

**An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna**

**Department of Education and Skills**

**Subject Inspection of Geography  
REPORT**

**Fingal Community College  
Swords, County Dublin  
Roll number: 70121H**

**Date of inspection: 2 February 2011**



**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 GEOGRAPHY**

---

**SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT**

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Fingal Community College. It presents the findings of an evaluation of the quality of teaching and learning in Geography and makes 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, 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, the deputy principal and subject teachers. The board of management 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**

Fingal Community College is a co-educational school under the trusteeship of County Dublin Vocational Education Committee (VEC). It has a current enrolment of five hundred and forty eight students.

Geography is a core subject in the school's junior cycle and classes are allocated three single periods per week. The school has introduced mixed-ability class grouping and this is a welcome development. At the time of the evaluation teachers were availing of continuing professional development (CPD) in relation to using differentiated teaching strategies which will support this positive move to a mixed-ability class structure. The geography teachers, who are all subject specialists, have availed of CPD in relation to Geography and whole-school issues. For the established Leaving Certificate Geography is an optional subject and students are provided with an open choice of subjects before option bands are generated. The uptake of the subject is in a very healthy state with three or four class groups being formed in each year. This high uptake reflects the very positive experiences of students in their study of the subject in the junior cycle. In the senior cycle five class periods, consisting of one double and three single class periods, are provided for Geography. This time allocation is in line with syllabus recommendations. Lessons are appropriately spread across students' timetables.

Teaching and learning in Geography are very well supported by school management with the provision of a wide range of resources, particularly welcome is the ongoing upgrading of the school information and communications technology (ICT) facilities. Resources are stored in a central location which is accessible to all members of the department. A detailed inventory of these resources is contained in the subject department plan. Individual teachers have also assembled a wide range of resources in their individual classrooms. These resources have been used to create a stimulating learning environment for students. The displays of key words,

students' projects, maps and photographs are noteworthy. Notice boards in classrooms and on a corridor are used to display photographs and articles from the print media related to current events with a geographical theme. All of this helps to stimulate students' interest in the subject and to establish a link between the study of Geography and the world outside the classroom.

Teachers are made aware of students with special educational needs (SEN) at the start of the school year. The geography teaching team has assembled a wide range of resources to support these students and for students for whom English is an additional language. These resources, along with the planned teaching programme for Geography and lists of key words have been provided to the learning support department. Support for students is provided through withdrawal from class and by the use of differentiated teaching strategies in geography lessons. All of these good practices reflect the school's commitment to cater for the learning needs of its students and deserves to be acknowledged. Team teaching is used in the school and consideration should be given to extending this strategy to geography classes where appropriate.

## **PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

The geography teachers work collaboratively and share their considerable professional expertise. This was evident from minutes of subject department meetings and from discussions held during the evaluation. A notable feature outlined in the subject plan was a record of reflective practice and self-evaluation carried out by the team of geography teachers. Strengths and areas for development were identified and actions agreed. This is very good practice. As a means of building on these good practices it is suggested that some time be set aside at department meetings for teachers to discuss teaching and learning, to share lesson plans and in relation to areas for development to identify specific targets and to agree action plans to be delivered within agreed time frames. A subject co-ordinator is in place and this role is rotated amongst the members of the geography teaching team.

The subject department plan was presented in a series of six folders reflecting a considerable amount of work done by the collaborative efforts of the geography teachers. One folder contains the long-term planned teaching programme for each year in the school. Two approaches were evident in this plan. In one approach the curriculum content to be taught for each year group was presented on a term and weekly basis and included reference to resources, teaching strategies and audio-visual aids. The second approach focused on identifying learning outcomes to be achieved by students. It is recommended that in the next review of this plan these two approaches to long-term curriculum planning be integrated into a single document. Resources provided during the evaluation will support this. The focus on identifying learning outcomes is very good practice as it puts the student at the centre of the planning process and would reflect the good practices evident during classroom visits.

