

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

**Subject Inspection of Geography  
REPORT**

**Portumna Community School  
Portumna, County Galway  
Roll number: 914130**

**Date of inspection: 22 April 2009**

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**REPORT ON THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN GEOGRAPHY**

**SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT**

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Portumna Community School. It presents the findings of an evaluation of the quality of teaching and learning in Geography 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 of the school was given an opportunity to comment on the findings and recommendations of the report; the board chose to accept the report without response.

**SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT**

In Portumna Community School Geography as a subject is in a strong position. It forms part of the core curriculum for junior cycle. Geography is also included within the Transition Year (TY) programme and is allocated two teaching periods per week for the entire school year. At Leaving Certificate level Geography is an optional subject. The open-choice system offered to students for selection of subjects is commended. Uptake of Geography at this level reflects the national norm. In junior cycle Geography is allocated three class periods per week in second year and third year. In first year two class periods per week are assigned to the subject. It is recommended that this time provision be increased to three class periods per week in view of the breadth of the junior-cycle Geography syllabus. At senior cycle time allocation is in line with syllabus recommendations and includes an appropriate mix of single and double class periods. In the majority of cases lessons are well spread throughout the week. Within the constraints of the timetable this provision should be extended to all year groups to ensure regular contact between students, teachers and the material covered. Class organisation at all levels is in mixed ability groupings.

Senior management supports the teaching and learning of Geography. The geography teachers have access to a range of subject specific resources and audio-visual equipment. In line with good practice these resources are listed in the subject plan. It was reported that the geography department would benefit from some updated visual resource materials and a large map of India. The acquisition of these should form the focus of future resource planning within the department. The school has a dedicated geography room which is well equipped, has a ceiling mounted data projector and provides for a stimulating geographical learning environment. Two of the three geography teachers have base classrooms which has facilitated the development of print-rich classrooms. It is recommended that the third geography teacher be facilitated to teach the subject in a room that is equipped with large maps of Ireland, Europe and the world. These provisions are necessary for the teaching of locational Geography which underpins all areas of the syllabuses.

The school has good information and communication technologies (ICT) facilities which include the availability of wireless broadband throughout most of the plant, two computer rooms and a number of data projectors. Senior management is committed to the further expansion of the school's ICT facilities to support the increased integration of ICT as a valuable teaching and learning resource. Plans are in place for the installation of ceiling mounted data projectors in a number of classrooms in the next academic year. This planned provision is commended. The geography teachers are commended for the use of ICT which provides students with visual and enriching learning opportunities in the subject. In this regard the use of web-based geographical resources including Scoilnet maps is encouraged at junior cycle.

The school management is supportive of the continuing professional development of its teachers and has facilitated their attendance at in-service training provided by the Geography Support Service. It is recommended that the geography teachers affiliate themselves to the Galway Geography Teachers' Association as a further means of keeping informed of developments in the subject. Attendance at Association meetings could be rotated among the teachers and the information obtained subsequently shared at department level.

**PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

Subject planning for Geography is well established and supported by the provision of formal meetings times and the appointment of a co-ordinator for the subject. It is recommended that an agreed rota for the position of co-ordination be put in place so that all members of the geography teaching team can experience a leadership role in the subject. Records of formal meetings are kept and these were available during the evaluation. This is good practice as it supports continuity in planning.

A copy of the subject plan was viewed during the evaluation. Long term curricular plans for each year group are contained in the subject plan. In addition the geography teachers have developed short-term schemes of work which include a more detailed breakdown of content to be covered within shorter timeframes, resource materials and methodologies to support the teaching of the syllabuses units and the assessment modes employed to evaluate students' knowledge and progress. The expected learning outcomes are also integrated into these schemes of work. The teachers are highly commended for this level of planning which is in line with best practice.

In first year the planned teaching programme has a marked concentration on the teaching of physical Geography. It is recommended that this provision be reviewed and that some less technical topics also be included in the programme. The introduction of map and photograph skills, initially using large scale 1:0000 maps and aerial photographs of the local area are encouraged at an early stage in first year. This provision will expose students to a practical and familiar encounter with the subject. These skills can be subsequently developed in association with the teaching of other areas of the syllabus. It is recommended that the first-year long-term curricular plan be amended to reflect the course provision detailed in the short-term scheme of work for this year group.

A written plan for Geography within the TY programme was made available. The topics studied aim to expand students' knowledge of regional Geography and environmental issues. The programme also incorporates elements of field work. It is recommended that this latter provision be extended to enable students to develop geographical skills which will prepare them for undertaking the geographical investigation at Leaving Certificate. To this end students should prepare a report on the fieldwork activity undertaken using a broadly similar format to that of the Leaving Certificate geographical investigation report. It is good to note that the use of ICT and Scoilnet maps is integrated into the teaching and learning of geography in TY. This provision is commended.

