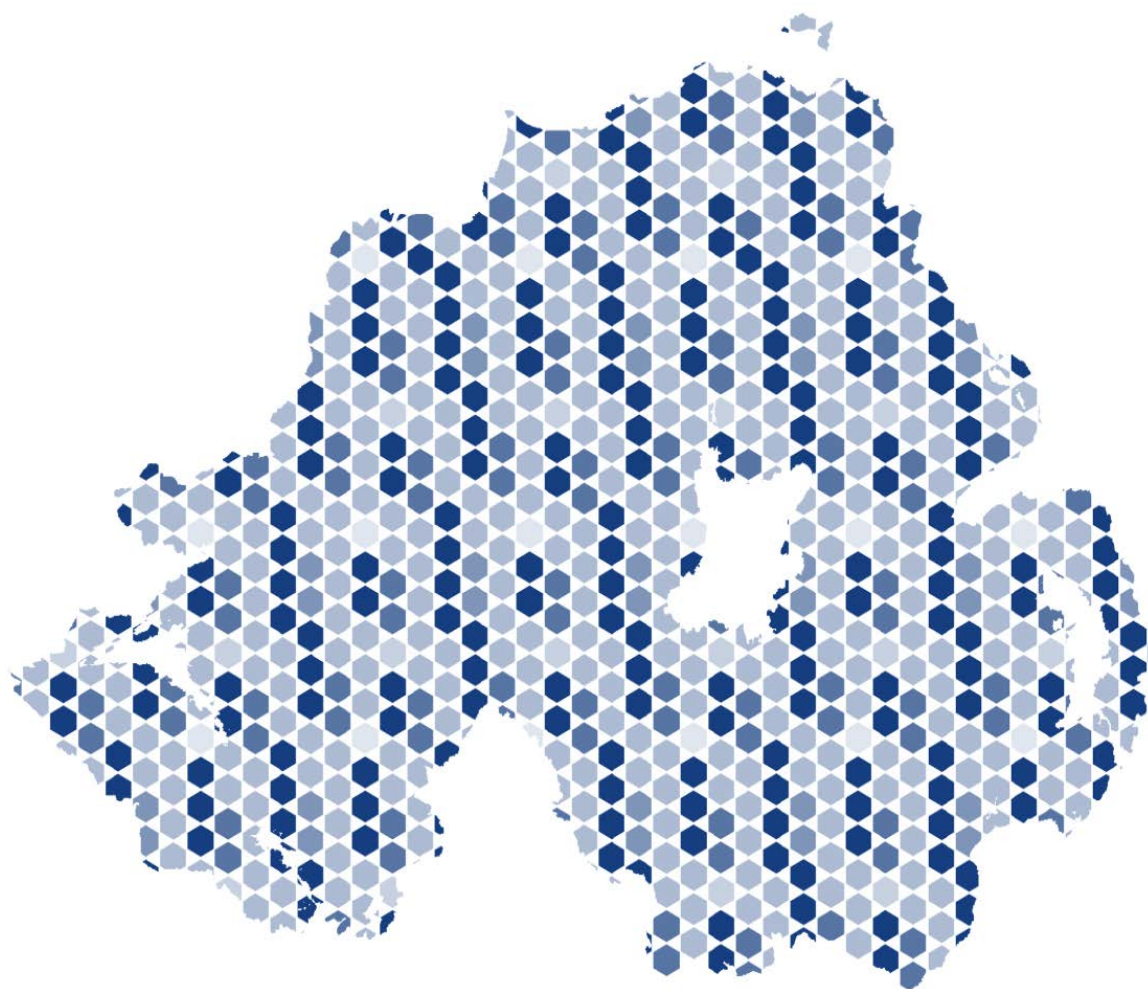


# POST-PRIMARY INSPECTION



Education and Training  
Inspectorate

Assumption Grammar School,  
Ballynahinch

All girls, voluntary grammar, 11-18 school

Report of an Inspection in  
April 2015



*The Education and Training Inspectorate -  
Promoting Improvement*

Providing Inspection Services for

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

CUSTOMER  
SERVICE  
EXCELLENCE



### 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%

### Performance levels

The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) use the following performance levels in reports:

DESCRIPTOR
Outstanding
Very Good
Good
Satisfactory
Inadequate
Unsatisfactory

## Contents

Section	Page
1. Inspection method and evidence base	1
2. Focus and purpose of inspection	1
3. Context of the school	1
4. Overall findings of the inspection	2
5. Quality of achievements and standards	2
6. Quality of provision	4
7. Quality of leadership and management	5
8. Conclusion	6

**Appendix** on trends in examination performance and other statistical data

## **1. Inspection method and evidence base**

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

Inspectors observed teaching and learning, scrutinised documentation, data 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.

