

Report of an Inspection  
Christian Brothers' Primary School, Armagh

September 2024

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# **1. INTRODUCTION**

## **A. BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

Christian Brothers' Primary School is a co-educational, maintained primary school situated on the Keady Road in the city of Armagh. The children come from the city and the surrounding rural areas. The school is under the trusteeship of the Edmund Rice Schools Trust (NI) Limited. The school has an Irish medium nursery (Naíscóil), an Irish medium stream, an English medium stream and a specialist provision in mainstream schools (SPiMS) class for social communication/autism. The school's enrolment stands currently at 545, comprising 298 children in English medium classes, 207 in the Irish medium classes and 30 children enrolled in the Naíscóil. Thirteen percent of the children have been identified as having special educational needs (SEN) and just over eighteen percent have the free school meals entitlement.

The school has undergone significant changes in senior leadership and staffing in the past year. A new principal was appointed in September 2023. The vice principal post is filled currently on a temporary basis through a job share arrangement by two members of teaching staff. For the first four months of the principal's tenure there was not a quorum of governors to take forward key actions. Five new governors were appointed in January 2024. Since then, seven permanent teaching staff have been appointed.

The school operates a breakfast club and an afterschool club, both of which are very well attended. In addition to the school's Naíscóil, an Irish medium voluntary playgroup is located on the school site.

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

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

Almost all of the year 7 children responded to the questionnaire and a majority of them provided written comments. All of the children said they feel safe in school and almost all said the teachers and other adults in the school treat them with kindness, care and respect. The children are proud to belong to their school community and almost all of them said that everyone in their school is welcomed, valued and respected. The written comments in the questionnaire, and the groups of children who spoke with inspectors, indicated a high level of enjoyment of school life and an appreciation for the wide range of extra-curricular activities.

A majority of the parents responded to the online questionnaire. They all agreed their child is happy at school and almost all would recommend the school to other parents and carers. In the seventy-seven written comments, the parents were overwhelmingly positive about their child's experiences at school. They emphasised the improvements in communication since the new principal's appointment, the warm, caring atmosphere and the high-quality support provided for their children.

Most of the teachers responded to the online questionnaire. They all agreed they are clear on and contribute well to the school vision. All agreed they have benefitted from recent professional learning opportunities. The fourteen written comments from the teachers affirmed the recent improvements in resourcing, professional working relationships and community links.

A majority of the classroom learning support staff and other support staff responded to the questionnaire. They all are clear on the school's vision and enjoy working in the school. The small number of written comments were positive also.

### **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 staff articulate clearly and exemplify the vision of an inclusive ethos; they foster a caring, well-resourced environment in which children feel safe and happy and which recognises the unique and special gifts and identities of every child.
- The children have high levels of interest and enjoyment in their learning and through the active learning opportunities provided, set in real-life contexts, are developing well their thinking and problem-solving skills.
- The school's recent focus on improving the quality of the planning and provision for outdoor learning in the foundation stage has resulted in high-quality and holistic play experiences for the children.
- The school places a high priority on the children's emotional health and wellbeing through the encouragement to make healthy food choices and the wide range of physical activities offered to support the children's physical growth and development.
- The highly skilled teachers and classroom assistants work collaboratively to deliver well-considered targeted interventions which are informed by a wide range of qualitative and quantitative data, underpinned by appropriate professional learning and are improving the children's outcomes as a result.

- The uniqueness of every child is recognised, and the celebration of the children's successes begins within the warm and supportive classroom environments where they are affirmed and encouraged in their learning by the adults who support them.
- The high-quality, inclusive provision in the naíscóil promotes the holistic development of each child in a nurturing, stimulating and linguistically rich environment.
- The children are making good progress in their learning and those taught through the medium of Irish are progressing well in their language development in a fully immersive environment.
- The SPiMS class is well-resourced and the staff work effectively and flexibly to meet the diverse and complex needs of the children and provide excellent, well-planned opportunities for them to integrate with their peers in mainstream classes.
- 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:

- review the effectiveness of the planning across the curriculum to meet the diverse range of learning needs within each class; and
- re-instate appropriate structures to monitor and evaluate the quality of the learning and teaching to improve further the outcomes of the children.

### **3. MAIN REPORT**

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

The school's ethos of recognising the special abilities, gifts, needs, personality and cultural background of each child is in keeping with the overall vision of Edmund Rice schools of promoting full personal and social development in caring Christian communities of learning and teaching.

The leadership and staff have a clear commitment to the promotion of an inclusive, happy and safe ethos where children achieve their full potential. In realising the vision, they ensure that children are exposed to a wide variety of learning experiences and they value and respect the contribution of parents/carers and the wider community.

The school's self-evaluation processes are being reviewed and evaluations are at an early stage of development. The school used a commercial survey and an internal school survey to consult with parents, staff and children to ensure an accurate baseline on which to build. The senior leaders have identified the appropriate key priorities to take forward.



The governors endorse fully, and are well informed about, the school priorities and have identified the key actions to improve the monitoring of the provision and the children's outcomes. They are proud of the place of the school in the local community and are committed to providing high quality learning experiences for generations of families.

