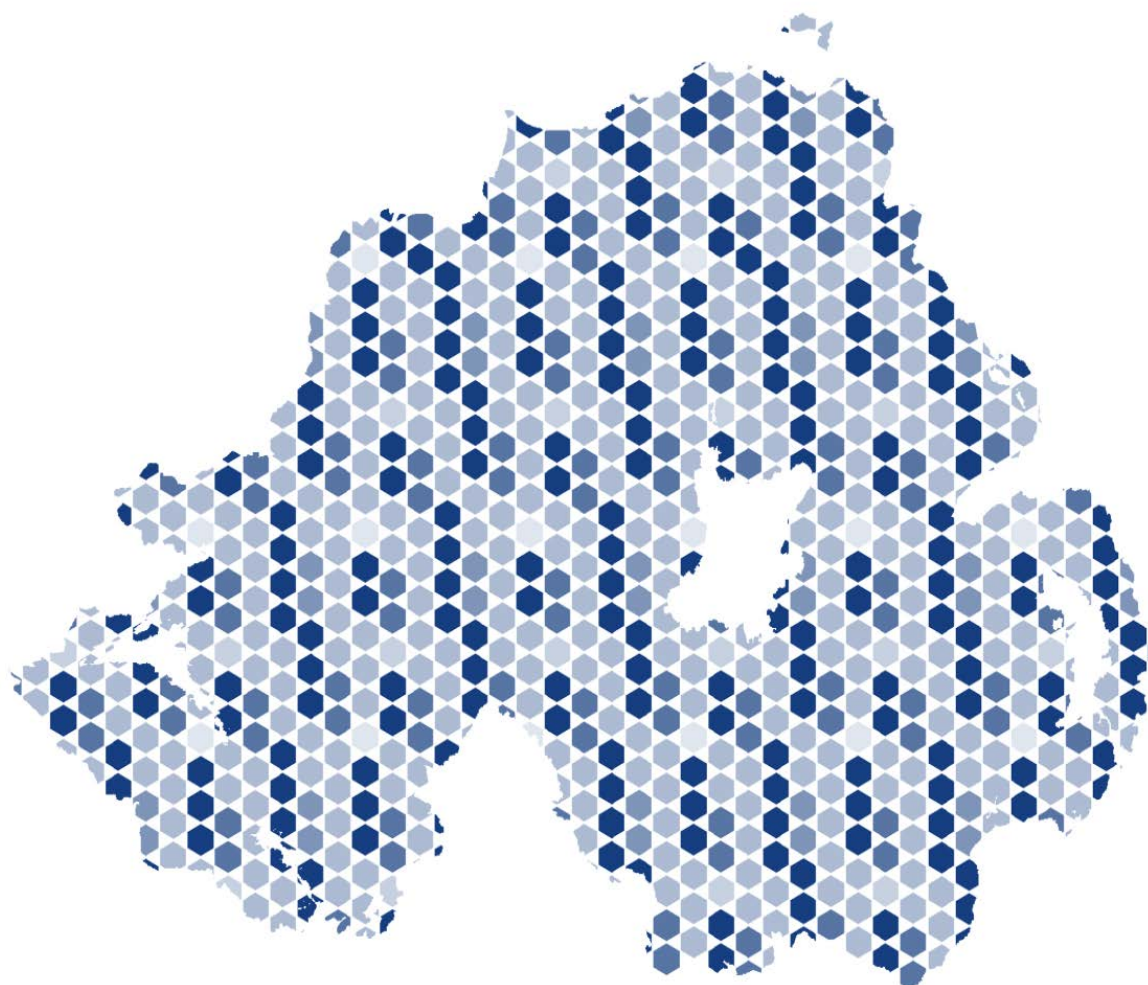


# POST-PRIMARY INSPECTION



Education and Training  
Inspectorate

Thornhill College, Londonderry

All-girls' 11-18 Voluntary Grammar School

Report of an Inspection  
in November 2015



Providing Inspection Services for

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



## Quantitative terms used by the Education and Training Inspectorate

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 when reporting on Achievement and standards, on Provision for learning and on Leadership and management:

Outstanding
Very Good
Good
Important area(s) for improvement
Requires significant improvement
Requires urgent improvement

## Overall effectiveness

The ETI use one of the following inspection outcomes when evaluating the overall effectiveness of the school:

The school has a high level of capacity for sustained improvement in the interest of all the learners. The ETI will monitor how the school sustains improvement.
The school demonstrates the capacity to identify and bring about improvement in the interest of all the learners. The ETI will monitor how the school sustains improvement.
The school needs to address (an) important area(s) for improvement in the interest of all the learners. The ETI will monitor and report on the school's progress in addressing the area(s) for improvement. There will be a formal follow-up inspection.
The school needs to address urgently the significant areas for improvement identified in the interest of all learners. It requires external support to do so. The ETI will monitor and report on the school's progress in addressing the areas for improvement. There will be a formal follow-up inspection.

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## **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.etini.gov.uk/index/together-towards-improvement/together-towards-improvement-post-primary.htm>.

Inspectors observed learning and teaching, 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.

Seven percent of parents (94) responded to the questionnaires, with 35 of them providing written comments. Almost all of the parents commented positively on: the pupils' enjoyment of their learning; the care and support provided by form teachers and pastoral heads; the high standards attained by the pupils in public examinations; and the opportunities for the pupils to develop personal and social skills through their participation in a wide range of enrichment programmes. Twenty-seven percent of staff (34) responded to the questionnaires, with eight providing written comments. The staff commented positively on the school community, the pupil-centred ethos and the mutual respect between pupils and teachers. The small number of issues raised in the questionnaires were discussed (maintaining the confidentiality of the respondents) with the governors and the principal.

## **2. Focus of the inspection**

In order to promote improvement in the interests of all pupils, the purpose of a post-primary inspection is, through 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.

In addition to the focus on English/literacy and mathematics/numeracy, there was a supplementary subject focus on modern languages in this inspection.

## **3. Context**

Thornhill College is an all-girls' voluntary grammar school for pupils aged 11-18 years. The school was founded in 1932 by the Sisters of Mercy and is underpinned by the values of faith, justice, community service and the pursuit of excellence. The current building opened in 2003. The pupils come from all parts of the city and from the surrounding rural area. On entry to the school, most of the pupils have attained at or above the expected level in literacy and numeracy. The proportion of pupils entitled to free school meals has risen significantly over the last three years to around one-quarter of the pupils. The school is an active member of the Foyle learning community. There have been significant changes to the structure of the senior leadership team (SLT), most recently with the two vice-principals taking up post in the last year.

Thornhill College	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16
Year 8 Intake	200	200	203	206
Enrolment	1407	1400	1398	1403
% Attendance (NI Average)	95.3% (95.3% )	95.8% (95.8%)	95.7% (n/a)	N/A (n/a)
FSME Percentage <sup>1</sup>	16.99	15.43	23.89	25.25
% and (Number) of pupils on SEN register (Including Stage 0)	11.67% (164)	10.93% (153)	11.09% (155)	4.9% (70)
No. of pupils with statements of educational needs in the mainstream school	7	*	5	7
No. of pupils with statements of educational needs in the Learning Support Centre (if appropriate)				
No. of newcomers	*	*	*	*
<i>Intake<sup>2</sup>:</i>				
% of Y8 pupils with L5 English	57.50	55.50	#	#
% of Y8 pupils with L5 mathematics	63.00	61.50	#	#
% of Y8 pupils with L4 and above in English	98.00	99.00	#	#
% of Y8 pupils with L4 and above in mathematics	99.00	98.50	#	#

**Source:** data as held by the school.

\* fewer than 5

N/A not available

# Data unavailable due to industrial action in some primary schools

#### 4. Overall findings of the inspection

<b>Overall effectiveness</b>	High level of capacity for sustained improvement
<b>Achievements and standards</b>	Outstanding
<b>Provision for learning</b>	Very good
<b>Leadership and management</b>	Very good