Just over 12% of parents (90) and 35% of staff (35 teachers and support staff) responded to the questionnaires. Almost all of the staff and most of the parents responded positively. The parents' comments reflected positively on the outworking of the Assumption ethos, as demonstrated through the high quality pastoral support and the commitment of the staff to secure the welfare and learning of the pupils. A few concerns about communication and consultation were shared with representatives of the governors and the principal and, where relevant, are addressed in this report.

## **2. Focus and purpose of inspection**

In order to promote improvement in the interests of all pupils, the purpose of a post-primary inspection is, through an 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 standards; and
- inform the school's planning for improvement.

## **3. Context of the school**

Assumption Grammar School is situated on the outskirts of Ballynahinch. Around ten percent of the pupils come from the town and the rest from a very wide catchment area. The school is regularly oversubscribed; pupils enter from over 60 contributory primary schools and the ability of the pupils on entry is high. Each year, a small number of pupils from other schools join the sixth form.

The school is an active partner in the Ballynahinch Area Learning Community and has effective community links, connections with local businesses and a strong shared education programme.

The school operates under the Trusteeship of the Missionary Sisters of the Assumption and its life and work are underpinned by the '*Fully Alive*' ethos of gospel values.

Significant staffing changes at senior leadership level occurred in the year prior to the inspection, including the appointment of a new principal in September 2014.

<b>Assumption Grammar School</b>	<b>2011/12</b>	<b>2012/13</b>	<b>2013/14</b>	<b>2014/15</b>
Year 8 Intake	122	121	120	122
Enrolment	865	849	849	844
% Attendance (NI Average)	95.0 (95.7)	95.1 (95.3)	95.6 (95.8)	N/A (n/a)
FSME Percentage <sup>1</sup>	6.2	7.5	7.1	11.5
% and (Number) of pupils on SEN register	6.1 (53)	10.3 (87)	8.2 (70)	10.4 (88)
No. of pupils with statements of educational needs in the mainstream school	*	*	*	*
<i>Intake<sup>2</sup>:</i>				
% of Y8 pupils with L5 English	79.5	80.2	40.5	n/a <sup>3</sup>
% of Y8 pupils with L5 mathematics	80.3	86.0	50.4	n/a
% of Y8 pupils with L4 and above in English	100	98.3	98.3	n/a
% of Y8 pupils with L4 and above in mathematics	100	98.3	99.2	n/a
<i>Source: data as held by the school.</i>				

\* fewer than 5

#### 4. Overall findings of the inspection

<b>Overall Effectiveness</b>	<b>Very Good</b>
<b>Achievements and Standards</b>	<b>Very Good</b>
<b>Provision</b>	<b>Very Good</b>
<b>Leadership and Management</b>	<b>Very Good</b>

#### 5. Quality of achievements and standards

- The pupils are highly motivated, confident, polite and articulate. They show high levels of mutual respect and engage in learning with enthusiasm and maturity. Their behaviour, both in and out of the classroom, is exemplary. When given the opportunity, the pupils work well independently and with others to research and evaluate information. They think critically and creatively, review their own learning and assess each other's work.
- The pupils benefit from a broad range of learning and enrichment experiences, including extensive opportunities to become involved in academic, cultural, sporting and charitable activities. The spiritual and moral development of the pupils is afforded a very high priority by the school and, as a result, the pupils display high levels of empathy and sensitivity; they embrace readily their roles as active citizens and are prepared very well to progress to the next stage of their education.

