

Report of a Post-primary Inspection  
St Columba's College, Portaferry

December 2024



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# **1. INTRODUCTION**

## **A. BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

St Columba's College is a maintained, non-selective, 11-16 school in Portaferry with an enrolment of 159 pupils. Over one-third of pupils (35%) have a special educational need (SEN), and under one-fifth (18%) of pupils have a statement of SEN. One-third of the pupils have free school meals entitlement (FSME) and there are a small number of newcomer pupils. The school is part of a long-established shared education partnership with Strangford Integrated College.

## **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.

Of the majority (64%) of pupils who responded to the online questionnaire, most feel that they are treated with care and respect and are encouraged to set their own learning goals; nearly all value the opportunities the school provides them for physical exercise; and the majority of pupils appreciate how their talents and achievements are celebrated in school and the help they receive from staff when they find it difficult to learn. All the year 8 and 9 pupils who responded to the questionnaire highlighted how well they were supported by their teachers when they were settling into the school.

A minority (18%) of parents/carers responded to the questionnaire, over one-half of whom provided additional written responses. Nearly all of these parents/carers appreciated how their child is happy at school and is making good progress. Most of the parents/carers know the school's vision and aims; they appreciate the quality of the pastoral care and support for their child from the staff, the links the school has with the community and the opportunities their child has to participate in educational visits. Over one-third of the written comments highlighted a number of issues, including the limited subject choice for study at GCSE level.

Nearly all of the teachers (94%) responded to the questionnaire and their responses were generally positive. All of the teachers indicated that they are clear about the school's vision and the contribution they make to achieve the vision. Most of the teachers feel their views are sought, valued and acted upon. A small number of written comments highlighted the need for better access to resources and staff professional learning (SPL).

Most (88%) of the non-teaching staff responded to the questionnaires and their responses were also generally positive. All of the non-teaching staff are clear about the school's vision and the contribution they make to achieve the vision. Nearly all reported they benefit from recent opportunities for professional learning.

A summary of the questionnaire responses, including any issues highlighted, was shared with the principal, the chair of governors, and representatives from the Education Authority and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools.

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

The ETI worked alongside St Columba's College 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 staff enable the pupils to live out well the school's aims to grow spiritually strong, to be confident in their personal worth, as active members of their community and in showing care and consideration for others.
- The pupils appreciate their school's family ethos where they know each other and their teachers well.
- The pupils are welcomed and valued for their uniqueness and understand their collective responsibility to welcome others.
- Through the long-established shared education partnership, the pupils learn to respect differing identities in Northern Ireland.
- The pupils enjoy sharing and celebrating their personal successes and that of others.
- The quality of planning, teaching and assessment for successful learning requires development consistently across the curriculum.
- A particular strength of the provision is the well-considered work to improve the literacy provision and the carefully planned and progressive preventative curriculum, including the provision for relationships and sexuality education (RSE).
- The needs of the pupils with SEN are not met consistently well in the classroom.
- For a minority of the pupils, the curriculum offer at key stage (KS) 4 narrows the potential options for progression.

- 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. The ETI will monitor the progress of the school in addressing the following area for action: given the reconstitution of the board of governors, ensure that training requirements are completed.

Areas for action:

- to ensure the school's development planning process is informed by robust self-evaluation of qualitative and quantitative information, the pupils' work and observations of learning and teaching to improve the consistency of the quality of planning, teaching and assessment for successful learning across the curriculum; and
- to review the effectiveness of the curriculum for all, and the suitability and uptake of the qualifications at KS 4 for all pupils to ensure that they progress successfully to the next stage of education, training or employment.

### 3. MAIN REPORT

#### A. SETTING THE VISION

The staff enable the pupils to live out well the school's aims to **grow spiritually strong**, to be confident in their **personal worth**, as **active members of their community** and in **showing care and consideration for others**. The school's aims are rooted in the cultural heritage of St Columba, expressed confidently through assemblies, liturgical events across the year, community celebrations and charitable contributions.

