

Department of Education and Skills

**Subject Inspection of English
REPORT**

**Ashbourne Community School
Ashbourne, Co. Meath
Roll number: 91495T**

Date of inspection: 09 November 2010



**A N R O I N N | D E P A R T M E N T O F
O I D E A C H A I S | E D U C A T I O N
A G U S S C I L E A N N A | A N D S K I L L S**

REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN ENGLISH

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Ashbourne Community School. It presents the findings of an evaluation of the quality of teaching and learning in English 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 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

Ashbourne Community School offers a range of programmes to students. These include the Junior Certificate; the established Leaving Certificate, the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) and the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP). An optional Transition Year (TY) is also available in senior cycle. This is a very popular option and, at the time of this evaluation, three TY class groups had been formed. The school's current student enrolment is 1038, approximately half of whom are female.

In junior cycle, five lessons in English per week are timetabled for each of the three years. This is optimum provision. In senior cycle, provision is very generous. Students on the TY and LCA programmes are timetabled for four lessons in the subject weekly. The additional of a sixth lesson period for English on the established Leaving Certificate programme is particularly supportive of the work done by teachers to help students achieve to their potential in certificate examinations.

While class groups are usually mixed ability for English for each year in junior cycle, this arrangement is reviewed annually to ensure that the learning needs of all students can be met. From time to time, a small support class for English is formed in second year. This is facilitated by concurrent timetabling for English from the beginning of second year and the deployment of an additional English teacher in both second year and third year. Student progress through first year is carefully monitored and placement in the support class is informed by the teachers' knowledge of students and their performance in end of year assessments. This arrangement, and the flexibility it provides, is excellent practice as it allows students to study English at the level which best suits their ability in the subject. In senior cycle, separate class groups are formed for ordinary-level and higher-level courses. Again, concurrent timetabling facilitates students' choice of course.

Deployment of teachers is generally in line with their qualifications, skills, knowledge and interests. There are arrangements in place to support the induction of new teachers to the subject and more experienced members of the English department act as mentors. This speaks well of the collegial and professional approach of the English teaching team. Management encourages and facilitates continuing professional development (CPD) for teachers. In addition to whole-school in-service on a range of issues, including using information and communications technology (ICT) in the classroom and on assessment for learning, members of the department have attended, in their own time, modular courses relevant to English provided by the Second Level Support Service. In addition, some members of the department have achieved relevant post-graduate qualifications. The benefits of this CPD for students in the school were evident in classrooms visited during the evaluation.

Access to teaching and learning resources is very good in this school. DVDs, textbooks, worksheets and notes are available to all teachers of English in a resource press. In addition, a resource bank for English is under development on the school's internal network drive. The school makes funds available on request from the subject co-ordinator to enable the department to purchase resources as needed. ICT facilities are available in some of the classrooms visited and arrangements are made to swap rooms when these resources are needed. ICT is also available in the computer rooms, which are available on a booking system. Classrooms are assigned to teachers and in all those visited excellent use had been made of the facility to create a stimulating and supportive learning environment for students. There is a school library, which is also used as a classroom. Students have access to a range of good reading material and time is allocated in the school's junior cycle programme in English to reading for pleasure. This is very good practice. The department has established good links with the local library and students are encouraged to join. Teachers of English made very good use of all the resources provided to support teaching and learning in the lessons observed.

Students are provided with opportunities for a range of extracurricular activities in English. Visits to the theatre are organised by the teachers as are opportunities to participate in poetry competitions during the school's inter-cultural week. It is suggested that the English department should make use of the opportunities provided by concurrent timetabling in junior cycle to organise inter-class activities, such as debating and public speaking events, for example.

In summary, there is excellent support for the teaching and learning of English in Ashbourne Community School.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

The school facilitates meeting time for subject departments at least once a term. The English teachers maintain minutes of these meetings and these records show a strong developmental focus in discussions held since 2004. For example, subject planning has moved from an outline description of the content to be covered each year to a fuller description of the organisation, planning and delivery of the subject in the school. The subject folder provided evidence of a structured and collaborative approach to the teaching of English. The planning documentation available at the time of this evaluation was of a very high quality.

Particular strengths of the plan for English include: the identification of clear learning outcomes for each area of the syllabuses taught; the quality of the guidance given to individual teachers regarding the curriculum content to be covered in each year. This guidance is coupled with

sufficient flexibility to allow teachers select texts which suit the particular interests and needs of their class groups. There is a strong emphasis on developing students' oral skills in English, specifically in the TY and LCA plans. The following recommendation is made only to support the teachers' commitment to continuous development. The description of the TY course in English should be developed beyond the very general outline currently available. This can be done by including the specific schemes of work being delivered by the TY teachers each year. The benefits of establishing a specific developmental aim for each year group in junior cycle should be considered. For example, a focus on reading skills such as skimming and scanning in first year, or on note-making skills in second year, might be considered. Finally, time could be set aside at subject department meetings to share good practice within the team.

There is very good liaison between the English department and the learning support department in the school. This is facilitated by the fact that some of the teachers of English are also support teachers. The inclusion of notes on appropriate teaching strategies for use with students who have special educational needs (SEN) is very positive. The school has assigned responsibility for co-ordinating support for students in each year group to an anchor member of the SEN team for each year. In determining the needs for the support class in second year the English department, as is best practice, consulted with the relevant member of the support team. Additional support to students is also provided either through team teaching in class or through withdrawal for one-to-one or small group support.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Very good quality teaching was observed during this evaluation. Teachers had identified clear objectives for their lessons and they had prepared relevant and helpful resources which took into account the level of ability of their students. In most lessons, the learning intention was shared with students at the outset, providing them with a clear indicator of the teachers' expectations of their work in class. It is recommended that the lesson objective should be revisited at the close of lessons to determine students' learning.

