

**An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna**

**Department of Education and Skills**

**Subject Inspection of Irish  
REPORT**

**Saint Muredach's College  
Ballina, County Mayo  
Roll number: 64510J**

**Date of inspection: 2 October 2009**



**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 IRISH**

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**SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT**

This report has been written following a subject inspection in St. Muredach's College. It presents 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 and examined the students' work. 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**

The quality of the teaching of Irish arose as part of a whole-school evaluation carried out in February 2008. At present, the majority of teachers involved with the teaching and learning of Irish are graduates in the subject. It is commendable that two of these teachers teach classes in both the junior and senior cycles and at the various examination levels, a practice which ensures that there is experience in the department of teaching classes from first year to the Leaving Certificate. In the case of the other teachers who are graduates in the subject, one teaches at junior cycle only and the other at senior cycle. One other teacher, who is unqualified in Irish, teaches senior classes. The standard of provision for Irish should be reviewed as a matter of urgency, and planning for the teaching and learning of Irish should be carried out which will ensure that a qualified core-team of teachers are teaching in both cycles and that there is continuity for the students throughout the cycles. It is further recommended that the management should establish a mentoring scheme in order to provide guidance and support for newly appointed teachers, particularly in the case of teachers who are required to begin by teaching senior cycle classes. It was reported that staff representatives attend continuing professional development courses, organised by the Second-Level Support Service (SLSS). It is recommended, as part of the school-development planning (SDP) process, that feedback from these courses should be shared with all the teachers of Irish. The storing of the support materials distributed at the SLSS courses in the planning file, as a point of reference for the team when engaging in collaborative planning for teaching and learning, is also offered as a recommendation.

The number of teaching periods allocated to the teaching and learning of Irish is satisfactory. A provision of four single periods per week is made in both the junior cycle and transition year and of six single periods per week in the senior cycle. Classes in first year and in transition year are of mixed ability and the remaining students are organised into classes in accordance with the levels in the state examinations. These classes are timetabled concurrently, which facilitates movement from level to level as is appropriate. The school manages the transfer of students who wish to change from one level to a more appropriate one, on condition that a change of level form has been signed by the student, the relevant teachers, the parents and the principal. This is practice is praiseworthy. With a view to increasing the number of students who follow the higher level

course for longer in each of the cycles, it is recommended that a specific period of time would be set aside at the end of each term for dealing with changes of levels. The number of students in the senior ordinary level classes had been a problem, but, commendably, an additional ordinary level class was established last year, which made a positive contribution to the provision.

The great majority of the teachers of Irish have been assigned designated classrooms. Almost all the rooms in the school have been fitted with good information and communication technology (ICT) facilities, including a broad-band system. Twenty data projectors are available in classrooms, together with mobile overhead projectors. In addition, televisions, videos, compact discs and DVDs are readily available. The school has a computer room which may be reserved. It is recommended that an analysis would be made of the strengths and weaknesses relating to the use of ICT in the classroom by the Irish department. An incremental plan could be drawn up in order to meet the identified needs and in order to provide students with the experience of using ICT in Irish, a technology with which they have become very familiar in their everyday lives. The school has a library containing a collection of short stories, novels and plays. When the library is being upgraded, it is recommended that the Second Level Support Service and [www.cogg.ie.be](http://www.cogg.ie.be) used as reference points. A list can be drawn up and a collection of resources for Irish systematically compiled that would support the teaching and learning of the language.

Arrangements for meeting health and safety needs form part of the departmental plan, as is appropriate. It is recommended that these details would be reviewed, so as to ensure that the furniture in rooms where Irish is being taught makes a positive contribution to the teaching and learning.

Among the school's population seven point five per cent have an exemption from the study of Irish. Seventy-five per cent of these students have recognised learning difficulties and a further twenty-five per cent received their early education outside of the state. Every encouragement is offered to students holding an exemption to participate in Irish activities. This year one student studies Irish, despite having an exemption.

A good range of co-curricular and cross-curricular events is made available to students, including quizzes and *Seachtain na Gaeilge*, and links have been forged with the Irish Colleges in Mayo. The team is congratulated on its dedication to promoting the language both inside and outside the classroom.

## **PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

The Irish department has been involved in the process of school development planning for some years. The teachers meet each term, and minutes have been kept of these meetings since January 2006. It is recommended that all staff members in the department should attend the planning meetings on a regular basis, so as to ensure that the whole staff contributes to all the decisions made.

The plan contains a substantial amount of information on the organisational details of the department, but the practices observed on the ground during the evaluation were not in keeping with the plan under many headings, in particular regarding teaching methods and assessment techniques. It is recommended that the aims and objectives of the department, which have been set down as learning targets for students across the four main skills of language, should be used as performance indicators to assess how effectively the departmental targets are being attained. In the plan, some good work has commenced in the areas of special educational needs and cross-curricular planning. It is recommended that the differentiation strategies recommended for

students with special educational needs should be implemented in the classrooms, and that links should be established with the other language departments in the school. These two initiatives would greatly enhance the learning experiences of all the students of the school.