**TEACHING AND LEARNING**

Very good quality teaching was in evidence during the course of the evaluation. The management of lessons was clearly informed by careful planning. Lessons were well structured, coherent and the planned learning objectives were clearly communicated to students at the outset. Teachers had pre-prepared a range of resources including worksheets, handouts and visual stimuli which supported students understanding of the lesson material.

In the lessons observed a variety of methodologies was employed to impart lesson content. Targeted questioning strategies were well combined with teacher-led instruction to stimulate interest in the topics, to enhance the participation of all students and to gauge their knowledge. In some lessons the provision of worksheets, pair tasks or short exercises provided an opportunity for students to reinforce and apply their learning. The inclusion of such practical tasks is commended and encouraged in all lessons. Good links were established with students' prior learning, their direct experience and topical material to support students learning.

In some lessons there was very good use of ICT to present visual stimuli including satellite images and maps of India, coastal features and animations of crustal plate movement and the rock cycle. These resources impacted positively on students learning and added good variety to the lessons. The use of such visual stimuli is encouraged in all lessons.

In some lessons PowerPoint presentations were used to present information and students were required to record this in their copybooks. To maximise the value of such notes as a useful revision aid for students, it is recommended that the material presented be confined to key points. The use of mind maps or other visuals is encouraged in this regard. As the textbook is a valuable learning resource it is recommended that key sentences and learning points are underlined to direct students' attention to the most important elements.

In some lessons there was an emphasis on examination preparation through topic revision and provision of differentiated homework based on examination questions. In one case a comprehensive handout had been prepared for students which provided a very good focus for revision of short questions. This provision is commended. In another lesson students written work on a sample examination question had been corrected using the Leaving Certificate marking scheme. This is good practice. The increased use of such marking schemes by all teachers is recommended for the correction of Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate students' written work.

Teachers are informed of students with additional educational needs and the nature of their learning difficulties. There was evidence of teachers catering for the range of abilities in their classrooms through differentiation by language, questions and homework. It was reported that some students on occasion receive additional support in Geography from the resource teacher prior to assessments or State examinations. Given the mixed-ability nature of geography classes it is recommended that key word lists be displayed on topics as they are being taught. These visuals will further support students in using subject-specific terminology.

There was evidence of good student engagement in the lessons observed. Students showed good levels of knowledge and understanding of the topics under study relative to their abilities.

Classroom management was uniformly good. There was very good rapport among students and teachers. This relationship created a positive learning environment. The students were polite and courteous and participated with interest in all classroom activities.

**ASSESSMENT**

Standard arrangements are in place for formal assessment of students. Common assessments are administered to first year students and the geography department is working towards extending this provision to other class groups. Parents and guardians are kept appropriately informed of students' progress through the issuing of school reports following formal assessments and annual parent teacher meetings for each year group. The school journal is also used as a means of communication with parents.

Informal assessment of students' knowledge and understanding was an integral part of all lessons. An examination of copybooks indicated that students' work is being regularly monitored by teachers and provided with developmental comments to assist them in improving the quality of their work. In line with good practice homework is regularly given to students to consolidate their learning. It is recommended that students be required to put a mark on their homework as whole class correction of this work is taking place. This will serve as a useful means of student self-assessment and encourage individual students to take more responsibility for their learning.

In Portumna Community College high expectations are set for learning. Written work completed in students' copybooks was neat and well presented and a significant number of students take higher-level papers in the State examinations. This is commended.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Geography is included within the Transition Year (TY) programme.
- At senior cycle uptake of Geography reflects the national norm.
- The school has a dedicated geography room.
- The use of information and communication technologies (ICT) in the teaching and learning of Geography will be further facilitated by the expansion of the school's ICT facilities.
- Senior management is supportive of teachers continuing professional development.
- Subject department planning for Geography is in line with best practice.
- Individual planning for lessons was of a good standard.
- Very good quality teaching was in evidence during the course of the evaluation.
- High expectations are set for learning.
- Classroom management was uniformly good.
- A positive learning environment was evident in all lessons.
- There is ongoing formal and informal assessment of students' progress.
- Parents are kept well informed of students' progress.

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

- In view of the breadth of the junior-cycle Geography syllabus it is recommended that three class periods per week be allocated to first-year Geography.
- Classrooms where Geography is taught should be equipped with large maps of Ireland, Europe and the world.
- The geography teaching programme for first-year students should be reviewed.
- The increased use of State examination marking schemes for the correction of Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate written work is recommended.

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