

**An Roinn Oideachais agus Eolaíochta**  
**Department of Education and Science**  
**Subject Inspection of Home Economics**  
**REPORT**

**Tarbert Comprehensive School**  
**Tarbert, Listowel, County Kerry**  
**Roll number: 81006S**

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**REPORT**  
**ON**  
**THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN HOME ECONOMICS**

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## **SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT**

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Tarbert Comprehensive School. It presents the findings of an evaluation of the quality of teaching and learning in Home Economics 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 subject 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**

Home Economics is offered as an optional subject on the curriculum provided in Tarbert Comprehensive School. Overall uptake levels, at both junior and senior cycle, are relatively healthy, particularly when one considers that boys account for sixty percent of the school's total student cohort. Home Economics is a very popular subject choice amongst the girls attending the school. While the number of boys studying the subject is significantly lower, nevertheless, it is important to highlight that a small number of boys are currently availing of the opportunity to study Home Economics. The school is providing the Hotel, Catering and Tourism vocational specialism for students intending to sit the Leaving Certificate Applied in 2007. It is unfortunate that a limited local access to a range of related businesses made providing for this course difficult and that as a result it has been decided not to offer it again.

Tarbert Comprehensive operates a system of open subject choice, whereby student demand determines the eventual banding of subjects. This approach, which takes maximum account of students' needs and interests, is commended. At present, incoming first-year students are required to make their subject choices prior to entry. However, students are accommodated as much as is

possible in the early months of their first year, should they wish to make changes to their initial choices. It is worth considering the impact that making subject choices prior to entry may be having on the previously identified low uptake in Home Economics amongst the male student cohort. A lack of knowledge about subjects may mean that students are more likely to rely on information from a myriad of external sources. At times, this information may not be totally accurate and can result in girls and boys choosing the familiar and more 'traditional' female or male subjects respectively. The school is therefore encouraged to provide students with some level of exposure to a range of subjects before they are required to select the subjects they wish to study for the Junior Certificate examination. This approach has the benefit of allowing students to sample subjects before making a choice.

Management's support for Home Economics is very apparent. On the whole, timetabling of the subject is favourable. By and large, the time provided for the teaching of Home Economics is consistent with the requirements of both syllabuses, although, the 'icing on the cake' would be the provision of four class periods in first year as opposed to the existing three. Double periods are provided for practical cookery lessons and it is good to note that significant efforts are made to ensure that two class groups are not simultaneously timetabled for the kitchen. The majority of class groups are timetabled so as to ensure a good spread of contact with Home Economics over the weekly timetable. While it is not always possible to achieve this, management is encouraged to continue to bear this in mind when timetabling the subject, but in particular when timetabling examination classes. Home economics classes are organised on a mixed-ability basis. Every effort is made to ensure that teachers retain assigned class groups through junior cycle and also through senior cycle. Students of the subject are encouraged to aim for high academic standards as evidenced by the high numbers who take higher-level papers in both of the State examinations. It was also noted that students are very successful in their pursuit of such goals.

Management is commended for providing teachers with some formal time for the purpose of subject department planning. Teachers' in-career development needs are provided for, in that they are released from school to attend in-service offered by the Department of Education and Science (DES) and school-based in-service and training is also organised as required. Official documentation from the DES and the State Examinations Commission (SEC) is given directly to the Home Economics department.

A current lack of accommodation in the school means that the two home economics rooms need to be shared with other departments. While this is understandable, it is unfortunate as it restricts teachers' access to the rooms for preparation for practical lessons and for the often necessary clear-up process. It also prohibits the carefree display of student work, including completed textile work, which it must be said is very deserving of exhibition. It is hoped that in the future, when circumstances improve, this situation might be remedied. The subject is well resourced and requests for additional resources are, if at all possible, greeted favourably. All staff has access, via a booking system, to the school's information and communication technology (ICT) facility, as well as to a mobile laptop and data projector. Bearing in mind that the home economics department, like most rooms in the school, has been networked to broadband, in time the provision of room-based ICT might be considered. This would greatly facilitate students' access to such technology as a natural part of a home economics lesson. Finally, while the development of a whole-school health and safety policy is commendable, it is recommended that consideration be now given to the preparation of a statement specific to Home Economics.

