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*The Education and Training Inspectorate -
Promoting Improvement*



Providing Inspection Services for
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Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure

Education and Training Inspectorate

Report of a Focused Inspection

**Castle Gardens Primary School
Newtownards**

Inspected: October 2009

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 SCHOOL CONTEXT

Since the last inspection, Castle Gardens Primary School has been re-located to a new site; it is now situated in a residential area on the outskirts of Newtownards, County Down. The present school building was opened in 2001 and is a modern purpose-built school. Originally, the new school was designed to accommodate an intake of three of each year group; however, these numbers have never been realised. As a result, the maintenance of the surplus accommodation is having a detrimental impact on the school's budget. The school has a wide catchment area with most of the children coming from the town and surrounding areas. Over the past five years, the enrolment has declined and currently stands at 306. At the time of the inspection, 16% of the children were entitled to receive free school meals and approximately 20% of the children are identified as having special educational needs.

1.2 FOCUS

The inspection focused on the quality of the children's achievements and standards in literacy and numeracy; the quality of provision for learning; and the quality of leadership and management. The inspection includes reference to the contribution of information and communication technology (ICT) in promoting and supporting learning. In addition, the school's arrangements for pastoral care, including child protection, are evaluated.

1.3 THE VIEWS OF THE PARENTS, TEACHERS, GOVERNORS AND CHILDREN

The arrangements for the inspection included the opportunity for the parents and the teaching staff to complete a confidential questionnaire prior to the inspection as well as meetings with representatives from the Board of Governors (governors) and groups of children from years 6 and 7. One hundred and twelve questionnaires were issued to the parents; 50% were returned to the Department of Education (DE) and 33 contained additional written comments. The responses from the questionnaires indicated that almost all of the parents are satisfied with all aspects of the life and work of the school. In particular the parents appreciate the approachable and professional Principal; the friendly, dedicated teachers; the good levels of communication between school and home; and the strong commitment to the pastoral care of the children.

The governors spoke very positively about the welcoming atmosphere within the school, the commitment of the Principal and the staff's hard work and dedication in the interests of the children and the wider community.

Eight of the teaching staff responded to the online teacher questionnaire, one included a written comment about the life and work of the school. The responses were unanimously positive about all aspects of the school; and the teacher praised the Principal's caring approach and highlighted the team spirit among the staff as a strength.

The year 6 children indicated that they are happy and feel secure in school; they know who to speak to if they have a concern. The year 7 children contributed positively to the discussion on healthy eating and physical activity. The Education and Training Inspectorate has reported to the Principal and representatives of the governors the main messages emerging from the questionnaires and the discussions.

1.4 PASTORAL CARE

The quality of the arrangements for pastoral care in the school is outstanding. A particular feature of the school is its strong family atmosphere and the warm and friendly welcome given to visitors. The development of the children's personal, social and emotional development is given high priority by the staff and is characterised by mutual respect and excellent working relationships at all levels. The classroom assistants, office staff, cleaning staff and other ancillary personnel contribute significantly to promoting and maintaining a pleasant working environment for the children. The school regularly awards achievement incentives to encourage the children's sense of self-esteem and self-confidence and operates a successful 'buddy' system to ensure that all of the children are cared for in the playground. The children are friendly, polite to visitors and their behaviour is exemplary. When given the opportunity to work in pairs or in small groups, the children co-operate well with one another.

The children's learning experiences are enhanced through a range of visitors who come to share their experiences with the children, links with other local schools, participation in competitions and sporting and music events, involvement in the Schools' Community Relations Programme and visits to places of educational interest. Music and drama play an important role in the life of the school. The children have many opportunities to perform and sing in the concerts, plays and musicals that are organised regularly. The children have enjoyed success in the Ulster Television (UTV) Choir of the Year Competition.

The school contributes to selected charities and appropriate emphasis is placed on caring for others in both the local and the wider communities.

The children benefit from very good opportunities to participate in a wide range of extra-curricular activities including music, drama and sports. The school has employed a National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) counsellor to support children experiencing emotional difficulties.

