

Report of a Post-primary Inspection
St Colm's High School, Draperstown

January 2025

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1. INTRODUCTION

A. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

St Colm's High School is a maintained, non-selective, co-educational, 11-18 all ability post-primary school located in the town of Draperstown. It attracts most of its pupils from Draperstown, Desertmartin and the surrounding rural area. Over one-fifth of the pupils (22%) have a special educational need (SEN) and around 16% of pupils have a free school meal entitlement (FSME). The principal has been in post since January 2021 and the vice-principal since September 2021.

The school is at the heart of the community and has well-established links with: community and social enterprise groups to support a range of initiatives; local businesses, particularly in the fields of engineering and construction; and sports clubs for the sharing of facilities. The youth club, 'Cornstore', is central to the work and outreach of the school, operating four nights per week and led by a youth tutor employed by the school and funded by the Education Authority (EA). The school is a member of the Magherafelt and Rural Learning Partnership (MRLP); the pupils can access a range of post-16 courses in the other schools and there are joint approaches to aspects of staff professional learning (SPL).

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.

Almost three-quarters (320) of the pupils from across all year groups responded to the questionnaire, with 70 additional written comments provided. Almost all of the pupils feel safe in school, know who they can talk to if they have any concerns and feel respected and cared for by the staff. They stated that staff care for them and help them settle well in their learning and they believe that the school is well thought of in their community. Most of the pupils learn how to manage their emotions and express them in a way that is helpful.

One-eighth (40) of the parents/carers responded to the questionnaire, 30 of whom provided written comments. Almost all indicated that their child is happy in school, they are aware of the safeguarding arrangements and believe that the school has good links with community organisations and clubs. Most consider that their child is making good progress in their learning and benefit from educational visits.

Over two-thirds (23) of the teaching staff responded to the questionnaire, with ten additional written comments provided. All staff reported that they have a clear understanding of the school's child protection arrangements, understand and contribute to the school vision and recognise the positive impact of strong community links on the pupils' learning. They feel that the achievements of everyone in the school community are valued and celebrated. In addition, just over one-half (21) of the non-teaching staff completed the questionnaire, with a small number providing written comments. All feel that staff wellbeing is promoted effectively, and they have benefitted from recent SPL opportunities.

A number of issues were raised through the questionnaires in relation to: levels of staff absence and the unavailability of specialist teachers; and general communication, which were shared with the principal and three representatives from the board of governors.

C. THE PROCESS OF INSPECTION

The ETI worked alongside St Colm's High 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

- St Colm's High School upholds the vision of **'Believe and Achieve'** with pupils and staff living out the values of **respect, faith, responsibility, and community**.
- Most of the lessons are inclusive and well structured, with good teacher explanations, effective questioning and learning activities that are engaging.
- The pupils are very welcoming, friendly and respectful. Their behaviour is exemplary; they are a great credit to their families and to the school.
- The school is well placed towards creating a three-year school development plan (SDP), requiring stakeholder consultations, filling leadership vacancies, and connecting further senior leadership with middle managers, as well as to provide a structure for more distributed leadership and accountability for actions.
- The school needs the support of the employing authority to resolve long-term staff absences in the best interests of the pupils. Additionally, in the near-term, mitigations around supporting temporary teachers to provide good quality lessons consistently are needed to ensure that no pupil falls behind in their learning.
- The pupils' learning experiences and progression opportunities are enhanced through well-established collaborative networks with a wide range of community organisations and businesses.

- The school promotes an ethos of inclusion, offering equality of opportunity and providing all pupils with the opportunity to learn and progress together.
- Pupils are well supported and nurtured; they benefit from a range of curricular, enrichment and leadership opportunities, as well as appropriate interventions.
- Pupils at Key Stage (KS) 3 and KS 4 access a suitably broad curriculum that enables them to progress and achieve well. At post-16 level, the number of subjects delivered in-house is restricted due to the number of pupils enrolled at this level.
- The school embeds and celebrates a wide range of pupil successes, including achievements in teams, faith-based activities and the highly successful musical, 'Beauty and the Beast'.
- 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.

Areas for action:

- with the support of the employing authority, the school needs to resolve unacceptably long-term teacher absence and unfilled leadership posts, in the interest of the pupils; and
- the need to develop further the capacity of postholders in carrying out well their leadership and management roles, in a distributed manner.

