

**An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna
Department of Education and Skills**

**Subject Inspection of Business Subjects
REPORT**

**Portumna Community School
Portumna, County Galway
Roll number: 914130**

Date of inspection: 21 October 2009

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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 Portumna Community School, Portumna. 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. 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

In Portumna Community School business education is represented through the provision of Business Studies at junior cycle and Accounting and Business at senior cycle. Business Studies is an optional subject for junior cycle.

Currently the number of first-year students taking Business Studies is approximately two-thirds of the cohort. The number of second-year and third-year students selecting the subject averages at one-third of each year group. The difference arises from the current subject selection mechanism for first-year students. Incoming first-year students must select optional subjects from designated subject groupings. At the end of first year, students must then review and reduce their options. Though it was reported that there is some input by the guidance department towards supporting parents and students in making informed subject choices, business teachers, in association with the guidance department, should take a more proactive role in informing students of the subject's benefits and opportunities presented for further study in the area.

The number of students taking the subject to Junior Certificate, though stable, provides a low base from which to encourage students to take at least one of the business subjects at senior cycle. The business department is relatively successful in maintaining a high level of progression to at least one of the business options at senior cycle. It is advisable that the department, in association with school management, keep the subject retention rates under review. In addition, any proposed changes in the subject options available to students should be structured to ensure the long-term provision of the range of business subjects within the school's curriculum.

The allocation of class periods to the subjects, both at junior and senior cycle, is appropriate and the periods are spread through the week, which is a good mechanism for establishing positive student-teacher interactions and continuity in delivery of the learning outcomes. Subjects at senior cycle are allocated to teachers based on previous experience and interests. While this means that there is generally limited rotation of teachers between the subjects, the skills of the subject team are such that it is possible to deploy them across the subjects on a rotational basis should it be required. The school's management is advised to consider the concurrent scheduling of formal assessments for first-year classes at Christmas and summer to facilitate the administration of common assessments. The current arrangements do not allow for this.

The school's management responds on a needs basis to teachers' requests regarding the acquisition of additional resources. There was evidence of teachers incorporating information and communication technology (ICT) as a teaching tool, and school management is commended for its commitment to equipping the business classrooms with data projectors. The business team is committed to continuing professional development, which includes self-directed learning, teacher in-service and in some instances membership of the subject association. Of particular merit is the commitment to self-directed personal and professional development undertaken by the team to up-skill in the area of ICT. All teachers are encouraged to become members of the subject association.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

The business department comprises a small team of experienced teachers whose competencies include very good technical knowledge and interest in the development of the subjects. This provides a useful starting point for the team to engage in subject development planning for business subjects. Though the inspection focused on business subjects, the department as it is structured within the school also includes teachers of the Link Modules of the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP). This is very good practice as it facilitates the development of cross-curricular planning between the business subjects and the programme. The school's management indicated during the inspection that many LCVP students had at least one business subject within their Vocational Subject Groupings (VSGs).

Subject plans have been developed for each of the junior and senior cycle business subjects. While it was clear that these plans had been developed individually rather than collectively, there was a degree of consistency in their presentation. Of particular merit in the subject plans was the inclusion of appropriate assessment modes linked to learning outcomes or concepts. In some instances, appropriate differentiation methodologies were linked to learning outcomes. The team is advised to pool the very good practice evident at individual level to generate an agreed template, using the tabular format for the presentation of plans across the subjects.

There was evidence that planning for the subjects is influenced strongly by assessment outcomes. Emphasis is placed on ensuring that all students experience the full curriculum in order that their options are maximised when it comes to making a decision about the level at which the subject will be taken for examination purposes. However, at junior cycle, though the early introduction of bookkeeping outcomes is commendable, the emphasis among the team on completing these outcomes by the end of second year is challenging and may discourage less able students from continuing to study the subject after first year.

The Transition Year (TY) plan is good and provides evidence of the team's commitment to reviewing and updating the subject plans as it includes references to the Consumer Protection Act 2007. All plans reference resource material but there was no strong evidence that these resources were shared, but rather that they are retained on an individual teacher basis. There is scope to pool the resources used to support the teaching of the subjects, especially those focused on supporting the development of student applied business skills.

Individual planning is very good. The level of preparation by teachers for the lessons inspected was excellent. The range of resources used in the teaching of the subjects included textbooks, notes, handouts, and question banks. There was evidence that handouts are prepared and stored electronically, which indicates that they are retained and updated regularly. The team also demonstrated capacity to use LCD data projectors to support teaching and learning. One member of the team has been using a personal projector for some time and the commitment of the school's management to the allocation of classroom-based LCD projectors is welcome.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

The teachers are conscientious and hardworking, as was evidenced by the preparation and approach to each lesson observed. Lessons were planned and methodical and students were clear about the expected outcomes. There was a high degree of continuity with previous lessons. Though the teaching methodologies observed were mainly traditional, students' engagement with the lessons indicated a positive response to their use. There was also some evidence that the teachers had refined their methodologies through the gradual integration of ICT as a teaching aid.

