

Report of a Primary Inspection  
Portstewart Primary School and Nursery Unit

November 2024

## Contents

1. INTRODUCTION.....	1
A. BACKGROUND INFORMATION.....	1
B. VIEWS OF CHILDREN, 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.....	5
E. GROWING A COMMUNITY OF LEARNING .....	6
F. CHILD PROTECTION .....	7
4. GOING FORWARD.....	7
5. APPENDIX.....	8
APPENDIX 1: QUANTITATIVE TERMS .....	8

# **1. INTRODUCTION**

## **A. BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

Portstewart Primary School and Nursery Unit is a controlled co-educational school located in Central Avenue in the town. Nearly all the children come from the town and its surrounding area. The school enrolment has remained steady over the last four years and currently stands at 258 children, including 26 children in the nursery unit. Approximately two-fifths of the children have free school meals entitlement.

Nearly 23% of the children have been identified as having special educational needs (SEN) and this is a rising trend over the last four years. The number of children with a statement of educational need has risen similarly from a small number in 2020-21 to 14 children in the current year. A Specialist Provision in Mainstream Schools (SPiMS) class was established in September 2024. At the time of inspection, a purpose-built permanent classroom for the SPiMS class was undergoing significant construction work and is expected to open in the early months of 2025. There are currently three children in this specialist provision class being educated in another classroom in the school.

A new principal was appointed in November 2019 and a vice-principal in 2021. There have been additional significant changes to the teaching staff in that time.

The school has a well-embedded shared education link with a nearby maintained primary school, a breakfast club, after-school care and extensive community links, which are detailed later in this report.

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

The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) issued online confidential questionnaires to year 7 children, all parents/carers and teaching and support staff in advance of the inspection. A summary of all the questionnaire responses was shared with the principal and representatives from the board of governors.

Nearly all the year 7 children (97%) responded to the questionnaire and twenty-seven of the thirty-nine responses provided additional written comments. All of the children indicated that they feel safe in school and are treated with care and respect. Their written comments were wholly positive. They told us that staff are kind and supportive, and learning is fun.

Ninety-six parents (55%) responded to the questionnaire; thirty-nine of whom provided a written response. All of the parents indicated that their child was happy in school and nearly all of them agreed that their child was making good progress in their learning and that they would recommend the school to others. Most of the written responses were wholly and highly positive. Good care and support for the child and effective communication with parents were cited as strengths of the school's provision.

Nearly all of the teachers (92%) responded to the questionnaires and a small number provided an additional written comment. The teachers indicated they place children at the centre of their work and enjoy their work most, or, all of the time. All feel that they benefit from opportunities for professional learning.

There were twenty-eight responses from the support and learning support staff, which included a small number of written comments. The responses were all very positive indicating high levels of job satisfaction, where the children are placed at the centre of their work.

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

The ETI worked alongside the Portstewart Primary School and Nursery Unit 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**

- All of the children thrive in a high quality, inclusive learning environment that begins in nursery and extends across the whole school.
- The children, staff and parents are wholly invested in the new school vision of, '**Inspiring success, while caring for all**'.
- The caring and committed teachers provide thoughtful and creative lessons, some with notable imagination, that allow the children to develop skills in problem solving, working with others and investigating real life issues.
- The learning support staff are a strength of the school's provision: they are skilful in responding proactively to the children's needs.
- The children are ready to learn, show kindness to others and have extremely positive dispositions to learning. They spoke about their learning using words like, "love", "enjoy", "fun" and "exciting", reflecting high levels of pleasure and engagement.
- Aspects of outdoor learning are highly effective and the leaders and staff recognise fully the benefits to the children of learning outdoors in both the school and nursery unit.

- The children progress well from differing starting points, including those with additional needs, and by the end of key stage 2 most achieve their expected outcomes, or above, in literacy and numeracy.
- The senior leaders' initiatives to develop curriculum teams is an excellent step forward in building further the capacity of the staff and their confidence in using and refining effective monitoring practices.
- The regular consultation processes and robust self-evaluation practices are leading to improvements in aspects of the provision.
- The staff are child-centred and the children's wider achievements, successes and dispositions are celebrated extensively within the school and the wider community.
- The very good communication with families and extremely effective links with the wider community support, enrich and benefit the children's learning experiences.

### 3. MAIN REPORT

#### A. SETTING THE VISION

In 2021, the staff and governors re-visited the school vision due to the changes in staff and the changing profile of the needs of the children. The current vision encapsulates a desire to provide a child-centred, inclusive learning environment where everyone is valued and supported to achieve their best; '**Inspiring success, while caring for all**'. Integral to the outworking of the vision is the school's desire to play an active and positive role at the centre of the Portstewart community.

