

EDUCATION AND TRAINING INSPECTORATE

SPECIAL SCHOOL INSPECTION

Oakwood School and Assessment Centre,
Belfast

Controlled, co-educational, DE Ref No 131-6582

Report of a Second Follow-up Inspection (Involving Action Short of
Strike) in January 2023



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Second follow-up inspection visit to Oakwood School and Assessment Centre, Belfast, BT9 6TX (131-6582)

Introduction

The [original inspection](#) of Oakwood School and Assessment Centre was carried out in October 2016 which identified significant areas for improvement which needed to be addressed urgently. As a consequence, the Department of Education (DE) entered the school into the Formal Intervention Process under its 'Every School a Good School' policy in October 2016.

The [first follow-up inspection](#) took place in October 2018. The school had taken some actions to address the areas for improvement identified in the original inspection. However, insufficient progress had been made and the evaluation of the quality of provision in the school remained unchanged. The follow-up inspection identified that the school needed to address urgently two significant areas for improvement, namely to:

- develop more robust and comprehensive systems of monitoring and evaluating of the planning and assessment at all levels to improve the provision and further improve outcomes for the children; and
- continue to provide professional development opportunities for the middle leaders and senior management to enable the development of effective leadership skills, disseminate effective practice, and to monitor and evaluate the impact of the planned actions to effect improvement.

Following the periods of lockdown due to the Covid-19 pandemic, ETI carried out a monitoring visit in June 2021 to help the school reflect on its current provision, with a view to being well prepared for the second follow-up inspection.

The second follow-up inspection, carried out in January 2023, was impacted by action short of strike (at the time of the follow-up inspection, some of the teachers were mandated by their teaching union to participate in industrial action short of strike, which included not engaging with ETI inspections). The senior leaders and a small number of teachers engaged with the follow-up inspection. As a result, the school was unable to provide a complete inspection evidence base to demonstrate the school's progress in addressing the areas for improvement. The ETI has a [statutory duty](#) to monitor, inspect and report on the quality of education being provided for children and young people. Therefore, the follow-up inspection proceeded on a partial basis and the key findings in this report are based on the evidence made available at the time of the inspection visit.

Key actions and changes

In the interval since the first follow-up inspection, the school has received external support provided by the Education Authority (EA) in relation to:

- the development of leadership skills, such as school development planning and associated action planning at senior and middle leadership level; and
- a review of the curriculum provision with a focus on meeting the learning needs of all of the children and to provide a better balance across all areas of learning.

The following are the key actions or changes which affect the work of the school.

- A new principal was appointed in September 2022, and a new vice-principal took up post in December 2022.
- The board of governors was reconstituted in February 2021; a further two new governors have recently been appointed by the Department of Education.
- The senior leadership team (SLT) has been restructured to align the roles more closely to the priorities in the school's development plan (SDP) and the needs of the children.
- A staff wellbeing group and a pupil wellbeing team has been formed to support the emotional health and wellbeing of the school community.

Views of parents/carers and staff

All of the parents/carers and staff were provided with the opportunity to complete an online questionnaire.

Fifteen percent of the parents/carers (17) responded to the online questionnaire, with eleven of them providing additional written comments. All of the parents/carers who responded to the questionnaire indicated that they were happy with their child's learning experiences at the school and that they were making good progress. In the written comments, all reported that their child is very happy and content in school.

Facilitated by the school, the inspectors met with a small number of parents. They reported that their child's transition into the school was managed well, and that their child has made very good progress in the development of their independence and in social and communication skills, which has impacted positively on their home lives. They voiced their appreciation of the highly inclusive, welcoming atmosphere created by staff, and the positive "can-do" approach shown in relation to their children's ability and confidence.

Seventy-four percent of the teaching staff (13) and thirty-one percent of the non-teaching staff (20) responded to the online questionnaire, with six teachers and six non-teaching staff providing additional written comments. Almost all of the teachers (92%) who responded to the questionnaire were wholly positive about all aspects of the school, including how welcoming, inclusive and supportive it is for the whole school community. They reported positively on how well the school is led and managed. In the written comments, all of the teachers reported that the new senior leadership team has established purposeful, respectful working relationships wherein staff feel valued and can contribute to school improvement at all levels. A majority of the non-teaching staff (60%) who responded to the questionnaire were similarly positive about all aspects of the school, indicating that staff with specific responsibilities contribute effectively to school improvement and that they support fully the care and well-being of the children and the wider school community.