## **PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

A team approach has been adopted to the co-ordination of the work of the home economics department. This is enhanced by a spirit of collegiality and a generous sharing of ideas and resources. There is evidence of a highly collaborative approach amongst the members of the home economics department, both in terms of the development of a subject plan and in planning for the delivery of the curriculum.

The department is making good progress with regard to the development of a home economics plan. As a means of enhancing the very good work completed to date, it is recommended that the department evaluate the contribution that the Home Economics Support Service planning templates

might make to this document. It is good to note that a diagnostic window exercise has been completed by the department, as this provides a focus for planning in the department. This approach, which could be used as an evaluative tool for departmental work, should be revisited and repeated on a regular basis.

Common programmes of work have been agreed and devised for all year groups and this is praised as excellent practice. The schemes of work for some of the year groups are quite well developed. These are time bound and provide detailed information with regard to topics to be covered, together with an identification of suitable methodologies, strategies and resources. In time, this approach should be extended to all schemes of work. Consideration should also be given as to how the schemes might be further developed. Suggested enhancements and additions include: provision for the integration of topics, the establishment of clear links between theory and the practical work being undertaken, assessment procedures, homework exercises and, when and where applicable, revision. This task is quite labour and time intensive so it is recommended that it be carried out on a phased basis taking, for example, one junior and one senior cycle class per annum. Course syllabuses and *Guidelines for Teachers* as appropriate, rather than textbooks, should inform such detailed planning. The contribution that the appropriate ICT would make to the compilation of these schemes should also be investigated by the home economics department. The use of ICT for such work would greatly simplify the revision of the schemes, as required.

The home economics department has collated an impressive bank of teaching resources, intended to support students' learning in the subject. These include a large selection of worksheets, handouts and assessment papers which are appropriately filed. A series of pamphlets and leaflets, videos and books combine to provide teachers and students with a room-based resource library. The department needs to investigate how this library might be enhanced and some provision should be made with regard to providing for the regular updating of the library.

Management is to be commended for the provision of some formal time for the purpose of subject department planning. Teachers also deserve recognition for regularly giving of their own free time to meet informally to discuss planning and matters relating to the delivery of both syllabuses. It is recommended that, in addition to the above, the department devote some of its meeting times to discussing and sharing approaches with regard to actual teaching and learning. As a starting point for this, suggested topics for discussion might be, for example, strategies for dealing with mixed-ability class groups, providing for activity-based learning or approaches designed to support the development of higher-order thinking skills in students. Furthermore, it is recommended that the outcomes of all department meetings be recorded and filed in the subject plan for future reference.

The department's planning for the provision of co-curricular activities designed to support student learning in a number of areas of study was also obvious and is commended. Guest speakers in the classroom have provided students with additional and supplementary information on topics such as sensory analysis and cheese-making. Students are also encouraged to enter local and national cookery competitions.

## **TEACHING AND LEARNING**

There was evidence of a good level of short-term planning for lessons observed. A number of resources which contributed to students' understanding and learning in the subject, as well as to their involvement in the lessons, had been diligently prepared or collected. These included; worksheets, information sheets, quizzes, word searches, leaflets, posters, notice-boards and product samples. Short-term planning ensured that lessons had clear aims and objectives. It was good to note that these were openly shared with the students. This transferred some of the responsibility for learning to the students themselves and provided them with a focus and a goal for each lesson. On occasions, medium-term to long-term targets were also shared with the class, which is a very helpful way of easing student tension regarding required coursework, particularly for students in examination classes. It is recommended that, in tandem with the open sharing of lesson aims and objectives, the intended learning outcomes be clearly emphasised during the introductory part of lessons. Overall, lessons were well structured and grounded in work previously covered. Generally speaking, the pacing of lessons was appropriate and took account of students' levels. On occasions, a reduction in pace in combination with a decision to cover less information, while utilising different approaches to

the delivery of information being taught, is recommended. The latter part of this recommendation will be dealt with in more detail further on.