There are significant strengths in how the school has embedded its vision. The consultation processes, which informed the changes, were inclusive and robust. Survey questionnaires and focus group meetings allowed children, parents, carers, governors and community stakeholders to provide their views. The process was facilitated by the Controlled School Support Council and there was effective engagement from all learners and stakeholders. The school leaders have subsequently identified a number of associated values to facilitate the living out of the vision and encourage exemplary behaviour within a positive rewards scheme.

A high-quality school development plan (SDP) underpins the vision. The one-year interim plan is ambitious in scope, strives for children to enjoy success in different ways and is measurable and time-bound. The self-evaluation aspects of the school development planning process are effective, pinpointing areas for improvement within the school, such as enhanced monitoring and evaluation of the children's learning. The senior leaders' initiatives to develop curriculum teams is an excellent step forward in building further the capacity of the staff and their confidence in using and refining effective monitoring practices. This assessment is supported by the inspection findings.



The governors, who met with the inspectors, are committed and very proud of the school. Their diverse skills-sets are employed well to provide effective governance and they know their school and its strengths and challenges very well.

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

The teachers' good knowledge of the children and their effective use of data are used to plan and implement a relevant, coherent and enjoyable curriculum for the children. The provision is inclusive and responsive to the children's needs, abilities, and interests.

The planning for learning is effective and the teachers design thoughtful and creative lessons, some with notable imagination, that allow the children to develop skills in problem solving, working with others and investigating real life issues. The school has an effective preventative curriculum that includes support from: Love for Life (on relationships), Police Service of Northern Ireland (on staying safe) and Action Mental Health (on improving resilience). The parents are given appropriate support also through 'Worry to Wonder' (a mental health initiative) and a strength of the pastoral support is the way the school staff try to involve the children's parents and carers in their child's learning.

The characteristics of the most effective practice included: differentiated activities; the effective use of ICT to support learning; and lessons that provided opportunities for the children to make choices in their learning. The classroom assistants play a crucial role in providing quality support, enhanced by the positive working relationships and the opportunities for professional learning they receive. The communication between the teachers and learning support assistants is very good, and they function as a team more collegially than hierarchically.

Very good priority is given to outdoor learning; some aspects of the outdoor provision, particularly in the nursery unit, are highly effective in providing the children with opportunities to grow in confidence and learn well together. The nursery unit's 'family forest' event allowed every child to learn and play with their parents and grandparents in a very well-orchestrated series of fun learning activities. The event was extremely well attended.

Across the school, the children work well independently and collaboratively, adapting to different ways of learning and developing an understanding of their own learning processes. The children spoke about their learning using words like, "love", "enjoy", "fun" and "exciting", reflecting high levels of pleasure and engagement.

The children progress well in their learning and by the time they leave in year 7, most attain expected levels of performance in literacy and numeracy. Over the last three years, nearly all transitioned to their first-choice post-primary school. Inspectors met with groups of children from Years 3, 5 and 7, as well as representatives from the school council and the eco committee. The children were friendly, confident and spoke easily with the adults. They praised the staff in the school for the way they care for them and talked about learning being fun. They were universal in their praise around how much they enjoy school. They brought with them some items that they were proud of (pieces of work, sport, music and dancing medals, Lego constructions and photographs of drama performances), which showed how well all of their achievements were known, valued and celebrated within school.

## **C. BUILDING EQUITY**

The school's vision is centred on inclusion and caring for all. During the inspection, the questionnaire responses, observations of learning and meetings with staff and children all confirm the school as a welcoming, friendly and inclusive environment for children to learn and play together.

The school's open and inclusive ethos is strengthened by its well-established shared education partnership with a neighbouring maintained primary school. The children told us they value their shared education opportunities; nearly all of the parents indicated that their child has benefitted from this collaboration.

The school addresses well the needs of the children who have been identified as having SEN. The teachers use a wide range of pastoral and academic information to identify, from an early stage, the children who require additional support.

There are appropriate and effective interventions in place with ongoing monitoring of the children's progress. The Personal Learning Plans are of a good quality and children who are high achievers, or those children identified as potentially underachieving, have a Targeted Learning Plan to ensure their specific needs are being met and their progress is monitored. The use of assistive technology and other well-considered reasonable adjustments are subtly and sensitively made to ensure learning is inclusive.

The children benefit from a range of interventions, with withdrawal booster groups being provided for children in specific year groups. Some children engage in Reading Partnership, where community volunteers trained by school staff support the children. Some children also receive support in their reading through the Enrichment Programme, where pupils from a local post-primary school work alongside the children to help them improve their reading. The children are also supported using online adaptive reading and maths programmes.

The recently opened SPiMS class for children in foundation stage and key stage 1 with moderate learning needs adds notably to the richness and inclusivity of the provision and provides effective learning experiences for the children who attend. Work is currently well underway to create a more appropriate and purpose-built learning environment for the class.