Careful pre-planning of the lessons ensured that students were actively and purposefully engaged in learning across each of the four language domains, reading, writing, speaking and listening. The emphasis on the development of students' aural skills is particularly commendable. In three of the lessons observed, teachers used CDs to provide students with an opportunity to listen to the texts being studied. This approach was very effective in helping students appreciate the rhythm of a poetry text and tension in a drama text. It is suggested that more frequent use of recordings across all lessons would support reading and build students' listening skills.

A range of teaching strategies was used by the English teaching team, including whole-class work directed by teachers' questions, some pair work and individual student task work. In the majority of lessons observed, the strategies used were effective in engaging students' attention and interest and good quality learning resulted. Teacher instruction was generally clear and accurate and time was invested in ensuring that students understood the new vocabulary and concepts encountered. In one lesson, for example, excellent practice was seen. Students were pre-taught words before they encountered them in the novel they had just begun to read. They were also shown how to bookmark a text and how to use context to discern the probable meaning of words. As a result, a very relaxed atmosphere was created and the students in this ordinary-level class were confident reading the text aloud.

An examination of students' written work indicated that they had completed a satisfactory range of exercises in evaluation, critical commentary and critical analysis as well as personal writing assignments. The standards achieved in that work reflected both the relative abilities of students and their attitudes to the subject. In the majority of instances, students work was purposeful and focussed and demonstrated a good knowledge of the texts they had studied. The most able students wrote fluently and they had little difficulty establishing, supporting and maintaining an argument. Their work was marked by good use of critical literary vocabulary and a strong sense of personal voice. Students taking the ordinary-level courses also wrote well, though their pieces were generally shorter. In many of these copies, good attempts were made to develop responses to questions on studied texts. Students clearly articulated the relationships between key events and the development of themes and they used their texts to provide relevant supporting evidence for their opinions. They were less confident in tackling composing tasks, however, and it is suggested that an explicit focus on teaching story-building skills would support these students. In summary, students' learning was generally of a very good standard.

ASSESSMENT

The school's homework policy is interpreted in the subject department plan and a commitment is made there to using a range of modes of assessment. Students are assessed on completion of a unit of study and homework is regularly set. A homework club is available in the school for students who receive learning support. Homework assignments were purposeful and provided opportunities to reinforce learning achieved in class.

Student copies indicate that, in all but one of the class groups visited, they attempt the tasks set for them. In one class, it was evident that some students are not motivated to attempt or complete homework assignments. Where students in this group had done their work, it was of a good standard and good quality feedback was provided to them to help them improve. It is suggested that the full English department should collaborate to develop a policy regarding the setting of homework and its correction. Standards of presentation and organization of notes should be agreed and applied consistently across all year groups. It is further suggested that students should be more actively involved in developing the success criteria for specific homework tasks.

Assessment during lessons mainly took the form of oral questioning to check understanding and to allow students express opinions. Questioning was specific, relevant and matched to students' abilities and students' responses were always strongly affirmed. Summative assessments take place regularly for all year groups, often on completion of a topic or unit of work. Examinations are held twice annually and reports are sent to parents following these. It is recommended that, where appropriate, common elements should appear in examination papers for all year groups, as appropriate. This would allow for comparison of students' progress across a year group and can provide a clear basis for recommendations regarding the level at which a student should sit certificate examinations.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- There is excellent support for the teaching and learning of English in this school. Timetabled provision for the subject is optimum and deployment of teachers is in line with their qualifications, skills, knowledge and interests.
- Arrangements for student placement in class groups are sufficiently flexible to ensure that the learning needs of all students can be met.
- Access to shared teaching and learning resources is very good.
- There is a structured, collaborative, approach to the teaching of English and the documentation available at the time of this evaluation was of a very high quality, demonstrating a strong developmental focus in the department's planning.
- The careful pre-planning of lessons ensured that, in the lessons observed, students were actively and purposively engaged in learning.
- Teachers made very good use of a variety of strategies to support students and the level of student participation in the lessons observed was very good.
- Students' work accurately reflects their ability in the subject.
- Homework is set and assessed on a regular basis. Teachers provide clear guidance for students on the quality of their work and effort.

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

- The description of the TY course in English should be developed to include the specific schemes of work being delivered by the TY teachers each year.
- The English department should collaborate to develop a policy regarding the setting of homework and its correction.

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

Appendix

SCHOOL RESPONSE TO THE REPORT

Submitted by the Board of Management

Area 1: Observations on the content of the inspection report

The Board of Management of Ashbourne Community School welcomes the Inspection of English and is delighted with the particularly positive affirmations cited in the subsequent report such as:

1. The collegial and professional approach of the English teaching team.
2. The stimulating and supportive environment for students evident in classrooms.
3. The high quality of planning documentation in particular the sections identifying clear learning outcomes for each area of the syllabi taught.
4. The purposeful approach to planning and teaching and the very good standard of students' engagement and learning evident in the subject area.

Area 2: Follow-up actions planned or undertaken since the completion of the inspection activity to implement the findings and recommendations of the inspection

The Board equally welcomes the two recommendations contained in the report and acknowledges them as further extensions of the excellent practice which is evident in Ashbourne Community School.

- Currently the TY course is taught in modular form and detailed schemes of work are available for each module. Each scheme focuses on a different skill in English and as recommended by the Inspector these will now be included more explicitly in the general subject plan.
- As recommended in the report the English teaching team will extend its current policy regarding the setting of homework and its correction making it specific to the teaching of English.