Most lessons began with a recap on work previously covered. This was mainly facilitated through questioning students and noting the keywords of students' answers on the blackboard. Overall questions were well distributed to named students with significant efforts being made to ensure that most, if not all, students were involved. In some instances there was a tendency to accept chorus answering to questions posed. This approach is discouraged, as the correct answer very often gets lost in a sea of muffled responses. It also makes it more difficult to determine individual student's understanding and learning in a particular topic. In one senior cycle class visited, a novel approach involving the distribution of a multiple-choice quiz sheet formed the basis for this exercise. Students' completion of this was carefully monitored by the class teacher. The sheet was then filed by students for future reference and revision work. One very minor recommendation is that time be provided for students to complete this individually prior to discussing it as a class. This would serve as a clear indication to individual students of their personal progress with regard to the particular area of study.

Teacher instruction was clear and accurate. New and difficult concepts were explained very well, with significant efforts being made to contextualise and make relevant information being presented. This approach, which supports the rationale behind the Junior Certificate syllabus, is very laudable. In the majority of lessons there was an extremely impressive non-reliance on the textbook in the delivery of lesson content. In these instances the teaching observed was very natural, highly informed and very insightful. Information flowed freely and in an interesting and thought-provoking manner. Where this was the case, students' attention levels were notably high, mainly because teaching was not textbook led and therefore students were unable to pre-empt what the teacher was going to say next. This approach to lesson delivery is highly praised and encouraged in all lessons. It is important to highlight that, at the same time and in general, the textbook was not completely ignored. It was used selectively and in a way that supported teaching and students' understanding of the topics under discussion. In the main teaching was guided and determined by the key concepts of topics being presented and excellent use was made of the board to highlight and emphasise these very ideas.

Every effort was made during lessons to identify links between the topic being examined and other relevant areas of the course. In a junior cycle lesson visited, for example, coeliac disease was introduced in tandem with the main focus of the lesson which was cereals. Similarly, in another junior cycle lesson, while nutrients were the main focus of the lesson, appropriate references were also made to areas such as healthy eating and the food pyramid. This approach, which once again reflects the rationale behind the Junior Certificate syllabus, is praised as best practice. In one lesson, the relevance of the theory being discussed was enhanced by direct reference to the dishes that students would be preparing in the near future. Once again this is commended as best practice.

