

Report of a Post-primary Inspection
St Colmcille's High School

October 2024



Contents

1. INTRODUCTION.....	1
A. BACKGROUND INFORMATION.....	1
B. VIEWS OF PUPILS, PARENTS AND STAFF.....	1
C. THE PROCESS OF INSPECTION.....	2
2. SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS.....	2
3. MAIN REPORT	3
A. SETTING THE VISION.....	3
B. IMPLEMENTING AND IMPROVING TO ACHIEVE THE VISION	4
C. BUILDING EQUITY	5
D. DEFINING, CELEBRATING AND EMBEDDING SUCCESS.....	6
E. GROWING A COMMUNITY OF LEARNING	7
F. CHILD PROTECTION	7
4. GOING FORWARD.....	7
5. APPENDICES	9
APPENDIX 1: HEALTH & SAFETY	9
APPENDIX 2: QUANTITATIVE TERMS	10
APPENDIX 3: SMALL SCHOOLS	11

1. INTRODUCTION

A. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

St Colmcille's High School is a co-educational, maintained non-selective school for pupils aged 11 to 16. It is situated in the small rural community of Crossgar, and pupils attend the school from the local and wider community. The enrolment has increased from 267 in 2019 to 360 in 2024; 29% of the pupils have free school meals entitlement. One-third of the pupils have a special educational need (SEN), almost 40% of whom have a statement of SEN.

The senior leaders, in consultation and agreement with parents and the Education Authority (EA), have replaced classroom assistance hours with additional teacher support which is provided as in-class or withdrawal small group support. A specialist provisions in mainstream schools (SPiMS) class for key stage (KS) 3 pupils with social and communication needs opened at the end of September 2024 and full enrolment has not yet been reached. In recent years, a number of minor works has also been completed which has resulted in secure access points around the school and an attractive modern reception area.

The school is an 'Into Film' Ambassador School and was recently awarded the Audience Choice Award at the 'Into Film' Awards ceremony in London in June 2024. A small number of pupils are finalists in the ABP Angus Youth Challenge for 2024 which helps young people develop their knowledge and practical skills relating to sustainability within the local agri-food industry.

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-eight percent of the pupils responded to the questionnaire, with almost two-thirds of the responses from KS 4 pupils. Most of the pupils stated that: they are encouraged to set their own learning goals and targets; there are adults in the school they can talk to if they are worried; and the teachers and other adults in the school treat them with respect.

In discussions with the pupils, they reported that they enjoy being part of the St Colmcille's High School community and that they like the small rural location of the school as everyone is welcome and known. The pupils emphasised that they feel encouraged and well supported by their teachers and classroom assistants and there is a good range of extra-curricular and lunch time clubs such as girls' and boys' Gaelic football, camogie, science and maths clubs. They also said they enjoy practical learning, know that their achievements are recognised and are assured that staff will support them to overcome any challenges they face in their learning or personal lives.

Fifteen percent (45) of the parents responded to the questionnaire and most stated that their child is happy at school, making good progress and that they are content with the quality of teaching and pastoral support provided by the staff. Almost all of the parents reported that the school has good links with community organisations and clubs. Twenty-two of the parents provided additional written comments, with just over one-half commenting on the staff's care for their child and the strong sense of community that the school fosters. Additional comments around communication and staff absence were shared with the principal and two representatives from the board of governors.

Sixty-one percent of teachers (17) responded to the questionnaire, a small number of whom provided written responses. All of the teachers reported that they were clear about and had contributed to the school's vision, and that their views were sought, valued and acted upon. Sixty-three percent of non-teaching staff responded to the questionnaire (15). They reported that they all completed child protection and safeguarding training, with almost all responding that everyone in the school is respected and understood.

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

- The school's motto of 'Caring, Learning, Believing, Achieving,' underpins the commitment of the school community to valuing and supporting each individual pupil, in line with the school's vision.
- The school is proud to be at the heart of the local community. The pupils benefit from strong links with local businesses, sporting and cultural organisations and other schools in the area.
- A particular strength of the school is the nurturing approaches embraced by staff which reduce the barriers faced by many of the pupils.
- Self-evaluation processes have identified appropriate areas for development, together with a monitoring and evaluation schedule. Leaders at all levels need to monitor and review consistently the first-hand evidence of the pupils' learning.