#### 5. Achievements and standards

- The pupils are quietly confident, highly motivated and articulate. They have high expectations of themselves and engage eagerly in their learning. Through the range of classroom opportunities for independent, paired and group activities, the pupils interact respectfully and maturely with one another and with their teachers. They listen sensitively, express their opinions confidently and make reasoned responses to the challenges posed by their teachers. Through their participation in a broad range of extra-curricular and enrichment activities, including voluntary and charity work, the pupils acquire highly developed social, personal and team-working skills. Their involvement in community and international initiatives underpins the pupils' sense of responsibility and social justice.

<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

- The standards attained in English and English literature are very good. At GCSE and A Level, the pupils attain outcomes which are at or above the Northern Ireland (NI) average when compared with similar schools. Their progress in literacy is reflected in their ability to manage information effectively and express increasingly independent opinions with growing levels of accuracy and sophistication. The extra-curricular programme of English-themed initiatives enables the pupils to achieve, gain valuable skills, develop confidence and win awards in, for example, public speaking and writing competitions.
- The pupils attain very good standards in mathematics. Across the year groups, the pupils are motivated, enjoy learning mathematics and can work independently. The standard of their written work is appropriately high. The levels of attainment by the pupils in mathematics and statistics at GCSE level are consistently above the NI average, and there is a strong uptake for mathematics at post-16. The pupils' performance in GCSE further mathematics and A level mathematics is not high enough; consequently, there is a need to raise standards in these subjects and, in particular, to review the framework and allocation of curriculum time for delivering GCSE further mathematics in year 12.
- The standards attained by the pupils in modern languages are very good. All of the pupils study at least one language to GCSE level and, over the last three years, standards achieved at GCSE in all three languages have been broadly in line with, and more often significantly above, the NI average. High numbers of pupils continue their study of languages to A level and their achievements at grades A\* to C in French, Irish and Spanish have consistently exceeded the NI average for similar selective schools over the last three years.
- Over the last three years, the percentage of pupils attaining seven or more GCSE examinations, including English and mathematics, at grades A\* to C, has been above the NI average for similar schools in the same free school meals category; almost all of the pupils achieve at this level. The pupils' performance in most GCSE subjects is above the corresponding three-year NI averages for selective all-girls' schools at grades A\* to B. Around one-quarter of the subjects are performing at more than ten percentage points above the respective averages.
- In two of the last three years, the percentage of pupils attaining three or more grades A\* to C at A level has been above the NI average for similar schools in the same free school meals category. The performance of almost all of the individual subjects is above the respective three-year NI averages for selective all-girls' schools at grades A\* to C, with around one-quarter of the subjects performing at more than ten percentage points above the corresponding averages.
- Over the last two years, it is noteworthy that pupils from Thornhill have been among the top candidates in GCSE art and design, biology, child development, further mathematics, history, Irish and Spanish; and in A level geography and music.

- The pupils who require additional support with aspects of their learning benefit from the regular opportunities to develop their independence and social skills. As a result, they interact confidently with their peers, engage well in their learning and develop appropriate life skills. The standards they attain are generally in line with, or higher than, the standards attained by their peers.
- The pupils entitled to free school meals attain consistently high standards at GCSE and A level which are in line with the standards attained by their peers.
- The percentage of pupils who stay on from year 13 to 14, and the percentage of pupils who leave to go to further and higher education, are slightly above the respective NI averages.