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

<sup>2</sup> From 2013, KS2 standards in English and mathematics are reported as Levels of Progression in Communication and Using Mathematics and cannot be compared directly with KS2 data from previous years

<sup>3</sup> Due to industrial action, not all data from end-of-key-stage 2 assessments in 2014 was made available to the school by the contributory primary schools

- In English, the pupils attain excellent standards in public examinations at both GCSE and GCE A level; outcomes at key stage (KS) 4 are consistently above the Northern Ireland (NI) average for similar selective schools and, at A level, they are significantly above the corresponding average. A particular strength is the dual entry of all pupils in GCSE English Language and English Literature and the subsequent high levels of attainment in the latter subject.
- The pupils attain good standards in mathematics. The standards in GCSE mathematics and further mathematics are in line the NI averages for similar schools. However, the percentage of pupils attaining the highest grades has declined over the past three years. Standards in A level mathematics are in line with the NI average for similar schools and have improved over the past three years. Appropriately, the school broadened the curriculum by introducing A level further mathematics in 2013.
- The pupils, including those entitled to free school meals, attain consistently high standards in public examinations which reflect well their abilities and aptitudes.<sup>4</sup> The percentage of pupils attaining 7 or more GCSE examinations including GCSE English and mathematics, at grades A\* to C, is consistently above the NI average for similar schools; almost all of the pupils attain at or above this level.
- The performance of most of the individual subjects, at GCSE grades A\*-B, is in line with or above the corresponding NI three-year average for girls in selective schools, with around one-fifth of subjects more than ten percentage points above average.
- At A level, the percentage of pupils attaining 3 or more subjects, at grades A\* to C, is above the average for similar schools in the same free school meals category, but has been falling over the past three years. The school has identified the raising of standards at A level as a priority and has put appropriate strategies in place.
- The performance of most of the individual subjects, at A level grades A\*-C, is above the corresponding NI three-year average for girls in selective schools, with around one-quarter of subjects more than ten percentage points above average.
- Each year, a small number of pupils attain at the highest levels in GCSE and A level subjects, with pupils gaining top places at a regional level in, for example, mathematics, journalism and home economics.
- The percentage of pupils who stay on from year 13 to year 14 and the percentage of pupils who leave to go to higher education are both above the NI average.

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<sup>4</sup> The examination data and an analysis of trends in examination standards over the past three years are given in the appendix.

## **6. Quality of provision**

- Planning, teaching, learning and assessment were effective (good or better) in more than four-fifths of the lessons observed during the inspection. In these lessons, the teachers and pupils share high expectations and enjoy excellent working relationships. The teachers have a sound knowledge of their subject and plan well for stimulating and challenging learning activities. They provide supportive oral and written comments throughout lessons and in well-timed plenary sessions which help the pupils raise the standard of their own work. There are well-conceived opportunities for the pupils to engage in purposeful individual, paired and group activities.
- In the less effective practice, in around one-fifth of the lessons observed, the planning is insufficiently detailed and specific to meet the needs of all of the pupils; the intended learning is not clear enough and there are missed opportunities to further develop the pupils' skills and understanding of key concepts.
- The provision in English is enhanced by a wide range of challenging texts across all genres, by the teachers' questioning skills, by pace and challenge in the lessons and by appropriate enrichment activities such as the annual Drama Festival. The pupils are able to converse confidently and to write accurately, creatively and analytically for a wide range of purposes and audiences.
- A literacy audit has been carried out and the review of the literacy policy indicates that each department has identified opportunities to promote purposeful talking and listening, reading and writing and to model good practice in these areas. The specific opportunities, however, for developing the pupils' communication skills, across all of the subjects, is not explicit enough.
- Mathematics is characterised by teachers providing clear explanations and examples, teacher-led whole-class questioning and pupils working individually as the teacher provides supportive one-to-one guidance. There are, however, insufficient opportunities for the pupils to work in pairs and small groups, to discuss, reason and explain fully their mathematical thinking and to encounter appropriate challenge through problem-posing and solving. The teachers need to develop further teaching and learning approaches, including questioning strategies and to raise expectations and enhance the pupils' learning experiences.
- The numeracy policy has been reviewed recently; departments have embedded appropriate opportunities in their schemes of work through which numeracy can be promoted. During the inspection, the teachers of other subjects approached the mathematical elements in their own subject with confidence and competence; almost all of these lessons augmented well the pupils' learning of mathematical concepts and skills.

