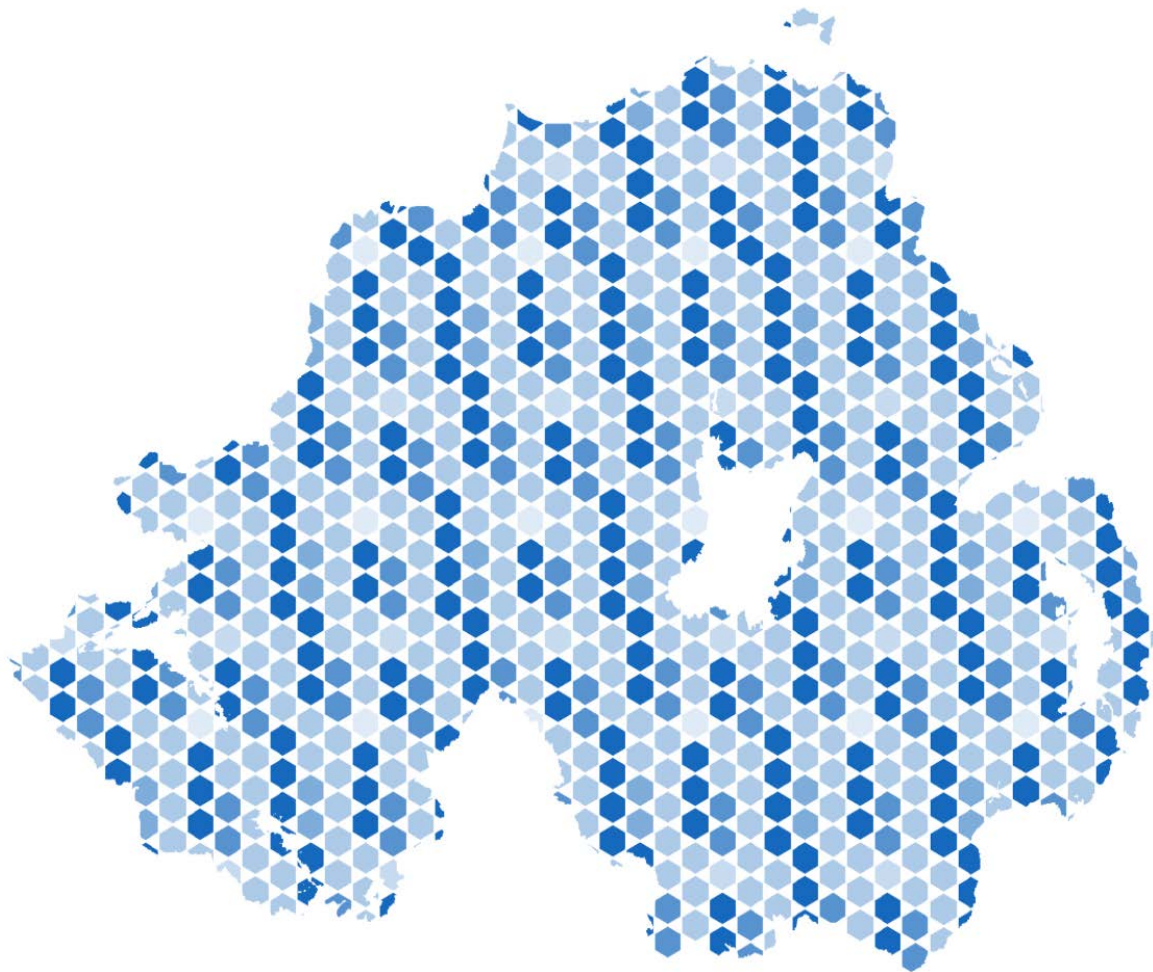


SPECIAL SCHOOL INSPECTION



Education and Training
Inspectorate

Mitchell House School,
Belfast

Report of an Inspection in
November 2015



Providing Inspection Services for

Department of Education
Department for Employment and Learning
Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure



Quantitative terms used by the Education and Training Inspectorate

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%

Performance levels

The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) use the following performance levels when reporting on Achievement and standards, on Provision for learning and on Leadership and management:

Outstanding
Very good
Good
Important area(s) for improvement
Requires significant improvement
Requires urgent improvement

Overall effectiveness

The ETI use one of the following inspection outcomes when evaluating the overall effectiveness of the school.