## **6. Provision for learning**

- Planning, teaching and assessment are effective at promoting and progressing learning in most of the lessons observed. Just under nine-tenths (88%) of the lessons were good or better, with just under two-fifths (38%) of these lessons being very good or better. In the most effective practice, the teachers and pupils share very 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. The pupils have regular opportunities to reflect on their own learning and improve the quality of their work. The teachers monitor the pupils' progress very closely and, when appropriate, intervene to consolidate their learning. The well-informed tracking of the pupils is a key strength of the post-16 provision in particular.
- In the less effective practice (with important areas for improvement), in just over one-tenth (12%) of the lessons observed, the planning is insufficiently detailed and specific to meet the needs of all of the pupils. There are missed opportunities to develop the pupils' oral and thinking skills, and to use appropriate assessment for learning strategies to identify specific ways in which the pupils can improve the quality of their work.
- The provision for English is very good, with strengths in nearly all of the teaching observed and in most aspects of the assessment of, and for, learning. The pupils benefit from well-planned paired and group work which is focused on purposeful learning and underpinned by high levels of challenge and support. In the most effective lessons, the use of drama techniques and appropriate information and communication technology (ICT) allows the pupils to engage in and enjoy their English experience more fully.
- Literacy is given an appropriately high priority in the school development plan and the work is well informed by a good quality policy document and well-motivated leadership. Across the curriculum, pupils are given increasingly relevant and challenging opportunities to communicate effectively in a wide range of appropriate oral and written forms.

- The quality of provision in mathematics is good. In the best practice observed, there is a wide range of teaching strategies and learning experiences, complemented by high levels of active participation by the pupils in their learning. The work and tasks are matched well to the ability of the pupils and the level of challenge for the more able is appropriately high. During these lessons, the pupils have sufficient time to articulate their thinking, knowledge and understanding, and consolidate their learning. There is some variation, however, across the department in the quality and breadth of the pupils' learning experiences in mathematics.
- The co-ordination and promotion of numeracy and using mathematics across the school is underdeveloped; the school has identified appropriately that this is a priority area for development.
- The quality of provision for modern languages in the school is very good. In the highly effective practice, in two thirds of the lessons observed, the learning activities are vibrant, challenging and well paced. High expectations are consistently evident and the pupils benefit from expertly tailored teaching techniques and high-quality, detailed feedback for improvement. The taught provision is enriched by a wide range of purposeful extra-curricular experiences which support the pupils well in further developing their confidence and fluency.
- The provision for careers education, information, advice and guidance is a high priority at whole-school level. As a consequence, it is well established and very effective. The needs of individual pupils are met to good effect through a coherent, well-planned and progressive careers programme across all of the key stages. As a result, the pupils develop a very good knowledge and understanding of the career options and progression pathways available to them. The extensive range of well-conceived enrichment activities and careers-focused events provides the pupils with many opportunities to develop and apply a wide range of important transferable skills, including leadership, interview and enterprise skills. While the post-16 pupils benefit from relevant workplace experiences, which are matched well to career interests and progression pathways, more could be done to strengthen the work-related learning experiences for the key stage (KS) 4 pupils. Good progress is being made in extending the contribution to the pupils' careers education by subject departments and the school has appropriately targeted this area for ongoing development.
- The curriculum offer at KS 3 is broad and balanced and meets well the needs of the pupils. At KS 4 and post-16, the school is meeting the requirements of the Entitlement Framework through a largely traditional, self-sufficient curriculum offer. A very high proportion of the pupils progress to higher education courses. The uptake of mathematics and traditional science subjects is strong, with very good outcomes for the pupils. A suitably wide range of language options is available to the pupils. The curriculum offer is under review and more contemporary subjects are planned, including software development. More needs to be done, however, to broaden the curriculum offer at KS 4 through, for example, the promotion of design and technology and engineering. Although the school collaborates with a few other schools within the area learning community, the numbers of pupils involved is low and the opportunity to broaden the curriculum offer through collaboration is underdeveloped.