- Planning, teaching and assessment were mostly effective in promoting successful learning. The pupils listen well, are ready to learn and can work flexibly and confidently, both independently and with their peers.
- The use of an unqualified teacher to teach one subject within the KS 4 curriculum is not in line with the [Department of Education's Circular 2023/07](#).
- Work-related learning in careers education, information, advice and guidance (CEIAG) for most of the pupils at key stage (KS) 4 is underdeveloped.
- The connected elements of the preventative curriculum, relationships and sexuality education and learning for life and work, are appropriately under review so that the pupils' learning experiences are more coherent and cohesive.
- The KS 3 pupils acquire and develop skills, understanding and knowledge through their participation in highly effective project-based learning, for example, they create and produce high-quality films.
- Success for the pupils is a key aspect of the school's vision. It is defined broadly to recognise progress made from individual starting points as well as the extra-curricular and wider achievements of the pupils, which are celebrated within the school and local community.
- At the time of the inspection, the evidence provided by the school demonstrates that the arrangements for child protection align to the current statutory guidance.

Areas for action:

- to develop further the school's self-evaluation processes through first-hand evidence of the pupils' learning by leaders at all levels and consultation with key stakeholders; and
- to cease the use of an unqualified teacher to teach one subject within the KS 4 curriculum and for the work-related learning element of CEIAG to be developed further.

3. MAIN REPORT

A. SETTING THE VISION

The care for pupils and support for their learning is central to the school's vision of recognising pupils' individual needs, hopes and aspirations and empowering them to reach their full potential. The school's motto of 'Caring, Learning, Believing and Achieving' is at the heart of the vision and supports very effectively the familial and welcoming atmosphere created by the staff and pupils. They are very proud that the school is rooted in their local rural community, and they value greatly the highly effective partnerships with local community groups and organisations. Through this collaborative work, the staff are supported to live out the school's vision and help pupils to succeed.

To achieve its vision more fully, the school is working appropriately on increasing pupil attendance, improving the provision for careers education advice and guidance (CEAIG) and implementing further processes to support assessment for learning and data analysis at classroom and departmental level. There are a small number of focussed and appropriate action plans but there is a need to move to and implement a school development plan which is supported by more effective processes for self-evaluation. This will require rigorous consultations with all stakeholders so that identified priorities are shared and agreed by the school community.

The board of governors is fully committed to the life and work of the school and understand its context extremely well. The governors are aware of the challenges in the recruitment of staff, particularly for technology, health and social care and Information and Communication Technology. They are completing a review of roles and responsibilities across the school to ensure that the staff structure is appropriate and supports the pastoral and curricular needs of the pupils. Consequently, there have been recent middle leadership appointments for assessment, special educational needs and CEAIG.

B. IMPLEMENTING AND IMPROVING TO ACHIEVE THE VISION

The pupils enjoy their learning, listen attentively during lessons and most engage confidently in individual, paired and group work, articulating well their opinions and experiences. In the most effective lessons, the pupils are very engaged and enthused where learning is set in real and relevant contexts, and they have opportunities to participate in investigative and enquiry-based learning. The work in the pupils' books is neat and presented well but there is an over-reliance on worksheet activities across the year groups which limits the opportunities for extended writing.

The staff convey a high level of care and respect for pupils and affirm pupil success, which is reflective of the school's vision. Additional classroom assistance or teacher support is given sensitively and purposefully. The use of adaptive teaching is inconsistent across the school and the pupils would benefit from a wider variety of choice across subjects, to showcase and express their learning, such as through presentations, projects and audio recordings.

A new assessment schedule has been introduced for 2024-25 which facilitates a more comprehensive review and alignment of pastoral and academic information and data, shared and used by all staff. This work is at an early stage of development and should inform an assessment policy, which is not yet in place, and identify clearly the procedures in place for controlled assessments.

