

Post-primary Insights Report

September 2021 – September 2024

Contents

Introduction	2
Key findings.....	2
Key challenges.....	6
Conclusion	9

Introduction

The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) is committed to being the voice for equity and excellence for all learners by identifying, reporting and promoting impactful practice and informing improvement through enhanced professional dialogue. This phase insights report highlights the work undertaken by ETI in post-primary schools and EOTAS centres during the reporting period 2021-24. The findings within this report are distilled from ETI's first-hand observations and evidence from a wide range of engagements including district and monitoring visits, Development of Inspection visits, visits as part of thematic evaluations, 16 follow-up inspections (14 post-primary schools and two EOTAS centres) and two post-primary inspections where the new model of inspection was piloted. (Inspection activity impacted by action short of strike has not been included in the figures provided.)

Key findings

Schools continue to rise to meet significant challenges.

Schools are rising to meet significant challenges including, for example: the legacy of the pandemic; a shortage of funding; industrial action; the increasing numbers, and changing profile, of pupils with special educational needs (SEN); lack of capital investment in infrastructure, and associated curriculum impact; a lack of system-level assessment at key stages and the consequences of qualification reform in other jurisdictions; staffing and expertise shortages; and the cessation of important support programmes tailored to the needs of individual pupils. Many schools have taken the opportunity to reflect on, and re-establish, their mission, vision and aims, allowing them to move forward with confidence, purpose and optimism. Appropriately, schools continue to prioritise supporting pupils' emotional health and wellbeing across the curriculum and are adapting existing accommodation to facilitate the establishment of wellbeing hubs and the use of quiet spaces.

Effective leadership and communication are crucial to the development of a culture of continuous improvement.

Schools are committed to driving school improvement forward, despite the challenges of action short of strike (ASOS) in how schools effect improvement. As part of school development work, there is improved monitoring and tracking of pupil progress which identifies low and underachievement, informs planning for learning and teaching, and results in more appropriate targeted academic and pastoral interventions and support. Action has also been taken to improve curriculum design processes, involving effective consultation with pupils, parents and staff, leading to a wider choice of courses to meet better the needs and interests of pupils.

In EOTAS centres, staff monitor pupil progress holistically using a wide range of outcomes, including the views of pupils and their parents/carers in partnership with schools, to develop individualised programmes of support. The appointment of specialist literacy and numeracy staff and the development of an enriching pastoral curriculum have led to improvement in the quality of provision. Principals and centre

leaders also report a greater understanding of self-evaluation through participation in the ETI's 'Empowering Improvement: Stepping Forward Together' programme. Teachers also reported the benefits from participation in the Education Authority's 'Steps into Leadership' programme, with its emphasis on action-based research in school improvement.

The review of the small number of post-primary pilot inspections has shown that leaders and staff are committed to achieving their strategic vision. The schools involved in the pilot inspections spoke appreciatively of the holistic evaluation within their context and the recognition of the differing starting points of individual pupils. The piloting of the new model allowed for the dissemination of practice relating to the Empowering Improvement Framework's core question 4 and 5: defining, celebrating and embedding success; and building a community of learning for all.

Schools continue to develop creative and innovative approaches for living and working in today's evolving technological landscape.

Digital access and digital skills are crucial to hybrid learning and online collaboration with others. Schools continue to develop creative and innovative approaches to build the capacity of staff to develop their own digital skills, and those of the pupils. Through the EA's Education Information Solutions (EdIS) programme, Microsoft Surface Pro 7 Plus devices have been rolled out to all teachers, including those in EOTAS centres, which has helped address variation in digital infrastructure and investment.

The ETI's [Digital Skills in the Curriculum](#) evaluation (April 2024) points to a variation in the extent, prioritisation and impact of strategic curricular planning for the development of pupils' digital skills. The report emphasises the importance of DE developing a digital skills strategy to provide all children and young people with an equitable and relevant digital skills curriculum. To optimise the potential benefits of a well-resourced digital skills curriculum, DE officials are working collaboratively with key stakeholders to maintain a strategic focus on the development of the digital skills provision within schools.

The ETI's [Future Ready Digital Learning Report](#) (April 2024) highlights the significant growth in teachers' confidence in the use of online platforms to support pupils' learning, in class and remotely, and reports that, if required, most schools are now well placed to deliver significant aspects of the curriculum remotely.

The ever-evolving risks to learners, particularly in the digital world, has resulted in more stakeholder groups working together to empower learners to understand, and manage successfully, their safety and wellbeing through an effective preventative curriculum, underpinned by robust safeguarding, care and welfare policies and procedures.

