

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

**Subject Inspection of Business Subjects
REPORT**

**Lanesboro Community College
Lanesboro, Co. Longford
Roll number: 71720L**

Date of inspection: 21 October 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 Lanesboro Community College as part of a whole-school evaluation. 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 one day 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.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

In Lanesboro Community College business education is represented by the subjects Business Studies at junior cycle and Business and Accounting at senior cycle. The subjects form part of the optional subject provision at both junior and senior cycle. The school is a small rural vocational school and the pattern of uptake in the subjects has been relatively consistent for the past number of years. A subject inspection of business subjects in the school was previously completed in 2004.

Among the recommendations of the previous inspection report was that management would continue to monitor the impact of option bands on the uptake of the subjects. The school's management makes significant efforts to provide a wide curricular choice to its students despite the considerable pressure placed on the timetable by the overall enrolment patterns. While the school manages to ensure continuity in provision of the subject from junior to senior cycle the numbers of students selecting either one of the two senior cycle options varies from year to year.

The previous subject inspection report also highlighted the low participation rate of boys in the subject at junior cycle and indicated that the structure of the option bands should be monitored to ensure that it did not contribute to the imbalance. While the imbalance has continued it was clear from interactions with students during the evaluation that their perceptions also contribute to this imbalance. At a whole-school level, senior management and the guidance department should promote the advantages to students of taking business subjects especially given the profile of the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) at senior cycle.

Arrangements for optional subject selection in first year have changed from the previous year-long programme to a short six-week taster programme. The subject department welcomes this change as it ensures that, following the taster programme, the subject is timetabled for four periods per week in each year of the cycle. From second year, classes are timetabled for two double periods which helps promote the department's emphasis on bookkeeping in the junior cycle programme. This is in line with the recommendations of the previous report. At senior cycle, the subjects are timetabled concurrently on pre-set option bands for five periods per week.

The school has three fully-qualified business teachers, some of whom teach in the school's post Leaving Certificate (PLC) area. Teachers are deployed by the school's management in line with their skills, knowledge and interests. However, the lack of rotation at senior cycle limits the opportunity for all teachers to maintain their skills in the range of subjects and to engage with ongoing developments in them. There is scope for the school's management to review the deployment of teachers to teach the range of subjects, which will strengthen the subject specialist skills among the team members.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

Subject department planning systems are in place in the school. The co-ordination function is shared between some of the team and there is good practice in relation to sharing resources and experience. Subject department meetings are held regularly and the outcomes recorded.

One of the recommendations of the previous subject inspection report was that the team of business teachers would develop the subject plan. Since the previous inspection, work has been ongoing in implementing this recommendation. Of particular merit is the overall policy statement with respect to the business subjects which has been framed within the context of the school's mission statement. The overall subject plan includes general background documentation and the individual subject plans and schemes. A key strength of the plan is its inclusion of strategies for meeting the needs of students with special educational needs (SEN) and promoting cross-curricular links.

Progress has also been achieved with respect to the individual schemes of work for each of the business subjects. This is particularly evident in the case of junior cycle Business Studies where collaboration between the teachers of the subject has produced a plan which structures the delivery of the curriculum content to suit the needs of the students and the skill set of the staff assigned to teach the subject. One of the best features of the plan is the restructuring of the content of the first-year taster programme to focus on activity-based learning outcomes that emphasise and develop students' research and information and communication technology (ICT) skills. For most business teachers, access to ICT to support teaching and learning in the subjects is limited to using the school's computer room. The business classrooms should be prioritised in the event of additional ICT resources, especially LCD projectors, being made available by the board of management as the ICT skill base is high among the business teachers and good systems exist for sharing expertise.

Progress has also been achieved in developing the senior cycle schemes, especially in Accounting. Additional work is required in the case of the Business scheme, which should be achieved by involving all the team in its development. The subject plan and yearly schemes for Business should also be reformatted and produced electronically to ensure consistency with the other business subjects.

In order to fully achieve the recommendation of the previous subject inspection report, further work is required with respect to the subject plan. The yearly schemes of work should specify the learning outcomes for each topic or unit to be covered and the resources, assessment modes and teaching methodologies appropriate to each. Using a tabular format provides a useful base for the inclusion of this additional information.