A long-term framework for the teaching and learning of the language has been outlined for all year groups, which includes a list of textbooks and of the resources allocated to all year groups. Curriculum plans have been formulated from this framework for the various year groups, on a termly basis. It is recommended that these curriculum plans be further developed into work schemes, in which the learning targets for the teaching and learning themes, the time periods, the methodologies, the resources and the assessment methods are specified. In this way, planning will be carried out to teach the language on a thematic basis and in an integrated fashion across the various aspects of the syllabuses, in line with the approach recommended in the Irish syllabuses. Exemplars of this integrated planning are to be found in *Treoirlínte mar thaca le Múineadh an Chúrsa Leasaithe Litríochta (Guidelines in support of the Teaching of the Revised Literature Course)* by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). While this collaborative planning is in hand, it is also recommended that the same work programme should be agreed for the first term for second-year and fifth-year students who transfer from higher level to ordinary level.

It is recommended that an action plan should be devised in order to guide the strategic development of the department. It would be of benefit if the recommendations of this report and the department's priorities were to constitute key elements of this plan. It is recommended also that time periods would be set for the action plan, as well as nominating the staff members who will bring about the realisation of the targets. It is also recommended that the work of the department should be reviewed regularly and that records of the outcomes of such reviews should be kept in the plan.

A separate programme has been devised for Transition Year (TY) Irish, and the Irish team is congratulated on devising alternative aims and objectives for the teaching and learning of the language during this year. In the interest of developing this plan, it is recommended that it should be revised and additional teaching and learning aims be formulated in keeping with the fundamental national aims for Transition Year as recommended by the Department in *The Transition Year Programme: Guidelines for Schools* or at [www.slss.ie/transitionyear](http://www.slss.ie/transitionyear). In this way, a framework will have been drawn up whereby a different learning experience will be made available for the students in this year, as regards content, methodologies and assessment methods. It is further recommended that the headings recommended above for the curriculum plans should be used as a guide when planning for the delivery of the curriculum during this year. The teaching and learning would benefit if the assessment and evaluation instruments available on the TY website were to be translated into Irish. This development would enhance the level of assessment in the language and afford students an input on the programme of study in TY Irish as a result of this evaluation.

## **TEACHING AND LEARNING**

Specific learning and teaching objectives was a feature of all lessons, however not all classes achieved the learning targets set. It is recommended that a certain number of learning and teaching targets should be selected in accordance with the length of the lesson. Differing learning expectations pertaining to the range of ability within each class should characterise all lessons, particularly the transition year cohort. In those classes where the short-term planning had been carried out well by the teacher, or was based on [www.vifax.ie](http://www.vifax.ie), the order of lessons was structured and developed in an incremental manner. It is recommended that this orderly, developmental

approach be employed more extensively while short-term planning is being carried out. In only two senior classes of the six classes evaluated was the planned programme in the Irish plan being implemented. It would be important that all the team members would discuss the importance of short-term planning and that the integrated, thematic approach recommended in the syllabuses would form the foundation stone for this discussion. Very good preparation had been made for these well-planned lessons in the form of transparencies, pictures, TG4 news items and worksheets. Preparation for the other classes took the form of worksheets and specific learning aids. In terms of preparation for certain senior classes, two recommendations are made: it is recommended, when worksheets are being prepared, that basic grammatical errors are not included in text provided to students. It is also recommended, in the case of one class, that the ages of the students be taken into account when selecting specific learning aids.

Questioning between the teacher and students formed the main teaching and learning method for Irish in the school. This technique succeeded in those classes where differentiated questions were used which afforded the majority of students opportunity to participate in lessons. All the teachers managed their classes well, and in general, a positive, co-operative atmosphere prevailed in the lessons observed during the evaluation. It was also apparent that a small number of teachers were capable of simplifying the language, so as to make the questions suitable for the level of student understanding. In other classes where the questioning method formed the main methodology, questions were not graded in this way so that some students were unable to answer due to a deficiency in the grading skills of the teachers. These students were not accustomed to the use of Irish as the everyday language of the classroom. It is recommended that this should be reviewed and, as a matter of priority, that all staff members should develop their simplification skills in preference to being too dependent on the use of English. It is further recommended that students should be given adequate time to answer questions, in accordance with their abilities, so as to achieve the greatest degree of participation in all classes.

A mix of whole-class teaching combined with paired and individual work applied in half of the classes observed during the course of the evaluation. In some of these classes, following a successful session of whole-class teaching, students were set to work in pairs on worksheets, but the collaborative work did not last long enough to allow for the completion of the task. No pre-skilled work on the worksheets was undertaken, an omission which had a negative effect on the success of the work among the pairs. It is recommended that this approach to group work should be reviewed. In one class, a very good pool of ideas was generated during a session as pre-skilled work for a hearing comprehension task. The students were working individually on a worksheet and the teacher was attending comprehensively to their various needs. The questions were corrected co-operatively and the teacher had previously prepared a worksheet on an essay subject in which the target language used during the class was reinforced. These techniques are commended and it is recommended that more extensive use would be made of them.