Schools value cross-departmental working and support to meet pupils' needs effectively.

Three inspectorates, including ETI, the Criminal Justice Inspection and the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority, undertook the [Pilot Joint Inspection of Child Protection Arrangements in the Southern Health and Social Care Trust Area](#) (June 2023). The subsequent report highlighted the benefits emerging from the examples of effective multi-agency responses and the importance of a partnership approach. When the threat of harm was acute, risk was identified in a timely way through a strong culture of securing the young person's right to be safe.

Innovative practice included schools, social workers and police officers working collaboratively to engage with children and identify appropriate support options. Schools value the introduction of [Operation Encompass](#) which supports them in keeping pupils safe and the Period Dignity scheme. Cross-departmental strategies such as the [Children and Young People's Strategy 2020-30](#), [Children and Young People's Emotional Health and Wellbeing in Education Framework \(February 2021\)](#), [Ending Violence Against Women and Girls \(2023\)](#) and [A Life Deserved – A Strategy for Children Looked After \(February 2021\)](#) are important in helping schools and agencies to support young people's holistic development.

The Inspectorates have reviewed their work to identify the successful aspects of joint working which can be developed further over time in bringing coherence to and helping to embed the range of supportive frameworks outlined above. Cross-departmental and cross sectoral approaches require further development if they are to support schools to: address pupils' health and wellbeing needs; meet pupils' special educational needs (SEN); get access to mental health services; improve attendance; and tackle paramilitarism, racism and hate crime. The accrual of cumulative learning will be a necessary element of the effective monitoring and evaluation of the impact of the above strategies on outcomes for children and young people.

Schools where inspection had previously identified areas for action have shown improvement.

The schools which had follow-up inspections were able to demonstrate discernible and important improvements in the quality of their education provision. Each school had a clearly defined vision which focused on the pupils' needs, aspirations and interests and the impact of teacher professional learning (TPL) on improving pupils' outcomes and their holistic development. Innovative practice in TPL included: teachers benefitting from opportunities to engage in specialised research-informed and evidence-based TPL identified from an analysis of their pupils' needs and aligned to the teacher's own developmental needs. Examples included: sharing effective pedagogical practice to meet the SEN of pupils between the staff within the specialist provision in mainstream (SPiMS) and the other teachers in the school; and the development of pupils' individual education plans (or personal learning plans) to enable the school to support their pupils more holistically and effectively.

The focus on empowering improvement for middle leaders through well-defined roles and responsibilities impacted well on the quality of their self-evaluation to effect improvement, such as the effective use of data to set targets for pupils' progress and outcomes and to review the curriculum provision. For example, TPL focused on the development of pupils' metacognition led to teachers using strategies appropriately to improve the pupils' approaches to independent learning.

Almost all (95%) lessons observed during the follow-up inspections were effective. The pupils benefitted from well-structured lessons, in which teachers: consolidated prior learning; gave the pupils thinking time to develop their responses; provided opportunities for pupils to skim, scan and summarise their work; and used skilful questioning to prompt and encourage pupils to extend their responses with justification. The teachers used a wide range of learning and teaching approaches, and assessment for learning strategies, to engage the pupils actively in their learning in group tasks and independent work. Staff encouraged the pupils to 'have a go', reassured them to learn from mistakes and celebrated their achievements as the lesson progressed. There were examples of teachers using creatively stimulating learning environments to engage the pupils further in their learning, including the effective use of outdoor learning. Appropriately, there were examples of schools identifying the need to develop further pupils' oracy, their thinking skills and personal capabilities and for pupils to have greater ownership of, and act on, the assessment of their learning to improve the outcomes they attain.

In discussions with inspectors, pupils reported that they would like more opportunities to hear from employers and providers in helping them to decide on career pathways. In some contexts, the pupils want better school accommodation and improved standards of maintenance. There were examples where pupils questioned the effectiveness of their learning for life and work (LLW) provision, including preparing them with practical skills in financial capability. The ETI's [evaluation of the preventative curriculum in schools and EOTAS centres](#) (April 2023) highlighted that in too many schools/centres there are significant gaps and inconsistencies in the preventative curriculum provision. Significantly, only 19% (1301) of year 14 pupils surveyed believed that LLW had equipped them to make informed and responsible decisions. Similarly, the Secondary Students' Union of Northern Ireland published a report in December 2023 entitled '[Let Us Learn](#)', in which they reported that 73% of young people who responded to their survey do not believe they have received adequate LLW education, and 89% did not feel they had adequate financial education. In going forward, the effectiveness of the preventative curriculum, including LLW, will be a key focus of all inspections through the evaluation of the contributory area of health, wellbeing and keeping safe.

