

A series of stylized, colorful paper figures holding hands in a line, set against a dark blue background with a light blue and purple gradient. The figures are rendered in shades of blue, purple, and pink, with a slight glow effect.

Report of a Primary Inspection

Comber Primary School and
Nursery Unit

DE Ref No 401-1588

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Education and
Training Inspectorate
Empowering Improvement

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Throughout the report the use of an asterisk * denotes further information included at Appendix 2.

1. INTRODUCTION

A. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Comber Primary School and Nursery Unit is a controlled co-educational school in the town of Comber, County Down. The school was established in 1938. The school provides for children mainly from the town of Comber and surrounding rural areas. Over the last four years the enrolment has remained consistent: there are 316 children in the primary school, and a further 53 children in two part-time sessions in the nursery unit. Thirty-three percent of the children have free school meals entitlement and 24% have been identified as having special educational needs (SEN). There are a small number of newcomer children.

The school grounds have been developed recently to include the 'Big Bear Wood' outdoor learning facility, outdoor learning courtyards and a multi-use games area pitch. The school provides a 'Comber Earlies' breakfast club and the 'Later Gators' after-school club for the children. The school was awarded its sixth ECO Schools Green Flag* Award in June 2025.

B. VIEWS OF PUPILS, PARENTS AND STAFF

The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) issued online confidential questionnaires to the children in year 7, all parents and staff in advance of the inspection.

The responses to the questionnaires are referenced, where relevant, within the main body of the report. A high-level summary of the questionnaire responses, including any concerns raised, was shared with the principal and representatives of the board of governors.

C. THE PROCESS OF INSPECTION

The ETI worked alongside Comber 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 define, celebrate and embed success; and
- grows and develops an inclusive community of learning.

2. MAIN REPORT

A. SETTING THE VISION

The school vision, captured in the motto, '**learning to love, loving to learn**', promotes a holistic and values-driven approach within the school, reflected in the courteous behaviour of the children who told us that they love learning and are proud of their school experience. The vision is widely understood across the school community, as reflected in the questionnaire responses.

The development planning process is at an early stage of development. Through consultation with the staff, the senior leaders have identified two overarching priorities, "More children learning outside more often" and "Capturing and reflecting children's views and experiences across a range of school areas", which reflect a commitment to the holistic development of the children and the importance of including the learner voice. These priorities are underpinned by nine action plans. While all of the areas are relevant and reflect important aspects of the school's provision, the staff now need to pace their development work more strategically, ensuring that key priorities are sequenced, focused and manageable to enable meaningful and sustained improvement.

The recently reconstituted school governors bring a broad and relevant range of skills and experience to their roles. They are supportive of the school's strategic direction and have a clear understanding of its current context, including key priorities and challenges. The governors are actively involved in the life and work of the school, with link roles enabling focused oversight of key areas of the curriculum. To achieve the vision of high-quality education more fully, the governors and school leaders need to review the length of the school day to ensure time is managed to maximise learning opportunities for all and that it is in line with statutory guidance (as per Department of Education Circular 2013/09). Improvements to accommodation, including building maintenance and adequacy of resources, are also required to meet the needs of the children and the staff.

B. IMPLEMENTING AND IMPROVING TO ACHIEVE THE VISION

Across all classes, a notable strength is the children's sustained focus and high levels of engagement in their learning. The learning and teaching is well planned, appropriately adapted to meet the learning needs of the children, and enriched through purposeful experiences, including outdoor learning. The effective use of assessment for learning strategies, including constructive verbal and written feedback, enables the children to understand how they learn and what they need to do to improve. The classroom assistants support the children very effectively to keep them on task, using a range of strategies and resources.

The nursery unit is an attractive learning space with a wide range of interesting activities which the teachers use to develop well the children's creative and problem-solving skills. The use of authentic and natural materials enriches further the children's learning experiences and encourages them to use their senses as they develop their fine motor skills and extend their vocabulary.

