

Report of a Post-primary Inspection
Cullybackey College, Ballymena

September 2024



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1. INTRODUCTION

A. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Cullybackey College is a controlled, 11-18 co-educational, non-selective post-primary school situated in the village of Cullybackey, near Ballymena. The school attracts pupils from a wide catchment area and almost 30 primary schools in mid- and North Antrim. In line with demographic trends in the area, enrolment in the school has declined from 715 in 2021-22 and stands currently at 672. The proportion of pupils with free school meals entitlement has also declined over the same period, from 30% in 2021-22 to 25% at present. While the proportion of pupils identified as having special educational needs (SEN) has remained steady, there has been a significant rise in the number of pupils with a statement of educational need, from 37 in 2021-22 to 52 currently. The number of newcomer pupils has increased from a very small number in 2021-22 to 13 in this academic year.

Following an extended process, a business case has been approved for a new school building, a prospective site has been identified and the process for procuring the land is underway.

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.

A very small number of pupils responded to the questionnaire. In discussions with the inspectors, pupils expressed their appreciation of the welcoming, caring staff who make them feel valued as individuals, celebrating their unique personalities. They know what to do and who to speak to if they have any concerns about their safety or wellbeing. They value the wide range of opportunities to foster their leadership skills and to care practically for others, reflected in the range of charitable fund-raising initiatives and through the school's competitive house-system.

A majority of the teachers (56%) responded to the questionnaire and their responses were highly positive. Around one-third of the teachers who responded also provided additional written comments which highlighted: the pupil-centred ethos; the supportive working relationships between staff and pupils; and the consistent focus on 'creating opportunities for success'. A minority (17%) of support staff responded to the questionnaires and their responses were also highly positive.

A minority (13%) of parents responded to the questionnaire and their responses indicated high levels of satisfaction with all aspects of the provision. Almost one-half of these parents provided written comments in which they expressed their appreciation of the welcoming induction for new pupils, the pastoral care provided across the school and the dedicated staff who help their children progress in their learning.

The small number of individual concerns expressed by parents, teachers and support staff was shared with senior leaders and representatives of the governors.

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

- Underpinning the vision is a well-embedded culture of care, support and acceptance in which the pupils' unique starting points and abilities are recognised clearly and which enables them to thrive right from the beginning of their time at Cullybackey College.
- As well as progressing academically, being successful in Cullybackey College includes: showing kindness, feeling safe and happy, enjoying learning and being able to participate fully in the life of the school: altogether, these aspirations support the school's vision of 'creating opportunities for success' for all the pupils.
- The kind, polite, respectful pupils have a strong sense of pride in, and belonging to, the school and to their community which helps them address any challenges with hope and positive attitudes.
- The pupils' holistic development is enriched through a wide range of leadership opportunities, their care for one another, and support from the staff and external partners including local churches, businesses and organisations in a network of learning.
- The school is committed to providing support for the pupils with SEN. The pupils' needs are identified at an early stage and good account is taken of pastoral and other information in the planning of intervention and support for individuals and groups.
- Most of the lessons observed during the inspection were effective in promoting successful learning. To ensure greater consistency in the pupils' learning, it is timely for senior and middle leaders to re-engage in observation of learning and teaching, identify the existing effective practice, share it among the staff and inform the next stages of teacher professional learning.

- The professional learning and wellbeing of staff are prioritised by the school and are aligned closely to the priorities in the school development plan.
- The curriculum is weighted more heavily towards applied subjects and needs to be kept under review. The current timetable includes multiple periods of a single subject on one day or isolated single periods for practical subjects which do not leave enough time for practical work: it does not support effectively enough the curriculum and continuity in the pupils' learning experiences.
- 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:

- to improve consistency in the quality of the lessons; and
- to review the curriculum and associated timetabling to enable the pupils to have continuity in their learning and make progress in line with their needs, aspirations and capabilities.

3. MAIN REPORT

A. SETTING THE VISION

The original vision for the school is articulated in the motto, 'per angusta ad augusta', (through hardships to honours), which is prominently displayed throughout the buildings and on the crest. The vision is complemented by the more recent strapline, 'creating opportunities for success', which informs all aspects of the provision and is shared and understood well by the pupils, staff and governors.

Underpinning the vision is a well-embedded culture of care, support and acceptance in which the pupils' unique starting points and abilities are recognised clearly and which enables them to thrive right from the beginning of their time at Cullybackey College.

