

Report of a Post-primary Inspection  
Aquinas Diocesan Grammar School

October 2024



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# **1. INTRODUCTION**

## **A. BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

Aquinas Diocesan Grammar School is a co-educational 11-18, voluntary grammar school, founded in 1993. The school draws its pupils from a wide catchment area. The school is regularly over-subscribed; pupil enrolment has increased by 15% in the last six years and currently stands at 970. The proportion of pupils with free school meal entitlement is 5.6%, and 8.5% of pupils are identified as having special educational needs (SEN).

Reflecting the diocesan character of the school, there is a purpose-built chaplaincy; the chaplain serves the whole school community and is a member of the Central Leadership Team (CLT). New appointments to the CLT include the principal and a vice-principal in September 2023 and three new senior leaders in the last three years.

## **B. VIEWS OF PUPILS, PARENTS AND STAFF**

The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) issued online confidential questionnaires to pupils, parents and staff in advance of the inspection.

Forty-three percent (422) of all pupils responded to the questionnaire; the responses were generally highly positive. Almost all pupils: feel that they are treated with care and respect, enjoy school and report that they find lessons interesting and challenging to varying levels. All pupils acknowledge that their achievements and talents are recognised and celebrated and that they are provided with good quality resources to support their learning. All the year 8 and 9 pupils who responded to the questionnaire highlighted how well they were supported by their teachers in settling into the school.

A significant minority (41%) of parents responded to the questionnaire, one-third of whom provided additional written responses. Most (75%) of the written responses were wholly positive with parents acknowledging high levels of satisfaction with all aspects of the provision. They specifically appreciated the pastoral care provided across the school, and the dedicated and approachable staff who helped their child to progress in all aspects of learning. Nearly all parents: are content with the subject choices their child can access; are happy with their child's learning experiences in the school; and know about the school's vision and aims.

Most of the teachers (82%) responded to the questionnaire and all of their responses were highly positive. All of the teachers are clear about the school's vision and the contribution they make to achieve the vision. Almost all of the teachers believe they have benefitted from effective teacher professional learning and feel their views are sought, valued and acted upon.

Just under one-half (45%) of the non-teaching staff responded to the questionnaires and their responses were also positive. All feel respected in the school to varying degrees and all feel that their work is valued by the school community.

A summary of the questionnaire responses, including a small number of issues, was shared with the principal and the chair of governors.

## **C. THE PROCESS OF INSPECTION**

The ETI worked alongside the school to consider how well the school:

- has identified and articulates its vision;
- prioritises actions to achieve the vision;
- overcomes the main challenges it faces;
- monitors and reviews progression to identify, celebrate and embed success; and
- grows and develops an inclusive community of learning.

## **2. SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS**

- Pupils and staff live out the vision skilfully in all aspects of school life to achieve 'personal, spiritual and educational excellence', enabling the 'truth to set them free'.
- Pupils attain well and develop their wider skills across the school and beyond the classroom. They thrive through an interesting and diverse range of enrichment and leadership opportunities.
- Planning, teaching and assessment was almost always effective, with pupils engaged actively in their learning and challenged in their thinking through their teachers' skilful questioning and feedback.
- The pupils' successes are celebrated widely across and beyond the school.
- As staff begin to re-engage with the sharing of effective practice, the school has identified appropriately that action planning at all levels will benefit from first-hand evaluations of learning and teaching to inform precise future targets.
- Pupils are supported effectively through a range of enabling strategies and creative initiatives to overcome challenges and barriers ensuring they progress well.
- Pupils enjoy a dynamic, flexible curriculum, enhanced greatly by the extra-curricular provision.
- A strong community of learning permeates the school.

- At the time of the inspection, the evidence provided by the school demonstrates that the arrangements for child and adult protection align to the current statutory guidance.

Area for consideration:

- to use evaluations of learning and teaching to better inform precise targets for action planning.

### **3. MAIN REPORT**

#### **A. SETTING THE VISION**

The school achieves its vision well in inspiring pupils to achieve ‘personal, spiritual and educational excellence’. Pupils and staff live out the vision through the Catholic ethos and commitment to their motto ‘Veritas Liberabit’ (the truth will set you free). The vision is informed through appropriate and extensive consultation with the school community and beyond and is understood well by the pupils, parents, staff, governors and the wider school community.

The school is in year one of a new school development plan. Self-evaluation processes are identifying appropriately priorities for development, and associated staff professional learning aligns closely to the vision. As staff begin to re-engage with the sharing of effective practice, the school has identified appropriately that action planning at all levels will benefit from first-hand evaluations of learning and teaching to inform precise future targets.

Governors are passionately committed to the vision and ethos of the school. Their collective experience and knowledge enables them to provide appropriate support, encouragement and constructive challenge to the school’s CLT. The governors have a clear understanding of the school’s current context and know well the life and work of the school.

