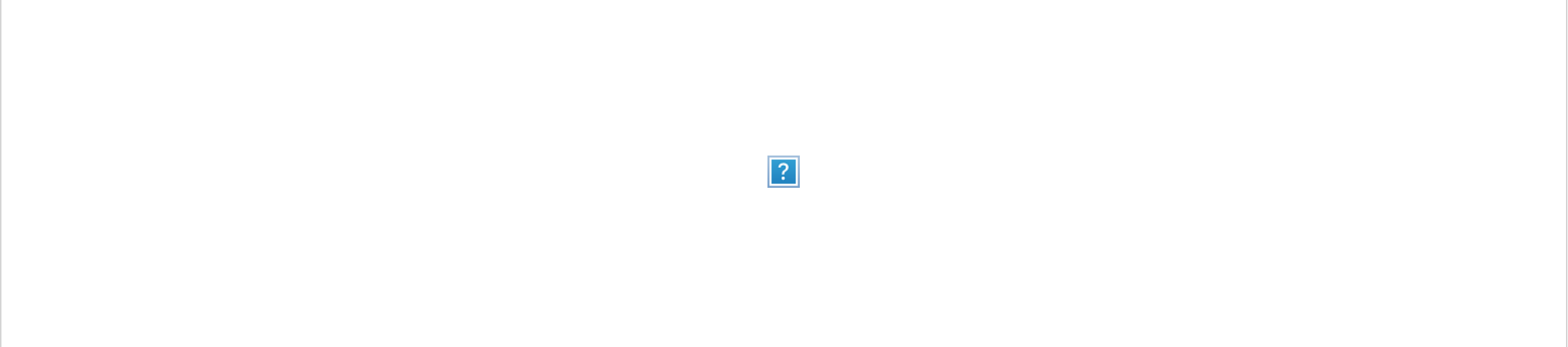




**An Roinn Oideachais agus Eolaíochta
Department of Education and Science**

**Subject Inspection of Business Subjects
REPORT**

**Davitt College
Castlebar, County Mayo
Roll number: 76060U**

**Date of inspection: 10 October 2006
Date of issue of report: 22 February 2007**

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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 Davitt College, Castlebar. 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

Business Studies is a core subject for the first year of the junior cycle. This is good practice, as it gives students an opportunity to get first-hand experience of the subject, before making final decisions on optional subjects for the remainder of the cycle. At the end of first year, students may choose Business Studies from other optional subjects, including Art Craft Design, Home Economics, Materials Technology (Wood), and Technical Graphics. On completion of the junior cycle, students may choose the Transition Year programme (TY), the Leaving Certificate (LC), the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP), and the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA). The participation rate in all senior-cycle programmes is quite high. The school also has a well-developed range of Post Leaving Certificate courses, including two business-related courses: Business Studies Secretarial, and Business Studies. Both courses are offered at Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) level 5. The PLCs are taught in a campus separate to Davitt College and while it is called Castlebar College of Further Education, it is a constituent part of Davitt College. The PLCs have fulfilled FETAC quality assurance requirements. Links for follow on study, on completion of the PLCs, have been developed with the Castlebar campus of the Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology (GMIT).

Business subjects are well catered for at senior cycle. There is a TY business module, and Accounting, Business and Economics are offered as optional subjects for the LC and the LCVP. The business teachers should review the TY business module with a view to integrating it with the double-class period per week for project activity. This would enhance cross-curricular links within TY, and also create more time for the current two single-class periods timetabled for the business module. While there has been no uptake of Accounting since 2003, the uptake of Business and Economics is considerably higher than the national average uptakes. The business teachers should examine what factors are giving rise to no uptake of Accounting for the past three school years.

Students are well supported in decision making at key points in their education including the transition from primary to post-primary, optional subject choice at the end of the first year of the junior cycle, transition from junior cycle to senior cycle, and optional subject choices for those taking either the LC or the LCVP. This support includes free choice of optional subjects for both cycles before final option bands are set up, ab initio study of senior-cycle business subjects, advice from business teachers, support of the guidance counsellor, aptitude testing for students, and open nights for parents at key points. The school is involved in a partnership approach to the induction of first-year students with parents, teachers and students, using resources developed by the Marino Institute of Education. Such an approach with students at the centre of the partnership is commendable.