Generally teachers were well prepared for the lessons observed during the inspection. Additional material including question sheets were prepared for use in the lessons.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Good quality teaching and learning was evident in the majority of lessons observed during the inspection. Lessons generally had clear aims and learning outcomes and these were communicated to students at the outset. In some lessons this was done explicitly and in others implicitly as part of general classroom practice and management.

There was good continuity with prior learning and lessons were consistent with the planned schemes of work. This was evident in all lessons observed. In all lessons content was appropriate to the class group and the topic. Methodologies were well balanced between teacher exposition and student-centred work. Questioning style tended to be global and greater use should be made of directed questions as an appropriate technique for supporting students' learning in mixed-ability settings.

Of particular merit in the teaching of junior cycle Business Studies was the emphasis placed on differentiation. The teacher varied the methodologies used and implemented the agreed strategy outlined in the subject plan. The differentiation was integrated into the teaching and learning activities and progress was tracked in terms of learning outcomes. However, there is scope at senior cycle to improve differentiation for students in the higher-ability range as not all students are challenged to reach their potential in all aspects of their work. Key to this change will be a change in the questioning style used in class and the structure of assessment instruments used.

The teachers demonstrate a good level of competence and skill in the subject area. They are up to date with developments in the local and wider business environment and use examples that are current and relate to the students' own personal experiences. Very good emphasis is placed on local exemplars and those familiar to the students' experiences. This is good practice in developing students' capacity to develop their applied business skills.

Students' behaviour during the inspection was very good. In most lessons observed students were motivated and engaged by all classroom activities and their enthusiasm and enjoyment of the subjects was evident. Where learning activities were varied to include oral, aural and practical work, these were well managed. The room arrangements were conducive to a safe, orderly and participative learning environment. The previous subject inspection had recommended that seating arrangements were structured in pairs to promote shared learning between students and this recommendation has been implemented.

Students were generally active in their own learning, in their questioning and in their responses to questions. For the majority of students, their written, oral and practical work indicated good progress, appropriate to their abilities, in relation to planned learning outcomes.

ASSESSMENT

A homework and assessment policy is agreed for junior cycle Business Studies and senior cycle Accounting and is implemented by the teachers of these subjects. This policy should also be included within the senior cycle Business subject plan. There is consistency with respect to record

keeping. Among the teachers, there is a very high degree of compliance with respect to the whole-school practice of monitoring attendance in each lesson. Teachers keep records, using the standard format agreed at whole-school level, of students' performance and progress.

There was evidence of very good practice with respect to the regularity with which homework is assigned. Homework was corrected at the start of lessons observed and a review of students' folders indicated that homework was corrected regularly and evaluative comments were provided by the teachers. One area for development is in relation to the assessment instruments used for Business. While questions set are linked to the learning outcomes, there is an overemphasis on short-answer questions. The assessment instruments used should include questions designed to fully develop students' higher-order skills, including critical thinking and analysis.

The analysis of outcomes in the state examinations is completed by the subject department with respect to nearly all the subjects. It is advised that this practice extends to all business subjects. The examination outcomes within each level are generally good but the team needs to encourage a greater uptake of the subjects at higher level, especially at senior cycle.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The school's management is commended for its efforts to maintain participation rates in business subjects.
- Since the previous inspection, progress has been made in developing the subject plan, particularly with overall policy and the junior cycle Business Studies aspects of the plan.
- The first-year taster programme has a positive emphasis on project work and ICT.
- There were examples of differentiated teaching strategies used in some of the lessons observed.
- There is a positive emphasis placed on bookkeeping in junior cycle which is reflected in the number of students opting for Accounting at senior cycle.
- In most lessons observed, students' engagement with the lesson content was maintained by teachers' use of a mixed range of teaching methodologies.
- Formal systems exist for the analysis of student outcomes in state examinations.

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

- Each subject's scheme of work should detail the learning outcomes, appropriate assessment techniques and resources for use with all topics.
- The department should develop a strategy to improve students' higher-order thinking skills in the subjects, especially at senior cycle. Key to this strategy will be a review of the design of in-school assessment instruments and in-class questioning techniques.
- The business department should be prioritised in the event of additional ICT resources being made available by the board of management as the ICT skill base is high among the business teachers and good systems exist for sharing expertise.

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

Published, November 2011