

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna
Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection in Geography

REPORT

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

Date of Inspection: 02-12-2016



WHAT IS A 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 Geography under the following headings:

1. Learning, teaching 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.

Subject Inspection

INSPECTION ACTIVITIES DURING THIS INSPECTION

Date of inspection	02-12-2016
Inspection activities undertaken <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Review of relevant documents• Discussion with principal and key staff• Interaction with students	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Observation of teaching and learning during seven class periods• Examination of students' work• Feedback to principal and relevant staff

SCHOOL CONTEXT

Blackrock College is a fee-paying secondary school for boys under the trusteeship of the Spiritan Education Trust. Students are offered Junior Certificate, a Transition Year (TY) programme and the established Leaving Certificate. Geography is a core subject at junior cycle and is offered as an option in TY and for Leaving Certificate. Students complete their first year of study at second level in the nearby Willow Park School.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS:

FINDINGS

- The quality of teaching, learning and assessment was very high in the lessons observed.
- Uptake of higher level and achievement at all levels in Geography in certificate examinations are significantly strong.
- Overall, provision for Geography is very good while aspects of the TY geography experience, for some students, are limited.
- Very high quality individual and collaborative planning informs the very positive experience of students in geography classrooms.
- The current positioning of geographical skills in the curricular plan for junior cycle limits the potential for students to practise and apply these skills throughout their three-year experience of Geography.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Provision for TY geography should be reviewed to include the development of an agreed TY appropriate assessment policy, the limiting of the use of Leaving Certificate textbooks in TY, and the extension of TY specific classroom methodologies to all the class groups in the programme.
- The curricular plan for Geography should be developed to include learning outcomes for students and the repositioning of the study of key geographical skills.

DETAILED FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. TEACHING AND LEARNING

- The quality of teaching, learning and assessment in Geography was very high in the lessons observed. The classroom atmosphere was very positive, mutually respectful and courteous. The levels of planning and preparation by individual teachers were reflected in the very high quality classroom practice observed.
- The structure of lessons and the coherence of the planned learning was very good. Lessons opened with the sharing of the planned learning, the lesson topic or some specific aims. The

lessons then progressed with a review of homework or previous learning, followed by discussion and questioning to introduce new learning. Tasks involving stimulus materials engaged students actively. Feedback and discussion from groups and individuals, including probing questions from teachers, facilitated both assessment of learning and assessment for learning. Within this structure, it was clear in all lessons that students were learning and progressing at a pace appropriate to their needs.

- Routine engagement with collaborative-learning strategies was observed to be particularly effective. Tasks, that were very well prepared, organised and structured, included engagement with issues concerning the global coffee trade, gender in the work place, oil extraction and the environment, industrial location, and the impact of tourism. These issues-based topics facilitated active engagement and very high-quality discussion by students.
- In some lessons, where students required a slower pace of learning, strategies used to engage these students were also of very high quality. The learning intention was particularly focused, clear and achievable. Lessons were progressed through tasks involving the completion of labelled diagrams, and through attention given to the understanding of process. The time and space created for individual attention to students in these lessons clearly supported their learning in a very positive atmosphere. It is recommended that this evident good practice be shared with subject department colleagues.
- Where recommendations were made to individual teachers, they referenced the need to balance teacher inputs with placing responsibility on students to engage through the use of active methods. The development of strategies to review what students had actually learned during the lesson was also discussed with some teachers, as was the related need to further develop the learning intention of the lesson.
- It is clear that geography teachers have high expectations for their students, and that all students are appropriately supported towards study at higher level. Outcomes for students in certificate examinations clearly reflect this, as uptake of higher level, and achievement at all levels in Geography, are significantly strong.

2. SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

- Provision for Geography in Blackrock College is very good. This finds expression in timetabling, in the provision of a high-quality geography room, through access to information and communications technology (ICT), and the facilitation of specific activities including the preparation and publication of an environmental magazine, and the use of a weather station on the school grounds.
- In TY, and in fifth year and sixth year, students are offered the study of Geography for five class periods per week, or within a 'split-class structure'. In the latter configuration, the time allocation of five periods is divided between two subjects. Students who choose this option receive intensive tuition for either two or three class periods, on alternate weeks, in parallel with another subject. The negative impact of this 'split-class structure' in limiting students' experience of Geography in TY should be considered.
- Students studying Geography in TY for five periods per week experience a skills-focused programme that includes map work, the study of meteorology using the school's weather station, and the production of student-authored articles on environmental issues in the very high quality 'Green Watch' magazine.
- Students in the 'split' class groups study Geography for either two or three class periods per week in TY. While the planned increase in timetable provision to three class periods per week

for these groups is positive and welcome, the impact of this configuration on the TY experience of these students is an area of concern. Provision for TY geography should therefore be reviewed to include the development of an agreed TY appropriate assessment policy, the limiting of the use of Leaving Certificate textbooks in TY, and the extension of TY specific classroom methodologies to all TY class groups in the programme, including the 'split' class groups.

3. PLANNING AND PREPARATION

- Very high quality individual and collaborative planning supports the strong position of Geography in the school and the very positive experience of students in geography classrooms. A comprehensive subject plan is in place and subject department planning is embedded and supported by a school appointed head of department.
- The curricular aspect of the subject plan for Geography should be further developed to include learning outcomes for students. The study of key geographical skills, particularly Ordnance Survey (OS) maps and aerial photograph analysis, should be repositioned within the plan to as early as is possible within the junior cycle. This will allow teachers and students to practise, and to apply, these skills as they progress through the curricular plan. Collaboration with the geography teachers of the first-year students in Willow Park School should be undertaken to ensure the implementation of this recommendation.

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

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 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;