- The pastoral care of the pupils is outstanding. The school's ethos is characterised by high levels of support, inclusion and a practical commitment to the welfare of pupils and staff. The school motto, '*Fully Alive*', is realised through the moral, social, spiritual and academic development of the pupils. The strong sense of community throughout the school promotes successfully a culture of mutual respect and encourages pupils to look out for each other. Pupils at all stages benefit from extensive opportunities to support the less-privileged, locally and globally, through which they develop good cultural awareness and leadership skills. The school promotes very effectively healthy eating, emotional well-being and physical activity.
- The provision for pupils who require additional support with their learning is a strength of the school. The pupils are well integrated, contribute fully to school life and achieve highly. The effective communication with the primary schools and the school's internal referral systems ensure that the needs of the pupils are identified promptly. The detailed individual education plans (IEPs) guide the provision and ensure that the differing needs of the pupils are addressed and monitored. IEPs are reviewed in liaison with appropriate external agencies and in consultation with the pupils and their parents. Through a range of well-conceived professional development opportunities, the school leadership continually builds the capacity of the staff. The teachers draw up clear targets for pupils who require additional support, across the subjects, which help to meet their needs successfully.
- The curriculum at KS 3 is broad and balanced and the school is meeting the requirements of the Entitlement Framework at KS 4 and post-16. Ongoing review and development of the curriculum have resulted in increased flexibility in pathways at KS 4 and the introduction of new courses to meet better the pupils' interests and career aspirations. The school engages positively with the Ballynahinch Area Learning Community, enabling pupils from neighbouring schools to access GCSE and A level courses.
- The school makes effective use of meaningful links with external agencies to provide the pupils with a varied and relevant programme for careers education, information, advice and guidance. The well-structured taught provision is coherent, takes account of the pupils' stage of development to ensure progression in their knowledge and skills development. The pupils access up-to-date information, including labour market information, to enable them to research career pathways and make informed choices.

## **7. Quality of leadership and management**

- The school development plan (SDP)<sup>5</sup>, which is informed by meaningful consultation and effective self-evaluation, details a range of appropriate priorities for school improvement. The associated whole-school action plans guide well the development work; there are effective processes for monitoring and evaluating the impact of the improvement plans.

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<sup>5</sup> The school development plan meets the requirements of the School Development Planning Regulations (NI) 2010.



- The highly effective senior leadership is characterised by a supportive, collegial approach and a shared, strategic vision for school improvement. The senior leadership team (SLT) has been restructured and extended with team members taking on new roles and responsibilities. The respective members have complementary strengths which underpins the effective teamwork.
- A trusted colleague network facilitates the sharing of existing good practice with a view to enhancing learning and teaching. In addition, the school is developing further quality assurance processes which include lesson observations, reviews of pupils' books, robust data analysis and enhancing the pupil voice. The inspection endorses these developments to monitor and evaluate more closely the quality of provision and learning experiences, and to raise further the standards attained by the pupils.
- Middle leaders provide enthusiastic and effective leadership within their areas of responsibility and focus appropriately on the pupils' attaining consistently high standards. The majority of their action plans link subject-specific targets closely to whole-school priorities and state clearly the improvement required and how it will be achieved and measured. In the minority of action plans which are less effective, the targets, actions and success criteria are not identified clearly enough, with the result that progress is difficult to identify and measure. In order to address this issue, it will be important for the SLT to disseminate the best practice in monitoring and evaluation and to inform departmental planning for improvement.
- The governors are involved fully in the improvement work of the school and provide high levels of challenge and support as appropriate. They are well-informed through, for example, regular meetings with middle managers and co-ordinators. As a result of their effective involvement in drawing up and implementing the SDP, they are well aware of the strengths and areas for improvement in the school's provision. Based on the evidence available at the time of the inspection, there can be a high degree of confidence in the aspects of governance evaluated.
- On the basis of the evidence available at the time of the inspection, the school has comprehensive arrangements in place for safeguarding young people. These arrangements reflect the guidance issued by the Department of Education. The pupils report that they feel safe in school and know who to speak to if they have concerns about their safety or well-being.

## **8. Conclusion**

In the areas inspected, the quality of education provided by this school is very good. The school is meeting very effectively the educational and pastoral needs of the learners; and has demonstrated its capacity for sustained self-improvement.

## Examination performance and other statistical data

### GCSE and equivalent examination results from 2011-12 to 2013-14

The table below compares the percentage of year 12 pupils in Assumption Grammar School achieving 7 or more GCSEs (A\* to C) and equivalent subjects with the NI average for selective schools in the same free school meals category<sup>6</sup>. It also shows the percentage of pupils entitled to free school meals achieving 5 or more GCSEs including English and mathematics (A\* to C).