Class-period provision for business subjects is satisfactory. There is more than adequate provision for the LCVP Link Modules, and this provision is unevenly distributed across the two years of the programme. There are also some issues relating to the balance and spread of class periods for some of the business subjects across the school week. The school should ensure that, given the logistics of timetabling, every effort is made to address these issues. Overall, business subjects are well catered for, and students are well supported in subject-choice arrangements.

The school has very well equipped information and communications technology (ICT) facilities, and has a pro-active approach to the provision of mobile technology, so that the use of Broadband and the integration of ICT in the teaching and learning of subjects may be promoted and maximised. In-house continuing professional development in ICT is provided for teachers in the use of laptops and data projectors for teaching purposes. Students are also well provided for in ICT with first-year junior-cycle students receiving two class periods in ICT per week, TY students receiving eight class periods per week, and other senior-cycle students receiving a minimum of one class period, while LCVP and LCA students also receive significant extra provision by virtue of the structure of these programmes. Business teachers fulfil Business Studies syllabus objectives relating to ICT through cross-curricular interaction with the ICT teacher, and by bringing students to the ICT rooms at selected intervals over the junior cycle.

Business teachers are well supported in their professional development. The school encourages and facilitates membership of the Business Studies Teachers' Association of Ireland (BSTAI), the use of external resources to teaching such as Business 2000, and guest speakers on selected topics. Business teachers have base classrooms. These rooms have been used to good effect through the development of a thematic range of business-related resources, and the development of a wide range of resources for use by the teachers.

Business subjects' students are taught in mixed-ability settings. This is in line with the syllabus structure of each business subject. There are well-established links between the learning-support team and the business teachers. Teachers are informed of students' ability range through reading ages from standardised tests. Business teachers share commonly used business terms with the learning-support and resource teachers for use in extra tuition provided to selected students in English. Staff development has taken place whereby the learning-support co-ordinator has provided guidance and support to teachers in mixed-ability settings. This is good practice, as it taps into in-school expertise. In subject plans and lessons observed, there was evidence of sensitivity being applied to all students, especially students with special educational needs and students, whose first language is not English. There was also evidence of very good record keeping of students' needs and progress.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

The school is involved in school development planning (SDP). In this context, the business teachers have been actively engaged in subject planning and have a well-developed subject plan. There are good structures in place to support subject planning, and regular meetings are held among the business teachers to review outcomes of the plan.

The subject plan is comprehensive, and covers, among others, a wide range of topics, including teaching methodologies, cross-curricular links, timed-content plan, special educational needs, and a glossary of business terms for junior and senior cycle. The plan for the TY business module has been developed on a themed basis that links into mini-company, and other co-curricular links such as work experience, and the use of guest speakers on relevant topics. Within LCVP, there was evidence of a team approach being applied to the link modules, as well as work experience opportunities for these students. Such co-curricular activity takes a considerable amount of co-ordination and planning.

Effective monitoring of the subject plan was evident in all lessons observed, as was flexibility of implementation to accommodate the needs of students. This is good practice, as students' needs are central to plan implementation, rather than the lesson content dictating lesson pace.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

In all lessons observed, an appropriate blend of supplementary materials was used to aid learning and revision. These materials consisted mainly of summary notes, and worksheets containing additional questions and sample answers. Classroom methodologies were suited to students' needs. Students were at the centre of lesson delivery, and pace was adjusted so that individual students were supported in learning new or difficult concepts, before new material was introduced.

A wide variety of teaching and learning aids were used. Effective use was made of visual aids to teaching and learning. These ranged from whiteboards to overhead projectors. In one lesson, the use of a laptop and data projector to highlight the key aspects of the lesson, using PowerPoint, was particularly effective. This is very good practice as apart from the obvious benefits of the use of colour to attract interest, it allows ICT to be used as a teaching and learning aid in a relatively seamless way.

Students were at the centre of lessons, and their active participation was assured through effective questioning. This had the effect of engaging as many students as possible in the flow of lessons, as well as ensuring their understanding. The teachers maintained lesson pace and focus through clear communication, and a lively conversational approach to lessons. There was a good variety of activity during lessons, through direct teacher input, in-class student assignments, and teacher support for individual students, as the need arose.