## **D. DEFINING, CELEBRATING AND EMBEDDING SUCCESS**

The school defines success widely. Being successful includes: showing kindness, feeling safe and happy, enjoying learning and achieving. Readiness to learn is embedded from nursery and is the key learning behaviour upon which the school builds and embeds the children's successes.

In the nursery unit, the children sustain interest at activities and, through established routines, are developing well their independence. They enjoy sharing their achievements with their peers and adults and are confident during their interactions. Photographs and videos are shared with parents to celebrate their child's successes. The 'nursery forest family', where parents, grandparents and children play and discover through outdoor activities, allow the parents, grandparents and children to bond and learn together.

Across the school, the children develop well as individuals, and they contribute positively and enjoy success in a wide range of academic, sporting and cultural areas. Their behaviour is exemplary. They are respectful in their relationships with each other and converse effortlessly with staff and visitors.

The school's positive rewards system allows the children to be rewarded in many ways, aligned to the school's values and associated behaviours. The successes and achievements of the children are shared through: in-class praise and feedback, school assemblies, 'Wow' wall displays, award certificates and a range of other events and initiatives. Their successes, within and outside of school, are showcased to the parents and wider community through a proactive and extensive use of [social media](#) and a very helpful [website](#).

The children in the Eco committee and the school council all believe that their views are listened to and valued by the staff. They took great delight in sharing with us their personal achievements both inside and outside of school in sport, dance and music as well as in their recent school production of 'Peter Pan'. These daily classroom practices, positive rewards and celebrations of achievements align to the school vision of, 'Inspiring success while caring for all'.

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

Growing a community of learning is a strength of the school's provision. There is a supportive learning environment for the children to play, learn and succeed together. The care and provision supports them as a community of lively and eager learners.

An extensive range of learning opportunities operate from Breakfast Club in the morning to after-school care and extra-curricular clubs and activities in the evening. The after-school opportunities, for example, allow the children to enjoy music, choir, Glow Club (Scripture learning), eco-activities and team sports where they can benefit from expert coaching. The children spoke highly of these opportunities and how well they have helped them develop skills and confidence. Participation levels are high, with over 90% of the children currently benefitting from taking part in one or more of the after-school clubs or activities.

Learner participation is effective. All the children in the nursery unit and primary school are actively encouraged to voice their views and opinions during their learning. The children representing the school council and eco-committee are great ambassadors for their school. They are confident and articulate young leaders who are keen to represent the views of their peers and believe that their views are listened to and acted upon.

The parents and carers are valued as part of the school's community of learning. Relationships are very good and the school leaders believe that the need to support its families is an integral element of its care for each child. This support is wide-ranging. The school also offers support for community initiatives that can indirectly affect better support for the children, such as the Butterfly Club, which is a local women's group.



The good community links allow the children to benefit from experiences in inter-generational work with local nursing homes, links with local churches and a range of charitable outreach. For example, the children told us they are proud of their charity fundraising support for MacMillan Cancer and other good causes.

The shared education link with a nearby maintained primary school is well established and the children have benefitted from science, engineering and music initiatives developing their creative talents and their inter-personal skills. There is a 'transition' link with a nearby post-primary school in Portstewart that allows the children to benefit from post-primary learning experiences in advance of transition.

Staff professional learning is planned strategically and aimed at supporting the changing profile of the staff and the children. The introduction of curricular teams provides a supportive framework for staff to learn from each other, while focusing on how well the children are progressing. The senior leaders and governors value and prioritise staff professional learning and have successfully established a culture of openness, reflection and sharing of practice.

The active Parent Teacher Association (PTA) plays a vital role in the building of an inclusive community within the school. In close collaboration with the school, they galvanise support and provide vital funds through fundraising events for new resources to enrich the children's learning, such as, interactive whiteboards and playground equipment. There are productive links with local benefactors and businesses, whose generosity endorses how they value the school. The children benefit from some entrepreneurial learning and from having members of the local community visit the school who teach them about the world of work and act as good role models.

## **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.

## **4. GOING FORWARD**

Portstewart Primary School and Nursery Unit demonstrates a clear commitment to living out its vision of '**Inspiring success, while caring for others**'. This is a welcoming, inclusive and friendly school, where children live out all that is best in being kind and caring for each other, while being enthused about learning and enjoying success. The senior leadership team are well placed to continue to lead the school in their ongoing improvement journey.

Portstewart Primary School and Nursery Unit has some highly effective practice from which other schools may learn. These are: developing effective outdoor learning provision; and optimising good links with the community.

The ETI will continue to work with Portstewart Primary School and Nursery Unit in the dissemination of this work.

## 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%

© CROWN COPYRIGHT 2025

This report may be reproduced in whole or in part, except for commercial purposes or in connection with a prospectus or advertisement, provided that the source and date thereof are stated.

Copies of this report are available on the [ETI website](#)

Follow us on  [@ETI\\_news](#)  [@ETInews](#)  InsPIRE