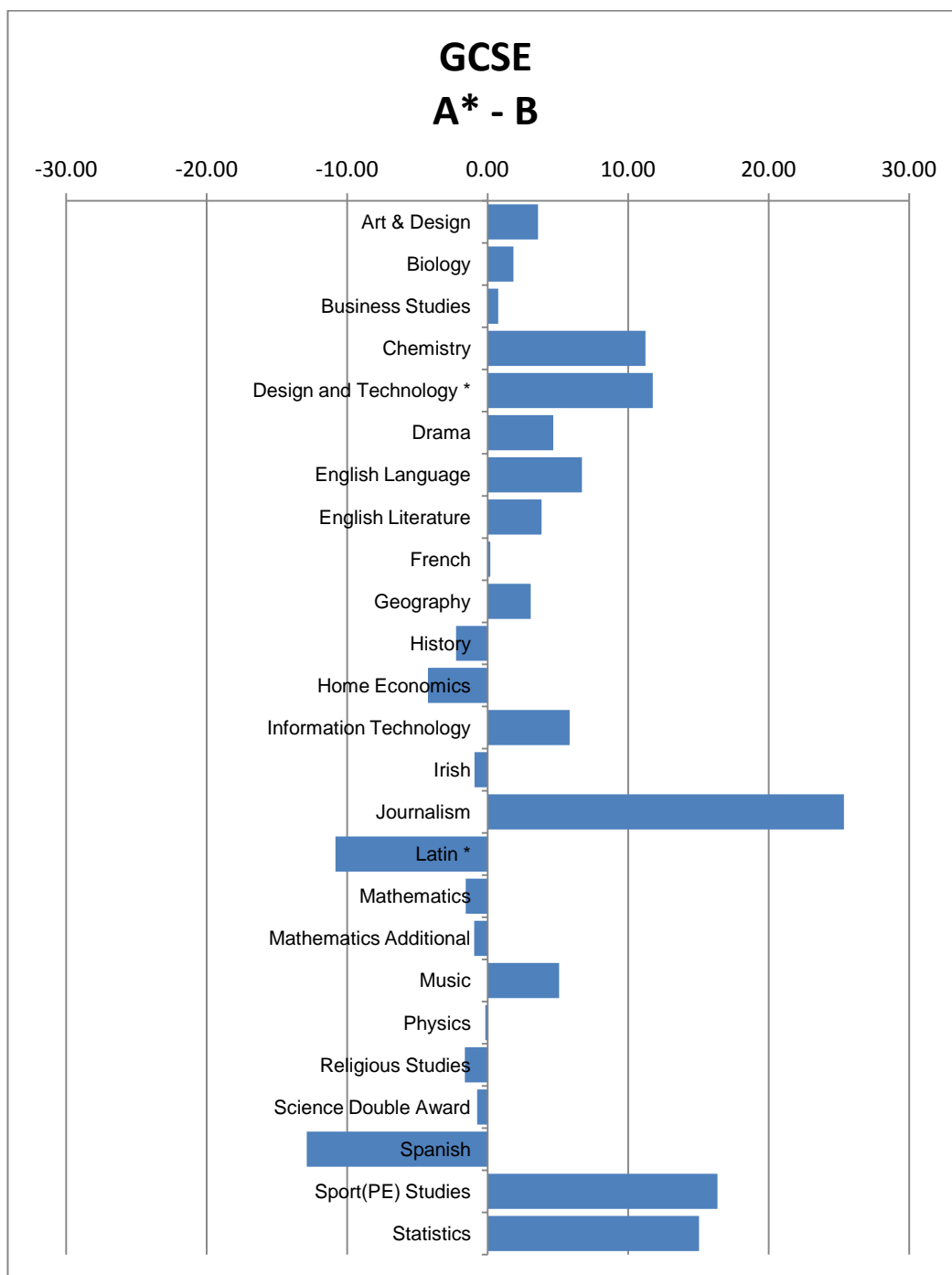
<b>GCSE and GCSE equivalent subjects - *following permitted exclusions</b>	<i>2012</i>	<i>2013</i>	<i>2014</i>
*Percentage of Year 12 taking GCSE & Equivalents in at least 7 subjects	100	100	100
*Percentage of Year 12 obtaining Grades C or above in at least 7 subjects	95.1	96.6	100
<a href="#">The NI average for similar schools in the same free school meals category</a>	<a href="#">93.7</a>	<a href="#">96.3</a>	<a href="#">N/A</a>
*Percentage of Year 12 obtaining Grades C or above in at least 7 subjects including GCSE English and GCSE Mathematics	94.3	95.0	95.8
<a href="#">The NI average for similar schools in the same free school meals category</a>	<a href="#">91.3</a>	<a href="#">92.8</a>	<a href="#">N/A</a>
*Percentage of Year 12 obtaining Grades C or above in at least 5 subjects	100	98.3	100
Percentage of Year 12 entitled to free school meals achieving 5 or more GCSEs Grades A* to C or equivalent (including GCSE English and GCSE Mathematics)	100	87.5	84.6

