

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

**Subject Inspection of Physical Education  
REPORT**

**Saint Mary's Secondary School  
Macroom, County Cork  
Roll number: 62320R**

**Date of inspection: 18 and 19 September 2008**

**REPORT ON THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN PHYSICAL EDUCATION**

**SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT**

This report has been written following a subject inspection in St. Mary's Secondary School, Macroom. It presents the findings of an evaluation of the quality of teaching and learning in Physical Education 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 lessons and observed teaching and learning. The inspector interacted with students and teachers and had discussions with the teachers. The inspector reviewed school planning documentation and teacher's written preparation. Following the evaluation visit, the inspector provided oral feedback on the outcomes of the evaluation to the principal and subject teacher. The board of management was given the 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 to this report.

**SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT**

A double period of Physical Education is provided to all students in the school, with the exception of Transition Year (TY) students who have no formal physical education lessons. TY students, however, have the option of participating in physical activity-related modules such as circuit training, yoga and self-defence. While the provision of two periods per week of Physical Education to the majority of year groups is not uncommon in many post primary schools, this falls short of the two hours per week recommended in the Department of Education and Science *Rules and Programmes for Secondary Schools 2004-2005*. It is recommended that the school work towards providing this amount of Physical Education to all students. Recent moves which the school has made in providing two periods of Physical Education to fifth-year and sixth-year students, where none had existed previously, are roundly applauded in this regard and fifth-year students encountered as part of the inspection greatly appreciated the fact that Physical Education is now available to them.

The school has one fully qualified physical education teacher on staff who has overall responsibility for the co-ordination of the subject and takes all classes in junior cycle for Physical Education. The fact that this teacher is currently job-sharing means that there is a shortage of qualified physical education personnel on staff at the moment. The school is encouraged to consider employing an additional physical education teacher, even on a part-time basis, so that timetabled lessons in Physical Education can be delivered by a qualified physical education teacher to all students. Notwithstanding this, the efforts which the school has made to overcome this shortfall are deserving of commendation. These involve students going to the local Macroom Community Leisure Centre to avail of its very good health and fitness facilities. All instruction is delivered by leisure centre personnel and students pay a nominal fee for this instruction and the use of the facilities. The good practice whereby a year head from the school accompanies and supervises students while they are

using these facilities is commended, as this helps to ensure compliance with health and safety requirements.

The facilities available for the teaching of Physical Education are satisfactory, comprising a small and a large hall, a field and tennis court area. The latter facility requires regular maintenance to keep it clear of moss, particularly during winter months, and the school is encouraged to keep this matter under review so that it remains available for physical education lessons. The school's main hall is a useful facility although its location up a steep hill, approximately five to seven minutes walk from the school, means that it cannot be easily accessed by students during inclement weather. The school has been allocated substantial funds from the Department of Education and Science for the refurbishment of this hall but has more ambitious plans in place for the building of a new hall with further generous assistance from the Sisters of Mercy. It is intended that this hall will be built much closer to the main school building and the school is commended for its initiative in this regard as an indication of the priority which it gives to Physical Education. The willingness of the school to use the nearby Macroom Community Leisure Centre is also commended as the range of facilities available there allows students to experience a much broader range of activities than could otherwise be provided.

The school's physical education equipment area is well stocked with a plentiful supply of materials for the delivery of a broad physical education curriculum. Access to information and communication technology (ICT) facilities for the teaching of Physical Education has been limited up to now but the recent purchase of a large number of computers has increased their availability to the physical education department and is expected to result in relatively easy access to one of the school's ICT suites as required.

## **PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

The quality of planning and preparation observed in this school was excellent and individual lessons were very well prepared. The physical education department has worked through a subject department policy checklist to ensure a thorough and comprehensive approach to planning. Despite the fact that the school has only one physical education teacher, detailed records of meetings between the physical education teacher and the school principal, occasionally including other teachers as well, are maintained. This practice is commended and records of meetings examined as part of the inspection indicate a clear willingness to continually improve the physical education experience of students in the school. Other meetings which have been documented have involved the school's physical education department and personnel from the Macroom Community Leisure Centre and the local Health Promotion Officer, aimed at ensuring greater co-operation on a range of issues.

A document outlining practical rules and procedures which students have to follow during physical education lessons has been formulated by the physical education department. The tone and content of this document is commended as balanced and fair, and the practice whereby all first-year and newly enrolled students are required to sign a copy of these rules is regarded as good practice. Students are then expected to keep a copy of the rules in their student journal for reference.