- The arrangements for care and support in the school are highly effective. The school has a warm, nurturing, inclusive ethos and demonstrates a strong commitment to the welfare of both pupils and staff. There is a clear focus on empowering all pupils to reach their full potential, which is underpinned by the school's mission statement of 'Educating concerned, informed, adaptable members of the world community'. A particular strength of the school's provision is the quality and range of enrichment and leadership opportunities for pupils of all ages. Through the active junior, middle and senior leadership teams, pupils are empowered to make decisions which have a positive impact on the school community and enrich their learning.
- The school has well-established external partnerships, including close links with universities, employers, charities, and local schools. These partnerships are skilfully harnessed to develop innovative, relevant and rigorously evaluated programmes for personal development and provide the pupils with valuable experiences to develop their interpersonal skills, resilience and an empathy for others.
- The needs of those pupils who require additional support with aspects of their learning are identified at an early stage and appropriate interventions are put in place. As a priority for the development of the special educational needs provision, the school has appropriately recognised the need to involve the pupils, their parents and the teachers more fully in setting and reviewing specific, measurable targets for the pupils.

## **7. Leadership and management**

- The senior leaders have identified appropriate priorities for further improvement in the quality of the pupils' learning experiences, the promotion of literacy and numeracy across the curriculum, and support for the pupils' well-being and resilience. These priorities are clearly articulated within the school development plan<sup>3</sup> and are focused on raising further the standards attained by the pupils. The staff development programme addresses systematically the whole-school priorities.
- While the impact of improvement work is evident across the school, particularly in the outcomes attained by the pupils at all stages, the quality of action planning is overly variable at all levels. In the most effective action plans, the targets are clear and monitored rigorously; as a consequence, progress can be measured and celebrated. It will be important for the senior leaders to disseminate this good practice.
- The members of the senior leadership team (SLT) have fostered within the school a collegial ethos based on trust; they enjoy the confidence of the parents and the wider community. The SLT has undergone significant re-structuring over the last two years, as three new senior teachers and two vice-principals have been appointed over that period. The establishment of an extended leadership team, with clear roles and responsibilities, is helping distribute leadership effectively and supporting improvement action planning across the whole school.

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<sup>3</sup> The school development plan meets partially the requirements of the School Development Planning Regulations (NI) 2010

- The enthusiastic, knowledgeable middle leaders provide effective leadership in their respective areas of responsibility and oversee sustained high standards. Led by the SLT, the middle leaders have recently and appropriately begun to work more collegially, with a view to sharing expertise and developing a more consistent approach to self-evaluation and action-planning in their areas of responsibility and across the school.
- The governors are well informed about the life and work of the school, notably about the high standards attained by the pupils. Their skills are harnessed effectively to manage the school's finances, ensure that the improvement work is sustained and support the SLT in all aspects of their work. Based on the evidence available at the time of the inspection, the ETI evaluation is that the school and wider community can have a high degree of confidence in the aspects of governance evaluated.
- On the basis of the evidence available at the time of inspection, the school's arrangements for safeguarding young people are comprehensive. These arrangements reflect the guidance issued by the Department of Education. The pupils reported that they feel safe in school. They know what to do and who to talk to if they are concerned about their safety or well-being.

## **8. Overall effectiveness**

Thornhill College has a high level of capacity for sustained improvement in the interest of all the learners. The ETI will continue to monitor how the school sustains improvement.

## Examination performance and other statistical data

### GCSE and equivalent examination results from 2012-13 to 2014-15

Based on data held by the school in SIMS<sup>4</sup> and verified with the ETI, the table below compares the percentage of year 12 pupils in Thornhill College achieving seven or more GCSEs (A\* to C) and equivalent subjects and the percentage of pupils entitled to free school meals with the NI average for selective schools in the same free school meals category<sup>5</sup>.