Questioning was used frequently and appropriately in lessons. The questioning styles used were inclusive and differentiated, thereby ensuring that students of all ability levels were encouraged to participate. The use of differentiated questioning is positive and appropriate in the mixed-ability class settings of the business subjects. During the inspection, the teachers affirmed students and maximised each individual student's involvement in lesson activities as appropriate.

Classroom management was very good. The teachers had made good use of the classrooms' physical space to ease teacher and student movement and transitions. The classroom atmosphere observed indicated that the teachers were experienced in encouraging respectful interactions, both among students and between students and teachers.

Class groups observed were well behaved and students were encouraged to engage in learning activities that were appropriate to their age and ability levels but included a certain degree of challenge. Occasionally, the level of challenge was too high for the class group and this was most evident in the junior cycle lessons, especially in first and second year. One advantage of this approach is that it sets high expectations of student outcomes. A disadvantage of this approach is that it can discourage less able students from opting to continue to study the subject when it becomes optional. Therefore it is recommended that the level of challenge included in the lessons is pitched appropriately to ensure that students of all abilities can access the subjects.

In examination classes, learning outcomes were closely linked to preparation of students for the state examinations. There was also some evidence that teaching strategies for those year groups were focused on practice of examination questions and techniques. However, this was not explicitly stated and was integrated through the methodologies used. For example, students were encouraged to answer case study questions without absolutely linking the activity to the Applied Business Question (ABQ). This approach is commended as it allows for greater flexibility in the development of students analytical skills without being narrowly focused on one particular examination technique.

The emphasis placed on bookkeeping elements of the junior cycle business studies syllabus gives students an excellent opportunity to experience the full scope of the syllabus with its consequent benefits in maximising student competencies in the subject. Teachers moved around the classroom offering individual support to students in addition to checking progress on practical questions. The atmosphere encouraged participation and student interaction on practical activities, for example, bookkeeping questions. However, there was limited evidence of paired work by students when completing practical exercises. Greater emphasis should be placed on paired work as a technique for improving students' practical skills in the subjects and to encourage co-operation and shared learning among the students.

Presentation of work is generally of a high standard for students of all ability levels, though some gender differences were evident in some classes, with the presentation by female students of a higher standard than that of male students. Students were focused and responsive in their interactions in class. The use of appropriate business terms by teachers and students was good. Some additional materials, including newspaper articles and mnemonics, were used but there was scope to increase the number of exemplars used by teachers to link theory to current business practice. Knowledge of the wider business environment could be improved, particularly at junior cycle, through the introduction of project work and the increased use of resource materials that explore the application of theory to practical examples.

ASSESSMENT

Each teacher maintains comprehensive records of students' homework and assessments. These records also include student attendance at lessons. This is very good practice as it enables teachers to link attendance with records of work completed. In addition, the teachers use the school's e-portal system for recording formal assessment results. Written homework is regularly assigned by teachers and a new whole-school assessment policy was introduced in the current school year. As part of this new policy, formal reports will be issued for each student four times during the school year, two reports before and two after Christmas. Adherence to the new policy is very high within the subject department. The school's management should undertake a brief review of the new system at the end of the current academic year to assess whether the objectives set out for it are being achieved.

In-class assessments are planned on a regular basis to complement the completion of specific topics by the teachers of the subjects. In some classes, a combination of oral and written assessment is used to assess students' progress. The use of an oral component as a summative assessment tool for business subjects is uncommon. A positive outcome of this approach, as evident during the inspection, was the high level of business oracy in the responses of students. This was particularly evident for those students answering higher-order questions. Care must be taken when using this approach to ensure that the criteria for assessment are transparent and clearly stated.

The teachers' expectations of student achievement are high. Considerable emphasis is placed on examination performance and students are encouraged to aim for high levels of attainment. This is reflected in the significant number of students who take the subjects at higher level in the state examinations.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Timetable provision for the subjects is very good, with lessons spread through the week.
- The business teachers' engagement with continuing professional development is very good.
- A good range of resources is available to support teaching and learning in business subjects and management is committed to installing LCD projectors in all business rooms within the current school year.
- The teachers use their ICT skills to good effect in the preparation of lesson materials.
- Subject planning is good and individual lesson planning is excellent.
- Classroom management as observed during the inspection was very good.
- Teachers subject knowledge is good.
- Student engagement with the subjects is good.
- Very good assessment practice is evident within the subject department.

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

- The sequencing of bookkeeping outcomes within the junior cycle plan for Business Studies should be reviewed so that the degree of challenge is balanced and access to the subject is widened.
- First-year and second-year students' engagement with and understanding of the wider business environment should be developed through the increased use of active teaching and learning methodologies, including research and project work.
- Teachers should increase the emphasis placed on paired work in both bookkeeping and accounting.

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