Subject Inspection of English
REPORT

Mercy Secondary School
Tralee, County Kerry
Roll number: 68070E

Date of inspection: 9 December 2011
REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN ENGLISH

INFORMATION ON THE INSPECTION

<table>
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<th>Dates of inspection</th>
<th>6, 7 &amp; 9 December 2011</th>
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| Inspection activities undertaken | Observation of teaching and learning during 13 class periods
• Review of relevant documents | • Examination of students’ work
• Discussion with principal and teachers | • Feedback to principal, deputy principals and teachers
• Interaction with students |

MAIN FINDINGS

• The standard of teaching and learning ranged from good to very good and included some practice of an exceptional standard.

• Teachers have high expectations of their students.

• There is very good provision for English on the school timetable.

• There has been considerable and consistent engagement in professional development on the part of English teachers.

• Common examinations are organised in first year.

• A comprehensive subject plan has been developed which includes common time frames and a developmental action plan.

MAIN RECOMMENDATIONS

• It is recommended that English teachers should regularly incorporate specific product goals when written work is assigned.

• The use of an integrated approach to the syllabuses and the exploration of a wide range of genres in students’ writing should be adopted across the English department.

• Common examinations should be organised in each year group, where at all feasible.

• Consideration should be given to the adoption of a rotational arrangement with regard to the role of subject co-ordinator.
INTRODUCTION

Mercy Secondary School, Mounthawk has a current enrolment of 1168 students. It is a voluntary secondary co-educational school. The school offers the following programmes: the Junior Certificate, the Leaving Certificate (Established), the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) and the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme. In addition, the school offers an optional Transition Year (TY) programme.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

- The standard of teaching and learning ranged from good to very good and included some practice of an exceptional standard. Objectives were clear and very good practice was observed where the learning intention was delineated at the outset of the lesson. This latter approach should be adopted across the department as a minor extension of existing practice. Teachers have high expectations of their students. This is evident in the caring modelling of behaviour in classrooms, as well as academic expectations.

- A wide range of resources was used to support teaching and learning. The effective use of information and communication technology (ICT) was observed and teachers are encouraged to continue to engage with this powerful teaching resource. A particular area for the English department to explore is the use of ICT to support the modelling of writing and reading activities. Where English classes are formed in junior cycle to support students with literacy difficulties, the possibility of planned access to the ICT room for the drafting of written work could be considered, within the inevitable constraints of available resources.

- A range of listening and speaking activities was undertaken in lessons. These were most effectively organised where students were assigned specific roles and co-operative learning strategies were utilised. The use of co-operative learning strategies which support listening and speaking skills is an area worthy of exploration during future English departmental meetings, or as a teaching and learning element in a future English subject action plan.

- Various effective reading strategies were employed in English lessons. It is suggested that the explicit teaching of reading strategies in classes with students with literacy difficulties, whereby teachers could model such strategies to provide a scaffold for students’ reading, could be investigated and advanced as a further element of the department’s good practice. A current project underway in first year classes which is focused on advancing the use of reading strategies should provide a very good support for this work.

- Students were regularly assigned written work in the classes observed. There was frequent evidence of the use of comment-based assessment by teachers. It is recommended that, as an extension of this good practice, English teachers should regularly provide specific product goals when written work is assigned, so that students are explicitly directed towards the learning goals connected to the relevant exercise. This will, in turn, support peer-assessment and self-assessment as well as teachers’ assessment of students’ work.

- There was some use of an integrated approach to the language and literature elements of the syllabuses. Overall, however, there was greater emphasis on graduated questions and examination questions in the assigning of written homework. While acknowledging the validity of these approaches, it is recommended that the use of an integrated approach to
the syllabuses and the exploration of a wide range of genres in students’ writing should be adopted across the English department. This should be addressed through both teachers’ individual planning and common departmental planning. These developments should then be carried through into teachers’ practice.

**SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT**

- There is very good provision for English on the school timetable. Students are organised into two bands in second year on the basis of an overview of their results in first year. There is good uptake of the higher level course in English. The school and the English department are encouraged to continue to maintain a keen vigilance with regard to the impact of the current banding system on uptake levels.

- A range of assessments is undertaken to evaluate students’ progress. Common examinations are organised in first year. In this context, it is recommended that common examinations should now be organised in other year groups, where at all feasible. This will save needless duplication of work and allow a clearer appreciation of students’ achievement across year cohorts.

**PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

- There is a subject co-ordinator in English, who is a postholder. The impressive work undertaken by the co-ordinator is acknowledged. It is recommended that consideration should now be given to the adoption of a rotational arrangement with regard to the role of subject co-ordinator in order to ensure a wide leadership skills base across the subject department.

- A comprehensive subject plan has been developed which includes common time frames. The English department has moved towards the development of action planning. It is suggested that a teaching and learning element could be identified for inclusion in the department’s action plan in the future. This could be specific to English or could link into the school’s current whole-school action plan.

- The creation of an English base room has been proposed by the department and supported by senior management. Given the current space constraints under which the school operates, the incremental approach to the development of a print-rich environment is endorsed. In time, the room’s print-rich environment should provide a strong argument for the department in advancing the development of other print-rich spaces.

- Texts are varied in English and cognisance is taken of the need to ensure common texts in senior cycle between ordinary and higher level class groups. This good practice should be consolidated through its inclusion as policy and practice in the English departmental plan. This especially applies to the study of poetry in senior cycle. As a further development of the good work being undertaken, the department is encouraged to expand the number of texts, in particular novels, studied in junior cycle in order to ensure as broad a literary experience as possible for students in these year groups.

- There is a TY plan which incorporates project work as a significant element in the assessment of students’ progress. This approach is a worthwhile support for students’ engagement with written work. It is suggested that greater specificity should be applied in the case of the TY plan so that it would incorporate clear learning goals to support
teachers new to TY and to inform teachers in fifth year regarding students’ previous experiences.

The draft findings and recommendations arising out of this evaluation were discussed with the principal, the deputy principals and subject teachers at the conclusion of the evaluation.

Published, June 2012