Schools reported that the impact of the industrial ASOS has resulted in the absence of robust monitoring and evaluation of learning and teaching through classroom observations in almost all schools. Inspection evidence shows that there was variation in the extent of the impact of TPL in meeting the needs of all pupils. Teachers, as learning leaders, are keen to re-engage in the direct observation of classroom pedagogy to develop their own skills and to help all pupils to access high quality learning and teaching consistently across the curriculum. The increase in the

number of pupils presenting with complex SEN, and the rapid growth of SPiMS, highlights the importance of teachers requiring more opportunities to learn from others, including parents, colleagues and external providers. School leaders need to monitor and evaluate more robustly the effectiveness of the differing aspects of provision for pupils with SEN.

Key challenges

Schools need to be enabled and supported to deliver a quality curriculum for all.

Pupils experience success when provided with a curriculum that reflects their needs, interests and career aspirations and gives them access to appropriate progression pathways. A significant minority of schools are struggling to maintain a sufficiently broad curriculum, particularly for pupils aged 14 to 19 as a result of: increasing financial challenges; perceived difficulty of studying and achieving well in particular GCSE/A level subjects, such as, modern languages and STEM; and the rapid change taking place in the labour market, driven by technological advance and global economic activity. Furthermore, investment in accommodation is not keeping pace with the requirements of a contemporary curriculum. In the majority of post-primary EOTAS centres, the accommodation does not comply with the standards of modern school buildings as required in the [EOTAS guidance](#).

[The Modern Languages at Key Stage 3](#) (September 2023) report shares examples of schools introducing different delivery and timetabling arrangements for modern languages and alternative level 2 qualifications in order to provide all pupils with an enjoyable and successful language learning experience, and to promote uptake at Key Stage (KS) 4. Despite their best efforts to promote languages and make the pupils' learning experiences at KS 3 meaningful and enjoyable, the teachers report that the perceived difficulty of studying, and achieving well in, modern languages is a key reason why some pupils are not choosing to study a language at KS 4. As a result, DE has prioritised improving the uptake of modern languages in the short to medium term and has commenced engagement with schools and the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA).

The DE/DfE 14-19 Framework, and the vocational qualifications reform project being led by the Department for the Economy (DfE), signal the importance of schools being enabled, challenged and supported to deliver a curriculum for all, including with suitably qualified specialists in subjects such as science, music and languages and access to a relevant range and balance of qualifications suitable for the full range of abilities. DE has commenced a review of the qualifications landscape to ensure that that schools have access to a sufficiently broad range of qualifications to enable them to meet the needs and aspirations of their pupils and deliver the Entitlement Framework. Increasingly schools will have to consider more comprehensively how well the qualifications they deliver align with areas of strategic importance to the NI economy and globally.

Schools who know their pupils' academic and pastoral strengths are highly responsive to their pupils' needs, abilities and career aspirations, as well as to the evolution of qualifications on offer and the wide range of progression pathways. Ongoing curriculum review is a key priority for these schools, including working more closely with parents, collaborating with others and building an extended community of learning to ensure that all pupils have access to a sufficiently broad range of qualifications to support progression to the next stage of education, training or employment. There is evidence that pupils are being prohibited from progressing from Year 13 to Year 14 following receipt of Advanced Subsidiary (AS) level outcomes, when, for example, the pupil has attained a 'D' grade or below in one subject. This practice is not acceptable due to the negative impact of this practice on both the pupil's timely access to alternative educational pathways and on the health and wellbeing of the pupil. Pupils can, and should be given the opportunity to, improve their overall A level attainment during their Year 14 studies. In some cases, the pupil's lower attainment in a subject at AS level was related to the quality of the teaching of the subject within the school.

DE and DfE are taking forward a range of actions in relation to careers education, information, advice and guidance (CEIAG), including a new joint strategy and implementation plan for careers. ETI evidence shows that a minority of schools have identified CEIAG provision as needing improvement. This is an opportunity for schools and FE colleges to renew their focus on collaboration to ensure that all pupils have access to a broad and balanced range of courses that are relevant to their interests and their future career aspirations.

Schools and centres need better access to professional learning opportunities to meet the needs of all pupils.