The school is involved in the implementation of the Junior Cycle Physical Education (JCPE) syllabus and activities planned as part of this syllabus are broadly in line with syllabus guidelines. Planning documentation reviewed indicates an awareness of the desirability of also providing aquatics to students and the school is encouraged to investigate the feasibility of so doing as learning to swim and having general competence in water are valuable life skills for students. The school is also encouraged to provide gymnastics to students and it is accepted that this will require some investment in new gymnastics mats. It is also suggested that the physical education department plan for increased use of ICT in the teaching and learning of the subject in order to exploit recent, commendable investments which the school has made in this area.

Very thorough and detailed schemes of work have been produced by the physical education department to assist in the delivery of each core area of the syllabus and much generic planning material has been modified and customised to meet the needs of the school. This work, and the compilation of a large volume of useful reference and resource material, represents a significant

amount of effort on behalf of the physical education department. This is particularly impressive, bearing in mind that there is only one teacher in the department. Management is commended for facilitating the attendance of the school's physical education teacher at continuing professional development (CPD) opportunities provided as part of the JCPE syllabus as, apart from the obvious benefit in availing of these CPD opportunities, this also provides the school's physical education teacher with a chance to network with colleagues in other schools, something that can be particularly valuable for a teacher who is the only subject specialist in a school.

Cross-curricular planning has been documented, involving collaboration between the physical education department and the geography, science and home economics departments in particular. Such collaborations have led to activities such as the school's "Health is Wealth" week which ran from late April to early May last year. This involved a co-ordinated approach to delivering key messages about healthy lifestyles throughout the school community and included fitness talks and activities, picnic lunch, treasure hunt, sports day, pilates, yoga, food/health table quiz and teachers versus students matches. Outside guest speakers and presenters were also invited to the school. All involved in this venture are highly commended for their efforts in planning and organising these activities as they can have a powerful impact on the attitudes of students towards healthy living. The range of extracurricular activity taking place in the school also helps to promote these values. Among the main activities currently provided are athletics (both cross-country and track-and-field) basketball, football and camogie. A residential trip to an outdoor education centre is provided to students in TY and the provision of modules of self defence, yoga, circuit training and dance in TY is also commended.

## **TEACHING AND LEARNING**

Excellent lesson management strategies were in place in all lessons observed as part of the inspection and lessons always began promptly with a roll call to check absences and non-participants. Students readily assisted in setting up and storing class materials at the start and end of lessons, often without any prompting from the teacher being needed. This was good to see and is indicative of the co-operative culture that has been established in physical education lessons. A thorough warm-up also took place at the start of each lesson and the ease with which students participated in this, and the competence with which they performed stretching exercises, indicates familiarity with the good practice of performing a thorough warm-up prior to participating in vigorous physical activity. Cool-down activities at the end of lessons were also well performed and the teacher used this time to reinforce the key concepts which has been learned during the lesson.

A very good range of teaching methodologies were in use during the lessons observed with opportunities provided for students to work individually, in pairs and in small groups. The teacher maintained an excellent focus on learning outcomes in all lessons. Good use was made of questioning strategies and a feature of most lessons was the manner in which key concepts were consolidated and knowledge was elicited from students through skilful questioning. This had the effect of maintaining students' interest and provided them with many useful opportunities to demonstrate learning.

The quality and quantity of teacher interventions was appropriate to the developmental age and general ability levels of students. Essential technical information was presented to students in a manner that was readily understood by them and explanations were always sufficiently brief and focused to ensure the momentum of the lesson was not lost. Excellent individual attention was provided to students as required and the manner in which individual students or groups of students were highlighted when performing a task particularly well was very successful in enhancing students' understanding.

A range of varied, purposeful tasks was set in all lessons and these demonstrated a clear progression in difficulty. This is commended as it allows all students to experience success in performing the more basic skills while challenging the abilities of the more able students to successfully complete the more advanced tasks. Full use was made of all available resources during the lessons observed as part of the inspection. Some suggestions were made in a hockey lesson as to a possible alternative approach to the organisation of the lesson aimed, primarily, at providing students with more time and

space in which to acquire new skills before moving on to performing these skills in a more demanding, competitive environment. In this regard, it is also suggested that some of the fundamental rules of the game, such as the need to avoid using the back of the stick and the need to avoid deliberately using the feet, be emphasised from the start as it may become more difficult for students to apply these rules at a later stage.

