

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

**Subject Inspection of Religious Education
in the Junior Cycle
REPORT**

**Virginia College
Virginia, County Cavan
Roll number: 70390L**

Date of inspection: 12 October 2010



AN ROINN OIDEACHAIS AGUS SCILEANNA | DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND SKILLS

REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Virginia College. It presents the findings of an evaluation of the quality of teaching and learning in Religious Education for junior-cycle classes 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, the deputy principal and the 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

Virginia College currently has an enrolment of 660 students. A broad range of programmes is offered in the school. These include the Junior Certificate, the Transition Year (TY) programme, the Leaving Certificate Applied programme (LCA), the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) and the established Leaving Certificate. The religious education (RE) syllabus prepared by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) is provided to all junior-cycle students in the school. The course is inclusive of students from all faith backgrounds and from none and is one of the core subjects in the junior-cycle programme in Virginia College. This RE course prepares students for Junior Certificate examinations in the subject.

Mixed-ability class groups for RE are formed in all years of the junior cycle. The allocation of three class periods per week in each of the three years is in keeping with syllabus recommendations. Lessons are generally distributed well across students' timetables. However, it was noted that deployment of teachers to classes is, in the case of three class groups, determined by timetabling constraints rather than good practice. Each week these class groups are taught two lessons in RE by one teacher and one lesson by a second teacher. As a result, a regrettable fragmentation of syllabus delivery occurs and the integration of ideas and concepts across sections of the course is compromised. In planning the timetable, care should be taken to address this.

Due to retirements and changes in personnel over the last number of years, there is no specialist RE teacher currently on the permanent staff of the school. The current RE team comprises three teachers on temporary contracts. All of these teachers are specialist RE teachers and are well qualified to teach this subject. Notwithstanding the very good teaching evident during this evaluation, given the place of RE as a core subject on the school's junior-cycle curriculum, it is

recommended that professional competence to teach this subject should be secured on a permanent basis in the school. This should be considered by County Cavan Vocational Education Committee (VEC) in the context of planning for teacher appointments.

Resourcing for the subject is good. Development of school facilities is on-going and a dedicated religious education room is planned for in the near future. This is very positive. In the meantime, a classroom has been allocated specifically for the use of one of the RE teachers and this allows for the storage of the teaching and learning resource materials available in the department. Some work has been done to create a supportive learning environment through the display of posters and students' own work. It is recommended that the three RE teachers collaborate to ensure that all RE class groups have access to this room on a weekly basis. They should also work to create a strong RE identity in this space, so that it facilitates the variety of methodologies and approaches appropriate to teaching and learning in the subject.

There is very good access to audio-visual equipment and information and communications technology (ICT) for teachers of RE. Most classrooms have a fixed data projector and teachers may also book one of the school's ICT rooms for whole-class work. It was reported that it will benefit from participation in a County Cavan Vocational Education Committee (VEC) initiative which is establishing a 'teacher drive' for use by teachers in all its schools. This initiative will allow teachers to share resources across schools in the scheme.

Management is supportive of continuing professional development (CPD) and the RE teachers are facilitated to attend workshops on subject-related themes organised by the RE support service.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

Subject department planning is very-well established in Virginia College. Management has supported this through the allocation of time for collaborative work each term. Members of the RE department conduct their meetings to agreed agenda and minutes are recorded. The RE teachers take turns each year to act as subject co-ordinator. This good practice ensures that the department benefits from the interests and expertise of all members. The RE teachers also meet frequently, though informally, to offer mutual support and they reported a strong commitment to collegiality.

Subject department documentation presented during the evaluation indicated a good standard of planning for RE. Virginia College is a non-denominational school and the RE plan is prefaced by a clear statement of the role the subject plays in supporting that ethos. This provides very good direction for the work of the department. Reference to RE in both the critical incident response policy and the Relationships and Sexuality (RSE) policy situates the subject as a key element in the school's care structures. It is recommended that the RE team agree a department aim which directly links teaching and learning in RE with the aspirations expressed in the school's mission statement.

A broad curriculum plan for RE has been developed. This outlines a linear approach to teaching the subject which allows for a systematic presentation of the content of the programme as the syllabus presents it. The curriculum plan indicates the syllabus sections to be taught by the teacher in each year of the programme. It reproduces the syllabus aims and objectives for each section of the course. This plan should be further developed to reflect how the RE teachers interpret those aims and objectives and plan their work to meet the needs of specific groups of

students. Currently, there is a strong dependence on the textbook used by students and teachers to direct teaching and learning. It is recommended that schemes of work for each year of the programme should be developed. These should provide information on the learning outcomes to be achieved, teaching and learning methods as well as possible resources to be used. The planning notes currently prepared by one member of the RE department are a good example of the planning approach recommended. It is suggested that an indication of the timeframe for delivery of particular aspects of the schemes should be included. Planning for assessment should be integrated with the schemes so that assessment is linked with the aims identified in the curriculum plan. Copies of all schemes should be retained within the department file. Particular attention should be paid to planning for teaching and learning for those class groups which are shared by two teachers.

It was evident that the RE teachers introduced students to research skills in RE early in junior cycle. This very helpful approach allows students the opportunity to explore projects with the guidance and support of their teachers and is a useful foundation for the journal work required as part of the certificate examinations.

The self-reflective practice of the RE team is a very positive feature of planning for the subject in Virginia College. The records of meetings indicate, commendably, that the RE teachers have identified areas for development in the department. Such review has led to changes in the content of the programme offered, for example, and the department has identified improving achievement in certificate examinations as a key goal for its work.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Four lessons were observed. There was clear evidence of effective planning and preparation by individual teachers for all of the lessons observed. All necessary resources and support materials were available as lessons commenced. This was evident in one lesson, for example, which made very good use of an animated film of the parable of the lost sheep. The students' engagement with the topic was further supported by a clearly laid out handout which included questions prompting personal reflection. In another lesson, a PowerPoint presentation had been prepared to support students' learning about images of God. The very good groundwork done in planning appropriate resources was effective in ensuring that all the lessons observed proceeded smoothly so that the intended learning objectives were achieved.