The processes for monitoring the provision, including appropriate consultation, have enabled senior leaders to identify appropriate key targets for whole-school improvement. However, the associated action plans do not specify clearly the processes for reviewing the improvement work and how progress will be measured accurately. The governors support, and are well informed about, the improvement work. They hear directly from senior leaders, heads of department and others leading key initiatives about progress in their area of responsibility and about the standards attained by the pupils.

B. IMPLEMENTING AND IMPROVING TO ACHIEVE THE VISION

The pupils display positive attitudes to their learning. In discussions with inspectors, they spoke positively about their mutually respectful relationships with teachers, the support from teachers and learning support assistants, and the structure of their lessons.

In the most engaging lessons, the pupils have opportunities to discuss their learning through well-planned group work, practical and problem-solving activities. They support each other with empathy and respect, engage readily in discussions and give extended responses which help to develop their thinking and oral communication skills. In these lessons, the teachers' evident enthusiasm for their respective subjects, their energetic communication and the pace of the learning engage and motivate the pupils. The skilful teachers provide suitable practical support and resources which enable the pupils to complete purposeful individual work successfully. In discussions with inspectors, the pupils were able to identify effective strategies that help them to learn, including opportunities for discussion, paired and group work. They recognise that, in most cases, teachers support them skilfully to achieve and reach their targets.

In a minority of lessons, the pupils were not engaged fully in their learning; the strategies used by teachers were limited and did not give pupils sufficient opportunities to extend their understanding of key concepts, discuss suitably challenging issues with their peers and participate actively in their own learning. Through the programme for teacher professional learning, the senior leaders have prioritised appropriately re-engaging with staff in lesson observations: this positive action will enable them to identify and share existing effective practice, to support greater consistency in learning experiences and improved outcomes for all pupils.

The pupils at KS 3 access a suitably broad curriculum designed to enable them to progress and achieve well. They benefit from baseline testing on entry to year 8 which identifies those pupils who need additional support in English and mathematics in particular. Continued use of internal assessment throughout KS 3 enables the school to measure the pupils' progress accurately and ensure that all have an appropriate curriculum that prepares them well for transition to KS 4.

At KS 4 and post-16, the curriculum offer meets the requirements of the Entitlement Framework. The KS 4 curriculum delivered in school and in collaboration with Northern Regional College is weighted more towards applied subjects which enable most of the pupils to achieve well in terms of any five GCSEs or equivalents at grades A* to C. However, this emphasis on applied subjects narrows the potential academic progression of a minority of the pupils.

While collaboration at post-16 with other schools in the 'Ballymena Learning Together' area learning community allows for some breadth in the curriculum and widens options for the pupils, a limited number of general qualifications is available to the pupils, which may narrow their options for progression into further and higher education. There is currently no enrichment programme for sixth-form pupils.

Across all key stages, the pupils report that the quality of their learning experiences is impacted negatively by the timetabling which includes multiple periods of a single subject on one day or isolated single periods for practical subjects which do not leave enough time for practical work. It will be important for senior leaders, in consultation with all staff, to review the timetabling arrangements across all subject areas.

The preventative curriculum equips the pupils with effective skills in keeping safe and in promoting their wellbeing, especially through physical activity. Bespoke external mentoring and coaching programmes, internal peer mentoring opportunities and engagement with a wide range of external agencies help the pupils to make informed choices. Appropriately, the school is reviewing its provision for learning for life and work and the outworking of the relationships and sexuality education policy to ensure pupils have more opportunities in a planned, progressive way across all key stages to prepare them for life and work.

The programme for careers education, information and guidance (CEIAG) includes appropriate opportunities for all pupils in year 11 to participate in work placements. The structured approach to personal career planning sessions is a benefit for pupils at KS 4 and post-16.

C. BUILDING EQUITY

The staff are committed to identifying the needs of, and providing support for, the pupils with SEN. Pupils' needs are identified through the analysis of a wide range of standardised assessments and pastoral information, together with detailed information from the pupils, their parents and the feeder primary schools. Importantly, the observations made by the learning support assistants and their interactions with the pupils contribute well to the planning for, and evaluation of, the effectiveness of the support.

The pupils benefit from a range of early intervention strategies including those facilitated by external partners such as Education Authority personnel, local churches and other organisations, all of whom work to support the pupils' development and prevent them from disengaging from their learning. There is a range of effective interventions in place for KS 3 pupils, including the 'reading partners' and 'numeracy mentoring' sessions facilitated by year 13 and 14 pupils. Pupils who spoke with inspectors indicated that the care, support and effective strategies provided by their teachers are helping them progress.