Some scope exists for the further integration of assessment-for-learning practices into teaching and learning in physical education lessons and it is suggested that the physical education department plan for this. This could include asking students, particularly older students, to lead warm-up and cool-down activities, for example. Although the start of the lesson was always purposefully used to recap on previous learning, the sharing of lesson objectives with students at the start of the lesson is also recommended. Students can then be asked to reflect on their own performance at the end of the lesson to see if they had achieved the lesson objectives. This can help students to become more self-analytical, reflective performers and can help prepare them for increased opportunities for self-directed learning, which could be provided as they get older. Opportunities for peer assessment could also be expanded and, in this regard, students who are not able to participate in the lesson could be usefully employed in providing feedback to students who are participating. This is regarded as preferable to the practice of giving non-participants health and physical-activity related worksheets to work through in a lesson, although it is acknowledged that much useful learning can also take place when completing these. In a lesson in which non-participants became involved in officiating, this proved to be a very successful strategy as it helped to integrate them fully into the lesson and allowed the teacher to give attention to other groups as required.

The atmosphere in all lessons observed was excellent and the mutual respect shown between teachers and students was clearly evident. Students took to all tasks with enthusiasm and goodwill and applied themselves diligently to all drills and practices. This was nowhere more apparent than in a senior cycle lesson which took place in the nearby leisure centre. It was clear that senior cycle students greatly valued the opportunity to use the facilities and thoroughly enjoyed the experience.

## **ASSESSMENT**

A good range of assessment modes has been documented in the school plan. These include the use of the assessment wheel, assessment ladder and peer assessment sheets provided as part of the JCPE syllabus. The practice of requiring students to keep a physical education copy in which all written material is maintained is commended as this can provide a useful source of reference for students.

Planning has taken place for the use of rich tasks, involving aspects of assessment for learning, where students' assessments are referenced against criteria agreed between the teacher and students. This is regarded as excellent practice and can be highly motivational for students. The practice of giving formal assessments to students, in both written and practical form, is also commended as a means of reinforcing and consolidating the valuable learning that is taking place in physical education lessons in the school. The fact that the outcome of these assessments, together with formative comments about students' learning in Physical Education, are communicated to parents in written reports and at parent-teacher meetings is also commended. In order to enhance the formative nature of comments in school reports, it is suggested that the range of comments available in the software package used for reporting be expanded to include more comments specifically related to Physical Education. Investigating the possibility of including free-text comments may also prove beneficial as this allows the teacher to give very specific, focused information on the progress of each student.

## **SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Recent moves which the school has made to increase the time allocated to Physical Education in senior cycle are commended.

- The school's ambitious plans to develop and upgrade its physical education facilities are commended.
- The willingness of the school to use locally available facilities to augment its own facilities is applauded.
- The quality of planning and preparation observed was excellent, reflecting a considerable amount of effort on behalf of the physical education department, and individual lessons were very well prepared.
- A good range of extracurricular activity is provided and cross-curricular ventures such as the school's "Health is Wealth" week are particularly praiseworthy.
- The quality of teaching and learning is very good and excellent lesson management strategies are in place.
- The atmosphere in all lessons observed was excellent with clearly evident, mutual respect between teachers and students.
- A good range of assessment modes have been documented and good reporting strategies are in place in Physical Education.

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

- It is recommended that the school work towards providing all students with two hours of Physical Education per week, in accordance with Department of Education and Science recommendations.
- The school is encouraged to consider employing an additional physical education teacher so that timetabled lessons in Physical Education can be delivered by a qualified physical education teacher to all students.
- Gymnastics should be included in the JCPE programme and the school should investigate the feasibility of also providing some aquatics.
- Some scope exists for the further integration of ICT into teaching and learning and for the expansion of assessment for learning methodologies.

Post-evaluation meetings were held with the teacher of Physical Education 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**

The Department of Education and Science recommendations to provide all students with a minimum of two hours Physical Education per week is unrealistic. Twelve other subjects must be accommodated within the timetable for Junior Cert Students and eleven must be facilitated in the senior cycle. (This includes examined and non examined subjects).

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

Since the schools only Physical Education Teacher is job sharing and the Department of Education and Science didn't give any hours for time lost due to job sharing in 2008/2009, the school will apply for curricular concessions for Physical Education in next year's allocation of part time hours. Arrangements have been put in place for the PE Department to have access to I.C.T. resources, whenever they are needed.