The development of the new 'Big Bear Wood' outdoor area is enhancing effectively learning and teaching across the school. Through the questionnaires and discussions, the children told us that they enjoy being active in this space. They use the wide range of natural materials to be creative, problem-solve, collaborate, and develop their curiosity and observations skills in the natural environment.

The whole-school focus on improving the children's love of reading has been enhanced through the recent investment in additional reading materials and the introduction of a structured online reading programme. The staff monitor closely the children's progress through online comprehension assessments and have identified appropriately the next step which is to meet with focus groups of children to evaluate more fully the impact of the reading programme.

The school's recent investment in interactive whiteboards is enhancing whole-class teaching across the curriculum. From the foundation stage, the children access regularly the technology suite, developing their digital skills with increasing independence, supported very effectively by the school's digital leaders. As the children progress through the school, they apply and extend their digital competence through research, coding, data handling, and multimedia creation, including digital storytelling linked to their World Around Us topics.

The children benefit from a range of well-planned opportunities that promote their physical and emotional well-being and encourage positive attitudes towards healthy lifestyles and environmental responsibility. Through the questionnaires and discussions, the children told us that they feel safe in school and know who to speak to if they have any concerns about their well-being. They are also aware of online safety and know how to keep themselves protected when using digital devices.

C. BUILDING EQUITY

A supportive and inclusive ethos underpins the life and work of the school and reflects a clear commitment to meeting the diverse and evolving needs of all the children. The children who met with us, and those who responded to the year 7 questionnaire, agreed that the teachers and the classroom assistants provide help when they find it difficult to learn.

The staff use a range of strategies, including visual schedules, regular well-being check-ins, positive reinforcement and adapted learning activities, to ensure that the children, including those with additional and specific needs, make meaningful progress. A range of assessment information is used effectively, alongside professional judgement and pastoral information, to identify the children who require additional support. Targeted interventions, such as small group booster sessions, and withdrawal classes, are supporting effectively the progress of these children. The additional support for newcomer children is particularly effective; one-to-one learning sessions help the children develop their reading, writing and communication skills while also offering important pastoral care. The progress made by the children is monitored closely, with the class and learning support teachers working collaboratively to ensure consistency and responsiveness to individual needs.

Individual Education Plans (IEPs) are in place for the children with SEN. The staff are beginning to incorporate the views of the children and parents as they move towards developing more personalised learning plans. The process for target setting within IEPs requires review at a whole-school level to ensure the targets are consistently specific, measurable, achievable and reflect progression in the children's learning.

Classroom assistants make a valuable contribution to supporting the children and monitoring their progress. The staff have identified appropriately the need to strengthen professional learning to meet the children's increasingly complex needs. Where professional learning has been most impactful, it is enhancing the staff's understanding of specific learning difficulties. Whole-school approaches to phonics and spelling are informed appropriately by data from a range of specialist assessment tools, which is used effectively to identify needs early and inform targeted support.

Irregular patterns of children's attendance continue to present a significant barrier to learning for some of the children. The school leaders and staff monitor regularly attendance to enable them to identify concerns and put interventions in place in a timely way.

D. DEFINING, CELEBRATING AND EMBEDDING SUCCESS

The children's self-management skills and ability to work collaboratively with peers is a key strength. The children demonstrate consistently high levels of respect, empathy and co-operation in their interactions with both their peers and adults; their behaviour is exemplary.

The children achieve well across the curriculum, with most of the children achieving expected outcomes or above in literacy and numeracy. They are articulate and confident communicators who engage meaningfully in discussions, using expanding vocabulary that includes technical and subject-specific language. As they progress through the school, they talk knowledgeably about their reading preferences and select responsibly books from the school library to match their interests and ability levels. The children write across a range of genres with increasing confidence, creativity and accuracy; their written work is well presented.

In nursery and the foundation stage, the children develop a sound understanding of mathematical concepts and language through outdoor play. As they progress through the school, they apply mathematical knowledge and concepts with growing accuracy. There is clear evidence of the children using problem solving strategies in meaningful, real-life contexts. In the more effective practice, the children are provided with extension activities that challenge their thinking and deepen their learning.