A strength of the current personal learning plans (PLPs) is the consultation with, and input from, the pupils and their parents. However, the targets for the pupils and strategies for the teachers are too general. Going forward, more sharply focused targets will enable teachers to adopt the most suitable strategies to support the pupils and measure their progress more accurately.

The school demonstrates its commitment to equality, diversity and inclusion through the very positive relationships at all levels; high levels of care, compassion and empathy are evident across the school community. The newcomer pupils report that they are given valuable opportunities to tell their peers about the richness of their own cultures and heritages.

The school had identified lower attendance as a priority and taken action to address it. The initiatives taken have been successful and, as a result, attendance has improved significantly.

D. EMBEDDING SUCCESS

The pupils' smooth transition from year 7 is a priority for pastoral staff. In their responses to the questionnaire, the parents commended the well-designed induction programme, including a residential trip as a full year group, which gives new year 8 pupils a secure basis for settling into their post-primary school.

As well as progressing academically, being successful in Cullybackey College includes: showing kindness, feeling safe and happy, enjoying learning and being able to participate fully in the life of the school: altogether, these aspirations support the school's vision of 'creating opportunities for success' for all the pupils. In discussion with the inspectors, the pupils expressed their appreciation of the positive rewards and merits which recognise application, positive attitudes and behaviours. The staff embed success on a daily basis by taking an interest in pupils as individuals, providing constructive feedback and praising their efforts.

The pupils develop well as individuals, who contribute positively to the life and work of the school and succeed in a wide range of academic, sporting and cultural areas. Their successes, within and outside school, are celebrated in class, through attractive wall displays, assemblies and the pro-active use of social media.

Their charitable work is a notable success: the school is recognised as a major fund-raiser for their chosen charity. A particular achievement for the Debating Society was their recent selection to represent Northern Ireland in the European Youth Parliament. These and other enrichment opportunities help the pupils to develop new skills through a wider range of life experiences and foster a sense of belonging and loyalty to their school.

The school's data shows that most pupils (89%) attain five GCSE qualifications at grades A* to C (or level two equivalent) which is in line with the school's expectations and the pupils' abilities. The school is now focused appropriately on improving further the proportion of pupils attaining five GCSE qualifications including English and mathematics, at grades A* to C: in 2024, a minority (44%) of the pupils attained at this level. Around 40% of the year 12 pupils progress to post-16 provision in the school. Almost all of the year 12 pupils leaving the school go on to courses in further education, training and employment.

The school acknowledges appropriately that the proportion of pupils at post-16 completing the two-year course and attaining three or more grades A*-C at A level or level 3 equivalent qualifications requires further improvement. Accordingly, recent changes have been made to the entry criteria to post-16 study and the guidance the pupils receive on the subjects best matched to their abilities and aspirations: the impact of these changes is still to be assessed.

E. GROWING A COMMUNITY OF LEARNING

The pupils appreciate the strong sense of community across the school. The school's active engagement with the wider local community enriches the pupils' moral, spiritual and entrepreneurial development through ongoing work with churches, businesses and community organisations. The school values highly the collaboration with a local faith-based organisation which delivers both sports coaching and mentoring for pupils at risk of disengaging from education.

Staff have fostered strong links with the 30 main feeder primary schools by providing two discrete activity-based learning days, including STEM-related activities, which are very well attended. In addition, the parent-teacher association plays an active role in raising funds by organising well-supported events in the local community which enhances the provision and benefits the pupils.

The professional learning and the wellbeing of staff are prioritised by the school through well-planned opportunities delivered both internally and by external providers. The programme for staff professional learning is closely linked to the priorities in the school development plan. The learning support assistants have availed of staff professional learning and developed their understanding and skills, for example, in adopting common approaches to helping pupils in class with aspects of literacy and numeracy.

Pupils volunteer to be trained as peer mentors and mental health ambassadors. They value these opportunities to care for others and develop leadership skills. The school has also established processes to enable the pupils to participate in decision-making about aspects of school life which affect them directly. Through their responses to internal questionnaires, the pupils and staff have identified the need to develop the school council's role both in seeking pupils' views and representing them at the relevant meetings, including the types of learning experiences they enjoy.

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.

4. GOING FORWARD

Cullybackey College fosters a culture of care, support and acceptance through which the vision of 'creating opportunities for success' is realised. The school has built strong connections with the local community for the benefit of the pupils. Within this pupil-centred ethos, teacher professional learning is closely aligned to the priorities in the school development plan and designed to meet more effectively the pupils' learning needs.

The ETI, through the engagement of the district inspector, will continue to work with the school as it takes forward the areas for action as set out in the report.

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% |

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