Most of the pupils at KS 3 benefit from a broad and balanced curriculum. The year 8 pupils are unable to study technology and design due to the current level of staffing. This is appropriately being kept under review by the principal and governors. A notable strength of the KS 3 curriculum is the generous allocation of time to the study of the arts subjects, which is developing well the pupils' creativity skills.

The curriculum at KS 4 meets fully the requirements of the Entitlement Framework, with an appropriate blend of general and applied subjects. A small number of year 12 pupils reported that they were unable to study occupational studies in bench joinery and carpentry, French or music. It is important that the curriculum remains under review and is informed by the pupils' preferences, abilities and aspirations. The use of an unqualified teacher to teach one subject within the KS 4 curriculum is not in line with the [Department of Education's Circular 2023/07](#). The governors have provided assurances that this practice will cease with immediate effect.

At the end of year 12, around 50% of the pupils study courses or apprenticeships in the local college of further education. Just over 40% of the pupils progress to post-16 courses in other schools and around 5% go into employment. Most of the year 12 pupils who met with the inspectors were clear about their preferred destinations and courses when they leave school.

The provision for CEIAG is delivered through discrete lessons in KS 3 and KS 4. The Department for the Economy's independent careers advisor met with an inspector who discussed their role in providing school-based guidance to year 12 pupils and their parents, and the appropriate arrangement of individual careers guidance interviews. The recent appointment of a CEAIG co-ordinator provides an opportunity to develop further this work so that all pupils understand the skills and qualifications required for their future career. There is currently limited work-related learning experiences for most of the pupils at KS 4: this gap in provision should be addressed to help ensure the pupils are able to make informed choices at the end of KS 4.

There are extensive multi-agency partnerships in place to support the pastoral, personal and academic needs of the pupils. The school is participating in an Emotional Wellbeing Team in Schools (EWTS) programme provided by the local health trust, as part of the implementation of the Department of Education's [Children and Young People's Emotional Health and Wellbeing in Education Framework](#). Through this work, it is timely that the staff are completing a review of the whole school provision for the preventative curriculum and relationships and sexuality education (RSE) to enable greater consistency across the school, better use of the form period and comprehensive planning to support progressive learning experiences. There are a number of policies which have been reviewed recently by the school. A schedule for policy review would support more effectively this process, beginning with the policy for RSE and positive behaviour management.

C. BUILDING EQUITY

To realise the school's vision, the staff work with high levels of care and compassion, to build supportive relationships with the pupils, to understand their strengths as well as the challenges they may face, and to encourage the pupils to achieve. A range of evidence including detailed information from the feeder primary schools, pastoral information and the views of the pupils and their families enable the school to develop appropriate support plans for individual pupils. The provision for the pupils includes creative approaches to providing in-class support, such as team teaching;

closer monitoring of the impact of these approaches will enable the school to evaluate more fully the impact of this work. The KS 3 pupils in the school's SPiMS class, 'The Burrow', have settled well and are benefiting greatly from the accommodation and resources available to them, such as the sensory room and the calm area.

A particular strength of the school is the nurturing approaches embraced by staff which reduce the barriers faced by many of the pupils. For example, the staff work hard to provide a sensitive and empathetic learning environment, which includes the provision of quiet spaces where pupils can relax and socialise at lunchtime. The pupils report that they enjoy the availability of these spaces, the sensory resources and feel well supported by the staff. Bespoke external programmes address successfully aspects of the pupils' personal and social development and there are numerous opportunities for all pupils, including those with SEN to take on leadership roles such as wellbeing champions and peer mentors. The pupils are respectful of one another, and they embrace and include all members of the school community.

D. DEFINING, CELEBRATING AND EMBEDDING SUCCESS

Success for the pupils is a key aspect of the school's vision which is centred on supporting pupils to 'believe' in their capabilities and 'achieve' their goals. The pupils are achieving success in public examinations with most (77%) in the last academic year achieving five GCSE qualification at grades A* to C including English and mathematics. The school reports that the outcomes achieved by the pupils are in line with their ability and the school's internal assessments.