<sup>6</sup> See benchmarking data and guidance contained in the annual DE Circulars on: 'School Development Planning and Target-Setting'.

## Attainment of pupils in individual subjects at GCSE level at grades A\* to B from 2011-12 to 2013-14

The bar chart below illustrates, based on data held by the school and verified with the ETI, the performance of each GCSE subject at grades A\* to B, in all exam boards, compared with the three-year average for girls in selective schools in Northern Ireland. A positive value (to the right) shows that the average individual subject performance is above the NI average. The number of entries to each subject will vary considerably and therefore comparisons between subjects should be treated with caution.

**Comparison with the three-year NI average at grades A\*-B**



\*indicates fewer than 30 entries over 3 years

## GCE A level examination results at grades A\* to C from 2011-12 to 2013-14

The table below shows the percentage of year 14 pupils in Assumption Grammar School achieving three or more GCE A levels at grades A\* to C. The table compares the percentage achieving three or more GCEs (A\* to C) with the NI average for selective schools in the same free school meals category<sup>7</sup>.

GCE A Level or equivalent	2012	2013	2014
Percentage of Year 14 taking A2 levels & Equivalents in at least 3 subjects	99.2	100	98.3
Percentage of Year 14 obtaining Grades C or above in at least 3 A2 levels	81.6	78.4	71.9
<i>The NI average for similar schools in the same free school meals category</i>	75.2	72.9	N/A

## Other examination results: post-16

The tables below show the percentage of year 14 pupils in Assumption Grammar School achieving grades A\* to C and A\* to E in vocational/applied courses equivalent to GCE A level. No average is available from the examining board(s) for the subjects in these tables to facilitate comparison.

