

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

**Subject Inspection of Home Economics
REPORT**

**St Vincent's Secondary School
Dundalk, County Louth
Roll number: 63900R**

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**AN ROINN | DEPARTMENT
OIDEACHAIS | OF EDUCATION
AGUS SCILEANNA | A N D S K I L L S**

REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN HOME ECONOMICS

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in St Vincent's Secondary School, conducted as part of a whole-school evaluation. It presents the findings of an evaluation of the quality of teaching and learning in Home Economics 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. Following the evaluation visit, the inspector provided oral feedback on the outcomes of the evaluation to the principal and the home economics teachers.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

Home Economics enjoys a high profile in St Vincent's Secondary School. The very good uptake of Home Economics for the Junior and Leaving Certificate programmes is indicative of the vibrant role that the subject plays in the school's curriculum. It is praiseworthy that students taking the Transition Year (TY) programme have the opportunity to study Home Economics. This can help to inform Leaving Certificate subject choice. Hotel, Catering and Tourism (HCT) is included as a vocational specialism within the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme.

A banding system, that includes a number of mixed-ability classes within each band, operates in the school. First-year students are placed into one of two class bands based on the results of the in-coming assessment tests and discussions with the primary schools. Students are then allocated to a class group within a band in alphabetical order. Revised arrangements in recent years now ensure that students in both bands have very good access to Home Economics. This has had a very positive impact on the uptake of the subject.

A subject sampling programme operates in first year. All first-year students study twelve core subjects. In addition, five optional subjects—Home Economics, Art, Music, German and Spanish—are offered. At pre-entry stage students choose to study three of these subjects for all of first year. At the end of first year, students in the top band drop two of their optional subjects. Students in the second band have the option of dropping Science and retaining two optional subjects. The benefits of this sampling programme in facilitating informed subject choices is acknowledged and commended. However, the length of the programme merits review for a number of reasons. One is that first-year students study a very large number of subjects. Another is that this arrangement impacts negatively on the amount of class time available to optional subjects. At present first-year students have only one double home economics lesson each week. This presents challenges in facilitating effective continuity in teaching and learning. Best practice in the timetabling of Junior Certificate Home Economics is where students have the equivalent of four single lessons per week in each of the three years. Therefore, it is recommended that

consideration be given to the provision of a shorter sampling programme that encompasses all of the optional subjects for just part of first year.

Senior cycle students, and their parents, are supported in relation to subject choice as part of the school's guidance programme. It is very good that the option bands in fifth year are generated from students' preferences and that every effort is made to accommodate students in their subject selection.

Timetabled provision for Home Economics, with the exception of first year, is in line with syllabus guidelines. In most cases there is a good spread of lessons across the week. The arrangement of class time into single and double periods that is evident in second, third and sixth year is particularly good in facilitating effective continuity in teaching and learning.

Good practice is evident in the deployment of specialist staff to Home Economics. It is particularly praiseworthy that teachers rotate between programmes. This can provide opportunities to build capacity and share expertise within the team. The home economics team has experienced considerable change in recent years partly due to a number of staff retirements. At the time of the evaluation two of the three teachers had joined the staff at the start of the academic year to cover for two fulltime teachers who are currently on leave. Very good procedures are in place at whole-school and subject-department level to induct new staff and support smooth transitions.

Management is very supportive of staff members' continuing professional development (CPD) and a very good level of past engagement with CPD is evident. To support current staff members' needs, all new staff should access the induction programme for home economics teachers provided through the local education centre network.

The home economics team is commended for the contribution members make to many extracurricular and co-curricular activities in the school. The department plays an active role in school activities such as healthy living week and open evenings. Students' learning is extended beyond the classroom through a range of planned activities such as participating in competitions and the use of guest presenters.

Very good specialist facilities are available for Home Economics. This includes two kitchens and a textiles room. The two kitchens have recently been re-furbished to a high standard. The work of the home economics team in maintaining and organising such high-quality facilities is praiseworthy. The stock lists being compiled for each room will prove very useful in facilitating an annual stock take. Senior management is very supportive of requests made for additional equipment. There is a good range of dedicated information and communications technology (ICT) to support the teaching and learning of Home Economics. Two of the specialist rooms have ceiling-mounted data projectors while the department has its own networked computer and printer. The home economics team, as part of their systematic resource planning, should continue to plan for the further integration of ICT into teaching and learning.

