

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

**Subject Inspection of Business Subjects
REPORT**

**Killina Presentation Secondary School,
Rahan,
Co. Offaly
Roll number: 65630B**

Date of inspection: 27 & 28 April 2010



AN ROINN OIDEACHAIS AGUS SCILEANNA | DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND SKILLS

REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN BUSINESS SUBJECTS

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Killina Presentation Secondary School. It presents the findings of an evaluation of the quality of teaching and learning in business subjects and makes recommendations for the further development of the teaching of these subjects 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 deputy principal. The board of management of the school 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

Curricular provision for business subjects in Killina Presentation Secondary School includes Business Studies at junior cycle and two options, Accounting and Business at senior cycle. A business module is also included within the Transition Year (TY) programme. The time allocated to the subjects at junior and senior cycle meets the respective syllabus guidelines and provision for the business module within TY is good.

Business Studies is included within the option taster programme for first year. Three class periods are allocated to the subject for the year which increases to four periods for both second and third year for students who opt to continue with the subject after first year. The second-year and third-year provision is good, especially the inclusion of the double period in each year that is targeted for the completion of the bookkeeping elements of the syllabus. Students are supported by the guidance department in making their optional subject selection at the end of first year. Approximately half of the students opt to retain Business Studies to Junior Certificate. The pattern of participation in Business Studies has been relatively consistent in recent years. However, the pattern of participation in senior cycle business subjects is less consistent and the subject department should take a more active role in tracking the progression and subject selection of Junior Certificate business studies students at key transition stages.

Subject selection for senior cycle is supported by the provision of a timetabled guidance period for third-year students. An increased participation rate of students in the TY programme has not yet been evaluated for its impact on the uptake of senior cycle business subjects. In order to support students' decision-making processes with respect to senior cycle options, the business team should provide short descriptors of each of the senior cycle business options including broad course outlines, possible future third-level courses and careers.

There is a great degree of variance in teachers' level of expertise in information and communication technology (ICT). During the inspection, there was little evidence of the use of

ICT in lessons. Some of the team had made an effort to store and file materials and resources electronically in preparation for the inspection. But the lack of engagement with ICT was evidenced by the fact that only part of the subject plan was presented electronically. While it is accepted that engagement with continuing professional development (CPD) is voluntary, self-managed learning can be very effective in developing the relevant competencies. ICT can be very effectively used in teaching to demonstrate to students the dynamic and evolving nature of the wider business environment.

Effective use of ICT as a teaching and learning tool will be more critical with the completion of the *School's 100mbit/s Project* with its associated classroom-based laptop and LCD projectors. The teachers must ensure that the use of ICT is integrated into teaching and learning and not a substitute for whiteboards as a means of presenting material to students. A book rental scheme operates within the school although there is a very heavy emphasis on revision notes and past examination papers as aids in the teaching of the subjects. Document workbooks, not provided within the book rental scheme, are used in some of the classes. When used appropriately they provide a useful aid to students learning therefore the team should agree on the appropriate and timely use of workbooks within the teaching of junior cycle Business Studies.

Teachers retain classes throughout each cycle, and from second year in the case of Junior Certificate Business Studies. Subject expertise and preference among the team varies but covers the range of business disciplines. However, it is advised that the team shares, in a formal way, its expertise especially in relation to the bookkeeping aspects of the Junior Certificate syllabus. This may improve capacity for rotation in teacher allocation at senior cycle.

The local branch of the subject association is no longer active but in the past the teachers were involved with the activities of the branch. Most CPD undertaken by the team has been through whole-school professional development events that in recent years have focused on special education.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

There is collaboration among the business teachers and a formal subject department with a co-ordinator post is established. The post of co-ordinator rotates among the team. The composition of the team has varied over the years, but in recent years there has been greater stability with an improved involvement of subject specialists within the team. However, the team often subdivides when planning for junior and senior cycle. To enhance the development of the subjects and promote shared learning and expertise among the team, it is advised that it always meets collectively, with an agreed agenda.

A subject plan, including the main curricular business options, is in place since 2005. The plan, which is presented using the School Development Planning Initiative (SDPI) template, is heavily reliant on existing syllabus documentation. With the exception of the TY aspect of the plan, there is limited evidence of review in the documentation since that time. A comprehensive review of the overall subject plan is recommended. The plan should be compiled in an electronic format to facilitate ease of review and update. Provision should be made within the plan for appropriate strategies for differentiation and assessment within the teaching of the subjects and for methodologies for mixed-ability teaching, as the minutes of subject department meetings indicate some concern among teachers about this. As part of this process, the business department is also advised to undertake an analysis of the factors affecting students' selection of business options at key transitional stages, including first to second year and junior to senior cycle.

