

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

**Subject Inspection of Music
REPORT**

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

Date of inspection: 5 February 2008

[Subject inspection report](#)
[Subject provision and whole school support](#)
[Planning and preparation](#)
[Teaching and learning](#)
[Assessment](#)
[Summary of main findings and recommendations](#)

REPORT ON THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN MUSIC

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Abbey Vocational School. It presents the findings of an evaluation of the quality of teaching and learning in Music and makes recommendations for the further development of the teaching of this subject 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

Abbey Vocational School currently caters for 789 male and female students. The music department is staffed by two teachers each of whom has a specialist qualification in Music. Music enjoys a very good profile in the school and is available to all year groups. First year students have the opportunity of sampling Music as a subject on two occasions; from September to October and from February to March. At the end of first year, students are presented with an open menu of subjects and option bands are formed around their choices. This system works well for Music and has contributed to the healthy uptake of this subject throughout junior cycle.

Transition year (TY) is an optional programme and Music is mandatory within this. All TY students study Music for the entire year. This provides TY students with a high level of contact with the subject and is

commended. For fifth year, students are also provided with an open menu from which to choose optional subjects. The level of uptake of Music for the Leaving Certificate is also very good. Commendably, in both junior and senior cycle, there is an even distribution of boys and girls choosing Music.

Timetable provision for Music is in line with syllabus guidelines with an appropriate spread of lessons throughout the week. A sufficient number of double periods have been allocated to all year groups to facilitate practical work and this is good.

There is no pre-determined budget for Music. Instead staff make direct requests to school management when resources are needed and this system works very well. Lessons are held in a dedicated music room. This room is well equipped and resources available include an upright piano, keyboards, portable stereo, one computer, guitars and percussion instruments. A sizeable storage room in conjunction with ample storage facilities in the music room ensures that resources and equipment can be stored safely. A vibrant learning atmosphere has been created; for example, there are posters, both professionally printed and handcrafted, in the room which include illustrations of components of Irish music such as performers, orchestral instruments and theoretical concepts. At the time of the evaluation, student project work was also on display. The use of project work in this way is highly recommended as it motivates and encourages students as well as develops their ability to work independently from the teacher.

One teacher is a member of the Post Primary Music Teachers' Association (PPMTA) and has attended summer courses regarding music technology in the past. Participation in the activities of a professional organisation has many advantages for teachers. Consideration might now be given to attending the annual conferences hosted by the PPMTA which provide valuable opportunities for networking and engaging in useful dialogue with fellow professionals.

In addition to the curricular aspects of the subject and examination preparation, a wide variety of extra-curricular and co-curricular activities is available for students. These include participation in the school orchestra, which comes together on occasions, the school choir, a bi-annual musical production, liturgical ceremonies, workshops, trips to concerts, competitions and instrumental lessons. The support of the Donegal Music Education Partnership is noted in the organisation and management of these instrumental lessons. This level of provision for the students is very good and the music department is commended in this regard.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

School development planning is ongoing and subject departments are well established. Formal time is allocated to all staff on three occasions per year for subject planning purposes. While meetings of the music department have taken place, minutes were not available during the evaluation. It is recommended that minutes from all formal planning meetings should be maintained and readily available so that they can inform future planning meetings. Co-ordination of the music department is undertaken by one teacher in a voluntary capacity.

A detailed music plan was presented containing documentation outlining how the department is run. Long-term curriculum planning containing schedules of the topics to be covered was also included. These schedules were relevant to the syllabus and to the requirements of the certificate examinations. It is recommended that planning should also include the development of individual schemes of work for class groups outlining subject content for the year, methodologies, learning outcomes, assessment criteria and specific detail on how music technology is to be integrated into music lessons. Opportunities to collaborate and share best practice should now be fully optimised as part of this planning process.

A TY plan was also included in the overall department plan. This plan outlined varied topics aimed to foster active and participatory learning for the students. Commendably, time has been allocated for student engagement with project work. Further support can now be obtained regarding the writing of the TY plan from the Second Level Support Service available at www.slss.ie.

