

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

**Subject Inspection of English
REPORT**

**Abbey Vocational School
Donegal Town, County Donegal
Roll number: 71180F**

Date of inspection: 5 October 2011



**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

INFORMATION ON THE INSPECTION

Dates of inspection	4, 5 October 2011
Inspection activities undertaken <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Review of relevant documents• Discussion with principal and teachers• Interaction with students	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Observation of teaching and learning during eight class periods• Examination of students' work• Feedback to principal and teachers

MAIN FINDINGS

- In most lessons observed, teaching and learning of English was good; there was a very positive learning environment in almost all lessons.
- An appropriate range of resources, methods and activities was used to promote learning in a majority of lessons. In a minority only, traditional didactic approaches did not develop higher-order thinking, autonomous learning or creativity.
- There is a commendable emphasis on the development of language skills in many lessons but reading and writing are currently not receiving sufficient attention in the Transition Year (TY).
- Subject planning is good in many areas.
- Assessment practice was good in many lessons but there is scope for development in the quality of feedback to students in a minority.
- Whole-school support is generally good, resources are good and information and communications technology (ICT) resources are currently being developed.

MAIN RECOMMENDATIONS

- To cater for the diversity of learners, there should be more emphasis on differentiation practice, and a more creative range of learning activities and resources should be used.
 - The development of higher-order thinking skills, and a personal aesthetic response should be prioritised in all lessons.
 - The English department should target set for improved uptake of higher-level English.
 - The TY programme should be reviewed to ensure that students have continuity in the learning and practice of basic reading and writing skills.
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INTRODUCTION

Abbey Vocational School is a co-educational second level school in the Donegal Vocational Education Committee (VEC) scheme. English is provided in the Junior Certificate (JC), optional TY, Leaving Certificate (LC) and Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programmes. The school serves a diverse catchment area and currently has an enrolment of 723 students.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

- The quality of teaching and learning was good in most lessons. In some, learning intentions were explicitly conveyed to students; this good practice should be implemented in all lessons.
- Resources, methods and activities were appropriate in most lessons but in the best, active learning and creative use of resources engaged students and enhanced learning. There was effective use of the interactive whiteboard to enrich understanding and use of critical language in one lesson.
- In a minority of lessons, too much teacher input and a didactic approach did not promote creativity, initiative and higher-order thinking. Such practice should be reviewed and the broader syllabus aims and objectives should underpin all lessons.
- A good repertoire of analogies and links was used to clarify new learning. Good questioning strategies generated group discussion and elicited assessment information in the best lessons.
- Language skills, including vocabulary acquisition received appropriate attention in many lessons. In a junior cycle lesson, students demonstrated confidence and fluency in discussion.
- Commendably, the features of short-story writing were learned in a lesson. The integration of language and literature is commended in another. Students read their work aloud in one lesson, providing modelling opportunities. There is scope for fostering a process approach to writing and consideration should be given to students maintaining a portfolio of work in different genres.
- Reading and writing practice are in particular need of attention in the TY to ensure continuity with the JC and to bridge students' experience to the LC.
- There is greater need for differentiation upwards and downwards in many lessons. The use of writing frames should be more widespread for some students.
- In all lessons, students should be encouraged to express a personal aesthetic response.
- In almost all lessons, classroom management was effective; there was a very good rapport between teachers and students in all lessons.
- Classroom atmosphere was conducive to learning. Very good use was made of wall space to display stimulating materials and students' own work.
- Classroom-related assessment practices varied. Best practice focused on assessment for learning and oral and written feedback were formative. In a small minority, there was little evidence of writing practice and little teacher feedback in copybook samples examined. There should be consistency in all lessons.

- In most lessons, teachers monitored learning through movement around the classroom and through questioning. Such good practice should be emulated in all lessons.
- A recent first-year literacy initiative involving reading a class novel complemented by a cinema visit is particularly commended.
- Student attainment is good but some are overachieving at ordinary level and may need to be challenged to take higher-level English.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

- Whole-school support is good. Resources are good and plans to develop ICT infrastructure are a welcome development.
- Timetabling allocation for English is very good and concurrency facilitates change of levels. Commendably, students are taught in a mixed-ability setting in first and second year and in TY. Common approaches to syllabus delivery make setting for levels in third year possible.
- A good range of co-curricular and extracurricular activities provides opportunities for learning outside the classroom.
- There is regular summative assessment and a very good level of reporting to parents on students' progress.
- Planning for staff development is quite good: for example, the theme of differentiation was addressed in the past. It is suggested that the area be revisited. Staff development in the area of ICT should now be prioritised.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

- The quality of planning for English is good and the department is commended for the commitment demonstrated. Planning structures are effective and evidence suggests a collaborative ethos and a capacity for self-evaluation. It is positive that data on assessment outcomes in state examinations are now being analysed.
- Detailed yearly schemes marry syllabus requirements with those of the examinations and there is a positive focus on learning outcomes.
- There is a very good level of interaction between the learning-support department and individual teachers. The plan for English includes a section on catering for students with special educational needs. Specific strategies to cater for needs need to be integrated into individual lessons through effective differentiation practice.
- It is reported that there is regular review of the TY programme. However, currently, reading and writing are not receiving sufficient attention. The planned TY magazine could provide a very good opportunity for TY students to develop writing skills in an experiential way.
- An area for development is uptake of higher-level English and planning effort should set targets for improvement in this area. The department's good practice of analysing examination outcomes will serve it well in this context since it provides useful baseline data.

- Good use is made of the school library to promote reading and this is complemented by positive initiatives at class level. Current discussion around the development of a group reading project should now lead to action planning. There is a need for a more concerted drive in the senior cycle and specific policy and practice should be developed in TY in particular.
- Records of attendance are well maintained in all cases. Records of assessment are very good in some but is an area for development in others with little information being recorded that would help to track student progress.
- Individual teacher planning was very good in most cases.

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

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.