The school has a high level of capacity for sustained improvement in the interest of all the learners. The ETI will monitor how the school sustains improvement.
The school demonstrates the capacity to identify and bring about improvement in the interest of all the learners. The ETI will monitor how the school sustains improvement.
The school needs to address (an) important area(s) for improvement in the interest of all the learners. The ETI will monitor and report on the school's progress in addressing the area(s) for improvement. There will be a formal follow-up inspection.
The school needs to address urgently the significant areas for improvement identified in the interest of all learners. It requires external support to do so. The ETI will monitor and report on the school's progress in addressing the areas for improvement. There will be a formal follow-up inspection.

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1. Inspection method and evidence base

The key questions and quality indicators which guide inspection and self-evaluation of special schools, which were applied to this inspection, are available in the ETI publication *Together Towards Improvement: a process for self evaluation* at: <http://www.etini.gov.uk/index/together-towards-improvement/together-towards-improvement-special-education.htm>

Inspectors observed learning and teaching, scrutinised documentation and the pupils' written work and held formal and informal discussions with pupils (individually and in groups), teachers and staff with specific responsibilities.

The arrangements for this inspection included a meeting with representatives from the governors and the opportunity for all parents, teaching and support staff to complete a confidential questionnaire.

Eleven percent of parents (9 parents) and 58.75 % of staff (47 staff) responded to the questionnaires. The small number of parents who responded to the questionnaires were positive and value the progress made by their pupils and the inclusive and supportive ethos throughout the school. The teacher and support staff questionnaire responses were positive, and indicated support for the acting principal and life of the school. Issues concerning examination entry policy and staff training were discussed with the governors and senior leaders.

2. Focus of inspection

In order to promote improvement in the interests of all pupils, the purpose of inspection is, through effective linking of internal and external approaches, to:

- evaluate the quality of the provision and the outcomes for the pupils;
- evaluate the school's leadership and management and its capacity to effect and sustain improvement in its provision and outcomes; and
- inform the school's planning for improvement.

3. Context

Mitchell House is a special school located in East Belfast, for pupils with complex and physical disabilities with most having an associated learning difficulty. The school offers places for up to 90 pupils from 3 to 19 years old, mainly from Belfast, North Down and the surrounding areas. Pupils are enrolled in the school following consultation with parents and after medical and educational assessments by the Education Authority and Health Trusts. The school includes a nursery and outreach support for pupils with physical disabilities and their teachers in mainstream schools through the Mitchell House Support Service (MHSS). At the time of the inspection the school had an acting principal and an acting vice-principal. The uncertainty as to when the leadership posts in the school will be made permanent by the Education Authority makes the retention of experienced staff difficult and impacts upon the specialist expertise developed within the school.

Mitchell House school	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16
Enrolment school	90	83	80	81
Enrolment outreach	150	166	169	*
% Attendance	86.6	89.9	85.1	86
FSME Percentage ¹	50	49	50	47
Newcomers	*	*	*	*

Source: data as held by the school.

* fewer than 5

N/A not available

4. Overall findings of the inspection

Overall Effectiveness	High level of capacity for sustained improvement
Achievements and outcomes	Very Good
Provision for learning	Very Good
Leadership and management	Very good
Outreach provision	Very good

5. Achievements and outcomes

- The pupils enjoy the supportive school community and respond positively to the positive ethos; as a result, most make good, and sometimes better, progress towards the targets set for them.
- The pupils develop positive attitudes to learning and enjoy their lessons. They learn how to work with others and most have well developed social skills. Their achievements and work are celebrated frequently by staff and displayed prominently around the school.
- Most pupils make progress in reading and writing in line with their ability and their skills in talking and listening are well developed. They respond well to the creative stimuli presented such as through drama and music. Most pupils engage confidently with one another and with adults and are encouraged and supported to communicate effectively, using augmented communication devices where appropriate.
- In all key stages, the pupils enjoy learning mathematics and can communicate enthusiastically about their work. By the end of key stage 4 the pupils achieve a range of accreditation matched well to their needs, for example Council for Curriculum Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) GCSE Mathematics foundation level C, Oxford and Cambridge RSA (OCR) entry level Mathematics for Life, and CCEA Prerequisite Q skills.