Schools are finding it challenging to respond to the increasing complexity of pupils' needs which is leading to more challenging behaviour, greater levels of disengagement, lower attendance and increases in occurrences of emotionally/anxiety-based school avoidance. There is a high number of referrals to support services which cannot be met within the allocated resources. The subsequent delays in schools getting access to support services such as the EA's Educational Psychology Service and Education Welfare Service, and the Health and Social Care Trust's Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) are impacting adversely on early intervention support for pupils.

In post-primary EOTAS centres, there remains the challenge of ensuring pupils' needs are diagnosed earlier and met through appropriate intervention by schools to prevent them from disengaging from mainstream education. There is inconsistency in schools' interpretation of suspension and expulsion policies, including an increase in the number of pupils not attending for a full school day. Furthermore, the EA has identified the challenge of meeting highly complex medical and educational needs within the limits of an EOTAS centre. The increasingly complexity of needs is compounded by the demand on, and limited access to, services, such as CAMHS.

The ETI's [evaluation of TPL in meeting the SEN of learners](#) (December 2023) highlighted that the overall TPL provision is not sufficiently fit for purpose. It identified priority areas for consideration including: the full implementation of [DE's Learning Leaders Strategy](#); greater access for teachers to more effective in-person and collaborative TPL networks; an easily accessible, research-informed, coherent and centralised TPL programme for SEN to support the reflective practitioner, through early career development and career-long access to accredited professional learning; and a centralised, interactive and up-to-date repository of SEN research and practice from across all TPL providers.

Pupil absence is a serious concern.

The percentage of pupils with ten percent or more absence as of June 2024 is more than double the figure in 2017/18 and 2018/19. Schools report an increasing complexity of reasons for low attendance including medical grounds, poor mental health, emotionally based school avoidance and family holidays taken during term time. Schools continue to monitor closely attendance and seek ways to support pupils and their families. However, they are finding substantial improvement difficult to effect, with many schools and EOTAS centres reporting that they are not able to access timely support from the EA Education Welfare Service.

System-wide approaches and additional support for schools are required to address the increased levels of pupil absence and reinforce to parents and pupils alike the importance of regular school attendance. There are examples of effective early intervention by schools working in partnership with EOTAS centres and the EA Post-primary Behaviour Support Service to prevent pupils from disengaging from their learning. Schools have also benefitted from the EA Attendance pilot project (2022-23) with helpful strategies reflected in the [DE and EA Attendance Matters practical guidance \(2024\)](#).

Adult Safeguarding.

There is a small number of pupils in post-primary schools of 18 years of age and over. As a result, schools are aware of changes to arrangements for adult protection and the need to liaise with the EA's Child Protection Support Service which is reflected in the school's child protection and safeguarding policy.

Flexibility to adapt to the changing needs of pupils arriving in NI is paramount.

[NISRA's statistical release on annual enrolments at schools and in funded pre-school education in Northern Ireland 2023/24](#) reports that schools are more ethnically diverse and that the number of pupils whose first language is not English continues to rise. There is variability in the quality of provision for these pupils, recognising that there is no one single approach to supporting newcomer pupils and those from the Asylum Seeker and Refugee (ASR) communities. Factors that influence the provision include, for example: the number of newcomer pupils and those from ASR communities enrolled in the school; the age, stage of development and education history of each pupil; and the experience and capacity of the staff.

Schools require further support in meeting the needs of newcomer pupils and those from ASR communities who arrive in a key transition year. This is particularly the case in post-primary schools, most notably when pupils with limited English language skills join during key stage (KS) 4. Of paramount importance is ensuring that these pupils get access to a suite of suitably motivating and challenging qualifications matched appropriately to their range of abilities, and their interests and career aspirations.


Conclusion

The period covered by this report has undoubtedly been a challenging time in education. However, schools continue to rise to meet significant challenges, as outlined in this report. We are grateful for the engagement of post-primary schools and EOTAS centres in our district work, evaluations, the two Empowering Improvement programmes and the Development of Inspection and pilot inspections. We have all worked collaboratively to co-design an inspection process, informed by extensive consultation, that focuses on the vision and values of the school. Collectively, we share the aspiration of ETI's vision and mission: to empower improvement and be the voice for equity and excellence for all learners, ensuring too that, every child is 'happy, learning and succeeding'. (DE's Corporate Plan (2023-2028) [Every CHILD](#))

© CROWN COPYRIGHT 2024

This report may be reproduced in whole or in part, except for commercial purposes or in connection with a prospectus or advertisement, provided that the source and date thereof are stated.

Copies of this report are available on the [ETI website](#)

Follow us on  [@ETI_news](#)

 [@ETInews](#)

 InsPIRE

 Empowering
Improvement
Stepping Forward Together