#### **B. IMPLEMENTING AND IMPROVING TO ACHIEVE THE VISION**

The planning, teaching and assessment were almost always effective in promoting successful learning. In the most effective lessons, the pupils engaged actively in fast-paced and well-resourced high-quality learning. The pupils apply their knowledge, understanding and skills well across the curriculum in response to their teachers’ skilful probing questions which challenge and extend their thinking. They use oral feedback, and peer and self-assessment to improve the standards and accuracy of their work. Through engaging purposefully in pairs and in group work, the pupils consolidate their understanding of concepts and interrogate lines of enquiry. The pupils excel through their teachers’ modelling of effective communication skills in analysis, interpretation and evaluation, using subject specific knowledge and understanding. The pupils are encouraged to: think critically; do their best; listen to and respect the views of others; and develop understanding, empathy and skills for life beyond academic success.

Through the school implementing its vision, pupils at all key stages enjoy a broad and dynamic curriculum which meets the requirements of the Entitlement Framework and the Northern Ireland Curriculum. It provides pupils with the opportunity to thrive through an interesting and diverse range of enrichment, extra-curricular and leadership opportunities. The curriculum is reviewed regularly, informed by the pupils' views, attainment, needs, aspirations and pastoral information. In discussions with pupils, they reported how much they enjoy the 'Feel Good Friday' activities to boost their mood and well-being and appreciate developing wider skills through their involvement in events, such as the annual Shakespeare festival.

The whole-school planning for the development of the pupils' communication skills is a key strength. It includes: a common approach to feedback; enhancing oracy and structured talking and listening; and encouraging wider reading and precision in evaluation and synthesis in written work. These strategies have been effective in improving further the standards attained by the pupils.

The curriculum is enhanced well by a diverse enrichment programme for pupils in years 13 and 14 and an interesting range of extra-curricular opportunities for all pupils to enhance their personal and social development, embrace healthy lifestyles, build resilience, resolve conflict positively and acquire positive attitudes and dispositions to their learning. A key strength of the extra-curricular provision is reflected in the range of opportunities available, with approximately four-fifths of all pupils taking part in one or more activity. The school's review of the provision for learning for life and work (LLW), and the outworking of the Relationship and Sexuality Education policy, is opportune as the pupils reported in discussions with inspectors that they would value more opportunities to explore issues regarding identity, human rights, equality and social justice.

The well-planned careers education, information, advice and guidance (CEIAG) provision supports the pupils effectively at key transition stages. This includes careers information events, pupil interviews and presentations from former pupils. The school collaborates effectively with local employers and other stakeholders, to support the pupils to make informed choices. In-house professional learning empowers non-specialist careers teachers to provide effective CEIAG. At post-16, the pupils benefit from work experience, university finance information and interview practice which prepares them well for transition beyond school. The school monitors their leavers' destinations along with attainment in public examinations to assess the success rate of most pupils being able to follow their preferred progression route to continue to review and refine the provision.

The school has prioritised appropriately the development of the pupils' digital skills. This includes the use of stimulating enrichment activities, a review of the curriculum at Key Stage (KS) 3 to develop skills such as robotics, coding, programming and creative arts, and the introduction of the digital leaders to support the delivery of the KS 3 curriculum. The digital leaders communicate effectively with younger pupils as positive role models in addressing the gender imbalance in the uptake of digital technology.

## **C. BUILDING EQUITY**

The school is highly responsive in implementing a range of strategies and creative initiatives to enable pupils to overcome barriers and challenges in their learning and daily lives. The individuality of each young person is valued and informs bespoke support. The pupils want to come to school, as shown in the high attendance rate, and in how they rise to meet the high expectations of them in class and in all aspects of school life.

The innovative SEN provision is constantly evolving through the views of pupils, parents and the evaluation of learning experiences and outcomes. Well-developed support strategies adopted by staff take account of the pupils' growing maturity and their changing educational and pastoral needs. The pupils' personal learning plans (PLPs) include individualised subject specific targets which are appropriate, and staff professional learning (SPL) has helped to progress the quality and value of these.

The pupils in KS 3 benefit from the ongoing sixth form mentoring support in English, mathematics and science that the school began through the Department of Education's Engage programme. This mentoring programme impacts positively on the progress the KS 3 pupils make and the skills older pupils acquire as mentors. An innovative e-learning support strategy is an effective way for staff to monitor the impact of all the support strategies across the subjects for the pupils.

The pupils are keen to make a difference and treat each other fairly. In response to the summer anti-immigration protests, year 13 pupils initiated a pupil-led cultural committee to plan events and processes to celebrate the many cultures represented across the school community. The pupils use assemblies, social media, posters and 'Form-class' time to discuss and plan events to celebrate cultural diversity, appreciating the richness of the myriad of cultures through music, costume, food and dance.