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

The relationships across the school and behaviours for learning are positive. The children listen well, settle quickly and are very keen to learn. They demonstrate high levels of interest and enjoyment in their learning and work well in pairs and small groups. Where learning is most successful, the staff provide learning opportunities, set in real-life contexts, where children can develop their thinking and problem-solving skills.

At this early stage in the pre-school year, the children in the naíscoil are developing very well appropriate skills, knowledge and understanding and they display positive dispositions to their learning.

The staff who teach through the medium of Irish use effective immersion strategies to develop further the children's linguistic competency, in both Irish and English, and to broaden their understanding of different topics across the curriculum. The children's skills of communication, teamwork and creativity are developing well.

The school's recent focus on improving the quality of the planning and provision for outdoor learning in the foundation stage has resulted in the children having access to high-quality and holistic play experiences. In working towards realising their vision, the staff plan to extend their provision of outdoor learning to other year groups in the school.

Across the school, the provision is adjusted to meet the children's needs, for example, some children have access to withdrawal or in-class support, and, where appropriate, are supported by the inclusion of movement breaks to help support them in their learning. Where most successful, the children are given opportunities to engage in and benefit from appropriately challenging learning experiences, within the classroom and in the outdoor environment.

The school leadership has recognised the need to invest in digital technology and training for staff and prioritise the development of Information and Communication Technology (ICT). Through listening to the views of the children and staff, the ICT suite has been reinstated and the additional digital tablets provide opportunities now for the children to engage in research, take digital photographs and access digital applications to support them with their literacy and numeracy development. The children have too few opportunities to develop and apply a range of digital skills across the other areas of the curriculum.

The school places a high priority on keeping the children safe and ensuring they are happy in school. The preventative curriculum and other initiatives encourage and enable the children to make healthy food choices, know the benefits of being physically active and have a good awareness of how to stay safe online. There is a

wide range of physical activities offered to support the children's physical growth and development and their emotional health and well-being. For example, as a result of the children's participation in the 'daily mile' initiative, the implementation of the Regional Integrated Support for Education in Northern Ireland's (RISE NI) sensory-motor development programme and the use of sensory spaces in the school, there are improvements in the children's attention levels and their ability to manage their emotions.

### **C. BUILDING EQUITY**

The school's inclusive ethos is evident in the interactions between the staff and the children. Potential barriers to learning are identified early by effective analysis of a wide range of quantitative and qualitative data. There is regular and appropriate whole-school professional learning to support the children's needs, including training in trauma informed approaches, effective observations of learning and autism strategies. The intervention strategies used by the staff are impacting positively on those children identified as having SEN and attendance levels across the whole school have improved significantly over the last three years to pre-pandemic levels.

The specialist provision is valued by all in the school and is well-resourced. The staff work effectively and flexibly as a team to meet the diverse learning needs of the children. There are excellent, well-planned opportunities for the children to integrate with their mainstream peers and effective monitoring of the children's outcomes indicates that they are making good progress in relation to their individual starting points.

The wraparound care extends to the families to include a uniform swap shop, provision of a subsidised summer scheme, and a breakfast and after school club to support families.

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

In keeping with the Edmund Rice ethos, success in the school is identified at individual level and recognises the uniqueness of every child. Celebration of the successes of all children in the school begins with supportive classroom environments where the children are affirmed and encouraged in their learning by the adults. The skilful interactions of staff enable the children to make good choices, sustain engagement in their learning and make good progress.

The staff monitor the progress of all children through formative assessment and observations of learning in the classroom, which shows that the children are making good progress in their learning, and those taught through the medium of Irish are progressing well in their language development in a fully immersive environment. The effective transition arrangements and baseline assessments enable the teachers to plan well for successful learning. Almost all the lessons observed were effective.

Participation in and enjoyment of a wide range of sports is embedded in the school's priorities. The children enjoy and celebrate significant sporting success at many levels including in the County Armagh Hurling Championship and at the Primary Schools International Road Race.

The successes of children, past pupils, staff and family members are celebrated through social media and within the school to provide an inspiration for children going forward.

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

The school has harnessed the support of outside agencies and invested in the support of external advisors to develop staff confidence and expertise in for example, play-based learning, linguistic phonics and reading partnerships. These collaborative networks have had a positive impact in the areas of provision for play-based learning and literacy and the outcomes achieved by the children. Highly skilled classroom assistants engage in professional learning opportunities in a range of areas that include, for example, the training by RISE NI in the sensory-motor development programme, enabling them to provide bespoke support for pupils to help them overcome barriers to learning.

The school's participation in a wide range of sporting and other competitions, its links with local organisations and the strong connections with local businesses are valued by the children and their families.

#### **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**

Christian Brothers' Primary School places at its core an intrinsic value on the holistic development of every child, including in a bi-lingual setting, and a celebration of unique talent and gifts. The needs of the child are central to all the improvement work and the school has identified the appropriate actions to ensure it achieves its goal of providing high quality learning experiences for all children.

The inspection has highlighted two areas for action to enable Christian Brothers' Primary School to achieve its vision more fully. The District Inspector will monitor the progress of Christian Brothers' Primary School in addressing the areas for action as laid out in this report.



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