

EDUCATION AND TRAINING
INSPECTORATE

POST-PRIMARY INSPECTION

Dundonald High School, Belfast

DE Ref No 421-0262

Report of a Follow-up Inspection in December 2024

Follow-up to the Inspection of Dundonald High School, Belfast, BT16 1TH (421-0262)

Introduction

This follow-up inspection was carried out in December 2024 to provide the school with the opportunity to demonstrate its progress in addressing the areas for action from the time of the last inspection in May 2022.

Since the last inspection, the enrolment has decreased slightly from 593 to 575. Around one-half of the pupils have free school meals entitlement (FSME), a slight decrease from previously. The proportion of pupils with a statement of educational need has increased from 12.5% to 18% (101 pupils) and there are 48 newcomer pupils in the school. At the time of this inspection, there was an acting principal and acting vice-principal in post, and approximately one-sixth (10) of the staff were substitute teachers. The school's vision is to be a caring school at the heart of the community.

Views of parents, staff and pupils

The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) issued online confidential questionnaires to pupils, parents and staff in advance of the follow-up inspection.

Eleven percent of pupils (66) in the school responded to the online questionnaire across years 8 to 11. Most of the pupils who completed the questionnaire indicated that the teachers and other adults in the school treat them with care and respect and there is someone they can talk to if they have a problem. Almost all agreed that the school provides them with opportunities for physical exercise. A majority of pupils would welcome more opportunities to be involved with clubs and activities outside of the classroom and to engage and learn with pupils from other schools.

Eleven percent of parents/carers (59) responded to the questionnaire. Most of the parents/carers indicated that their child is happy, making good progress and are content with the subject choices their child can access. A small number of parents/carers (22) provided additional written responses, with almost one-third reporting positively about the life and work of the school. A small number of the parents/carers expressed concerns regarding communication and the high number of substitute teachers.

Thirty-seven percent (22) of the teaching staff responded to the questionnaire, with just under one-half of them providing additional written comments (12). Most of the teaching staff reported that they are clear about the school's vision and that they have benefitted from recent opportunities for professional learning. A majority of the staff reported that they would like their views to be sought, valued and acted upon. All of the staff who provided additional written comments raised concerns relating to: inadequate facilities; communication; staffing matters; and behaviour management.

Twenty percent (8) of classroom learning support staff responded to the questionnaire and most agreed that they are clear about the school's vision and they have the resources to do their job effectively.

The issues raised in the parent and staff questionnaires were discussed with the acting principal and vice-principal, the chair of governors and a representative of the Education Authority (EA).

Key actions and changes

The key actions which affect the work of the school are set out below.

- The school has received external support provided by the Education Authority in relation to: action planning and data analysis; middle leadership; and the continued development of strategic leadership, including governance.
- The EA also facilitated an extensive range of opportunities for staff professional learning which focused on:
 - increasing pupil attendance;
 - restorative practices and behaviour support;
 - development of the middle leadership;
 - improving the quality of learning and teaching through the use of the four-phase lesson plan structure and sharing effective practice;
 - careers education, information, advice and guidance;
 - whole-school literacy and the provision for mathematics;
 - supporting pupils with special educational needs (SEN); and
 - Integrated Curriculum Financial Planning (ICFP) with senior leaders and governors.

Key findings

- The whole-school action plans align well to the priorities for development. There are clear roles and responsibilities for senior and middle leaders. There are link governors and link senior leaders who meet with middle leaders to monitor well the improvement work. The senior leaders have used effectively a wide range of first-hand evidence to evaluate the progress of the priorities for development. The governors are actively involved in the life and work of the school. They are well informed about the provision in the school from a range of post-holders which enables them to provide an effective 'support and challenge' function to help bring about the improvement.

- The behaviour for learning policy has recently been updated (November 2024). It has been revised appropriately to include the implementation of restorative practices; appropriately, the school is planning to include a revised rewards system. The senior leaders plan to monitor closely the consistency of the implementation of the policy and its impact on supporting the pupils to manage their emotions and to engage productively in their learning.
- Pupil attendance, at 81%, continues to be an area of concern despite the range of strategies being used by the school, including close monitoring and follow-up by the school's attendance officer and liaison with the EA's Education Welfare Service. During the inspection, pupil attendance was low in almost all classes. As a result, the school has begun work this year on a research project to identify barriers to pupil attendance and learning, in particular, for those pupils with FSME in order to improve attendance. The school has also recently updated the pupil attendance policy; however, it needs to have more specific targets and clear roles and responsibilities for all staff to address pupil attendance issues.
- The staff analyse well the qualitative and quantitative data to monitor pupil progress from their individual starting points and to inform teachers' planning and individual target-setting for the pupils. The school engages with a wide range of external agencies, including the EA's Behavioural Support Team and the local youth and community workers to provide a range of pastoral interventions to support small cohorts of pupils identified as being at risk of disengaging with their learning. These interventions are having a positive impact on the pupils' attendance, engagement and behaviour in class, and it is appropriate that the impact of these interventions is being disseminated more widely across the school to support the work in fostering good attendance practices.
- Staff professional learning is given an appropriately high priority, notably through the well-designed programme for ongoing staff development. The introduction of a school-based strategic initiative of internal teacher professional learning (TPL), called 'TPL Tuesdays', supports well the development of all teachers, in particular the high number of new and temporary teaching staff. The middle leaders have benefitted from the EA leadership and development programme and associated school improvement projects. As a result, the action plans are more streamlined, have accurate and evidence-based baselines and have more measurable and specific targets to enable the middle leaders to monitor progress in their areas of responsibility. With the cessation of action short of strike, the middle leaders are keen to re-establish direct observations of learning to provide opportunities for all staff to learn from one another and to support the use of a wider range of first-hand evidence to support further improvements in the pupils' learning experiences and the outcomes they attain.