<b>GCSE and GCSE equivalent subjects - *following permitted exclusions</b>	<b>2013</b>	<b>2014</b>	<b>2015</b>
<i>*Percentage of Year 12 taking GCSE &amp; Equivalents in at least 7 subjects</i>	100%	99.5%	100%
<i>*Percentage of Year 12 obtaining Grades C or above in at least 7 subjects</i>	98.5%	99.5%	98.5%
<i>The NI average for similar schools in the same free school meals category</i>	96.9%	96.3%	N/A
<i>*Percentage of Year 12 obtaining Grades C or above in at least 7 subjects including GCSE English and GCSE Mathematics</i>	97.5%	99%	98%
<i>The NI average for similar schools in the same free school meals category</i>	93.6%	95.4%	N/A
<i>*Percentage of Year 12 obtaining Grades C or above in at least 5 subjects</i>	100%	100%	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)	96.8%	97.2%	95.3%

### Other examination results: key stage 4

Based on data held by the school in SIMS and verified with the ETI, the table below shows the percentage of year 12 pupils in Thornhill College achieving grades A\* to C and A\* to E in vocational/applied courses equivalent to GCSE level. No average is available from the examining boards for the subjects in this table to facilitate comparison.

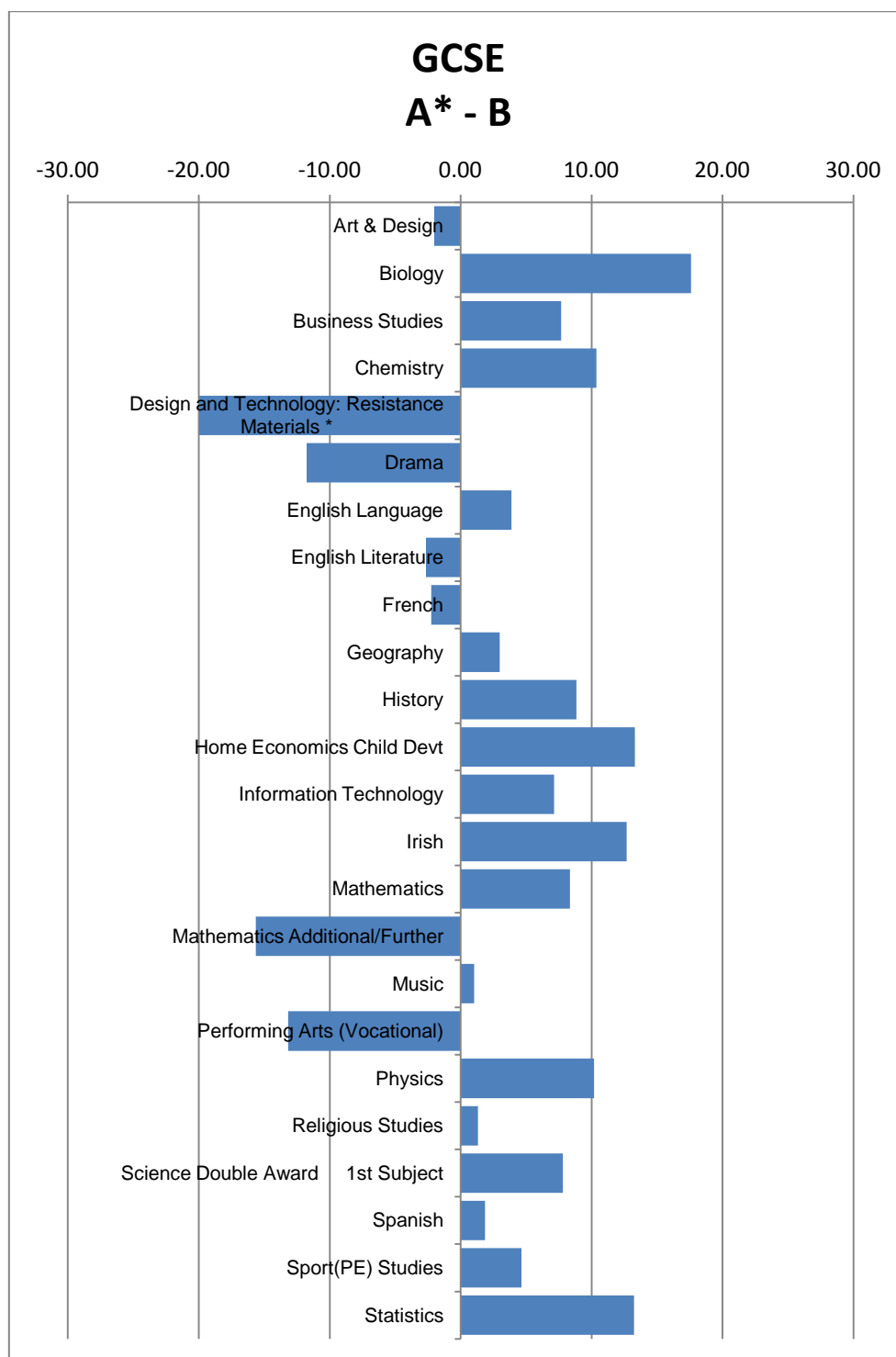
<b>Level 2</b>	<b>2013</b>	<b>2014</b>	<b>2015</b>	<b>Total entry over 3 years</b>
	<b>% pass</b>	<b>% pass</b>	<b>% pass</b>	
BTEC Engineering	100%	100%	100%	18