The potential for ICT to enhance the teaching and learning of RE was evident in the lesson described above. It was particularly effective where high-quality resources which featured familiar situations had been accessed. For example, a lesson on reconciliation was attractive to students because it built on their interest in a story about a young victim of violence in Ireland. In another lesson, stills from contemporary film caught students' attention and supported their discussion of images of God. These resources allowed students to begin to explore the relevance of topics to their own lives. In developing the schemes of work recommended in the previous section of this report, the RE department should build on this very positive base. By designing thematically linked sequences of lessons, continuity from topic to topic is facilitated and students may make meaningful connections between their own experiences and features of religion, belief and the non-religious perspective.

In the majority of lessons observed, the teacher used questioning to manage the forward movement of lessons and took the lead in framing class discussion. It is suggested that more

frequent use of pair work and small group work would provide students with opportunities to develop their own thinking about the topics under discussion in a helpful context. In some instances, the teacher was too supportive of students, so that explanations and commentaries on learning activities were supplied too readily. During class discussions, time should be provided for students to record key points made and to use these to construct their own notes on topics so that they deepen their thinking about and understanding of the concepts which are taught in RE.

Classroom management was of a high standard in all lessons and students were very well behaved. They were very co-operative and they readily engaged with the learning tasks set for them.

Students are making very good progress through the RE course and they demonstrated familiarity with key concepts. Generally, they had very good recall of topics and in their written work, they demonstrated good ability to use learned definitions in an appropriate way. In some instances, the work set for students was too heavily dependent on the textbook used. Third-year students would benefit from more frequent written exercises in the subject, particularly tasks which push them to develop and articulate their own responses to the ideas explored in RE. This approach would be in keeping with the school's own mission statement, which aspires to developing students 'as caring, responsible and participating members of society'.

ASSESSMENT

Teachers monitored students' learning in a variety of ways during the RE lessons observed. Good questioning strategies were used frequently, in addition to worksheets and observation of students' engagement in lessons. Students keep worksheets and notes in their folders and they also have a homework copy. An examination of these indicated inconsistent standards of organisation and presentation across the classes visited. It is recommended that the RE department agree standards in these areas and implement them consistently in their classes. This would support students and ensure that the work done in class is available to them as a revision aid.

In keeping with the school's homework policy, homework is regularly set by the teachers of RE. Homework was generally corrected promptly and 'tick' marking was used to acknowledge completion of work. In many instances, students' errors are identified and addressed through the provision of advice on how to improve. It is recommended that this should be augmented by recognition of the many positive aspects of students' work. The provision of positive feedback can both motivate and reassure students. Students in third year should be provided with detailed, developmental, feedback which both identifies areas for development and affirms the work done. This should include information on marks achieved in examination-style questions.

Students' progress is measured regularly. In many cases, class tests are administered on completion of a unit of study. Formal in-house examinations are set for first-year and second-year students at the end of October, at Christmas and at the end of the summer term. The very good practice of differentiation of the marking schemes used in these examinations is a good support to students with educational support needs. Third-year students sit 'mock' examinations early in the second term. In addition to parent-teacher meetings which are held annually, parents are kept informed of students' progress through reports which issue twice during the year for all students in junior cycle. The religious education teachers keep careful records of students' efforts and achievement in the subject and these indicate steady progression.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The resources available to support teaching and learning in RE are very good.
- The RE team is mutually supportive and there was evidence of self-reflective practices.
- A good standard of planning for RE has been achieved and a broad curriculum plan for the subject has been developed.
- Students are introduced to research skills in RE early in junior cycle.
- Short-term planning and preparation for the lessons observed was very effective. Teachers employed a wide variety of resources to support students' learning and the teaching strategies used provided opportunities for students to work together and to learn from each other.
- Students are making very good progress through the RE course and they demonstrated familiarity with key concepts. Generally, they had very good recall of topics and in their written work, they had good ability to use learned definitions in an appropriate way.
- A range of assessment modes, including in-class questioning and homework exercises is used to assess student competence and progress. Teachers maintain good records of students' achievements.

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

- In the context of planning for teacher appointments, serious consideration should be given by County Cavan Vocational Education Committee (VEC) to ensuring that professional competence to teach this subject is secured on a permanent basis in the school.
- Schemes of work for each year of the RE programme should be developed and particular attention should be paid to planning for teaching and learning for those class groups which are shared by two teachers.
- The RE teachers should review their assessment practices, with particular reference to the type of work set for third-year students; expectations regarding organisation of notes and the provision of positive feedback on homework completed by students.

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

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Appendix

SCHOOL RESPONSE TO THE REPORT

Submitted by the Board of Management

Area 1: Observations on the content of the inspection report

In the report, it was stated that there is a “strong dependence on the textbook”. However, this statement was contradicted in the report as the report states that “resourcing for the subject is good” and that there is “very good access to audio-visual equipment” The religion department endeavour to use a variety of resources in the teaching of religion which include PowerPoint, video clips, hand-outs, all of which were utilised during the inspection. It was also stated that schemes of work should provide “teaching and learning methods as well as possible resources to be used”. The aforementioned are listed in the religion department’s departmental folder.

In the report it was noted that “students in third year should be provided with detailed, developmental, feedback which both identifies areas for development and affirms the work done. This should include information on marks achieved in examination style questions”. Students are given detailed examination style questions with feedback which include marks obtained and a teacher’s comment.

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