaching and learning of home economics syllabuses. To support high quality student-centred learning, the programme plans for Junior and Leaving Certificate Home Economics should be developed further.

Each revised programme plan should demonstrate that a balanced, coherent, integrated and incremental approach is taken 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. Opportunities to integrate and links topics from within and between core areas of the relevant syllabus should be maximised and the practical coursework completed over the duration of the programme should be integrated into the sequence of lessons. In planning for the Junior Certificate programme, the range of dishes chosen from first year through to third year should support a balanced and incremental development of students' procedural and manipulative skills. Information on suitable teaching and learning strategies for each unit of work, specific assessment activities and suitable resources should also be included.

Current planning for the Junior Certificate core textiles practical coursework is not fully in line with syllabus requirements. The item made only supports the development of a very basic range of practical textiles skills. While it is acknowledged that the lack of timetabled provision may be a factor in influencing the decisions taken, there is scope to review the items made to support students to acquire a broader range of skills. Therefore it is recommended that planning for the practical coursework in the area of core textiles be revised to ensure that the items made are fully in keeping with syllabus requirements. 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. This will provide a sound basis for progression into the design and craftwork option which is undertaken by some students at a later stage in the programme.

A good range of additional resources, including reference books, is available to support student learning. It is commendable that these resources are catalogued and included in the department plan. There is scope to explore the potential of information and communications technology (ICT) to support the teaching and learning of Home Economics. While the home economics room is not equipped with dedicated ICT equipment, the resources can be accessed in other areas of the school. The use of ICT in lessons can support students to engage in independent and guided research that is appropriate to the coursework requirements in Home Economics. Furthermore, there are software packages and educational websites available that are useful in the preparation of material for lessons. To promote the use of ICT, it is recommended that the home economics department develop a strategic plan that demonstrates concrete strategies for utilising and embedding ICT in the teaching and learning of Home Economics. This plan should inform the development of an action plan that can be met over time as funding becomes available, to equip the home economics room with dedicated ICT resources.

It is commendable that the learning support department provides information to mainstream teachers regarding students who have additional learning needs. This is good practice. However,

there is scope to develop a greater awareness of the specific educational needs of individual students. To optimise inclusive practice and support students' learning, communication between the home economics department and English as an additional language (EAL) department should be strengthened to facilitate the integration of strategies into lessons that effectively meet the additional educational needs of EAL students.

Short-term planning and a good level of preparation were in evidence for all lessons observed. This included the advance preparation of student handouts and worksheets to support learning. However, in planning for a number of lessons there was scope to adjust the pace and pitch of the content covered to support quality learning at a level that was more in keeping with syllabus requirements and that met the educational needs of the full range of students present. To support planning for differentiation it is recommended that learning outcomes be devised for all lessons. The learning outcomes should be clearly aligned to syllabus requirements and be differentiated in terms of the knowledge, understanding and skills that students must, should and could acquire. The chosen learning outcomes should inform the selection of teaching strategies and resources used.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

In all of the lessons observed there was clarity of purpose. The good practice of sharing the aim of the lesson with the students was noted. To support learning, however, time should always be allocated towards the end of a lesson to re-visit the planned learning intentions. This would provide opportunities to assess students' learning, affirm effort and further clarify points of information.

In general, teacher explanations were accurate and contextualised. There were some nice examples of linking the lesson content to the everyday experiences of students. This good practice fosters a deeper understanding of the topic being taught. There was very good continuity with previous lessons through the use of questioning strategies that linked the topic of the lesson to prior learning. Student responses indicated that they generally had a good understanding of material from previous lessons. On occasion, questioning strategies challenged students to think more deeply about the topic or elicit a more comprehensive answer. This is good practice and its wider use is encouraged to support high quality learning.

A variety of teaching strategies was observed during the evaluation. However, in all of the lessons observed there was a need to extend the range of teaching strategies to accommodate the various learning styles evident, as well as to support students who had particular educational needs. A greater emphasis needs to be placed on ensuring lesson activities support an incremental approach to the acquisition of knowledge. Strategies that support the visual, auditory and kinaesthetic learner need to be incorporated into all lessons, and a stronger focus placed on supporting EAL students to access the technical language associated with the subject. There is scope to further enhance the physical environment of the specialist room to create an attractive and stimulating learning atmosphere. Further displays of educational posters and the use of key-word strategies would prove useful in supporting students' literacy skills.

In the practical food studies lessons observed there was some good integration of theory and practice. This supports the rationale underpinning home economics syllabuses. Students demonstrated a commendable ability to work independently and in pairs. Senior cycle students in particular displayed good organisational and procedural skills, through their level of advance preparation and the manner in which they carried out their task. During each practical lesson the

teacher provided a high level of assistance to individual students as they carried out their tasks. However, this praiseworthy practice needs to be balanced with whole-class instruction. In the practical lessons visited there was significant scope to incorporate further whole-class teaching and spot demonstration to support high quality applied learning and to promote the development of a higher standard of culinary skills, particularly among junior cycle students. As the development of culinary skills is a key objective underpinning home economics syllabuses it is strongly recommended that oral instructions and individual monitoring be balanced with actual teacher demonstrations of key food preparation, cooking and serving processes so students can model best practice and refine their manipulative skills. Spot demonstrations also provide opportunities to apply relevant theoretical knowledge.