The planned teaching programme for first-year students contains a unit of study devoted to OS maps and aerial photographs which is planned for the third term. This is good practice as these key geographical skills can then be integrated into the rest of the teaching programme thus facilitating further development by students. It is recommended that OS map and aerial photograph skills be developed at an earlier stage in first year. The use of local large-scale maps and photographs of the local area would be particularly appropriate.

There is a focus on topics from physical geography in the rest of the first-year programme. It was noted in one classroom visited that students in first year had made landform models and this is a

very good method of facilitating students' understanding and of catering for a variety of learning styles. However, this focus on physical geography makes considerable demands on students in terms of understanding and using technical terms and lacks variety. The programme could be made more appealing to students at this stage by including a variety of topics from both physical and human geography. For example topics on Economic Activities from Part C of the Junior Certificate Syllabus should be considered for inclusion.

Planning and preparation by individual teachers for the lessons observed was of a very high standard and included the preparation of teacher-generated support materials. All teachers presented a detailed written plan, on a standard template, for the lessons observed. Commendably this written plan contained clear aims and included reference to both student and teacher activity. The range of resources prepared to support students' learning included: digital presentations, worksheets, locational maps, supplementary textual material, Ordnance Survey (OS) maps aerial photographs and stationary requirements. Clearly presented and well laid out worksheets were notable features in the lessons observed. This level of preparation reflects the commitment of teachers to provide rich learning experiences for their students and is praiseworthy.

## **TEACHING AND LEARNING**

Very high quality teaching was evident in all of the classrooms visited. Teaching strategies effectively catered for the range of student abilities present in class groups. Teachers adopted an exploratory approach to learning and encouraged students through focused discussion and a range of student activities to seek explanations for geographic phenomena. There was a clear focus on student activities which included: brainstorming, question and answer sessions, completion of individual or group and pair tasks and feedback in a whole-class setting. It was notable that in group and pair work students were quickly assigned to groups and were given clear instructions on the task to be completed within a set timeframe. Students were supported by the provision of very well presented worksheets. The provision of base maps would be useful in facilitating students' knowledge of locational geography. It was evident that students enjoyed the active learning strategies used by teachers.

All of the lessons observed had clear learning intentions and these were shared with students at the start of lessons and in some instances were written on the whiteboard. This is very good practice and gave a clear focus for students' attention. In some instances these learning intentions were revisited during the course of the lesson to assess learning and were used for revision at the end of class. These are very good practices.

Teachers are aware of the need to differentiate learning and to cater for the needs of a wide range of learning styles. This was very effectively achieved in a number of ways in the lessons observed. Teachers moved around the classrooms providing support and affirmation to individual students as appropriate. Questions to individual students were carefully phrased and care was taken to teach the language of Geography. Key words were clearly taught during lessons, were in some instances written on the whiteboard or displayed on notice boards. Questioning was also used to encourage students to offer explanations, to develop their answers more fully or in the case of newcomer students to provide examples from their own experiences. These good practices helped to develop higher-order thinking and to create an inclusive atmosphere in classrooms. The provision of a handout with a lesson summary provided further support for students in some lessons.

Lessons were delivered at an appropriate pace so as to maximise learning. Students were given clear guidance during lessons in relation to the high standard expected by teachers in how they were to maintain a record of their writing work. However, students were encouraged to make their own notes and did not rely on dictation by their teachers. This encourages students to become independent learners and is good practice.

Teachers have adopted a visual approach to the delivery of the planned teaching programme for Geography. ICT, particularly short video clips, was very effectively used to stimulate students' interest and to clarify complex geographic concepts. In order to maximise learning the video clips were introduced at an appropriate time in lessons and were of short duration. Students were prepared before viewing and a focused discussion during and afterwards helped to deepen the level of discussion between teacher and students. Teachers are encouraged to get students to use ICT for personal research which could then be used in a class context. The use of the overhead projector, an interactive whiteboard and very clear work on classroom boards by teachers made significant contributions to enhancing the quality of teacher presentation. Having students leave their seats to complete work on classroom boards, to provide feedback after group activity or to demonstrate the effects of high population density was effective in catering for the variety of learning styles present in classrooms.