ALL LESSONS WERE VERY INCLUSIVE OF STUDENTS, AS EVIDENCED BY THE FACT THAT STUDENTS WERE CONSTANTLY BEING ASKED FOR SOME LEVEL OF VERBAL INPUT. DESPITE THIS, HOWEVER, SOME LESSONS WERE VERY TEACHER LED. AS A MEANS OF REBALANCING THIS SITUATION IT IS RECOMMENDED THAT, WHERE RELEVANT, THE GREATER INCLUSION OF MORE ACTIVITY-BASED METHODOLOGIES BE CONSIDERED. THESE STRATEGIES CHANGE LEARNING FROM BEING A PREDOMINANTLY PASSIVE ACTIVITY TO BEING MORE ACTIVE. THEY ALSO ALLOW FOR THE SHARING OF IDEAS, THE GREATER EXPRESSION OF OPINIONS, THE DEVELOPMENT OF CRITICAL-THINKING SKILLS AND AN ENHANCED PERSONALISATION OF THE LESSON CONTENT. ACTIVE METHODOLOGIES ALSO ENCOURAGE INDEPENDENT AND COLLABORATIVE LEARNING, TWO OF THE KEY FOCUSES OF BOTH SYLLABUSES. STUDENTS WHO ARE NOT REACHED BY PURELY VERBAL PRESENTATIONS ALSO GAIN MORE FROM THE LEARNING EXPERIENCE. EXAMPLES OF THESE STRATEGIES, SOME OF WHICH FEATURED IN A NUMBER OF LESSONS INCLUDE: BRAINSTORMING EXERCISES, PAIR AND GROUP WORK, INVESTIGATIONS AND EXPERIMENTS, CASE STUDIES, WORKSHEET ACTIVITIES, QUIZZES, PROJECT WORK, STUDENT PRESENTATIONS AND DEBATES. WHILE THE USE OF A RANGE OF STRATEGIES WAS NOTABLE IN SOME OF THE CLASSES, THIS WAS NOT THE CASE IN ALL LESSONS. AS A RESULT IT IS RECOMMENDED THAT, WHERE APPLICABLE, CONSIDERATION BE GIVEN TO THE IMPACT THAT SUCH AN APPROACH CAN MAKE TO CLASS MOMENTUM AND STUDENTS' ENGAGEMENT LEVELS.

In a senior cycle class visited, excellent use was made of a students' homework exercise, which took the form of a worksheet that the teacher had pre-prepared on the topic under discussion, to involve students fully in the lesson. The worksheet, which had been completed by students for homework, formed the basis of the lesson and guided and directed lesson content. The approach also ensured

that any difficulties encountered by students when completing the worksheet at home and any questions that arose for them with regard to the topic being explored, could be aired and clarified during the lesson. This approach meant that students were highly focused on lesson content.

Students' contributions were fully encouraged, warmly welcomed, readily acknowledged and appropriately affirmed. In the majority of classes there was a good show of students' hands to answer any questions posed or contribute to any invitations for opinions provided by teachers. Students' answering demonstrated a good level of knowledge of the topics being taught. Students also appeared confident and happy to freely contribute to general class content. In situations where students were finding it difficult to answer a question posed, teachers were very supportive and encouraging and assisted students in responding quickly and accurately, thereby avoiding any embarrassment on the part of the student. Many of the questions posed sought students to recall information previously learned. It is recommended that the department explore the greater use of higher-order type questions, which require students to apply learned information to a range of different scenarios. It was encouraging to see the natural inclusion, in some lessons, of the *cúpla focail as Gaeilge*, for example, the use of the phrase *lámha suas*.

Teachers were very conscientious with regard to noting students' completion or non-completion of assigned work. It was clear, from the various exchanges that were observed and the systems that teachers have established, that expectations regarding students' application to their studies and assigned work are very high. The department, for example, issues letters to the parents of all students studying Home Economics, which outlines the parental support and encouragement that is required regarding students' practical food studies work.

The department requires students of Home Economics to maintain subject folders. These take the form of highly organised files. These files include; notes, which often take the form of tabular style revision notes which involve students in their preparation, worksheets designed to support topics being taught and completed assessments, which will be referred to again in the next section of the report. These are stored in the home economics rooms and collected by students at the start of every lesson.

The range of craftwork completed by Junior Certificate students for the design and craftwork optional study area is most impressive. A variety of craft options is open to students including knitting, patchwork, crochet, cross-stitch and embroidery. In addition to this, the items completed by individual students are wide-ranging, original and highly creative. Projects are beautifully presented in covered boxes and complete with neatly executed reports. The department is highly commended for its guidance of students' work in this area, for encouraging students to choose a craft that they like and for fostering students' input and creativity in terms of the product itself.