1.5 CHILD PROTECTION

The school has very good arrangements in place for safeguarding children. These arrangements reflect the guidance issued by the Department of Education.

1.6 HEALTHY EATING AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

The school gives very good attention to promoting healthy eating and physical activity, for example, through the provision of the fruit break, popular healthy school meals and a wide range of sporting opportunities, all of which encourage the children to adopt healthy lifestyles.

1.7 LINKS WITH PARENTS AND THE LOCAL COMMUNITY

The school has developed very good communication and links with the parents; there are regular opportunities for the parents to consult with the teachers both formally and informally. The children's progress is monitored through a combination of class tests, mid- and end-of-year assessments. The parents attend two meetings each year, at which they are given information on their child's progress. In addition, a meeting is held, for each year group, to share information with the parents about the curriculum.

There is an active Parent Teacher Association (PTA) which provides additional support and resources; most recently the PTA purchased an interactive whiteboard which significantly extends the teaching and learning opportunities throughout the school.

2. ACHIEVEMENTS AND STANDARDS

2.1 LEARNING

Almost all the children demonstrate high levels of motivation and positive attitudes to their learning. They complete tasks co-operatively and demonstrate pride and enjoyment in their learning. The children interact confidently with their teachers.

The classrooms and communal learning areas are stimulating and well organised. Communal areas are used to provide extended learning activities and give the children opportunities to develop independence; for example, during the inspection year 7 children worked independently on computers.

An analysis of the key stage (KS) 1 and KS2 assessment data over the past three years shows that, in English, the school's performance has fluctuated; the most recent data indicates that compared to all primary schools in Northern Ireland (NI) it is above the average. Compared to schools in a similar free school meals category, the levels of attainment in English are below the average.

In Mathematics the school's performance over the past three years has also fluctuated; the most recent data indicates that standards have improved and shows that standards are above the NI average. When compared with schools in a similar free schools meals category, the levels of attainment in Mathematics are just below the average.

2.2 ENGLISH AND LITERACY

The quality of the provision for English and literacy in the school is satisfactory. The annual schemes of work provide a useful framework for progression. In the teachers' six-weekly plans, literacy across the curriculum and the three modes of language - talking and listening, reading and writing - are given due attention, but are not yet integrated fully within the framework of the Northern Ireland Curriculum (NIC). Thinking Skills and Personal Capabilities have not yet been included within these plans and developed coherently through a range of well-planned classroom activities.

The review and updating of the literacy policy, schemes of work and planning are matters of urgency. The literacy co-ordinator, in conjunction with the senior management team, needs to draw up appropriate action plans which should be reflected in the school development plan (SDP).

In the foundation stage (FS) and KS1, play-based learning promotes the development of children's oral skills and helps to develop the children's confidence. Teachers need to ensure that talking and listening opportunities are exploited more fully to extend the children's vocabulary and thinking skills.

As they progress through KS2, the children's talking and listening are supported through group and paired work. The teachers need to ensure that group discussion is appropriately structured and that roles and responsibilities are assigned to group members in order to develop appropriately sophisticated responses.

In the FS and KS1, the children are acquiring basic reading skills through the development of phonological awareness, as well as through shared and guided reading. Timetabled access to an attractive and well-stocked central library and class libraries encourages the children to browse and handle books appropriately. Enjoyment of reading is promoted further by sustained silent reading in KS2 classes. During the inspection, the children were

observed reading aloud from an increasingly demanding range of texts. They did so fluently and spoke enthusiastically about their enjoyment of reading. The standard of reading observed and the results of the standardised tests suggest that, by the end of KS2, the majority of children are achieving at a level corresponding with their ability.

In the FS the children are beginning to experiment with letter and word formation through a range of play-based activities. In KS1 and KS2 there are some examples of sustained writing by the children in displays and workbooks. In the children's workbooks there is an over-reliance on closed comprehension and grammar exercises and worksheets; although the standard of accuracy in these tasks is good, the teachers need to ensure that independent and extended writing are developed further and are prioritised in their planning and classroom practice. Opportunities for the children to use ICT for research and drafting, are included in teachers' planning. During the inspection small groups of children were observed using computers independently, or in pairs, to support their learning.