The extent and quality of planning for the individual lessons observed varied. Best practice was observed when the content was varied, when lessons included the synthesis of the three disciplines of

Music—performing, listening and composing—and when the pacing was appropriate to the learners' levels of achievement and motivation. It is recommended that attention should focus on ensuring that these occur in all lessons. ICT was widely used and integrated effectively into lessons. This was a particular strength of the planning observed. A noteworthy feature of planning was the development of composing exercises for senior cycle students which were based on well known songs such as *Somewhere over the Rainbow*.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Three lessons were visited during the course of the evaluation: two in junior cycle and one in senior cycle. In all lessons, there was a supportive and affirming learning environment. In addition to the whiteboard, stereo, piano, handouts and ICT, teaching and learning was supported by a range of teaching methodologies including pair and group work activities, teacher talk and teacher demonstration. In most lessons, students were challenged and motivated by all activities and clearly engaged with the content of lessons. Worksheets, which were designed to build students' knowledge progressively, were very effective. Best practice was observed when the content and objective of these worksheets were clearly explained to the students. Consequently, students were able to tackle the exercises more readily. This strategy is recommended particularly where students are engaging with a topic for the first time.

Examples of sound music methodological practice were observed in some classes visited. Teaching was of high quality when the teacher succeeded in engaging and motivating the wide range of abilities of the students through well-structured and varied activities. For example, in one lesson, the topic at hand was the prescribed work *Piano Concerto No.23 in A Major* by Mozart. Students were encouraged to develop their knowledge of this work independently from the teacher, primarily through effective and purposeful pair work. Throughout the exercise, students were closely monitored by the teacher who probed by questioning and encouraged students to deepen their analytical responses. The teacher adeptly moved the lesson into composing where students engaged with a melody, also by Mozart. This strategy was very good as it allowed students to relate to this composer within two different disciplines. This is commended. The object of this composing class was to teach students the ways in which a melody can be varied and this was successfully achieved through the participation of all students in music-making activities. Good learning was observed as a result.

In a minority of cases, low-level disruption occurred resulting in incessant talk unrelated to the content of the lesson. This was generally due to the inappropriate placement of students for group work activities and the excessive amount of time allocated to a single task. It is recommended that collaboration regarding the effective management of group work strategies be initiated between both members of the music department so that the learning needs of all students are catered for.

Practical activities were effectively integrated into most lessons. Instrumental activities allowed students to work with material that was challenging and developmental. Students were systematically led through pieces; for example, in one lesson observed students clapped the rhythm before performing the notes and this was effective. Opportunities to integrate group work in practical activities could be optimised which would ensure that all students could be monitored more easily.

ASSESSMENT

In addition to regular assessments at Christmas and summer and the mock certificate examinations for Junior and Leaving Certificate students in the spring, formative assessment takes place in a variety of ways. Homework, which includes written, aural and practical work, is given on a regular basis. Other examples include questioning in class, completion of worksheets and practical assessments. Practical elements are continually assessed and students perform in class regularly. Currently, first, second and fifth year students do not experience practical assessments under examination conditions. Such methods would allow for more careful monitoring of students' progress, provide sound guidelines to the students for performance in the certificate examinations and further help all students achieve their maximum potential in Music. This is recommended.

In the lessons observed, students were generally confident and capable, and performed overall to a good standard. Student folders and manuscripts showed evidence of good organisation. In most cases, there was evidence that students' work had been frequently monitored. The provision of comments with suggestions for improvement was evident in some cases. This strategy, if used widely, would further support students and its extended usage is recommended. In addition to reports issued after formal examinations at Christmas and summer, regular parent-teacher meetings take place for all class groups. These meetings provide a forum for parents to discuss any concerns or difficulties students may be having.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Music enjoys a very good profile in Abbey Vocational School and is available to all year groups as an optional subject.
- The uptake throughout both junior and senior cycle is very good.
- A wide variety of extra-curricular activities is available to all students.
- A detailed music plan was presented.
- In all lessons, there was a supportive and affirming learning environment.
- Practical activities were effectively integrated into lessons.

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

- Minutes of all formal planning meetings should be maintained and readily available.
- Planning documentation should include individual schemes of work outlining content for the year, methodologies, learning outcomes, assessment criteria and the enhanced integration of music technology into music lessons.
- Support should be obtained regarding the writing of the TY plan.
- Collaboration regarding the effective management of group work strategies should be initiated between both members of the music department.

Post-evaluation meetings were held with the teachers of Music and with the principal at the conclusion of the evaluation when the draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation were presented and discussed.