3. MAIN REPORT

A. SETTING THE VISION

St Colm's High School strives to meet its vision of '**Believe and Achieve**' through instilling the values of **respect, faith, responsibility and community** in all of its stakeholders. The vision is understood well by pupils, parents, staff, governors and the local community. The school's vision and values are reflected well in the high expectations for every pupil. There are positive, respectful and empathetic interactions between staff and pupils that demonstrate that the vision and values are being lived out.

School development planning at St Colm's is well placed to move from the current one-year transitional development plan to a more comprehensive three-year SDP. The school should engage in meaningful consultations with all stakeholders during the development planning process, ensuring the SDP aligns with the school's long-term vision of enabling the pupils to 'believe and achieve'. To support this process, it is crucial to fill the vacant leadership posts, establish further appropriate links between the senior leadership team (SLT) and middle leaders to facilitate the sharing of good practices in learning and teaching, as well as provide a structure for more distributed leadership and accountability for actions.

Long-term staff absence in science, mathematics and English was highlighted in the questionnaires and discussion groups as a concern for a number of parents and pupils. These longer-term absences are impacting negatively on the pupils and the difficulty of securing appropriately qualified teachers is not an issue that is solely limited to this school. The school needs the support of the employing authority to resolve these long-term absences in the best interests of the pupils. Additionally, in the near-term, mitigations around supporting temporary teachers to provide good quality lessons consistently are needed to ensure no pupil falls behind in their learning.

The governors are invested heavily in the life and work of the school and are highly committed to the school's vision, values and Christian ethos. They have a strong affiliation to the school and are extremely proud of how its vision and values affect positively the pupils' holistic development and how well they achieve. The governors participate in intergenerational events, such as Parish life and the Camino Walk, and assist directly with promotional events to raise funds to help the pupils and the school community.

B. IMPLEMENTING AND IMPROVING TO ACHIEVE THE VISION

Most of the planning, teaching and assessment for successful learning is effective. When learning was more effective, the lessons were well-structured, and teachers built on prior learning to create lessons that had appropriate levels of challenge and taught efficiently at a good pace. Some of the staff made good use of digital technology to enhance the pupils' learning. Pupils' work was regularly corrected, but there was a scarcity of written marking for improvement. The working relationships between pupils and staff are very good and pupils requiring additional support benefitted from the attentive classroom assistants.

Pupils at KS 3 access a suitably broad curriculum designed to enable them to progress and achieve well. At KS 4, the curriculum offer meets the requirements of the Entitlement Framework (EF). The school's ethos of inclusion is reflected in an open choice for pupils across all of the subject areas at KS 4. Consequently, pupils can select subjects that align with their interests, abilities and aspirations resulting in higher levels of pupil engagement and motivation. It is appropriate that the school is currently exploring vocational options to improve further the outcomes for pupils and their opportunities for progression. Through participation with MRLP, the offer at post-16 also meets the requirements of the EF; the number of subjects delivered in-house is restricted due to the number of pupils enrolled at this level. As the school continues to prioritise the growth and sustainability of the post-16 provision, it will be important to keep the curriculum under review and, in particular, the range and number of subjects delivered in order to meet the needs, abilities, interests and career aspirations of the pupils.

The curriculum is enhanced by a wide range of sporting, cultural and other opportunities: educational visits, and charitable and volunteering activities develop well the pupils' sense of social responsibility both locally and globally. The enrichment programme for post-16 includes all year 13 pupils participating in the

[Pope John Paul II Award](#). Pupils who met with inspectors spoke of the benefits of the programme, including the development of their leadership, communication and teamwork skills. The pupils told us of how they develop entrepreneurial skills, not only in formulating a concept, but also in fundraising to make the idea a reality.

There is a well-structured, coherent approach to CEIAG at KS 4 and at post-16 level. The pupils told us that they have a clear understanding of the range of career pathways and opportunities available to them. The pupils benefit from work-related learning opportunities, including work-placements for pupils in years 11, 13 and 14, and this is an integral part of the CEIAG provision. The CEIAG programme is complemented further by visiting speakers from business and industry and further and higher education. Leavers' destination information at year 14 is gathered, analysed and used well to monitor the pupils' career progression beyond the school. The information around the destinations of year 12 pupils would benefit from more forensic monitoring to inform the provision at KS 4.