During the inspection, yearly schemes of work were generally presented electronically. However, one area of concern is the lack of review of the first-year programme that was agreed in 2005. The existing first-year programme is heavily weighted in favour of bookkeeping outcomes. Given the optional status of the subject in first year, the team needs to agree objectives for the programme that are wider than mere outcome completion. It needs to develop a programme, based on the existing syllabus that gives life and business skills to students whether continuing with the subject after first year or not. The main focus on bookkeeping outcomes should therefore transfer to the second and third year of the cycle.

Overall, the subject plan needs to be developed into broader schemes of work with designated learning outcomes matched to suggested teaching methodologies, resources and assessment modes appropriate to each unit or topic.

The TY business module is well established and its strength is that it focuses on enterprise activity. To support the programme, the school has well-established links with both Athlone Institute of Technology (AIT) and the Offaly Enterprise Board. The use in TY of project and research methodologies could also be promoted in the mainstream business subjects. For example, a short project could be included early in second year that would focus on revising first-year learning outcomes. This would also provide a useful bonding mechanism for the newly formed second-year class groups.

Individual lesson planning was good. Teachers' work rate is very good with the team either on schedule or ahead of schedule in terms of completion of topics for the academic year. The resources used were mainly whiteboards, handouts and past examination papers. In senior cycle business, current newspaper articles were used to support the achievement of the lesson outcomes. This is good practice and should be extended across the subject range. The staff work room is well resourced and provides ready access to on-line resources that can be used to support teaching within the subjects.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

The overall standard of teaching and learning observed during the inspection was good. The class routines were very strong which is very good for creating and supporting positive learning environments. Some very good examples were observed of teachers sharing learning outcomes with students at the start of lessons. In some instances these were explicit and in others, for example accounting lessons, they were implicit but clearly identifiable. Course coverage and adherence to the agreed subject schemes is good.

In general, preparation and pace were good but there is a need to review the degree of difficulty of the agreed first-year programme. As the programme is a taster, greater emphasis should be placed on *The Business of Living* syllabus outcomes. This would provide all students, including those who will not take the subject after first year, with an understanding of how business relates to them personally.

Teaching styles among the team varied but generally included demonstration and guided practice followed by individual student work. In some lessons, especially Accounting, there was an emphasis on pair work. In most instances, the presentation of material by both teachers and students was good with students mirroring good teacher presentation especially with bookkeeping and accounts elements. However, there needs to be consistency among the team in this respect, and agreement as to the use of record books or self-ruled stationery among junior cycle students.

Agreement should also be reached with the mathematics department on appropriate calculator usage for conventional computations.

The teacher-centred approach observed in many of the lessons resulted in students remaining passive in the learning process. There were very few instances of student-initiated questions observed during the inspection. Efforts were made to vary the questioning style used but in most instances the teachers reverted to using global questions as the lessons progressed. Students, though passive, did work diligently to complete the class work assigned. Interactions between students and teachers were respectful and teachers affirmed students' efforts. Discipline was good and classes evenly managed with class routines well established.

Students were not given sufficient opportunity to apply their knowledge and understanding to the current business environment in either junior or senior cycle business subjects. This is because very little lesson time is given to the exploration of learning outcomes that would develop these skills and competencies among students. For example, awareness of current business trends, including the banking crisis, was poor despite students having studied money and banking. In addition, students' capacity to apply accounting principles and practice to understanding business and enterprise was limited by the emphasis placed on examination practice. There is scope to improve students' capacity to demonstrate initiative and creativity in applying knowledge within business subjects through a combination of more active teaching methodologies and experiential learning opportunities.

Efforts have been made by the teachers to develop the print environment in classrooms to support students learning. However, the resources generated need to be portable as classroom assignment rotates among the teachers annually, which militates against the creation of specialist resource rooms for the teaching of the subjects. The completion of the project to introduce LCD projectors and interactive computer access to the classrooms will provide scope to develop other ways to introduce business resources to the classrooms.