The children are developing a strong sense of social and environmental responsibility through purposeful initiatives. Their engagement in creating and planting a school allotment, alongside recycling and upcycling projects, enhances their understanding of sustainability and active citizenship. Through their involvement in charitable activities, the children show a growing awareness of the needs of the wider community.

A range of reward systems, including pupil of the week, manner of the month, house points and class-based incentives, celebrate the children's success and reinforce the school values. The children's achievements in learning, the arts and sport are celebrated regularly through assemblies, certificates and social media. Creative and thoughtfully curated displays throughout the school reflect the breadth of the curriculum and contribute to an inclusive and affirming learning environment.

E. GROWING A COMMUNITY OF LEARNING

The school has made a positive start in fostering learner participation, as evidenced by a small number of children undertaking a range of leadership roles, including digital leaders, playground buddies, sports captains, and house captains. These roles are having a positive impact on the well-being, learning and engagement of their peers. The staff have identified appropriately the need to provide more opportunities for the children to give their views on the curriculum.

The teaching staff have accessed recently training in dyslexia awareness, which has had a positive impact on classroom practice. More whole-school opportunities for staff collaboration, professional learning and the sharing of effective practice are needed to develop further a culture of reflective practice, as reflected in the staff responses to the ETI questionnaires.

Effective communication with the parents includes curriculum information and induction activities with year one parents and supports parental understanding of the children's learning. Almost all of the parents who responded to the ETI questionnaire agree that the information provided by the school is helpful and they are happy with their child's learning experiences in the school. Within the nursery, the Department of Education's 'Getting Ready to Learn'* Programme is used well to stimulate interest in books, and feedback from parents has confirmed the positive impact this programme has had on their routines and support for the children at home.

The Parent Teacher Association contributes significantly through fundraising to the work of the school, enabling the enhancement and replenishment of learning resources. A notable aspect of community engagement is the work with grandparents and local volunteers through the Time to Read* programme, who make an important contribution to supporting the children's literacy development. In line with the school values of respect, fairness, citizenship, and responsibility, the staff encourage the children to respond to the needs of others within the local and global community through charity work supporting, for example, the Samaritan's Purse Shoebox Appeal and the Poppy Appeal.

Collaboration with Forest Schools Northern Ireland* and local horticultural groups enrich opportunities for the children to learn about the world around them. For example, collaboration with the Comber Regeneration Project and Comber Community Garden Group has enhanced significantly the outdoor learning provision.

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.

3. NEXT STEPS

The school's vision is centred appropriately on a holistic, values-driven ethos, captured in the motto of **learning to love, loving to learn**. This ethos is reflected clearly in the school's nurturing environment, where the children feel safe and supported. The children are proud of their school, enjoy warm and respectful relationships with the staff, and are achieving well across the curriculum.

The next steps for Comber Primary School and Nursery Unit are to take forward the following areas for action:

- to establish a robust school development planning process, informed by a full range of monitoring and evaluation processes; and
- to strengthen the community of learning among the staff through strategically planned opportunities for collaboration, the sharing of effective practice, and continuous professional learning.

ETI will monitor the progress of Comber Primary School and Nursery Unit in addressing the areas for action. There will be a progress inspection.

4. 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: NOTES

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The Eco-Schools Green Flag Award*

The Eco-Schools Green Flag is an internationally recognised award for excellence in environmental action and learning.

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Getting Ready to Learn*

The Getting Ready to Learn project supports DE funded pre-school education providers to encourage and develop parental involvement in children's early learning. It is focused on improving outcomes for children in pre-school by engaging and empowering parents to help them create and sustain positive home learning environments.

Time to Read*

Time to Read is a volunteering initiative, developed by Business in the Community and supported by the Department of Education. It aims to improve literacy, foster a love of reading and build confidence and social skills of children at Key Stage 2 in local primary schools.

Forest Schools Northern Ireland*

A forest school is an outdoor learning approach where children learn through play, exploration, and supported risk-taking in natural woodland environments, fostering confidence, self-esteem and independence



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