In a meeting with the classroom assistants, they reported to the inspectors that their opinions are listened to and valued by the teachers and senior leaders. They have opportunities to contribute to short-term planning and evaluations and attend regular professional development courses. Two of the classroom assistants use their training as qualified manual handling tutors to cascade their learning to their peers. They enjoy participating in recently introduced staff wellbeing activities, including early morning fitness sessions and 'employee of the month' celebrations.

The multi-disciplinary staff and education providers with whom the inspectors met report that they liaise closely with the senior leaders, have very positive working relationships with all education staff and are respected and valued as members of the whole school team. The allied health professionals who work in the school report that they work closely and purposefully alongside education staff in assessing, planning for and meeting the holistic needs of the children.

The small number of issues raised by the parents and the non-teaching staff, which related mainly to the availability of adequate resources, were discussed with the principal, senior leadership team and the chairperson of the board of governors.

Key findings

The following findings are based on the evidence available at the time of the second follow-up inspection.

- The newly formed SLT is fostering a positive ethos and a whole-school approach to school improvement. Improved communication systems now exist across the school, and a reviewed programme to better meet the health and wellbeing needs of the pupils and staff is in place. The work with the EA on curriculum review is helping to motivate and engage all staff in improving the provision, and to disseminate examples of effective practice within, and outside of, the school community.

- The SLT continues to support the roll-out of a well informed and researched curriculum which aims to better meet the complex learning needs of the children by developing relevant, child-centred learning programmes. A new associated system for mapping and assessing children's personal progress has been introduced, alongside existing specialist assessment procedures. A comprehensive staff professional learning programme is in place to support these initiatives, and senior leaders have begun to disseminate the experiences, practice and findings of this work within the special school sector.
- The senior leaders have put in place robust systems for monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of planning and assessment. In addition, they have developed an effective system for monitoring the children's progress which demonstrates that, at the time of the inspection, almost all of the children are making good progress and are achieving their individual educational targets. Appropriate attention is given to tracking the wellbeing and progress of those children who are experiencing specific difficulties in, or new challenges with, their learning. The ETI was unable to observe the impact of this curriculum review on the learning and teaching as no lessons were observed.
- The programme for staff professional learning aligns closely with the priorities outlined in the transitional SDP and accommodates the extensive range of mandatory special school training. The new postholders at middle and senior leadership level are undertaking the EA's course in leadership development; this learning is being complemented well by a programme of in-school EA support. A positive culture of in-school professional learning and development is being promoted; for example, through peer-mentoring for new colleagues and for the curriculum working groups. The effectiveness of these actions to bring about improvement in the children's learning experiences and the standards they attain will be a focus for ETI during the next inspection visit.
- Purposeful links and collaborations continue to develop with an increasing range of schools, local community groups, multi-disciplinary agencies, special educational needs (SEN) specialists and academics. The SLT focuses appropriately on growing the potential of such links to support staff professional learning, for example in areas of knowledge and application of SEN pedagogy, multi-disciplinary assessment, planning and teaching, and the development of new initiatives to support the children's learning and wellbeing, such as the Forest School Initiative. The senior leaders report that this work has impacted positively on children's experiences and holistic development.
- The inspectors met with a group of children from across the year groups in the school. The children spoke positively about aspects of school life, including listening to stories, physical education, outdoor play and having fun with their friends. They communicated confidently using a combination of Makaton-signing, speech, gestures and the use of communication aides.

- The school was unable to provide sufficient evidence for ETI to evaluate the school's arrangements for safeguarding children. The children who met with the inspectors reported that they feel safe and happy in school and know what to do if they have any concerns about their safety and well-being. In relation to the school's policies, the school needs to update its anti-bullying, promoting positive behaviour and intimate care policies to reflect more fully the current guidance from the Department of Education.

Conclusion

The school's follow-up inspection is incomplete due to the action short of strike of the teaching unions.

Given the evidenced progress made in the areas of leadership, including the implementation of more robust monitoring and evaluation processes, the remaining area for improvement are now to:

- demonstrate the effectiveness of the planning and assessment practices by the class teachers and middle leaders; and
- demonstrate the impact of the overall improvements in leadership and the curriculum on the children's learning experiences and outcomes.

The ETI has not been able to evaluate the school's progress in effecting the required improvements in the quality of its education provision for a period of six years. The District Inspector will continue to monitor the school's progress, and the follow-up inspection process will be completed at the request of the school for a period up to, and including, June 2023. Subsequently, the inspection will be completed without further notice.

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