ASSESSMENT

Within the subject department there is a very strong emphasis on continuous assessment, as is consistent with the whole-school assessment policy. Most of the assessments are topic or chapter based. In addition, there is a strong emphasis on examination techniques and question styles in the assessment instruments used by the business department. Good practice exists in first year where common tests are assigned for all class groups. The whole-school policy also includes two formal reporting periods each year, Christmas and summer or Easter for examination year groups. Overall, the team is very consistent in its application of the whole-school assessment policy.

A feature in the teaching of the subjects is the frequent use of past examination questions as a formative assessment method and a teaching support. This is reflected in the subject plans, especially Accounting. While homework is given, there was limited evidence of teacher moderation of the homework completed by students. Greater exploration of the range of assessment modes appropriate to the subjects and to students' needs and interests is required. Therefore, it is advised that the subject plan is reviewed to include comprehensive statements in relation to appropriate assessment strategies for the business subjects. A variety and combination of assessment modes, consistent with the strategies and principles appropriate to the *Assessment for Learning* pattern for teaching and learning, should be agreed and included within the subject department plan.

Teachers' records are well maintained. Both attendance and assessment records are recorded in the teachers' journals. Some recent analysis of Leaving Certificate examination outcomes has been undertaken by the subject department and this is a good development. This practice should be extended, formalised and included within discussion at planning meetings. The analysis should also include analysis of Junior Certificate outcomes.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The time allocated to the subjects at junior and senior cycle meets the respective syllabus guidelines and provision for the business modules within TY is good.
- There is collaboration among the business teachers and a formal subject department with a co-ordinator post is established.
- The TY business module is well established and its strength is that it focuses on enterprise activity.
- Teachers work rate is very good with the team either on schedule or ahead of schedule in terms of completion of topics for the academic year.
- Interactions between students and teachers were respectful and teachers affirmed students' efforts.
- The class routines were very strong which is very good for creating and supporting positive learning environments.
- The team is very consistent in its application of the whole-school assessment policy.

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

- The teachers must ensure that the use of ICT is integrated into teaching and learning and not a substitute for whiteboards as a means of presenting material to students.
- A comprehensive review of the overall subject plan is recommended. The review should include comprehensive statements in relation to appropriate assessment strategies for the business subjects.
- The objectives and outcomes of the first-year business studies programme need to be reviewed and the emphasis on bookkeeping outcomes transferred to the second-year and third-year programme.
- There is scope to improve students' capacity to demonstrate initiative and creativity in applying knowledge within business subjects through a combination of more active teaching methodologies and experiential learning opportunities.
- The practice of analysing examination results should be extended and formalised and included within discussion at planning meetings. The analysis should also include analysis of Junior Certificate outcomes.
- Agreement should be reached within the department in relation to the use of record books and with the mathematics department on appropriate calculator usage for conventional computations.

A post-evaluation meeting was held 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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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 welcomes this report and is very pleased with the strengths of the business department which are highlighted in the report i.e.

- Time allocation to the business subjects is good,
- There is collaboration among the business teachers and a formal subject department with a co-ordinator established,
- Well established TY business module,
- Work rate of teachers very good,
- Respectful interaction between students and teachers with students efforts affirmed by teachers,
- Class routines very strong which is very good for creating and supporting positive learning environments,
- Consistency in the application of the whole school assessment policy.

However the business teachers feel that in general;

- Students participate actively in the learning process though this may be less evident in the presence of a visitor to the classroom,
- Moderation of homework is completed on a regular basis by subject teachers,
- Students are given sufficient opportunity to apply their knowledge and understanding to the current business environment.

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

- Business teachers will endeavour to ensure that the use of ICT is integrated into teaching and learning.
- A comprehensive review of the business plan is being carried out. The plan will be compiled in electronic format to facilitate ease of review and update. Provision will be made within the plan for appropriate strategies for differentiation and assessment within the teaching of the subjects and for mixed ability teaching.
- The first year business studies programme has been reviewed and the emphasis on book keeping transferred to second and third year.
- Agreement has been reached within the business department in relation to the use of record books and agreement will be reached with the mathematics department on appropriate calculator use for conventional computations.
- Analysis of examination results will be extended and formalised and will include analysis of Junior Certificate outcomes.
- The business department will take a more active role in tracking the progression and subject selection of Junior Certificate business studies students at key transition stages and evaluate how the increased participation rate of students in the Transition Year programme impacts on the uptake of business subjects at senior cycle