## **ASSESSMENT**

Students' folders housed a series of previously assigned assessment papers which, it is good to note, reflected the style of questions provided on past State examination papers. As in the main, the questions provided were based on Section A type questions, it is recommended that the greater inclusion of Section B, and where relevant Section C, type questions be explored. Some of the folders examined, for example third-year folders, contained assessments that the students had completed in first and second year, in addition to those completed during the current school year. This was most impressive. In addition to the grading of students' work, correction of the assessment papers provided some good examples of comment-based marking. This approach, which reflects the principles of Assessment for Learning (AfL) and provides students with constructive feedback on their work, is praised and further encouraged. Information on this approach can be accessed on the website of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment at [www.ncca.ie](http://www.ncca.ie). The students' folders also contained a bar-chart style graph of students' progress in home economics assessments. This graph, which is prepared by students themselves, is a very clever way of involving students in tracking their achievement in Home Economics over a given period. This is also used at the annual parent-teacher meetings to inform feedback provided to parents or guardians. This strategy is highly praised. At key times of the school year students studying Home Economics in any one particular year group are provided with common assessment papers. This is noted as best practice. All aspects of students' coursework, including practical, project and journal work, is assessed by the department. The

department is very systematic in the recording of students' progress and achievement in the subject. School reports are issued to parents twice annually. As a means of consolidating all the good work that is taking place, it is recommended that the department devise a subject-specific assessment policy.

The department is to be praised for the comprehensiveness of its draft subject-specific homework policy. The draft policy outlines the purpose of setting homework, systems employed, the type and amount of homework to be assigned to each year group, a timetable for the completion of practical and project work, modes of record keeping and ways of helping students to produce better quality homework. The department is encouraged to finalise its approach with regard to the remaining areas, that is, homework for students with special educational needs, approaches to evaluating the success of the department's homework policy and how the policy relates to the school's mission statement and its overall school policy regarding homework. In all classes visited, there was evidence of homework being assigned and in a fashion that was consistent with the approach determined in the policy. The regular monitoring of students' homework was also apparent. There was evidence of the assigning of a variety of homework exercises. These different student assignments supported the development of a range of skills including research, analytical, presentation and memorisation. This varied approach is applauded.

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

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Overall, uptake levels in Home Economics are relatively healthy, even though the number of girls studying the subject is significantly higher than the number of boys.
- While students are required to make their subject choices prior to entry, the school operates a system of open subject choice, whereby student demand determines eventual subject bands.
- Management is very supportive of Home Economics and of the work of the home economics department. Timetabling of the subject is quite favourable, the subject is well resourced and management provides some formal time for subject department planning.
- Home economics students are encouraged to aim for high academic standards and their success in the pursuit of this goal is noted.
- There is evidence of a highly collaborative spirit amongst the members of the home economics department, both with regard to the development of a subject plan and in planning for the delivery of the curriculum.
- Common programmes of work have been agreed and devised for all year groups and some of the schemes that have been prepared are quite well developed.
- The home economics department is highly organised and has established a number of very impressive systems with regard to fostering high standards of student participation and application to their work.
- The teaching observed reflected many of the principles of best practice and students' learning and achievement was apparent.
- The department is highly commended for its approach to the design and craftwork area of the Junior Certificate course and for the resulting impressive collection of student work.
- The department has developed highly effective systems with regard to homework and the assessment of students' progress and achievement in Home Economics.

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

- The school is encouraged to consider providing incoming first-year students with some level of exposure to a range of subjects before they are required to select the subjects they wish to study for the Junior Certificate examination.
- Due to a current lack of accommodation in the school the home economics rooms need to be shared with other departments. For the reasons outlined in the body of the report, this situation is not ideal. It is to be hoped that when circumstances improve this situation might be remedied.
- The preparation of a subject-specific safety statement is recommended.

- The suggestions contained in the body of the report with regard to enhancing the department's schemes of work should be considered.
- Where relevant, the greater inclusion in lessons of a range of teaching strategies, along with the introduction of more activity-based methodologies is recommended.
- The department is encouraged to formalise its very methodical approach to assessment through the preparation of subject-specific assessment policy.

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