The school's preventative curriculum is mapped well across the year groups and ensures progression in the essential topics of keeping safe, self-awareness and developing the pupils to be effective and responsible contributors to society. Tutor sessions throughout the school are well planned and purposeful. All year 8 pupils benefit from the [Community of Lifesavers Education Programme](#) provided in association with CCEA, the EA and the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service. Notably, the year 14 pupils revisit this programme before they leave school. There is a range of appropriate policies to support the school's safeguarding practices, including the school's Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) policy which takes account of the statutory guidance.

The pupils are very aware of their health and wellbeing and their civic and social responsibilities. A number of current initiatives focus well on recycling/sustainability and health and wellbeing, and the school is a [Take 5 Steps to Wellbeing](#) school. At KS 3, in 2024, all pupils benefitted from the delivery of thematic learning which connects a range of subjects around a common theme. The pupils developed their thinking skills and personal capabilities in: New Beginnings (year 8), Healthy Lifestyles (year 9) and Our World (year 10).

C. BUILDING EQUITY

The school promotes a strong ethos of inclusion, ensuring equality of opportunity through all-ability classes, where pupils learn and progress together in a supportive learning environment. The school has identified appropriately a number of priorities which include: promoting good attendance; the use of an information management system as part of the school's pastoral care procedures; improving home-school contact; a phased review and revision of the individual education plans (IEP) for those pupils with SEN; and supporting the health and wellbeing of pupils and staff. The pupils benefit from a range of interventions including support for literacy, numeracy and wellbeing. Additionally, school counselling is available to all pupils for one half-day each week.

There is close monitoring of attendance at individual pupil level throughout the school and, where necessary, pupils and their parents/carers are supported well through attendance clinics led by the senior leadership team and the Education Welfare Service. The school avails of a range of appropriate support services for pupils when required and reports, for example, that the targeted event for year 8, 'The Chase', delivered in conjunction with the EA, has promoted well the importance of school attendance.

In discussions with inspectors, the pupils reported that they enjoy participating in wider groups that support their learning, such as: the 'maths clinic', after school revision sessions and homework club. At lunchtime, pupils benefit from having appropriate access to the ICT suite and Games Club, as well as sporting activities.

Through the 'Cornstore' youth club, there is a well-considered transition programme that prepares pupils well for entering year 8. All pupils have access to a full range of curricular experiences, with full integration into mainstream classes for all pupils with SEN. The pupils who experience barriers to their learning and those who are operating on an appropriately reduced timetable, are all being supported well. The learning support assistants know and support well the pupils they work with.

D. EMBEDDING SUCCESS

The school's motto, '**Believe and Achieve**' and the four associated values: **faith, respect, responsibility and community** inform closely how the school values, embeds and celebrates success.

The pupils are very welcoming, friendly and respectful. Their behaviour is exemplary; they are a great credit to their families and to the school. Good behaviour, good attendance and good effort are rewarded regularly and help explain why the pupils achieve so well. They benefit from the high expectations that are set for them and are serious about achieving and succeeding.

The school encourages the pupils to participate and succeed in a wide range of sporting, cultural and social endeavours, such as, sports teams, liturgical events, charitable outreach, mentoring year 8 pupils (the Cara buddy system) and the very successful 'Beauty and the Beast' musical. In discussions with inspectors, many of the pupils were fired with excitement about being involved in the musical. They knew exactly the benefits they received from the transferable skills and dispositions that their participation facilitated, and they spoke of improved confidence, building perseverance, making new friends and learning the value of teamwork. In addition, the pupils told us that they enjoyed being assigned a Cara buddy when they were in year 8.

Target-setting and the effective use of performance data allows the teachers to monitor progress, identify learning gaps and intervene if necessary. In 2024, 90% of the pupils attained five GCSE (or equivalent) qualifications at grades A* to C and almost 75% of pupils achieved five GCSE (or equivalent) qualifications at grades A* to C, including English and mathematics. The GCSE outcomes achieved by the

pupils are in line with their ability and the school's expectations. In 2024, just over 60% of the pupils attained three A level (or equivalent) qualifications at grades A* to C. The school's analysis of A level subject performance indicated variability in outcomes and has identified appropriately the need for improvements across a range of subjects. The school's internal data shows that the pupils, including those with SEN, achieve in line with their abilities and the school's expectations.

