

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna
Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection in English

REPORT

Ainm na scoile / School name	Blackrock College
Seoladh na scoile / School address	Blackrock College Co Dublin
Uimhir rolla / Roll number	60030V

Date of Inspection: 04-04-2019



**An Roinn Oideachais
agus Scileanna**
Department of
Education and Skills

SUBJECT INSPECTION

Subject Inspections report on the quality of work in individual curriculum areas within a school. They affirm good practice and make recommendations, where appropriate, to aid the further development of the subject in the school.

HOW TO READ THIS REPORT

During this inspection, the inspector evaluated learning and teaching in English under the following headings:

1. Teaching, learning and assessment
2. Subject provision and whole-school support
3. Planning and preparation

Inspectors describe the quality of each of these areas using the Inspectorate's quality continuum which is shown on the final page of this report. The quality continuum provides examples of the language used by inspectors when evaluating and describing the quality of the school's provision in each area.

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.

CHILD PROTECTION

During the inspection visit, the following checks in relation to the school's child protection procedures were conducted:

1. The name of the DLP and the Child Safeguarding Statement are prominently displayed near the main entrance to the school.
2. The Child Safeguarding Statement has been ratified by the board and includes an annual review and a risk assessment.
3. All teachers visited reported that they have read the Child Safeguarding Statement and that they are aware of their responsibilities as mandated persons.

The school met the requirements in relation to each of the checks above.

SUBJECT INSPECTION

INSPECTION ACTIVITIES

Dates of inspection	2, 3, 4 April 2019
Inspection activities undertaken <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Review of subject department planning folders• Discussions with principal, deputy principal and subject co-ordinators• Interaction with students	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Observation of teaching and learning in eight lessons• Examination of students' work• Feedback to principal, deputy principals and the English department

School context

Blackrock College is a long-established day and boarding school for boys, in the trusteeship of the Spiritan Education Trust. The school offers years two and three of the Junior Cycle programme; students complete first year in Willow Park School on the same campus. In the senior cycle, students take a compulsory Transition Year programme, and the established Leaving Certificate.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS:

Findings

- The teaching observed was effective and often highly effective, and teachers were very open to suggestions about further developing their practice.
- The intended learning was achieved in all lessons, and at times exceeded, and students' engagement was very impressive.
- Assessment practices support the consolidation and extension of students' learning.
- Aspects of subject provision, including class formation and class size, are not optimal.
- Subject co-ordination and planning practices are very good.

Recommendations

- To further enhance students' enjoyment of English, teachers should emphasise the concept of valid personal response, and should use handouts and explanatory notes sparingly.
- The current system of class formation, and the size of most class groups, should be reviewed in the light of the principles of the Junior Cycle programme.

DETAILED FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. TEACHING, LEARNING, AND ASSESSMENT

- Eight lessons were observed, covering all years, levels and programmes. Teachers' practice in the lessons observed was effective and often highly effective. Teachers readily engaged in professional discussion during the evaluation, and were open to suggestions for further developing existing practices.
- Teachers demonstrated high levels of competence and knowledge and, where practice was of very high quality, teachers were enthusiastic advocates for the value of language, literature and the arts generally, and modelled what it is to be an engaged and responsive reader. Presenting English in the context of life-long learning is highly commendable and consistent with the aims of the English specification and syllabus.
- The intended learning for each lesson was achieved in all lessons. In some instances, the learning exceeded what was planned, driven by the students' engagement and teachers' response to it. In instances where individual students required further explanation or consolidation, teachers were aware of the need and took appropriate action.
- The lesson topics covered included poets and their work, close readings of texts linked by theme, the comparative study, and the development of writing skills. In most lessons, teachers engaged students in analysing and appreciating the creative process, guiding them to probe deeply into texts and to heighten their awareness of the writer's craft. Explicit attention to primary texts and to the students' own writing as 'work in progress' was central to this approach.
- In a few instances, secondary material, such as explanatory notes, was given prominence. The intention was to aid students' understanding, but in fact students have a wide enough frame of reference and sufficient perceptiveness as readers to benefit much more from a thorough analysis of the primary text. Therefore, teachers should introduce secondary material very judiciously. Their approach will be best guided by judging how much information students need to form their own sound and defensible responses.
- Very good lesson tasks and learning activities were prepared and managed in most lessons, and led to purposeful and productive work, both individual and collaborative. At times, the activity would have been enriched by a more explicit communication of its precise purpose and desired outcome. It would be very useful to develop students' understanding of the concept of success criteria, and to share and even co-create them for specific purposes.
- Teachers used highly effective questioning techniques, asking questions to help students construct understanding, and to shape and articulate their responses. Teachers are advised to be very open to a wide range of responses, and to beware of privileging certain responses over others that may be equally valid but perhaps more original or individual.
- Students were very impressive in their readiness to engage, and their often very perceptive responses. Their understanding of discourse is a significant asset, and their willingness to express their own views and listen thoughtfully to the views of others was good to see. Some concern about having the 'right' answer was detectable at times, and teachers are encouraged to counter this by explaining the concept of valid response, as applied by the State Examinations Commission.
- Homework that both consolidated and extended students' learning was a constant feature of lessons observed. Students' folders and copybooks contained an impressive volume of work, including substantial and challenging assignments. Some very good developmental

feedback was noted on students' work. Given the large class sizes, it is worth considering how success criteria could be used to deliver whole-class feedback, which students can then engage with individually, as an occasional alternative to individual marking.

2. SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

- The school timetable makes good provision for English in the number and distribution of lessons. English is timetabled concurrently for all the classes in a year group and also, more unusually, at the same time each day. The impact of this practice is worth assessing, for example in the case of the current third years who have English last lesson before lunch every day.
- The senior management team ably leads a whole-school culture of commitment to high standards. The system of class formation for English is viewed as supporting this culture, providing for discrete class groups of very able and of less able students, with a middle band of equally-ranked classes. In the context of the new Junior Cycle programme, this system should be revisited for second and third year. The validity of the basis on which students are placed in class groups in second year should be examined, as should the impact of the current streaming arrangements on students' opportunities to learn with and from each other, which is central to the principles of the new Junior Cycle.
- The present system creates small classes for students deemed to require more individual attention, meaning that the other class groups are big. When reviewing class formation as recommended, consideration should be given to creating nine rather than eight English classes in each year. Smaller class size would facilitate more active and participative learning experiences for students, and would be appropriate in the context of the planned piloting of one-hour lessons.
- Eight of the fifteen teachers of English teach both junior and senior cycle classes. To the greatest extent possible, this should be the pattern of deployment, and the timetabling of teachers to take just one class group should be minimised.
- School management supports teachers' engagement in continuing professional development and also supports the subject department structure to promote high-quality teaching and learning.

3. PLANNING AND PREPARATION

- The co-ordination of English is carried out very conscientiously and efficiently, and involves regular evaluation of practices and processes, and the production of a concise and rigorous annual report for school management. The most recent report identifies strengths and challenges in provision for English and merits careful attention.
- Key English planning documents include agreed year plans and broad schemes of work, a stimulating programme for TY English, reports on the outcomes of certificate examinations, the minutes of department meetings, and reports of subject learning and assessment review (SLAR) meetings. A sensible approach to year plans allows for some flexibility in text choice and approach within the framework of agreed outcomes.
- The plans for second and third year reflect a deepening understanding and experience of the English specification, and the department is encouraged to develop agreed approaches further as the whole-school engagement with the new Junior Cycle grows. This should include the continued involvement of the English department in Willow Park School to

ensure that students encounter all the learning outcomes for English as a continuum of knowledge and skills development within the intended timeframe.

- Planning for assessment is very good, and reflects whole-school policy. The department uses a wide variety of modes of assessment, and is commendably willing to exploit fully the possibilities for classroom-based assessment in the junior cycle. The in-house marking of 'mock' examinations is highly commended.

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

THE INSPECTORATE'S QUALITY CONTINUUM

Inspectors describe the quality of provision in the school using the Inspectorate's quality continuum which is shown below. The quality continuum provides examples of the language used by inspectors when evaluating and describing the of quality the school's provision of each area.

Level	Description	Example of descriptive terms
Very Good	Very good applies where the quality of the areas evaluated is of a very high standard. The very few areas for improvement that exist do not significantly impact on the overall quality of provision. For some schools in this category the quality of what is evaluated is outstanding and provides an example for other schools of exceptionally high standards of provision.	Very good; of a very high quality; very effective practice; highly commendable; very successful; few areas for improvement; notable; of a very high standard. Excellent; outstanding; exceptionally high standard, with very significant strengths; exemplary
Good	Good applies where the strengths in the areas evaluated clearly outweigh the areas in need of improvement. The areas requiring improvement impact on the quality of pupils' learning. The school needs to build on its strengths and take action to address the areas identified as requiring improvement in order to achieve a <i>very good</i> standard.	Good; good quality; valuable; effective practice; competent; useful; commendable; good standard; some areas for improvement
Satisfactory	Satisfactory applies where the quality of provision is adequate. The strengths in what is being evaluated just outweigh the shortcomings. While the shortcomings do not have a significant negative impact they constrain the quality of the learning experiences and should be addressed in order to achieve a better standard.	Satisfactory; adequate; appropriate provision although some possibilities for improvement exist; acceptable level of quality; improvement needed in some areas
Fair	Fair applies where, although there are some strengths in the areas evaluated, deficiencies or shortcomings that outweigh those strengths also exist. The school will have to address certain deficiencies without delay in order to ensure that provision is satisfactory or better.	Fair; evident weaknesses that are impacting on pupils' learning; less than satisfactory; experiencing difficulty; must improve in specified areas; action required to improve
Weak	Weak applies where there are serious deficiencies in the areas evaluated. Immediate and coordinated whole-school action is required to address the areas of concern. In some cases, the intervention of other agencies may be required to support improvements.	Weak; unsatisfactory; insufficient; ineffective; poor; requiring significant change, development or improvement; experiencing significant difficulties;