Students willingly engaged in the planned learning activities, contributed to class discussions and are making good progress in their studies. As teachers questioned students it was evident that they could recall previous learning and could use geographic terminology appropriately. Set tasks in lessons were successfully completed and the planned learning intentions were achieved. In lessons where OS maps or aerial photographs were used students demonstrated that they had acquired key geographical skills. In discussions with the inspector they demonstrated a good knowledge of geographical topics and in some instances showed a high level of awareness between their study of Geography and local examples and current events.

Classroom management was very effective. Teachers have in place clear routines for the start and conclusion of lessons and this created an atmosphere where learning could take place. A positive, relaxed, affirming and mutually respectful atmosphere was evident in all of the classrooms visited. The encouraging and invitational style of teaching resulted in very good engagement between teachers and students.

## **ASSESSMENT**

During the evaluation a sample of students' copybooks and journals was viewed. This sample indicated that homework is regularly set and it was evident in lessons observed that homework is monitored and corrected. Many good practices were evident in relation to homework. It is used to build on lesson content and included a variety of strategies to engage students, such as word searches, multiple-choice questions and supportive worksheets designed by teachers. Some worksheets required students to engage in a decision-making exercise affording them a suitably challenging task. This ensured an appropriate level of challenge for students so that homework did not simply involve transcription of sections of the textbook.

The good practice of having separate copybooks for homework and for keeping a record of students' class notes is in place. The quality of students' written work was generally of a high standard. Teachers monitor students' work and provide constructive feedback to students. This formative assessment was particularly evident where, in some instances, students had attempted

past examination questions. The use of assessment for learning principles is commended and it is suggested that the geography teachers agree a strategy for the further development of this assessment practice and include it in the subject department plan.

The geography department keeps a record of students' achievement in the certificate examinations. It is recommended that following an analysis of student attainment in certificate examinations specific targets be set for further development and that strategies be agreed and reviewed periodically by the geography teaching team.

Student progress is monitored in a variety of ways in Fingal Community College. During lessons learning was assessed through focused questioning and class tests are held when sections of the planned teaching programme are completed. Formal assessment arrangements are in place and the setting of common tests is good practice. Teachers maintain records of attendance, homework, test results and student behaviour. These are used to inform reports sent to parents and discussions held at formal parent-teacher meetings held annually for each year group.

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

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Teaching and learning in Geography are very well supported by school management with the provision of a wide range of resources. Among these, the ongoing upgrading of the school ICT facilities is particularly welcome.
- The geography teaching team has assembled a wide range of resources to support students with special educational needs and students for whom English is an additional language.
- The introduction of mixed-ability class grouping is a welcome development.
- The geography teachers work collaboratively, share their considerable professional expertise and have engaged in reflective practice and self-evaluation.
- A very comprehensive subject department plan is in place.
- Planning and preparation by individual teachers for the lessons observed was of a very high standard and included the preparation of teacher-generated support materials.
- Very high quality teaching was evident in all of the lessons observed. Teaching strategies effectively catered for the range of student abilities in class groups.
- Students willingly engaged in the planned learning activities, contributed to class discussions and were making good progress in their studies.
- Student progress is monitored in a variety of ways and the setting of common tests is good practice. The geography department keeps a record of student achievement in the certificate examinations.

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

- It is recommended that OS map and aerial photograph skills be developed at an early stage in first year. The use of local large-scale maps and photographs of the local area would be particularly appropriate.

- It is recommended that following an analysis of student attainment in certificate examinations specific targets be set for further development and that strategies be agreed and periodically reviewed by the geography teaching team.

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

*Published June 2011*

# **Appendix**

**SCHOOL RESPONSE TO THE REPORT**

**Submitted by the Board of Management**

**Area 1: Observations on the content of the inspection report**

We are very pleased with the content of the inspection report and welcome the affirmation of the excellent teaching and learning observed during the 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**

A review of the sequence of the acquisition of particular skills is underway for 1<sup>st</sup> year students. The Geography teachers will continue to set targets for students and will continue to share strategies for improved learning outcomes.