The school provides the pupils in years 8 and 9 with project-based learning opportunities through film-making, involving collaboration across six departments. This work is developing well the pupils' communication skills through: script writing, directing, acting and recording and involves learning experiences that replicate working in the creative industries. In the production of their films, pupils gain valuable skills by working with a local professional film-maker. The pupils' films were shown to the school and local community at the 'St Colmcille's Film Festival' and has been shown more widely after winning the 'Audience Choice' Award at the 'Into Film' Awards.

A small number of pupils met with inspectors and discussed their sense of pride in reaching the final of the prestigious ABP Angus Youth Challenge. This project on sustainable beef farming has required commitment over many months, including rearing calves, developing their ongoing understanding of sustainability and participating in training to use media to help promote their project.

The pupils across the year groups also audition for roles in the school's bi-annual musical which is currently in production. A larger number of pupils are enabled to participate through a range of 'back-stage' roles which align with pupil interests. This production is an important event for the school and is used well to develop pupil confidence, create special memories and promote their successes within the local community.

The school's social media platform is used effectively to share the achievements of the pupils with the wider community such as writing for National poetry day, participation in European Day of Languages and meeting the President of Ireland to discuss Global Sustainable goals.

E. GROWING A COMMUNITY OF LEARNING

The programme for whole staff professional learning is informed well by the changing pastoral needs of the pupils. The senior leaders have identified the need to audit professional learning across departments and pastoral teams in order to identify strengths for wider dissemination and areas for further consideration.

The school has developed effective partnerships with a number of external agencies who support the needs of the pupils and play a significant role in the local community. For example, the school facilities are used by the EA's Youth Service, in a new provision for the area which is attended by some of the pupils and their peers from other schools. The premises are also used by a wide range of external organisations for regular sporting, cultural and community events. There are well-established links with local businesses which enable, for example, owners to provide practical learning opportunities which help the KS 4 pupils when undertaking their controlled assessments in business studies. They also provide valuable sponsorship for the whole-school reward scheme and for key events in the life of the school. There are currently limited opportunities for the pupils to participate in shared lessons with other schools. A small number of written comments by pupils in the questionnaires indicated they would welcome more opportunities to meet and learn with pupils from other schools.

The school provides a range of ways through which pupils can share their ideas about their learning and their experiences of school life; in discussions with the inspectors, pupils reported that they are confident that any matters they raise will be addressed by the school. There is an active school council which has brought about tangible changes in school provision, such as timetabling arrangements and extra-curricular activities. There are also well-established collaborative approaches to improving learning and behaviour in which the pupils are encouraged to play an active role; these methods promote self-management and independence.

F. CHILD PROTECTION

At the time of the inspection, the evidence provided by the school demonstrates that the arrangements for child protection align to the current statutory guidance. In discussions with inspectors, almost all of 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

The school's motto of 'Caring, Learning, Believing and Achieving' exemplifies the vision and the steps to help pupils succeed. The pupils are supported well by the staff and local community. Through effective partnerships and collaboration with others, there is shared care for the pupils. The identified priorities are enabling the school to realise more fully its vision and a sharper and more strategic focus on learning and pupil engagement is central to supporting pupils to learn and achieve.

The ETI, through the engagement of the District Inspector, will continue to work with the school as it takes forward the areas for action detailed in the body of this report.

Inspectors identified aspects of highly effective practice from which others may learn. The aspect of practice which should be shared more widely is:

- the collaborative approach to project-based learning at KS 3.

5. APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1: HEALTH & SAFETY

There are occasions when a smaller bus is provided by Translink to take pupils home. Consequently, there are insufficient seats for all pupils with a small number having to take a later bus home, which can involve further bus connections. The EA, along with Translink, should collaborate further to provide sufficient transport arrangements so that all pupils do not experience unnecessary delays on their way home from school.

APPENDIX 2: 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%

APPENDIX 3: SMALL SCHOOLS

In all post-primary schools where the enrolment number is below the minimum number of 500 in years 8 to 12, as set out in the Department of Education's [Sustainable Schools Policy](#), it will be important that the employing authority, school governors and the staff plan for, and manage, issues related to the sustainability of the school provision and school budget, in order to address the current and future needs of the pupils and the staff.

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