2.3 MATHEMATICS AND NUMERACY

The quality of the children's experiences in mathematics is satisfactory. The work undertaken in the early years provides a solid foundation for future developments in mathematics. The younger children are introduced to mathematics through a variety of appropriate experiences including structured play, stories and games which involve them actively in their learning. They clearly enjoy these activities and are gaining in confidence. During the inspection many of the younger children demonstrated their ability to sort, count, match and identify colour, shape and numbers.

By the end of KS1, the children have a good level of understanding of place value and undertake accurately basic number operations. In addition, they can recognise common shapes, measure in a variety of units and present information in a number of appropriate ways.

In both key stages, the children's written calculations are mostly accurate and the majority show a good understanding of place value and other aspects of number. Overall there tends to be repetition of vertical sums and over-use of worksheets. It will be important to provide the children with a wider range of opportunities to undertake more open-ended, investigative activities and provide opportunities and contexts where they can apply their mathematical learning and develop greater flexibility in their thinking.

Although there is a policy for mathematics, whole-school planning is too general and needs further development. The yearly overview lacks breadth and balance and provides little detail of the progression required across the attainment targets for each year group and key stage. The teachers' individual planning for mathematics generally sets out the intended learning outcomes and there are useful sections on the activities and resources to be used.

Most of the children are making appropriate progress in number, data handling and aspects of measures; many are able to demonstrate knowledge and apply skills of place value, multiplication and estimation in real-life contexts. Some children, however, particularly the more able learners, would benefit from greater challenge and the opportunity to develop further their flexibility as mathematical thinkers. There is a need for the children to be encouraged and provided with the opportunity to explain their thinking processes. In the best practice, ICT is used to support and consolidate teaching and learning in mathematics.

3. THE QUALITY OF PROVISION FOR LEARNING

3.1 PLANNING

The school has appropriately identified the need to review the planning and several of the core policy documents including literacy and numeracy to reflect more fully the NIC. Over the years, the teachers have developed comprehensive planning. In the best practice, the teachers are planning for the strategies outlined in the NIC. There is a need to develop further the planning to include purposeful evaluation; to focus more sharply on the learning outcomes for the children; to promote greater coherence in the children's experiences across the curriculum beyond the basic use of textbooks and worksheets; and ensure that the learning experiences provided within each class are appropriately differentiated to meet more closely the ability of all the children. There is a need for all of the teachers to work collaboratively to ensure continuity and systematic progression in the children's learning.

3.2 TEACHING

During the inspection, the quality of the teaching observed ranged from satisfactory to very good; the majority of the teaching was good or better. In the best practice, the teachers shared the learning intentions and negotiated the success criteria with the children to focus effectively their attention and to consolidate the learning. In the less effective practice, there was an over-emphasis on whole class teaching when the lessons were overly directed by the teacher. There is a need to improve the organisation of lessons and management of classroom routines to reflect more fully the underlying principles of the NIC.

3.3 ASSESSMENT

Assessment for learning is identified as a priority in the current SDP. The school has identified appropriately the need to develop further its use of data to inform planning, to set appropriate targets for individual children and to evaluate the learning programme.

The teachers use a range of standardised and non-standardised testing to identify the children's needs and achievements in English and mathematics. The parents are kept informed regarding their children's progress through regular parent/teacher meetings and annual reports and an open-door policy for informal consultations.

The majority of the marking is of a supportive nature which acknowledges and praises the children's efforts. In the best practice the marking includes extended and evaluative feedback for the children; however, there is a need to develop further the monitoring of the internal and external performance data of the children's attainment to take more account of the year on year trends that are emerging.

3.4 SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

The quality of the provision for special educational needs is good. The school demonstrates an inclusive ethos which is characterised by the commitment of the staff to integrate and support children with a diverse range of needs. There is effective early identification of children who require additional intervention and good links are made with staff from a broad range of outreach services. During the inspection, there was evidence of children being given access to all aspects of the curriculum, making progress and benefiting from the additional support being provided. There is evidence that the children are making improvements as a result of this intervention.

