

EDUCATION AND TRAINING INSPECTORATE

Portadown Independent Christian School,
County Armagh

DE Ref No IS49

Report of a Re-registration Inspection Visit in
February 2024



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Context

Portadown Independent Christian School is an all-ability co-educational school, situated just off the Gilford Road in Portadown. The school is administered by Portadown Free Presbyterian Church under the auspices of the Presbytery Education Board. It celebrated its 35th anniversary in September 2023. The school's vision is to equip pupils for roles in later life as workers, citizens and parents within a clearly defined Christian ethos. The school's vision for each pupil promotes their academic, personal, social and spiritual development and permeates all aspects of the provision and practice.

The pupils come from a wide catchment area which stretches from the immediate locality of Portadown into the neighbouring counties of Down and Tyrone. Over the last four years, enrolment has increased by almost two-thirds, with rising numbers of both primary and post-primary age pupils. The pupils are aged between four and sixteen years and are grouped in five composite classes by key stage (KS). In KS 3 and KS 4, pupils are also divided into smaller groups for practical subjects. The provision also includes a nursery unit where 25 children, aged from two years and ten months to four years, are currently enrolled.

Funding is provided by fees paid by parents, fund-raising events, and gifts and donations from church members, friends and businesses. Accommodation is of a very good standard. The learning environment has been enhanced in recent years through the addition of designated areas and equipment for outdoor play, as well as a new mobile classroom to provide effectively for a growing school population.

Portadown Independent Christian School	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24
Enrolment	50	60	77	81
No. of pupils of pre-school age or younger**	31	33	33	25
No. of pupils of primary school age	32	41	48	47
No. of pupils of post-primary school age	18	19	29	34
% Attendance for pupils of primary school age	98	93	94	95
% Attendance for pupils of post-primary school age	95	91	92	92
FSME Percentage***	6	16.5	13	14.3
No. of pupils on the register of special educational needs	8	11	13	11
No. of pupils with a statement of educational need	*	*	*	*

Source: data as held by the school.

* Fewer than 5

** The majority of children in the nursery are younger than pre-school age. The nursery children are not included within the overall enrolment for each year.

*** FSME refers to pupils entitled to free school meals.

Focus of the Re-registration Inspection Visit

During the re-registration inspection visit, the inspectors focused on the extent to which the:

- school provides efficient and suitable instruction (referred to in this report as 'provision') that is matched to the age, gender and ability of the pupils;
- arrangements for child protection and safeguarding (including the vetting arrangements for staff) are appropriate, are in place and are being implemented;
- accommodation is suitable for a school and is appropriate for the age, gender and numbers of pupils attending the school;
- equipment and resources are sufficient, safe and appropriate, including those related to fire safety; and
- pupils get access to education on a full-time basis, with reference to pupil attendance.

It should be noted that independent schools are not obliged to follow the Northern Ireland Curriculum and may employ teachers who do not hold teaching qualifications recognised by the Department of Education (DE). Further details of the nature of the curriculum offered and the teaching qualifications held by the staff are included in this report. Inspectors observed teaching and learning, scrutinised documentation and the pupils' written work and held discussions with the teachers and staff with specific responsibilities.

Outcomes for learners

The pupils participate well in their lessons and are keen to learn. They engage confidently with adult visitors and speak with evident enjoyment about their learning. In the classes, they respond readily to the teachers' questions and demonstrate good oral skills.

In the nursery class and in the foundation stage, the children settle well, stay on task and develop increasing independence in their learning. Their social skills and fine and gross motor skills are developed well, notably through play-based learning: this effective practice is worthy of sharing with other Independent Christian Schools.

The primary and post-primary pupils respond particularly well to the real-life and practical activities within lessons. In paired and group tasks, they co-operate productively with their peers, listen respectfully to each other's views and take pride in their work.

The work in the pupils' books is well presented and there is clear evidence of progression throughout the year. They achieve well in a range of writing activities across various genres. In numeracy, the pupils benefit from opportunities to develop their oral and problem-solving skills in well-planned tasks: for example, developing financial capability through researching the costs associated with planning to live in another country for six months. This practical task aligns well with the school's vision to equip the pupils for adult life. The pupils' work is corrected regularly and, in the better practice, strengths are highlighted and there is clear guidance for improvement.

The school embeds success well. The bright, attractive showcases of the pupils' writing and art in all of the classrooms and corridors create a stimulating learning environment where the pupils' achievements are celebrated. The displays of the KS 3 pupils' 'SMART' targets also reflect their current levels of attainment and aspirations in learning.

The pupils attain good outcomes at the end of KS 4. Over the last four years, most have attained at least five GCSE grades A* to C, including English and mathematics. Just over one-half progressed to post-16 study in another school. For most of the other pupils, there is progression to a range of courses and apprenticeships in local colleges of further education, including the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE).

