

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

**Subject Inspection of Music
REPORT**

**Saint Finian's Community College
Swords, County Dublin
Roll number: 70120F**

Date of inspection: 28 April 2010



**A N R O I N N | D E P A R T M E N T O F
O I D E A C H A I S | E D U C A T I O N
A G U S S C I L E A N N A | A N D S K I L L S**

REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN MUSIC

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in St Finian's 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 the teacher, 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, deputy principal and subject teacher. The board of management was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the report; a response was not received from the board.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

St Finian's Community College caters for 308 male and 277 female students. Music is available in the school as an optional subject for the Junior Certificate and the Leaving Certificate examinations. In addition, Music is now available to students in the school following the Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP) following a recommendation made in a whole-school evaluation in 2007. Music is very well supported by senior management and every effort is being made to continue to raise the profile of the subject in collaboration with the music department.

The systems in place for selecting optional subjects for study in both junior cycle and senior cycle offer some choice and flexibility to students. Although students entering first year make their selections for study from a restricted range of subjects prior to entry in September, there is some flexibility in the system as students can change their minds until October. The arrangements in place for students entering fifth year provide a greater level of flexibility. These students make their selections from a full range of options. In addition, an information evening is held for parents of third-year students in order to support them 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 senior-cycle students who have not taken Music in the junior cycle along with their parents are provided with appropriate information about the challenges involved prior to making this choice. 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 aim to achieve success in the certificate examinations.

Currently, there is no first-year Music class. However, information provided by the school indicates that a high number of in-coming students have selected Music as one of their main

options the next academic year. Overall, a healthy proportion of students opt for Music throughout the school. However, there is scope to increase the number of boys selecting this subject, given the gender balance among the general student cohort. It is recommended that the school should explore the reasons for the low numbers of boys choosing Music with a view to improving this trend.

Timetabled 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.

In addition to the curricular opportunities, a wide variety of extracurricular musical activities is available for students. These include guitar and violin clubs, the annual musical production, participation in all liturgical ceremonies, the in-school talent competition, annual awards evening and graduation evening. In addition, students' music experiences are broadened through trips to the National Concert Hall (NCH). St Finian's is also involved in the annual *Festival of Music* concerts, hosted every year by the County Dublin Vocational Education Committee (VEC). Students from all schools within this scheme are invited to participate in these concerts which are performed in the NCH. Through all of the activities on offer in the school, all students have access to some form of music-making, which is very good. The music teacher's commitment to these events and the schools' support in facilitating 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 reasonably spacious classroom which is appropriately equipped with a sound system and computer with music software installed. This provision could be enhanced by exploring the range of resources in relation to music technology that is available on the internet. Installing these resources on computers in the computer room would allow music technology to be delivered to a larger number of students. This is recommended. There is an array of musical posters, both professionally printed and hand-crafted, on the music classroom walls. These are vibrant, relevant to the various aspects of the music curriculum and ensure an attractive and stimulating learning environment for the students.

The music department is staffed by one, fully qualified, specialist music teacher. St Finian's 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. At the time of the evaluation, the music teacher was also planning to attend an in-service course, *Creative use of ICT*, hosted by the Second Level Support Service (SLSS). All this should pay dividends not just to the overall CPD of the teacher but also to the development of the department.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

Formal planning time is allocated to all subject departments to meet three times per year. Currently, the music teacher uses these planning times to attend meetings of her other subject department. On occasion, it would be very useful for the music department to meet with other similarly sized departments. This would facilitate opportunities to share good practices and provide a forum for discussion of music-related issues.

The quality of planning and co-ordination of Music is good in this school. There is good planning for the timetabled lessons in Music in addition to the high level of advance planning that is necessary to ensure the smooth operation of the musical activities that take place. The quality of planning and preparation for all lessons observed was found to be good. The music teacher has devoted much time to the creation of handouts and resources which have been tailored to suit the students' needs and all of which have been filed and are readily accessible. It is particularly noteworthy that these resources are kept updated and relevant to the interests of the students.

Subject planning documentation was presented during the evaluation and there are some positive elements in it. It is noted that the school has developed its own template to support subject planning. The music plan provided detailed information about the organisation of the department including a general list of resources, a broad content plan for each year group in conjunction with short-term schemes of work which have been developed for the full year. All of this good work is commended.