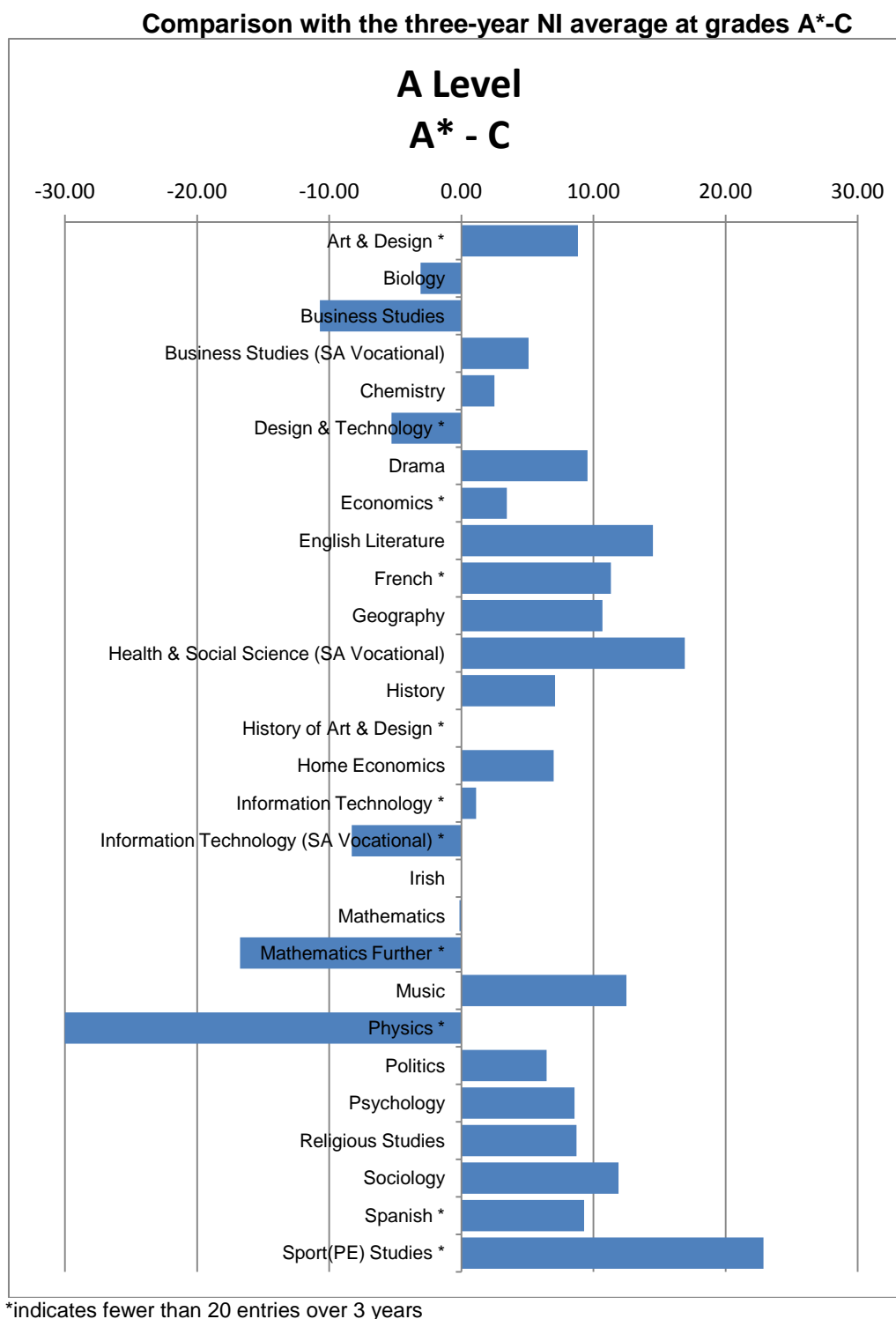
GCE Subject	2012		2013		2014		Total entry over 3 years
	% A*-C	% A*-E	% A*-C	% A*-E	% A*-C	% A*-E	
Polish	100				100		2

Level 3	2012	2013	2014	Total entry over 3 years
	% pass	% pass	% pass	
Certificate of Personal Effectiveness (COPE)	100	100	100	19

<sup>7</sup> See benchmarking data and guidance contained in the annual DE Circulars on: 'School Development Planning and Target-Setting'.

## Attainment of pupils in individual subjects at GCE A level at grades A\* to C from 2011-12 to 2013-14

The bar chart below illustrates, based on data held by the school and verified with the ETI, the performance of each GCE A level subject, in all exam boards, compared with the three-year average for girls in selective schools in Northern Ireland. A positive value (to the right) shows that the average individual subject performance is above the NI average. The number of entries to each subject will vary considerably and therefore comparisons between subjects should be treated with caution.



### Staying on rate

Based on data verified by the school with the ETI, the table below shows the percentage of the pupils who stay on at Assumption Grammar School from year 12 to year 13 and then from year 13 to year 14, compared with the NI average for all schools and f for the most recent year for which data is available (2012/13).

	<b>NI Average</b>	<b>School</b>
% Yr 12 staying on to Yr 13	95.7	95.8
% Yr 13 staying on to Yr 14	94.3	96.6

### Leavers' destinations

Based on data held and verified by the school with the ETI, the table below shows the percentage of all of the pupils from Assumption Grammar School who leave to enter further education, higher education or employment, or are seeking employment, compared with the average for selective schools.

	<b>School % (No.)</b>	<b>NI</b>	<b>Level 2 (No.)</b>	<b>Level 3 (No.)</b>	<b>Level 3+ (No.)</b>
Total Number of Leavers	122	9503			
Employment	2.5% (*)	3.4%			
Further Education	13.9% (17)	21.2%	5	11	*
Higher Education	83.6% (102)	72.0%			102
Training	0.0% (0)	1.2%			
Unemployed	0.0% (0)	1.2%			
Unknown	0.0% (0)	1.1%			

(\*) fewer than 5

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