¹ The term 'FSME Percentage' refers to the percentage of pupils entitled to free school meals.

- The pupils in key stage 4 where appropriate, attend mainstream schools to study examination courses alongside their peers. Almost all of the pupils attain accreditation in a wide range of courses, including CCEA entry level history, geography, and art and design; OCR entry level Life and Living Skills; GCSE foundation English Language, and CCEA levels 1 to 4 in Using Communication and Using Mathematics.

6. Provision for learning

- Almost all of the teaching is good or better and is underpinned by detailed and well-differentiated planning to meet the needs of all pupils. The teachers make very good use of a range of creative activities and relevant contexts to engage the pupils in their learning. Effective questioning to develop the pupil's thinking and understanding is an appropriate current focus throughout the school. An innovative system of baseline assessment with diagnostic investigation is at an early stage of development. In the most effective practice the teachers reflect on the pupil's learning and evaluate their progress to inform future planning. The teachers have high expectations for all pupils and encourage them to explore their ideas and make good use of plenary sessions to reflect on their learning.
- The individual education plans have clear targets and strategies to guide classroom practice. They are reviewed on a regular basis and updated. The school have appropriately identified the need to revise the plans to report more rigorously the progress made by the pupils based on the additional baseline testing arrangements.
- In the most effective practice observed, the pupils have well planned opportunities to develop a good understanding of numeracy through appropriate practical activities. While a particular strength of the provision is the development of the pupil's numeracy skills in real life contexts, particularly in the senior pupils' classes, there is a need to consolidate further early numeracy skills at the foundation stage.
- The teachers provide a very stimulating learning environment for literacy where the pupil's have good opportunities to present their ideas and demonstrate their understanding through talking and listening, reading and writing across all areas of the curriculum. Effective liaison with Speech and Language therapists further develops the pupils' oral communication skills. A recently introduced whole-school phonological approach has enabled co-ordinators to monitor well the pupil's progress in reading, and it is appropriate that the teachers have planned to extend this level of monitoring to all aspects of literacy provision.
- The pupils who require additional support with aspects of their literacy and numeracy programmes are supported effectively with appropriate interventions such as reading partnership and individual support sessions. This support is particularly effective for the post-primary pupils who successfully study for examinations with their peers in neighbouring mainstream schools.

- The pupils are competent in using a variety of information and communication technology (ICT) resources, which support and enhance their learning, particularly for those pupils pursuing GCSE accredited courses. The teachers use ICT appropriately to support the learning experiences and make lessons more enjoyable. The integration of ICT within the KS2 curriculum has been appropriately identified as a priority for further development.
- The nursery provision is highly effective and the staff expertise and interaction with the pupils is of a high standard. The pupil's learning through play is well planned and monitored based on a thorough assessment of their individual needs.
- The school outreach service provided to pre-school, nursery, primary and post-primary is very effective. Pupils referred to the service are assessed appropriately and their learning is planned for and supported by a team of skilled teachers. The support and guidance offered to parents and mainstream teachers is of a very high standard and has extended to include a very purposeful parent-toddler group based in the school.
- The quality of the arrangements for pastoral care is outstanding. The strong sense of teamwork and collegiality provides an effective and conducive climate for learning. There is a very caring, nurturing and inclusive ethos which permeates all aspects of the life and work of the school. The school works closely with parents and other agencies to ensure and promote the holistic education of each pupil. The staff are highly committed to the welfare of the pupils and to promoting high standards in work and behaviour. The excellent contribution of the support staff enhances greatly the development of each pupil. The pupils respond enthusiastically to the well developed structures which actively promote and reward appropriate behaviour.
- In discussions with the inspection team the pupils spoke enthusiastically about their school, the quality of the relationships with the staff and the friendships they establish and maintain with their peers. They spoke with confidence about the subjects they enjoy and the progress they make in their learning; they shared their plans for continuing their learning and gaining employment. The pupils have very good opportunities to contribute effectively to decision making through the school council.
- The staff have developed effective arrangements for careers education and have established and maintain valuable links with the local area learning community, and a wide range of employers who provide suitable work experience opportunities. The senior pupils are prepared well for transition to further education, training or employment. The very effective careers programme has an appropriate focus on the development of numeracy and literacy, and personal and social skills. The pupil's understand the career pathways and qualifications they require for their intended career, employment or further study in line with their interests and capabilities.
- The accommodation is restricting the curriculum provision and requires urgent improvement to give the pupils the appropriate opportunities for play and to develop their independence. (see Appendix 1).