There are some shortcomings in the written document which should now be addressed. On that basis, the following recommendations are made. In order to accommodate the progress which is achieved in the implementation of the plan, longer-term planning should be flexible. Consequently, schemes of work should be developed for shorter defined timeframes such as each school term, and they should be revisited when necessary. These schemes of work should be detailed and should fully reflect the teaching and learning practices that are happening in music lessons. For instance, differentiated strategies to target the individual needs of students were used in the lessons observed. The good work done in planning and implementing these strategies should be recorded in the subject department plan. In addition, 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.

The programme of work currently planned for first-year students is quite ambitious and should be reviewed to establish realistic expectations of the work to be done by students.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Three lessons were observed during the course of the evaluation, one in junior cycle and two in senior cycle. In all lessons, the teacher created a very positive learning environment and there was a very good rapport between the students and the teacher. Students' contributions to class discussions were welcomed and praise was used effectively to acknowledge their efforts. Good routines were established in all lessons from the outset and these generally included a roll call followed by a clear statement of the aims and learning intention of lessons. This is a particularly effective strategy as it provides the students with a clear focus and 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 observed were well structured and suitably paced. Resources were integrated into lessons at appropriate stages. However, in one lesson, it was apparent that some students were experiencing difficulties with some components of the written task. It should be borne in mind that it may sometimes be necessary to check students' understanding of a worksheet before requiring them to complete the exercise. When necessary, teaching strategies were adapted when students were experiencing difficulties. This is very good use of the assessment for learning (AFL) strategies as recommended by the National Council of Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). Further information is available on the website at www.ncca.ie.

High quality teaching and learning was observed in all lessons. Many of the strategies that were used were facilitative and invited student participation at a high level. In particular, it is good to see the practical skills of students being used in lessons. It was also evident that careful thought is being given to the deployment of differentiated strategies where necessary. Very good questioning strategies were used and these varied between those that required students to give a particular answer and those which required them to apply their critical analytical thinking skills.

Students were invited to apply specific skills during the lessons observed and this is good. For instance, in one lesson, a selection of individual students was asked to improvise on different rhythm patterns through a clapping activity. The remaining students recorded the pattern. The purpose of the exercise was twofold; to provide individual students with the opportunity to compose a rhythm pattern on the spot and to assess the remaining students on their ability to record the pattern correctly.

Students are making very good progress in their course work. This is evident from their written work, practical performances and responses during lessons. Practical music-making activities were incorporated into all lessons observed and it is very apparent that students are very accustomed to performing. The standard of all performances was appropriate to the age and ability of the students and their enjoyment of lessons was very apparent.

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 a number of assessment practices and it is good that peer assessment is one such model. Assessment of students' work is ongoing through the completion of worksheets, questioning strategies and practical performances. There is an expectation that students will store all materials and resources provided by the teacher in folders. However, this practice was not found to be consistent across all class groups. It is important that students are taught how to organise and manage their materials as these will function as useful sources for revision. This is recommended.

Homework was set in all lessons observed. Students' written work in relation to composing activities is marked frequently and comments indicating strategies for improvement are provided. Written feedback on students' work should, as appropriate, include a statement regarding the musicality and flow of a melody. In senior cycle, students are provided with good feedback regarding their performance when tackling certificate examination questions. This feedback follows the marking schemes set by the State Examination Commission. The use of 'comment only' marking strategies on occasion, instead of awarding grades, would focus students' attention better on the areas for development.

There was very little written information available in the school regarding students' progress in listening activities and there was no evidence of teacher marking of this work. It was reported that this work is corrected in class and that any advice is given orally. This is a valuable experience for students as feedback is provided instantly and attention can be drawn to any issues. However,

to further enable students to improve, it is recommended that students' written work in this area should also be taken up by the teacher and corrected. In addition, detailed profiles of students' application and attainment should be developed as this information is essential when reporting on their progress.

Achievement in certificate examinations is good but there is scope to keep this under review in order to ensure that all students are reaching their full potential. For instance, the music department should now analyse certificate examination results annually and compare school achievement to the national norms. This information should also be included in the music plan.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Music is very well supported by senior management.
- Overall, a healthy proportion of students opt for Music throughout the school.
- A wide variety of extracurricular musical activities is available for students.
- The quality of planning and co-ordination of Music is good.
- All lessons observed were well structured and suitably paced.
- High quality teaching and learning was observed in all lessons.

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

- Planning documentation should now be developed further and a clearer distinction made between longer-term and short-term planning. Schemes of work should be detailed, reviewed at regular intervals and include references to good practices currently in use in the department, for example differentiation.
- Listening exercises completed by students should be taken up and corrected by the teacher from time to time.
- Students should be shown how to organise and manage their materials in folders and these folders should be monitored by the teacher.

A post-evaluation meeting was held with the teacher of Music, 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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