In equipping the pupils as informed leaders, serving others, to better their community, the school has revived their shared education partnership which now includes two local schools to enable pupils to learn with, and from, a greater range of differing perspectives, to be at ease with difference, and to understand how conflicts arise.

## **D. EMBEDDING SUCCESS**

The pupils' successes personally, spiritually and educationally are celebrated widely across and beyond the school. The pupils spoke with inspectors at length about how their school celebrates their successes in sports, music, reading, drama, public speaking, languages, science through awards, the 'Spirit of Aquinas Award' assemblies, social media, displays and daily praise. They value how they are encouraged to adopt 'success as a habit' in all they do daily. They relish earning points for their 'Houses' through full engagement in producing high-quality work, thoughtful questioning, meeting deadlines, engaging in wider reading, and being kind, polite and helping others.

The pupils are curious, enthusiastic, and thoughtful learners who are increasingly independent as they progress across the key stages. By year 14, the pupils progress well holistically through leadership opportunities across the school, including as anti-bullying, wellbeing, or chaplaincy mentors. A key strength is how the pupils develop their wider skills across the school and beyond the classroom with understated confidence. They develop concern for others through a well-planned and diverse enrichment programme which includes: understanding the importance of organ donation and altruism; advocacy skills through mock trials; problem solving through coding; and a faith formation group reflecting on ways to show faith through charitable and community projects.

The pupils attain highly in public examinations, which are in line with the school's internal information and targets in both GCSE and A Level qualifications, and in a wide range of accredited programmes beyond the curriculum. Regular monitoring and review of pupil progress across all subjects allows this information to be shared with parents and the pupils themselves in a timely way.

## **E. GROWING A COMMUNITY OF LEARNING**

A strong sense of community permeates the school. The pupils have meaningful opportunities to reflect on the ways they learn best to inform how their teachers promote stimulating learning experiences within real and relevant contexts. This vibrant community of learning empowers the pupils to step out of their comfort zone in embracing new challenges such as: being science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) ambassadors in local primary schools; leading workshops in supporting newcomer pupils; engaging in a new sport; or applying rigorous research methodologies in their own investigations.

The pupils benefit from opportunities to learn with and from others in the workplace, including local employers and other stakeholders. A wide range of partners support the pupils' wellbeing and resilience including YoungMinds, Inspire, NEXUS and the AWARE charity, to support pupils well in dealing with problems and challenges. Through the chaplaincy, retreats and liturgical celebrations, the pupils are encouraged to learn from others in developing their spiritual awareness for life beyond school, including learning from others of differing perspectives. In supporting a range of charities, the pupils have high levels of social awareness and compassion for others.

The staff benefit from a flexible and responsive professional learning programme which is research informed and evidence-based. The strong focus on reflective practice, whole-school planning for communication skills and the relaunch of the 'trusted colleague network' approach to observing and reflecting on practice has helped to embed effective practice, including in how the pupils break down complex writing tasks which has contributed to an improvement in their performance in public examinations. The importance of ongoing internal and external staff professional learning is reflected in the number of staff engaging in further educational study, and providing workshops at conferences, teacher education colleges and with other



schools. The school is also an active member of its area learning community including, through sharing best practice at teacher and leadership levels. The school's senior leaders and governors prioritise the wellbeing of staff through a range of supportive approaches including fun team building exercised, bereavement education and the refurbishment of the gym with designated time for staff.

## **F. CHILD PROTECTION**

At the time of the inspection, the evidence provided by the school demonstrates that the arrangements for child and adult protection align to the current statutory guidance. In discussions with inspectors, the pupils reported that they feel safe and secure in school. They know what to do and who to speak to if they have any concerns about their safety or wellbeing.

## **4. GOING FORWARD**

Aquinas Diocesan Grammar School achieves its vision well in inspiring pupils to achieve 'personal, spiritual and educational excellence'. The pupils and staff live out the vision through the Catholic ethos and commitment to their motto 'Veritas Liberabit' on a daily basis.

Aquinas Diocesan Grammar School has some highly effective practice from which other schools may learn, including: how the school defines, celebrates and embeds success; and the dynamic curricular and extra-curricular learning experiences. The ETI will continue to work with Aquinas Diocesan Grammar School and support them in the dissemination of their work.

The school is well placed to take forward the area for consideration detailed in this report.

## 5. APPENDIX

### APPENDIX 1: QUANTITATIVE TERMS

In this report, proportions may be described as percentages, common fractions and in more general quantitative terms. Where more general terms are used, they should be interpreted as follows:

Almost/nearly all	-	more than 90%
Most	-	75% - 90%
A majority	-	50% - 74%
A significant minority	-	30% - 49%
A minority	-	10% - 29%
Very few/a small number	-	less than 10%

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