High priority is given to health and safety in Home Economics. The subject team makes very good use of subject-specific checklists to inform a regular review of health and safety in each specialist room. Very good practice was noted in the design of the health and safety notices in both kitchens where key points are visually explained. To build on these good practices it is recommended that a servicing schedule for key pieces of specialist equipment be documented as part of the health and safety procedures. A number of general safety notices were displayed in the

textiles room. To build on this good practice, specific safety notices should be clearly displayed at each area where sewing machines and irons are used.

The importance of differentiating for students with special educational needs is recognised and some very good whole-school practice is evident. To provide additional support management has assigned two home economics teachers to team teach one LCA class. These lessons are carefully planned to support the specific learning needs of the group. A good level of collaboration exists between the home economics and the learning-support departments with established referral systems in place. It is particularly noteworthy that the school provides resources during the in-house examinations that correspond to the reasonable accommodation that candidates may expect in the certificate examinations. This is very beneficial in helping students acquire the necessary skills, such as the use of a tape-recorder, as they prepare for their examinations.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

Subject department planning is well established and is facilitated by management as part of the calendar of staff meetings. An agenda is prepared and minutes are recorded to facilitate effective continuity between meetings. There is good communication between the home economics team and senior management. This valuable practice can foster a cohesive approach for the long-term development and support of Home Economics in the school. The position of subject co-ordinator, which is voluntary, rotates among the team. This arrangement is good as it builds leadership capacity within the team. Co-ordinator duties, which have been agreed with senior management, include a role in co-ordinating an approach to subject delivery. To this end it was noted that the co-ordinator would like to instigate small-scale projects that explore the benefits of particular teaching strategies in Home Economics. This could be helpful in extending the current range of strategies used and provide a forum to share effective practice.

A professional and systematic approach to subject planning is evident in the operation of the department. Very good progress has been made in the development of a subject plan. A mission statement for Home Economics has been developed that is clearly aligned to the values and ethos espoused in the school's mission statement. From reviewing documentation it is clear that a culture of self-evaluation exists within the department. This can ensure that an informed and proactive approach is taken to the continued development of Home Economics. It was noted positively that TY students complete a formal review on completion of the home economics module. This has proved an exceptionally good method of informing ongoing programme planning. Key policies in areas such as assessment, classroom routines, health and safety and teaching strategies have been developed. It is recommended that planning meetings routinely focus on evaluating the implementation of these policies. This would ensure that policies remain effective and that there is consistent practice across the department.

Very good progress has been made in the development of detailed programmes of work. Clear learning outcomes for each topic are set out. This good practice can support planning for differentiation. At the next review stage, the balance of higher-order and lower-order learning outcomes listed for each topic could be reviewed. Due cognisance should also be taken of the need to integrate topics and consequently learning outcomes from within and across core areas of each syllabus.

The next phase of planning should focus on discussing the strategies used to support the delivery of the content outlined, as well as the formative assessment modes used to monitor students'

progress. At present each programme plan includes a list of mostly generic resources and assessment modes. Therefore, it is recommended that all teachers use the programme plans as working documents. Specific resources, teaching strategies and formative assessment modes that proved particularly effective should be noted. This information should be shared at subject meetings and used to inform the further development of each programme plan.

As all home economics classes are mixed ability the home economics department recognises the need to plan teaching strategies accordingly. It is very good that a policy on supporting high achievers in Home Economics is being developed. The learning-support department has provided a useful set of guidelines to support subject departments in adapting learning strategies to meet specific needs. It is recommended that this information be used by the home economics team to inform on-going planning for lessons. To optimise inclusive practice each class teacher should also be aware of key points of information outlined in a student's individual education plan or language support programme. This would facilitate collaborative reviews of individual students' learning. In supporting on-going planning for differentiation two resources developed by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) could prove useful. These are *Exceptionally Able Students Draft Guidelines for Teachers* and the *Guidelines for Teachers of Students with General Learning Disabilities* which includes a CD Rom of useful material. These resources can be accessed from the website of the NCCA (www.ncca.ie).