- The school consistently promotes healthy eating through providing fresh fruit and water at break time and makes effective use of the limited outdoor space and resources to provide, regular and frequent physical activity to encourage the pupils to adopt healthy lifestyles. The pupils participate where appropriate in a range of sporting activities including cycling proficiency, wheelchair basketball, swimming and horse riding.
- The school has established valuable and inclusive links with the local special, primary and post-primary schools including participation in the Shared Education Signature Programme.

7. Leadership and management

- The acting principal and acting vice-principal form a very effective and experienced management team; they have developed a clear, strategic vision for the school that has been shared and agreed with all staff, parents and governors. They have re-organised and developed effectively the senior leadership and middle management teams, during a time of significant change, and have worked hard to minimise the impact on pupil's education.
- The co-ordinators all have clear action plans in place with appropriate strategies to involve staff fully in their implementation. They are well supported by the senior management who have appropriately identified the need to develop further the culture of self evaluation by monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of teaching and learning, and the impact of the action plans. The trusted colleague initiative is in the early stages of implementation.
- Based on the evidence available at the time of the inspection, the parents, staff and community can have confidence in the aspects of governance evaluated. The governors are well informed on matters relating to the progress of the pupils and all aspects of school life. They are effective in their challenge function regarding the quality of provision for the pupils. There are very good working relationships with the acting principal, however, the governors need to consult with school management in a more systematic manner.
- The school development plan targets have been prioritised and associated action plans are in place. The senior management have identified appropriately the systematic tracking of pupil progress as a key priority to develop highly individualised support programmes to meet the specific needs of the pupils.
- On the basis of the evidence available at the time of the inspection, the school has comprehensive arrangements in place for safeguarding pupils. These arrangements reflect the guidance issued by the Department of Education. In discussions with the inspection team the pupils stated that they feel safe and well-cared for in school and are aware of what to do if they have any worries about their safety or well-being.

8. Overall effectiveness

The school has a high level of capacity for sustained improvement in the interest of all the learners. The ETI will continue to monitor how the school sustains improvement.

Accommodation

1. The accommodation has a negative impact on the development of the curriculum. The small classrooms restrict the free movement of pupils using wheelchairs, standing frames and other apparatus. The hall, located in the old residential building, can only be used by small numbers of pupils in wheelchairs, making circulation and free movement very difficult, subsequently the use of the hall for physical education is very limited. The hall is too small for an assembly or special event and unfit for purpose.
2. The narrow and restricted corridors and steep ramps are difficult for pupils with limited mobility particularly for those in wheelchairs and beds. There are very limited facilities for the storage of wheelchairs and other essential equipment.
3. The old residential section of the school building requires constant repair and ongoing maintenance with single glazed windows. Some of the windows are ill fitting and have poor insulation properties resulting in additional expense in heating the school building.
4. The covered walkways that provide access to external mobile classrooms are not weather resistant and staff report that in inclement weather pupils in wheelchairs and those with restricted mobility have great difficulty accessing the numerous classrooms that are outside and separate from the main school building.
5. Therapy room two requires a glass observation panel in the door to ensure that others can see into the room at all times.

Health and Safety

1. The recently completed health and safety report compiled by the Education Authority highlights a number of issues that require urgent attention to ensure the safety and security of the very vulnerable pupils.
2. A small number of the emergency stop buttons in the Technology and Design workshop are located across worktops in positions that are not accessible for pupils in wheelchairs.
3. The work benches in the Technology and design area are unsuitable for use by pupils in wheelchairs.
4. There is an urgent need for management to carry out a health and safety audit of the Technology and Design department and to implement the recommendations.
5. Most of the windows in the main school building are single glazed and below 800 millimetres from the floorline, requiring urgent review to ensure the safety of the pupils.

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