To better meet the pupils' needs, interests and aspirations, the involvement of all staff in robust self-evaluation of the pupils' learning would inform more rigorously the school development planning process. The current associated action plans need precise targets focused on planning, teaching and assessment for successful learning.

The governors are highly supportive of the school and help to foster its deep connections in the community. They value greatly the role of the school in serving the local community and are aware fully of the current curriculum and financial challenges.

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

The quality of planning, teaching and assessment for successful learning requires development consistently across the curriculum. The most effective lessons were well-planned, had opportunities for the pupils to work together and skilful teacher questioning checked the pupils' understanding and encouraged them to think creatively and critically. There were high levels of pupil engagement and enjoyment, the classroom assistants were proactive in supporting pupils and as a result, the pupils made progress in their skills, knowledge and understanding.



The pupils consolidated their learning effectively through thinking diagrams, carousel discussion activities, pupil-led presentations and peer evaluation. As a result, the pupils were clear about the revision strategies that worked best for them. In the lessons when the learning was less effective the pupils were not challenged sufficiently; there was insufficient differentiation and over-direction by the teacher. Going forward, the identification and sharing of the most effective practice across the school will benefit the pupils and to improve the consistency of the quality of planning, teaching and assessment for successful learning across the curriculum. The pupils told us that they enjoy: working in pairs and groups; learning through active strategies; and they appreciate the opportunities provided to talk to staff about the teaching approaches that help them learn.

The school has core internal assessments to evaluate the pupils' learning at key points and to monitor their progress. There is variation in the frequency and quality of the assessment of the pupils' ongoing work. The pupils would benefit from more frequent and tangible advice from their teachers on how they might improve their work.

A particular strength of the provision is the well-considered work to improve the provision for literacy across the curriculum. Creative approaches such as the literacy profiles for year 8 pupils, paired reading facilitated by library prefects and the work to develop consistency of approach across the curriculum is beneficial to the pupils. Clear structures to support the monitoring of the quality of this work would enable the thorough evaluation of the impact on the pupils' literacy skills.

At key stage (KS) 3, pupils access a broad and balanced curriculum and given the size of the school and its geographical location, it is notable that the subject offer at KS 4 meets the requirements of the Entitlement Framework. The school provides a range of general and applied subjects, including through collaboration with South Eastern Regional School (SERC) to provide a Business and Technology Education Council qualification at level 2 First Award in Engineering to pupils after school.

In 2024, most (85%) of the pupils progressed to level 3 courses in SERC, the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise and other post-primary schools. For a minority of the pupils, the current subject offer narrows the potential options for progression. The effectiveness of the curriculum for all needs reviewed, including the suitability and uptake of the qualifications at KS 4 for all pupils to ensure that they can progress successfully to the next stage of education, training or employment.

The pupils benefit from a carefully planned and progressive preventative curriculum, including an age and stage appropriate provision for relationships and sexuality education, aligned well to the school's aims and Catholic ethos. A wide range of outside agencies support the school in the delivery of the preventative curriculum and the pupils told us that they found the information and awareness raising sessions to be helpful.

The pupils spoke positively about how they learn about and are encouraged to follow a healthy lifestyle. They expressed their appreciation for the opportunities the school provides to participate in a wide range of sports, reflected maturely on how they manage their time, and gave examples of how they manage their emotions and

feelings. Throughout the school there are attractive displays of the pupils' work highlighting and reinforcing the importance and benefits of practicing healthy lifestyles. As part of the Education Authority's 'Being Well, Doing Well' programme, the school has carried out an evaluation of current practice in relation to wellbeing, and identified aspects of the provision to build upon.