There is good planning for some of the practical coursework components in Home Economics. For instance, in the completion of first-year core textiles good strategies are used to foster learner autonomy and creativity. To enhance practice, it is recommended that further opportunities to integrate the additional stages of the design brief process in the areas of food and textiles studies be incorporated into junior cycle programme. This would enable students to develop essential knowledge and skills over time, in the areas of task investigation, problem solving, planning and evaluation. In planning for the Leaving Certificate food studies practical coursework, particular attention should be paid to the sequence for the completion of the coursework assignments. Assignments should be planned in a manner that supports an incremental approach to the acquisition of knowledge and skills and optimises opportunities to integrate relevant theoretical knowledge with each coursework assignment.

A very good range of additional resources is available to support learning. It is noteworthy that a resource catalogue is being compiled. This good practice helps to identify resource gaps and plan accordingly. There is a commendable willingness by each teacher to share materials via the electronic resource folder. In the context of future resource development, it is important to be mindful of the need to plan resources such as handouts and worksheets in a manner that supports differentiation and accommodates variations in students' learning styles.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Good quality teaching and learning was evident during the evaluation. All lessons had a clear focus and were in line with the common programme plan. The practice of sharing the learning intentions of a lesson was noted as routine practice across the department. This strategy proved effective in setting the scene for each lesson and assisting in the development of a logical lesson structure. In one lesson observed the teacher, after listing some of the learning intentions on the board, asked the students to suggest what other information they expected to learn in the lesson. This proved highly effective in engaging students in the lesson content and creating a sense of shared ownership of the lesson material. Best practice in the formative-assessment potential of

this strategy was evident in those lessons where the learning intentions were re-visited and students were provided with opportunities to state what they had learned. In some of the lessons observed there was scope to refine the number and pitch of the planned learning intentions. The potential of presenting information in a manner that highlighted links with other relevant topics could also have been optimised. Therefore it is recommended that teachers, in planning for their lessons, should identify clearly a set of differentiated learning outcomes which can be achieved by students during a particular lesson.

In some lessons observed very good efforts were made to link the new material with students' own experiences or build on prior learning. Teachers displayed good levels of subject knowledge and explanations were clear. However it is important that care is taken to ensure that the level of teacher explanation given is pitched in accordance with the relevant syllabus guidelines. Best practice in supporting learning was evident in lessons where due attention was paid to ensuring that students had an understanding of the key terminology associated with the topic being taught. On many occasions students' interest was stimulated and learning reinforced by the effective use of a variety of resources such as posters, laminated quiz cards, videos and handouts. Optimal learning occurred in instances where the resources used were particularly well designed to appeal to the different learning styles that were present in the classes.

There was some good use of methodologies that supported the active engagement of students. In one lesson very good use was made of a video clip to reinforce key points of information. Prior to watching the video students were provided with a worksheet that prompted them to record key points of information. Observation of students' responses during the plenary sessions indicated that meaningful learning had occurred. In lessons where Powerpoint presentations were used, very good use was made of graphics to assist understanding. Some slides were cleverly designed to check understanding and apply the information. This strategy encouraged students to remain actively engaged with the presentation and to reflect on their learning. It was noted positively that students were provided with a copy of the slides to enable them to note additional points of information. This is very good practice. In one lesson there was scope to improve the effectiveness of the use of the textbook and text-based material to support learning. Therefore it is recommended that the home economics team gives some consideration to strategies that promote the more effective use of class text books in lessons.

In the practical lessons observed there was some very good on-going integration of theory and practice. Students demonstrated a commendable ability to work on their own and in pairs throughout each practical lesson observed. It is very good that the food studies lessons observed focused on the completion of an assignment rather than solely on the preparation, cooking and serving of a dish. In one practical lesson observed effective use was made of spot demonstrations to facilitate a stepped approach to the task. However, on other occasions there was scope for using spot demonstrations to illustrate key stages of the practical task in hand so that students could model best practice and refine their manipulative and procedural skills. It is recommended that spot demonstrations be routinely used in all practical lessons. Student responsibility and reflective practice was fostered in the practical lessons observed through the use of student responsibility cards and various evaluation templates. This exceptionally good practice could be shared among team members and integrated as an agreed strategy into the common programme plans.