Provision for learning

The school provides efficient and suitable instruction, which meets the needs of all the pupils. The pupils have access to full-time education, beginning at 8.50 am and ending at: 2.00 pm for foundation stage; 3.00 pm for KS 1 and KS 2; 3.30 pm for the post-primary pupils between Monday and Wednesday and 3.00 pm on Thursday and Friday. Pupil attendance is very good.

The school has a complement of eighteen staff, most of whom are employed part-time. Most hold third-level qualifications and four have teaching qualifications recognised by DE. Almost all of the teachers have diplomas in Christian Education awarded by the Presbytery Education Board.

The primary curriculum comprises an appropriate balance of English, mathematics, art and craft, the world around us, information and communication technology (ICT), music, science, history, geography, physical education (PE) and swimming, Scripture and, in the foundation stage, play-based learning.

The curriculum at KS 3 is suitably balanced, reflecting broadly the Northern Ireland Curriculum with the addition of Scripture studies. The curriculum offer at KS 4 is similarly enabling and comprises 17 examination subjects, including the three discrete sciences, digital technology, business studies and motor vehicle and road user studies. In addition, English literature, history and agriculture are delivered online by teachers in other Independent Christian Schools.

The well-established links with the church and wider community enable pupils to perform songs for the residents in a local care home and participate in special church services, notably at Harvest, Christmas and Easter. Educational trips to the Northern Ireland Science Fair, adventure days in a local forest park, a residential shared with another Independent Christian School and sports days extend their learning experiences outside the classroom.

The school gives appropriate priority to staff professional learning. In order to meet the additional needs of the pupils, particularly in the primary classes, the school leaders have been pro-active in accessing a wide range of appropriate training in, for example, autism, dyslexia, developmental co-ordination disorder and the use of assistive technology, often supported and delivered by the staff of the Education Authority. Around one-third of the staff have accessed elements of this training: the special educational needs co-ordinator and school leaders have identified the priority of building a community of professional learning across the staff which is responsive to the needs of the pupils as they transition from the primary to post-primary classes.

Classroom assistance is highly effective in keeping pupils on task and helping them develop independence. Effective small group support is characterised by the skilful use of individualised strategies such as schedules and movement breaks which help pupils persist with, and engage fully in, their learning. While the individual education plans are detailed and feature appropriate strategies to support the pupils' learning, the targets need to be more specific so that the pupils' progress may be reviewed more accurately and celebrated appropriately.

All of the lessons observed were effective and characterised by positive, open and trusting working relationships. The teachers' energy and enthusiasm for their respective subjects underpinned engaging lessons across the school. Their classroom management was a strength: the well-structured lessons featured a range of learning activities and strategies, often based on the key principles of the Northern Ireland Curriculum, which engaged the pupils and enhanced their learning. Resources, including ICT, were used effectively to support learning and teaching.

Child Protection and Safeguarding

Based on the evidence available at the time of the inspection visit, there are appropriate arrangements for child protection and safeguarding of pupils in place. The school has updated its internal policy for child protection and safeguarding in line with guidance from social services. This policy, along with the code of conduct for staff, will be strengthened further by the inclusion of guidance dealing with more contemporary risks, such as the appropriate use of mobile phones and social media.

Accommodation, equipment and resources, including health and safety

The accommodation is suitable for a school and is appropriate for the age, gender and numbers of pupils attending the school.

The equipment and resources are sufficient and appropriate. The school's health and safety policy sets out the arrangements for emergency evacuations, the security of the site, including the playground, and the regular testing of equipment.

Recommendations from a recent fire risk assessment and PAT testing of electrical equipment have been addressed promptly by the staff. Risk assessments are rigorous and cover all important aspects of school life.

Summary of Key Findings

- Portadown Independent Christian School provides efficient and suitable instruction that is matched to the age, gender and ability of the pupils (Education and Libraries Order (NI) 1986 Part IV 39 (1) c).
- The important aspects of the provision include: the pupils' engagement in real-life tasks and in purposeful paired or group work which enable them to develop the communication and interpersonal skills necessary for the next stage of their education or employment; and the school leaders' strategic support for staff professional learning to meet more effectively the needs of all of the pupils.
- Based on the evidence available at the time of the inspection visit, there are appropriate arrangements for child protection and safeguarding of pupils in place.
- The accommodation is suitable for a school and is appropriate for the age, gender and numbers of pupils attending the school.
- At the time of inspection, the equipment and resources are sufficient, safe and appropriate, including those related to fire safety.


Conclusion

On receipt of this report, and considering all other evidence available, the Department of Education has concluded that the school will continue to be registered to provide education.

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