<sup>4</sup> SIMS: School Information Management System

<sup>5</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 2012-13 to 2014-15

Based on data held by the school in SIMS and verified with the ETI, the average over three years of the percentage of pupils achieving at GCSE level at grades A\* to B in individual subjects in Thornhill College is compared with the three-year NI average for similar schools. 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.



\*indicates fewer than 30 entries over 3 years

## GCE A level examination results at grades A\* to C from 2012-13 to 2014-15

Based on data held by the school in SIMS and verified with the ETI, the table below shows the percentage of year 14 pupils in Thornhill College achieving three or more GCE A levels at grades A\* to C, and two or more GCE A levels at grades A\* to E. The table compares the percentage of achieving three or more GCEs (A\* to C) with the NI average for selective schools in the same free school meals category<sup>6</sup>.

<b>GCE A Level or equivalent</b>	<b>2013</b>	<b>2014</b>	<b>2015</b>
Percentage of Year 14 taking A2 levels & Equivalents in at least 3 subjects	100%	100%	100%
Percentage of Year 14 obtaining Grades C or above in at least 3 A2 levels	79.1%	91%	89%
<i>The NI average for similar schools in the same free school meals category</i>	<i>86.3%</i>	<i>84.5%</i>	N/A

## Other examination results: post-16

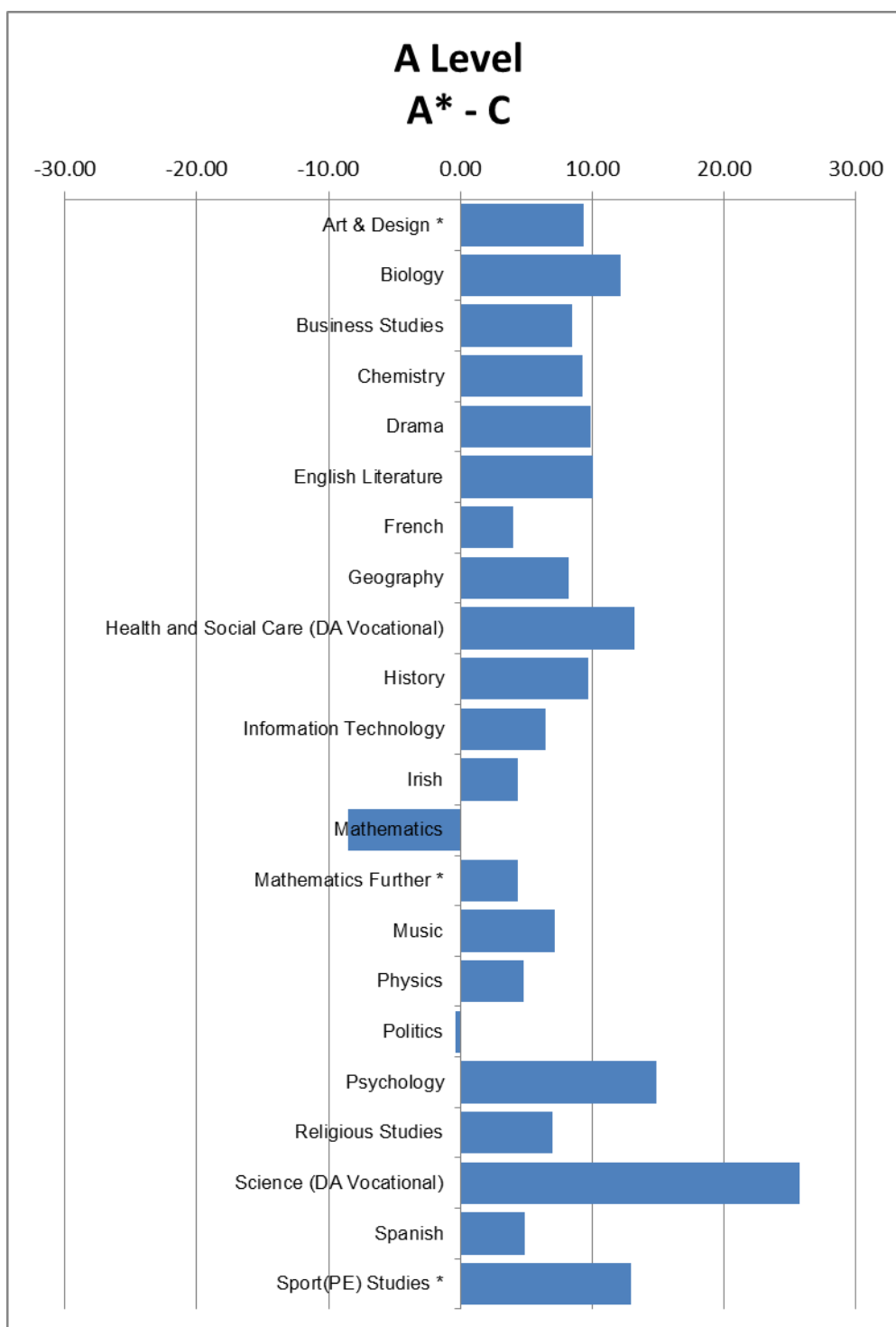
Based on data held by the school in SIMS and verified with the ETI, the table below shows the percentage of year 12 pupils in Thornhill College achieving grades A\* to C and A\* to E in vocational/applied courses equivalent to GCE level. No average is available from the examining boards for the subjects in this table to facilitate comparison.