In the majority of lessons, Irish was the language of communication used by the teachers in the classes observed during the evaluation. Many of the class groups had not fully mastered the vocabulary of the classroom. In one instance, during class observation, it was apparent that the language to which the students were being exposed was not entirely accurate. It is recommended that a complete review should be carried out of the use of the target language in the teaching and learning of Irish throughout the school.

In some classes, effective use was made of the board and of other visual sources in order to record new vocabulary, to emphasise grammatical points and to record the answers to class or homework tasks. This good practice, which reinforces the spelling ability and accuracy of the students, is

highly commended. It would be of great benefit to the students' learning if these approaches were to be used by all the staff members teaching Irish.

The vast majority of teachers involved in the teaching and learning of Irish have been assigned dedicated classrooms. In some instances, this advantage was fully exploited by having charts, posters and idiomatic expressions on display on the walls of the classrooms. The commitment of teachers to creating a stimulating learning environment for the students under their care is praiseworthy. It is recommended to the department that maximum learning opportunities be exploited from the advantage of being located in dedicated classrooms. The linguistic needs of students during class should be taken into account when these displays are being developed. This initiative could be devolved to the TY students, with a view to assisting in providing this year group with an alternative learning experience in the language, as well as giving them ownership of raising the status of Irish in the school.

## **ASSESSMENT**

A random sample of students' homework journals was collected and it was clear from those that contained records of homework that tasks are assigned regularly. In the case of the journals of one Leaving Certificate class, no regular records of homework had been kept until the last week of September. This practice should be reviewed. There was much emphasis on writing and rote learning. It is recommended that a variety of language skills should be included in the homework task. This approach would reinforce the competences of students in all the skills, rather than prioritising one skill only.

Different practices were observed regarding corrections in the sample of copybooks examined during the evaluation. One set of copybooks contained both mechanical corrections of grammatical errors and developmental corrections which provided clear guidance for learning. The approaches being implemented in the case of the correction of syntactical errors were good, without being excessive. The teachers are congratulated in respect of these techniques which enhance the students' learning. It is recommended that these assessment practices should be adopted by all staff members as is set out in the Irish plan. It was apparent from a sample taken of Transition Year copybooks that little work had been done since the beginning of the year. This work showed no continuity as regards theme or language function. In addition, this limited work did not correspond to the study programme set out in the TY plan. It is recommended that this should be reviewed without delay. Some copybooks contained long passages in English. It is also recommended that the overuse of the translation method should be examined.

A range of formative assessment methods is used in class in order to monitor the learning processes and the progress of students. Included in these is the daily correction of the students' written homework. Tests are administered on the completion of topics as well as at the end of term. Formative strategies were in use throughout the evaluation. Oral questioning at differentiated levels was conducted in a small number of classes, as was paired and individualised work, as well as attending well to the needs of students while completing tasks conducted in one class.

All the students undergo summative assessment twice yearly. Every student does in-house examinations at Christmas. In spring, mock examinations are administered to certificate examination students and students not involved in these complete end-of-year examinations. The teachers make every effort to base these summative examinations on the common elements of the course and it was reported that the four main skills of language are included in these. Such

practices are highly commended. Two reports are sent home each year based on the results of these summative examinations.

It is commendable that the management analyses and keeps account of the results obtained by the students in the certificate examinations. It is recommended that the subject department itself should make a comparison between the outcomes of this analysis and the average national attainments on an annual basis. It is recommended also that a study would be made of the number of students undertaking the higher level certificate examinations in both cycles. In this way, the department will be in a position to plan strategies designed to increase the uptake rate at higher level and to enhance the attainments of students.

### **SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The number of class periods allocated to the teaching and learning of Irish is satisfactory.
- Good assessment practices are implemented with almost all year groups.

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

- It is recommended that the school management review the standard of provision for Irish immediately and that planning for the teaching and learning of Irish be carried out which will ensure that a qualified core-team of teachers are teaching in both cycles and that there is continuity for the students throughout the cycles.
- It is recommended that the long-term framework for the teaching and learning of the language should be developed into work schemes under the headings suggested above. It is further recommended that an action plan be devised which will enhance the strategic development of the department.
- It is recommended that the management provide support to develop the teaching and learning methodologies of qualified staff.
- It is recommended that the school devises strategies to increase the levels of participation and attainment of the students in the state examinations.

Post-evaluation meetings were held with the principal and the deputy 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**

The Board of Management, School Management, Teachers, Parents' and Students at St. Muredach's College welcome the findings of the Irish Inspection.

The St. Muredach's College Community commends the professional, supportive and affirming approach taken in the subject inspection.

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

As a learning community we are happy to incorporate the recommendations into our curriculum and subject planning department plans.

Irish is a core subject in the school. We welcome the change that is occurring in the Irish Curriculum that gives more credit for the spoken language. This will help to increase the participation and attainment in Irish among very pragmatically minded students.

The Management is committed to ensuring that all the Irish teaching team avail of professional development to enable them to exploit the enhanced IT and e-portal facilities in St Muredach's College.