Classroom management was very good in all of the lessons observed. The atmosphere in all classrooms was pleasant and conducive to learning. There was a very good rapport evident between students and teachers with a high level of mutual respect and co-operation apparent.

Students enjoy Home Economics and demonstrate a sense of pride in their work. Observation of classroom activities and interaction with students indicated that, in many instances, they had a very good level of knowledge and understanding of the topics being studied and some very good levels of practical skills were evident. Observation of students' notebooks indicated good progress. It was noted that students routinely compile summary notes from textbooks to support learning. Over time consideration could be given to devising strategies that will support this revision. The use of flash cards, graphic organisers and guided mind maps could be considered as a means of highlighting the integration between topics, and reinforce learning.

ASSESSMENT

Students are encouraged to aim for high academic standards and to take the subject at the highest possible level in the certificate examinations. Teachers maintain good records of students' progress and parents are provided with feedback on a very regular basis. It is good that the home economics team analyses student outcomes in the Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate examinations. Positive trends and good practice identified as a result of this reflection should be used to inform planning and extend good practice as appropriate.

Some very good formative assessment practice was evident. Questioning was used as an integral component of all lessons. Best practice was evident in instances where there was a good balance of open and direct questioning to assess individual levels of student learning.

While there is an agreed homework policy there is some variation in the implementation of the procedures outlined. Observation of student work indicated some exemplary practice in the monitoring of some students' work, where student effort was affirmed and constructive feedback given. The reflective practice fostered and formative teacher feedback given in the case of TY students and some LCA students is particularly praiseworthy. This is a key strategy that can support all learning. It is recommended therefore that this good practice be extended to all classes. As all homework assigned should be carefully monitored, the home economics team needs to review how best to balance the amount of homework assigned with the provision of constructive feedback to support individual students. There is also some scope to review the range of homework activities assigned to each class group to ensure that the range of homework completed supports all of the assessment objectives of home economics syllabuses.

Some very good summative assessment practice is evident in the organisation of the in-class and in-house examinations. Common assessments are set where feasible. Where appropriate, students are awarded an aggregated mark for a written examination and an assessment of the relevant coursework components. As these procedures assess all components of the syllabuses and support the relevant assessment objectives, they are a good indicator of students' performance in the subject. To support this work it is recommended that the pitch of the in-house examinations used first and second year be reviewed. As all students at this stage are still aiming for higher level, the in-house papers should include a range of question styles typical of the Junior Certificate higher level paper.

An interesting range of coursework is completed as part of TY Home Economics. To optimise learning it is recommended that assessment criteria be devised for the project work undertaken. These criteria should inform the student feedback provided. The criteria should be linked to the intended learning outcomes and could be shared with students from the outset.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Home Economics enjoys a high profile in St Vincent's Secondary School.
- Very good specialist facilities are available for Home Economics. The subject team makes very good use of subject-specific checklists to inform a regular review of health and safety in each specialist room.
- A very professional and systematic approach to subject planning is evident in the operation of the department.
- A culture of self-evaluation exists within the department.
- Good quality teaching and learning was evident during the lessons observed. On many occasions student interest was stimulated and learning reinforced by the effective use of a variety of resources such as posters, laminated quiz cards, videos and handouts.
- Classroom management was very good in all of the lessons observed.
- Students enjoy Home Economics and demonstrate a sense of pride in their work.
- Students are encouraged to aim for high academic standards and to take the subject at the highest possible level in the certificate examinations.
- Some very good formative and summative assessment practices were evident.

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

- A servicing schedule for key pieces of specialist equipment should be documented as part of the health and safety procedures for Home Economics.
- Planning meetings should routinely focus on sharing effective practice in programme delivery to support differentiation. The implementation of the subject-specific policies should also be routinely discussed to ensure that procedures remain effective and promote reflective practice.
- A set of clearly differentiated learning outcomes should be devised for all lessons to support planning for additional resources and teaching strategies to be used.
- The pitch of the written in-house examinations used in first and second year should be reviewed.

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