The special educational needs co-ordinator (SENCO) keeps detailed records of the children's progress, using a range of diagnostic testing. These records inform the support provided in the bright, attractive withdrawal unit. The teacher in this unit creates an inclusive, child-centred environment and works very effectively with the small groups attending.

The children's individual education plans (IEPs) are written and reviewed in consultation between the class teachers and the SENCO; there is regular and timely communication with parents. Teaching in the withdrawal unit is informed by the needs identified in the IEPs and by regular consultation with class teachers. Assessment data is used effectively to target children's educational needs within the withdrawal unit and return them to mainstream class teaching once sufficient progress has been made.

In order to strengthen the good practice in the school, the SENCO needs to draw up an action plan which should be incorporated into the SDP. The action plan should include an evaluation of the most effective use of the classroom assistants in supporting the children's learning and the continuing professional developmental needs of the whole staff.

4. LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT

4.1 LEADERSHIP

The Principal has been in post for ten years; he is enthusiastic and hard-working; dedicated to the life and work of the school and to the well-being of the children and is highly supportive of the staff. The Principal, together with the Board of Governors, need to refocus on developing effective communications throughout the school and to review the roles and responsibilities of all staff and co-ordinators. There is a need for management, at all levels, to provide stronger curricular leadership in order to promote a broader range of teaching strategies and enrich the learning experiences for all of the children.

4.2 PLANNING FOR IMPROVEMENT

Recently, the Principal, assisted by South-Eastern Education and Library Board Curriculum Advisory and Support Service officers developed a one year Development Plan which identifies important areas for further development and could usefully form the basis of a SDP. The Principal's vision for the school is exemplified through a number of priorities for improvement, including the development of using data and target setting. The inspection findings would endorse this as an important priority. The school should consider adjusting its development plan to prioritise the areas identified for development through the inspection. The current SDP does not, meet fully the requirements of the School Development Plans Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2005. The school has not yet embarked on an effective process for self-evaluation.

4.3 RESOURCES, FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT AND GOVERNANCE

The Board of Governors are fully involved in the life of the school and support the Principal and the staff in the implementation of the SDP. The governors expressed their concerns about the negative impact of the falling enrolment and vacant accommodation on the school's budget.

4.4 ACCOMMODATION

The school building is modern, spacious and well-organised. Some of the additional rooms are being utilised to provide attractive and spacious accommodation for other areas of the curriculum, for example, a designated Music room and the 'Rainbow Room' which has been set aside for withdrawal sessions. The ICT suite and central library enhance the learning opportunities for the children. Good use is made of corridors and classrooms to celebrate the children's work and achievements. There are many bright and colourful displays depicting aspects of school life.

5. CONCLUSION

5.1 The strengths of the school include:

- the very positive ethos and the attractively presented learning environment;
- the high quality of the pastoral care arrangements and the good working relationships at all levels;
- the varied range of activities provided throughout the school year which enrich the children's experiences;
- the good quality of the teaching observed in the majority of the lessons; and
- the caring Principal and staff who display a high level of commitment to the welfare of the children.

5.2 Areas for Improvement:

- the need for management, at all levels, to provide stronger curricular leadership in order to promote a broader range of teaching strategies and enrich the learning experiences for all of the children;
- the need to develop further the school's development plan to ensure that the areas for improvement highlighted in this report are prioritised and that clear strategies for step-by-step implementation are developed, agreed and worked through; and
- the need to develop further the use of data to inform planning, to set targets for individual children and to track individual, class and whole school progress.

In most of the areas inspected the quality of education provided in this school is satisfactory; the strengths outweigh areas for improvement in the provision. The inspection has identified areas for improvement in, learning and teaching and leadership and management which need to be addressed if the needs of all the children are to be met more effectively.

The Education and Training Inspectorate will monitor and report on the school's progress in addressing the areas for improvement.

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