<b>Level 3</b>	<b>2013</b>	<b>2014</b>	<b>2015</b>	<b>Total Entry over 3 years</b>
	<b>% pass</b>	<b>% pass</b>	<b>% pass</b>	
<b>Certificate of Personal Effectiveness (COPE)</b>	100%	100%	100%	49

## Attainment of pupils in individual subjects at GCE A level at grades A\* to C from 2012-13 to 2014-15

Based on data held by the school in SIMS and verified with the ETI, the average over three years of the percentage of pupils achieving at GCE level at grades A\* to C in individual subjects in Thornhill College is compared with the three-year NI average for similar schools. 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.

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



\*indicates fewer than 20 entries over 3 years

### Staying on rate

Based on data held in SIMS by the school and verified with the ETI, the table below shows the percentage of the pupils who stay on at Thornhill College from year 12 to year 13 and then from year 13 to year 14, compared with the NI average for selective schools from school census returns to the Department of Education for the most recent year for which data is available.

	NI Average	School
% Yr 12 staying on to Yr 13	95.6	96.5
% Yr 13 staying on to Yr 14	94.1	97.9

### Leavers' destinations

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

	School	NI	Level 2 (No.)	Level 3 (No.)	Level 4 (No.)
Total Number of Leavers	202	9449			
Employment	1.0%	4.2%			
Further Education	14.4%	20.6%		14	15
Higher Education	84.7%	70.6%			171
Work-based Learning (Training)	0.0%	1.4%			
Unemployed	0.0%	1.1%			
Unknown	0.0%	2.1%			

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