The successes and achievements of the pupils are shared and celebrated through: in-class praise and oral feedback, awards, school assemblies, and a range of other events and initiatives, such as, receiving certificates or earning a class trip as a treat. The pupils' successes, within and outside of school, are showcased to parents/carers and the wider community through an extensive and very effective use of [social media](#) and a helpful [website](#).

The staff know the pupils and their families very well through the close links between school and community. Christian faith shapes the ethos of the school and there is a tangibly strong bond between family, school and church. Involvement in liturgical events and supporting the community is important to the school and an impressively articulate senior group of pupils told us about their pride in participating in such events and how they benefit from their formation in faith through gaining resilience, comfort and hope.

E. GROWING A COMMUNITY OF LEARNING

The pupils who met with inspectors reported that the school is welcoming, friendly and is an important part of the community. A key strength of the school is the proactive and highly creative engagement in a wide range of projects with community groups and organisations. As a result, the pupils develop a close and authentic appreciation of their community, civic responsibilities and local heritage. The school benefits from a highly effective working relationship with a local social enterprise organisation, the [Workspace Group](#), and is an active member of the Ballinascreen Community Forum, which partners with a wide range of organisations and other local schools.

The pupils play a significant role in the local community. They develop well their entrepreneurial skills and create awareness around sustainability through the work of the Eco-club and the 'pre-loved' fashion show. They contribute to the planning and delivery of community events within the 'live here, love here' scheme, such as the Christmas lights event, which this year involved around 60 pupils across all year groups developing skills in craft, event management, health and safety, organisation and teamwork. Pupils in the popular Eco-club understand their responsibility to enhance and protect the environment through planting trees and increasing homes for wildlife by building nest boxes. The school is home to '[Susan's Trail](#)', which is a community memorial garden of reflection that is highly valued by pupils and showcased by the World Wildlife Fund. The pupils in the school council and Eco-club believe that their views are listened to and valued by the staff. They took great delight in telling inspectors about their achievements, both inside and outside of school, through their work, such as, a community bulb planting initiative of around 10,000 bulbs that will bloom and brighten up their community in the coming months and years.

In addition, the school is developing further established links with local businesses to increase the provision of meaningful work-related learning opportunities for the pupils. The 'Careers Connections' event held in the school during the last year brought the pupils from year 10 to year 14 together with their parents/carers and 28 local employers from a wide range of sectors, to signpost them to suitable resources and access appropriate careers advice and information about progression pathways and the world of work. This inaugural event has extended further the school's commitment to retain the talent of its young people to meet the needs of their community.

Community use of the school's facilities is extensive and provides positive and accessible opportunities for skills development and improvement in the health and wellbeing of the pupils and the wider community. The youth club 'Cornstore', ably led by a youth tutor, provides a highly effective mechanism for identifying and supporting well the pupils to engage meaningfully with their learning and interact positively within and beyond the school community. The parents/carers of young people who met with inspectors told us about how their children loved going to youth club, how they developed life skills and made friends.

An annual programme of SPL is informed by the school's values and current whole school priorities. The school has identified appropriately the need to use data more effectively to inform learning and teaching, and the inspection has endorsed this. In addition, with staffing changes and the embedding of new leadership roles and responsibilities, it will be important to develop further the capacity of post-holders in carrying out well their leadership and management roles, such as aspects of monitoring and evaluation, and the effective analysis and use of data.

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. All of the pupils who met with inspectors spoke about a trusted adult with whom they could speak if they had a worry or concern.

4. GOING FORWARD

St Colm's High School's vision of '**Believe and Achieve**' underpins its life and work and the associated values of **faith, respect, responsibility and community** are lived out well by staff and pupils alike. The school is at the heart of its community and the pupils have a strong sense of belonging and purpose that develops them academically, spiritually and socially.

Inspectors identified an aspect of highly effective practice from which others may learn. The aspect of practice which should be shared more widely is the value and use made of embedding sound links between the school and the community to enhance pupils' learning experiences.

Through the district inspector, ETI will monitor the progress of St Colm's High School in addressing the areas for action as laid out in this report.

5. APPENDICES

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%

APPENDIX 2: SMALL SCHOOLS

In all post-primary schools where the enrolment number is below the minimum number of 500 pupils in years 8 to 12 and 100 pupils in post-16, 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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