All lessons were well managed. This was due in no small part to well-behaved students, and to effective management of planned classroom activities. There were positive interactions between teachers and students. This arose through students being affirmed for their effort, and the care and support that teachers showed for their students. There was a high level of mutual respect between students and their teachers. The effective use of teacher-based classrooms with displays of business-related posters created positive learning environments. Best practice was seen, where students were encouraged to develop a news board, using a collage of up-to-date business news stories. Overall, there was very good practice in classroom methodologies, management and atmosphere, in all lessons observed.

Students displayed a high level of knowledge, understanding and ability to apply this to practical situations. This was facilitated by the use of practical examples in lessons, and the active participation of students in lesson flow. Best practice was seen, where topics were introduced and students were prompted to share their experience and knowledge of the particular topic, so that a story-like build up to the lesson content was developed. This was done in an integrated way, so that students could relate previous learning to the new material. Appropriate links were also created to State examination requirements in some lessons.

ASSESSMENT

The school has a whole-school policy for homework and assessment. Student progress reports are issued to parents twice per year, and parent-teacher meetings are organised twice per year for all year groups and three times per year for first-year students, as they progress into second-year, and for TY students, as they progress onto the remainder of the senior cycle. Outside of these arrangements, parents are free to contact the school during the school year, should the need arise.

The business teachers have agreed an approach to homework and assessment, in line with the whole-school policy. There is agreement among the teachers on homework monitoring, and assessment arrangements. An examination of a sample of student copybooks highlighted uniformly good practice in homework monitoring, annotation, and the use of guiding or affirming comment. This is good practice as it encourages students' progress, and provides the type of individual attention that junior-cycle students, in particular, require for a subject such as Business Studies. A common assessment policy exists in first year, especially for the end-of-year assessment. Linked to this, there is a culture of continuous assessment for all year groups. An examination of the teachers' journals highlighted very good practice in record keeping of assessment results, as well as student attendance and progress of implementation of the subject plan. It may be of value to examine the Assessment for Learning (AfL) project on www.ncca.ie, as the teachers review their homework and assessment approach.

Students are encouraged to take business subjects at their highest level in the State examinations. Such decisions are taken at the latest opportunity. This is good practice, as all of the business subjects' syllabuses have common content for both higher and ordinary level. Parents are involved in decision making for levels, especially where the wish of the student is at variance with the opinion of the teacher.

As a matter of routine practice, the business teachers monitor student outcomes in the State examinations and compare these to the national average outcomes for the year in question. This is commendable as the teachers use these as a reflection point for subject planning review.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Business Studies is a core subject for the first year of the junior cycle, and business subjects are well catered for at senior cycle.
- Students are well supported in decision making at key points in their education, and parents are encouraged to be actively involved in such decisions.
- Class-period provision for business subjects is satisfactory.
- The school has very well equipped information and communications technology (ICT) facilities, and encourages the integration of ICT in the teaching and learning of subjects.
- Business teachers are well supported in their professional development, and teacher-based classrooms have been used to good effect through the development of a thematic range of business-related resources.
- There are well-established links between the learning-support team and the business teachers, and business teachers were sensitive to the needs of all students, especially students with special educational needs and students, whose first language is not English.
- The business teachers have been actively engaged in subject planning and have a well-developed subject plan. Effective monitoring of the subject plan was evident in all lessons observed, as was flexibility of implementation to accommodate the needs of students.
- There was very good practice in classroom methodologies, management and atmosphere, in all lessons observed. Students displayed a high level of knowledge, understanding and ability to apply this to practical situations.
- The business teachers have agreed an approach to homework and assessment, in line with the whole-school policy.
- An examination of a sample of student copybooks and teachers' journals highlighted uniformly good practice in homework and assessment, in line with agreed policy.
- Students are encouraged to take business subjects at their highest level for the State examinations, and parents are involved in such decision making.
- The business teachers monitor student outcomes in the State examinations, and use these as a reflection point for subject planning review.

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

- The business teachers should review the TY business module with a view to integrating it with the double class-period per week for project activity.
- The business teachers should examine what factors are giving rise to no uptake of Accounting for the past three school years.
- The school should ensure that, given the logistics of timetabling, there is an even balance and spread of class periods for some of the business subjects across the school week.

Post-evaluation meetings were 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.