In the senior cycle practical lesson observed some students completed the implementation and evaluation stages of their coursework assignment as part of the lesson. This is very good practice. In planning for junior cycle, strategies should be devised to integrate the stages of the design brief process into practical lessons. This will ensure that the focus on the lesson is not solely on the completion of the dish and will facilitate the gradual development of the higher-order skills of analysis and evaluation of a task.

Classroom management was generally good. Best practice was evident in instances where there was sufficient material planned to ensure that students remained actively engaged throughout the lesson. The positive rapport evident between students and the class teacher contributed to a caring classroom environment. Students' efforts were affirmed.

The agreed procedures and routines for the maintenance and organisation of first-year notebooks are working very effectively. This strategy is a very good example of the importance of teachers having appropriately high expectations of students' capabilities and how students respond accordingly. These routines should now be implemented with all classes. To support learning it should be routine practice that students bring their notebooks into all lessons. All students should be encouraged to retain the same notebooks throughout their 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. This would be a very useful revision tool.

Students are making some good progress in the completion of the Leaving Certificate mandatory coursework. However further strategies need to be devised to support students when undertaking the Junior Certificate optional study in the areas of Childcare, and Design and Craft Work. It is recommended that the chief examiners' reports and associated marking schemes published by the State Examinations Commission (www.examinations.ie) be used to inform the development of such strategies. These teaching strategies should be integrated into programme planning to improve students' learning outcomes. The teacher reported that high levels of student absenteeism are impacting negatively on student attainment. This is an issue that needs to be collaboratively addressed at whole-school level.

ASSESSMENT

In-house examinations are held at Christmas and summer and a system of continuous assessment operates throughout the academic year. Students preparing to take the certificate examinations sit mock examinations in the second term. No in-house examination papers were available for review during the evaluation.

Student progress is assessed through in-class questioning, revision tests and the monitoring of coursework. A small selection of student copybooks and notebooks was available during the evaluation. These copybooks indicated that student work is checked regularly by the class teacher. In the case of mock examination papers there were some noteworthy examples where written constructive feedback was provided for students, in line with the principles of assessment for learning (AfL). This is very good practice. Further AfL strategies could be explored at www.ncca.ie with a view to including them as routine classroom practice.

To support students' learning, it would prove very beneficial if the range of homework activities assigned to each class was extended. In the case of some of the notebooks reviewed there was an over-reliance on lower-order style questions or note-making exercises as homework activities. It is recommended that the range of activities assigned in each year group be reviewed to ensure that students complete a range of long-answer and short-answer style questions, as well as research activities. In addition to assessing recall and understanding of information, the work assigned should support the development of the higher-order thinking skills such as the analysis, synthesis and critical appraisal of information.

All home economics classes are of mixed ability. While participation rates at higher level in the certificate examinations are good, there is a need to look more closely at levels of student attainment. It is recommended that a more in-depth analysis of student attainment in the in-house and certificate examinations be conducted by the home economics department. This should include a comparative analysis with national trends whilst at the same time take school contextual factors into account. This will provide an opportunity to recognise positive trends and identify where attainment issues arise. Targeted interventions should then be devised by the home economics department in collaboration with senior management to address the issues identified. Interventions should include whole-school and subject-specific strategies that would judiciously increase student aspirations and attainment.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- St Patrick's Cathedral Grammar School is committed to providing a holistic education programme for students.
- Uptake of Home Economics is very good.
- There has been a good level of engagement with relevant CPD.
- Good progress has been made in the development of a subject department plan for Home Economics.
- A good range of additional resources, including reference books, is available to support student learning.
- The positive rapport evident between students and the class teacher contributed to a caring classroom environment in all lessons.
- During each lesson the teacher provided a high level of assistance to individual students as they carried out their tasks.
- The agreed procedures and routines for the maintenance and organisation of first-year notebooks are working very effectively.

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 the provision of a shorter taster programme in first year.
- Programme plans that demonstrate a balanced, coherent, integrated and incremental approach to the teaching and learning of Home Economics should be developed.
- Differentiated learning outcomes that are clearly aligned to syllabus requirements should be devised for all lessons. These learning outcomes should inform the selection of an appropriate range of teaching strategies and resources for each lesson.
- The teaching and learning strategies deployed in practical textiles and food studies lessons should be carefully reviewed to support the development of high quality procedural and practical skills.
- The range of homework assigned to all classes should be reviewed.
- A more in-depth analysis of student attainment in the in-house and certificate examinations should be conducted to provide an opportunity to recognise positive trends and identify areas where targeted interventions would judiciously increase student aspirations and attainment.

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

Published March 2011