Subject Inspection of Business Subjects
REPORT

St. Wolstan’s Community School,
Celbridge, County Kildare
Roll number: 91505T

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REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN BUSINESS SUBJECTS

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in St. Wolstan’s Community School, Celbridge. 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 subject teachers. 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

The provision for business subjects in the school is very good. Business Studies and all three senior cycle subjects, Accounting, Business and Economics are offered as optional subject choices for students. The number of senior cycle business subjects provided is dependent on student demand. Most years all three subjects are provided but on occasion student preferences can mean classes are formed in only two of the three options, that is Business and either Economics or Accounting. Business modules are also provided within the Transition Year (TY) programme. Overall, the time allocation to the subjects meets the requirements of the syllabuses.

Business Studies forms part of the sampler programme from which first-year students will select a number of optional subjects at the end of the year. This is the third year that the sampler programme is in operation and the business teachers indicated that they were satisfied with the outcomes from it. In particular, they indicated that though the numbers can vary from year-to-year, overall at least half of each second-year group takes the subject. In more recent years the number of students opting for senior cycle business options has declined and the business department is advised to monitor uptake of the range of senior cycle business subjects as part of the subject planning process.

The provision of information and communication technology (ICT) resources for the subjects is good as mainstream classrooms are fitted with a desktop computer and linked data projector. Nearly all the teachers demonstrated that they had engaged with personal professional development to improve their ICT skills as a support to subject and lesson planning. Presently, the subject department folder within the schools’ network is being developed and teachers are transferring their personal plans and resources to the shared system. The completion of this work will provide a good resource base for subject planning. Some teachers are more active than others in terms of involvement with the subject association and school management is supportive of teachers’ membership of the subject association.
PLANNING AND PREPARATION

The subject department is established and good subject planning systems operate within it. A co-ordinator is in place and the position rotates among the team. Subject co-ordination is working effectively and there is very good practice in relation to sharing resources and experience. A review of the subject department meeting minutes indicates that agenda items address both administrative and subject development issues, which is very good. For example, this year’s meetings have focused on planning for students with special educational needs. This indicates a capacity among the team for self evaluation. As part of the subject department’s evaluation of its activities, a regular review of the number of students opting for the subjects, the progression of students from junior to senior cycle and the factors influencing students’ choice of business subject should be carried out.

The subject planning documentation presented consisted of general background information and the agreed subject plans. There is scope to improve the presentation of the yearly schemes of work by consolidating the existing information into more defined schemes where the learning outcomes for each area are agreed and the resources, assessment modes and methodologies appropriate to each are linked in an easily accessible format. Of specific merit among the subject plans is the plan for junior-cycle Business Studies. The schemes were adjusted to accommodate the needs of the sampler programme. It is also clear that the plan has been framed to ensure that students access all the learning outcomes to the highest level. The high numbers of students taking the subject at higher level in the junior certificate examination indicates the positive impact of this approach on student outcomes.

At senior cycle the Business plan shows good reflective practice in that the sequencing of syllabus units alters to meet the needs of the students. The sequencing of topics in the Accounting plan is strongly linked to the format of the leaving certificate examination paper. This emphasis on examination preparation was reflected in the students’ inability to recall topics other than those most recently completed when asked by the inspector to identify preferences within the subject. The recent updating of the accounting plan, including initial work on identifying learning outcomes, is a positive development.

A key strength in subject planning is the identification and detailing of co-curricular and cross-curricular links. This was clearly evident in the consistency among class groups in using calculators for mathematical computations. Where common outcomes were agreed for year groups, consistency in the delivery of the outcomes was evident. This is supported by teachers setting common assessments for in-school assessments including Christmas and summer tests, where appropriate.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

The quality of teaching and learning observed was good, and very good in a number of lessons. Though the lesson objective was not explicitly shared at the start of each lesson it was clear that the lessons were structured to provide continuity with the outcomes of previous lessons, as students were able to identify the links with previous learning. Activities were well managed within lesson time and attention was paid, where necessary, to supporting individual learners.

Individual teacher preparation for lessons was very good. Also, the correction of bookkeeping exercises was well managed to ensure that it did not take up too much of the lesson time. While
students completion of written homework was checked in all the lessons observed, in many lessons no record was maintained of instances where students did not complete their homework.

The majority of the teachers were very skilled in their use of ICT to support teaching and learning. In one lesson the teacher used a self-designed spreadsheet template with inbuilt formatting, including colour-coded totals, and formulae for use with questions on Club Accounts. Presentation software was used in many lessons to present content.

A strong pastoral approach was evident in the management of classes that resulted in positive interactions between teachers and students. The approach also meant that lesson time was dedicated to teaching and learning activities. Students were engaged and respectful and the work rate was high in the lessons observed. Teachers questioning approaches worked best where they were used as a support to differentiation within the lesson.

The first-year business studies programme provides an opportunity for students to engage actively in learning with the emphasis on practical elements of the junior certificate programme. This positive approach is good, given that the subject is optional within the school’s junior cycle curriculum. The quality of learning observed was generally very good and in most lessons students were provided with opportunities for co-operative learning and pair work. In a number of lessons students were provided with opportunities for key skills development including research skills. For example, in Economics, students were asked to research recent newspaper articles and to select and critically evaluate articles covering current economic developments relevant to the lesson content.

Opportunities for active learning were provided where there was a good mix of teaching methodologies used. In addition, a range of strategies to promote students higher-order thinking skills was evident in many of the lessons observed.

Student outcomes in the state examinations are good, as is the level of students taking the subjects at higher level. While classes are grouped on a mixed-ability basis the inspectors interaction with students indicated that access to senior cycle accounting is limited to students who took Business Studies at higher level in the junior certificate examination. This is not consistent with the approach to the other business subjects and should be reviewed.

**ASSESSMENT**

Though subject planning documentation references Assessment for Learning (AfL) as a key strategy, in the teaching of the subjects there was limited evidence of AfL strategies forming a key part of lesson delivery. In the case of students’ written work, there is a need to increase the level of evaluative comment when correcting students’ homework, and for teachers to record students’ outcomes and completion rates.

The school’s homework policy gives indicative guidelines as to the amount of time students within each year group should spend on homework each night. A review of students’ homework journals and copies during the evaluation indicated that this was not consistently adhered to in all classes, given the amount of work assigned. However, it was evident in a number of lessons that there was good practice with respect to the assignment of work other than written work for homework, for example research or revision. It is advised that teachers instruct students to record the assignment of non-written work in their homework journals and that this work is assessed in the following lesson either orally or through a short written exercise.
SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- A strong pastoral approach was evident in the management of students within lessons.
- Many of the teachers engage positively with personal professional development that enhances the classroom experience for students.
- ICT was used effectively in the majority of lessons observed.
- The minutes of subject department meetings indicate an engagement with both subject administration and developmental issues.
- Where common learning outcomes are agreed for year groups, consistency in the delivery of the outcomes was evident.
- A good range of resources was available to support teaching of the subjects.
- A range of strategies to promote students higher-order thinking skills was evident in many of the lessons observed.
- The number of students taking the subjects at higher level in the state examinations exceeds the national averages.

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

- Further development of the schemes of work for the subjects is required.
- Greater consistency with the application of the homework policy is required. The subject teachers are advised to adhere to the policy objective of Assessment for Learning and formalise the evaluation and recording of formative assessments.
- As part of the subject department’s evaluation of its activities, a regular review of the number of students opting for the subjects, the progression of students from junior to senior cycle and the factors influencing students’ choice of business subject should be carried out.

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.

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