### **C. BUILDING EQUITY**

The pupils are welcomed and valued for their uniqueness and understand their collective responsibility to welcome others. The pupils make a significant contribution to promoting inclusion and equity through supporting and including others, respecting difference and valuing diversity. Effective use is made of the learning environment to provide pupils with safe and supportive spaces, including the breakfast club, games room and carefully considered break-out areas.

The pupils identified with SEN are encouraged to reflect on their interests and the learning and teaching strategies they find helpful, to inform their individual education plans. There were some examples of the pupils experiencing success in their learning through their teachers' effective questioning, clear explanations and high expectations, and the sensitive support from their peers. The needs of all pupils identified with SEN are not met consistently well in all classes.

### **D. EMBEDDING SUCCESS**

The pupils enjoy sharing and celebrating their personal successes and that of others. They are polite, well-mannered and welcoming. During discussions, the pupils told the inspectors that they have positive working relationships with their teachers and peers, and appreciate their school's family ethos where they know each other and their teachers well. The pupils value how their positive behaviour and efforts are encouraged and recognised by the awarding of 'merit points' which enables them to access reward trips. They develop their leadership skills by taking on roles, for example, as library prefects or form captains and participating in the prefect team. They develop a strong sense of social responsibility to support others through initiatives such as the 'Baking Buddies' and the shoebox appeal.

The school celebrates the pupils' successes in public examinations. In 2024, all year 12 pupils attained five GCSE (or equivalent) qualifications at grades A\* to C, with all pupils with FSME attaining five GCSE (or equivalent) qualifications at grades A\* to C, including English and mathematics. The school collates a range of assessment information to report on pupil progress in learning across the curriculum. The evaluation of qualitative and quantitative data to inform learning and teaching requires development across the school. In particular, to measure the pupils' progress accurately from their individual starting points and in setting meaningful targets for whole-school improvement.

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

The pupils engage in a community of learning through the school's rights respecting ethos and the school has gained the 'Rights Respecting School' award. The pupils spoke to us about how the values of kindness, equality, fairness and justice are

important to them and are developed within the school. Through the long-established shared education partnership, the pupils learn to respect differing identities in Northern Ireland. The pupils participate readily in controversial and sensitive issues about the past through links to the Ulster Museum and Nerve Centre. This helps them to understand better relevant issues within the community and how to make a positive contribution to conflict resolution. This provision is further enhanced through visits to local churches to understand and celebrate a variety of ways to worship. In evaluating the programme rigorously, the school prioritised the embedding of shared education opportunities more widely across the school, to now include English, history, physical education, religious education and science classes.

The staff, including the classroom assistants have benefited from SPL in promoting the pupils' emotional health and wellbeing, restorative practice and through the shared education programme. Inspection findings highlight the importance of SPL that is now focused on ensuring high quality planning, teaching and assessment for successful learning is consistent across the curriculum. Re-engagement by the staff in the observation of learning and teaching will support SPL and will enable the robust evaluation of its impact, to inform better the school's priorities going forward.

The school is an active member of its area learning community with staff representation in cluster groups to engage in the sharing of effective practice. The school benefits from links with a range of external agencies, including local primary schools, SERC, local community projects to equip the pupils in intergenerational learning, work-related learning opportunities and a range of external speakers to prepare the pupils for life and work.

## **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.

The ETI will monitor the progress of the school in addressing the following area for action:

- given the reconstitution of the board of governors, ensure that training requirements are completed.

The pupils told us that they feel safe in school, there are lots of people who help them, and there is someone they can speak to if they have any concerns.

## **4. GOING FORWARD**

The staff enable the pupils to live out well the school's aims to **grow spiritually strong**, to be **confident in their personal worth**, as **active members of their community** and in **showing care and consideration for others**.

The inspection has highlighted areas for action, as detailed in the report, which now need to be addressed. St Columba's College will require sustained external support to help it address the areas for action. There will be a progress inspection.



## 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 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, governors and the staff plan for, and manage, issues related to the sustainability of the school's provision and budget, in order to address the current and future needs of the pupils and the staff.

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