- The evidence from this inspection indicates that the whole-school four-stage lesson structure is implemented well by the staff and, as a result, the quality of planning, teaching and assessment across the curriculum is having a positive impact on the pupils' learning. The teachers use well 'starters' and active learning strategies to engage the pupils. There are mutually respectful relationships in the classroom, fostering a positive learning environment, with pupils given opportunities to work in pairs and discuss their learning. Effective questioning and prompting by the teachers enable the pupils to participate in class discussion, extend their thinking and understand new concepts. Where the learning was less effective, the teachers need to manage more effectively the pupils' low-level disruption and their disengagement from learning.
- In discussions with the pupils, they reported that they enjoyed practical lessons and learning actively, and that the teachers supported them well with their learning. The pupils were unsure what the student council did in school and were keen to support this work; the pupils' role in decision-making should be enhanced by including their views when reviewing the quality of their learning experiences, inside and outside the classroom.
- In 2024, a majority of the year 12 pupils (70%) who attained five GCSE (or equivalent) qualifications at grades A* to C achieved in line with their ability. The school is focused appropriately on: improving further the number of pupils attaining five GCSE (or equivalent) qualifications at grades A* to C, including English and mathematics (32% in 2024); improving this measure for those pupils with FSME (8%); and, reducing the gender gap (20%), with boys outperforming girls. These specific groups have been identified as performing below the school's internal predictions and the school has put targeted mentoring programmes in place to support identified pupils going forward.
- Levels of staff absence and the unavailability of specialist teachers are impacting negatively on the pupils' learning and progression. The school is participating in an EA project on 'managing staff attendance'. It is timely to take this work forward; a revised staff attendance policy, with clear procedures, needs to be developed as a priority.
- The mathematics department provides an effective structured approach to planning and teaching at key stage (KS) 3 through the use of a consistent framework, enabling pupils to build on prior learning and understanding of mathematical concepts. At KS 4, the staff have implemented well-designed, targeted intervention programmes which are monitored effectively.
- The quality of provision for English has improved further: the positive, supportive teachers work purposefully and patiently with the pupils to develop their understanding and the use of analytical language. The pupils respond well to their teachers' questioning and settle quickly to complete written tasks. Reflecting the department's vision to extend its provision and its aspiration for the pupils, there is now an annual and sustainable cohort of KS 4 pupils taking GCSE English Literature.

- The staffing structure within the moderate learning disability (MLD) classes has been reviewed to support effective leadership and management of the provision. The recently introduced personalised learning plans are well considered, identify smart targets and associated strategies, and include appropriately input from the parents and pupils. The staff have begun a review of the curriculum, assessment and associated qualifications. They are using data to inform better the planning for the pupils' learning experiences within the mainstream school and the provision within the MLD classes, and to improve further the pupil outcomes.
- There has been a number of recent improvements to support better the pupils with SEN. These include: an audit of the categories of SEN and the associated register which has informed a SEN handbook and the programme of staff professional learning; the creation of pupil profiles, with input from the pupils, about the practical strategies which teachers can use to help engage them in their learning; interventions for pupils for whom English is an additional language and for pupils who experience difficulties in reading or writing; and additional resources, such as coloured overlays and assistive technologies, to help those pupils with specific learning difficulties in literacy. Importantly, there are early indications that the pupils are making progress.

Areas for action:

- to develop further the capacity of the middle leadership to monitor progress and outcomes of all pupils, including those in the MLD classes; and
- to improve pupil and staff attendance.

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. The ETI will monitor the progress of the school in addressing the following area for action: to ensure that governor training is completed. In discussions with the inspectors, the pupils report that they feel safe in school and know what to do if they have any concerns about their safety or wellbeing.

Conclusion

Dundonald High School is living out its vision of being a caring school at the heart of the community. Effective staff professional learning and consistent learning and teaching approaches have resulted in improvements in the provision, including the pupils' learning experiences.

The ETI, through the engagement of the district inspector, will continue to work with the school to take forward the areas for action set out in the report. No further follow-up inspection is required.

Health and safety/accommodation


During the inspection there were a number of health and safety concerns raised:

- there is only one functioning boiler out of five and in some parts of the school there is no heat;
- the single-glazed windows in some classrooms are not fit for purpose;
- there are ongoing issues with roofs leaking into classrooms;
- there are a number of toilet blocks closed due to insufficient drainage and blocked pipes which are therefore not available for use by the pupils, impacting negatively on pupils promptly attending class following key transition points in the school day; and
- due to the need for additional accommodation for learning and teaching: there is currently no staffroom which impacts negatively on staff wellbeing and morale, and there is restricted access to the library.

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