

Rockport School, Holywood, County Down

DE Ref No IS24

Report of a Re-registration Inspection Visit in May 2023



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Context

Rockport School is situated on a 28-acre private estate between Belfast and Bangor. There are 287 learners enrolled, with 91 of pre-school and primary-school age and a further 196 in the post-primary year groups. The ages of the learners attending the school range from 3 to 18 years and they come mainly from Northern Ireland; a minority attend the school from overseas, with 17 nationalities represented. Forty-seven learners board at the school, either on a full-time or weekly basis.

The enrolment has increased by 52% over the last four years: while there has been a little fluctuation in the number of learners enrolled in the primary classes, the number of post-primary learners has almost doubled. There has also been a significant increase in the proportion of learners who require additional help in aspects of their learning.

The school has been an active member of the Round Square global network of independent schools since January 2014 and learners benefit from ongoing connections with other Round Square schools across the world which enable them to participate in local, national and international projects.

With the significant increase in enrolment since 2019-20, five new teachers and non-teaching staff altogether have been employed. All of the teaching staff in this school are educated to at least initial degree level and hold a teaching qualification.

Rockport School	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
Enrolment	189	218	267	287
No. of learners of primary school age	88	103	115	91
No. of learners of post-primary school age	101	115	152	196
No (and %) of learners on SEN register	50 26.45%	70 32.11%	90 33.70%	104 36.24%
% Attendance for learners of primary school age	96.7%	99.2%	97.8%	98.4%
% Attendance for learners of post-primary school age	92.8%	94.1%	93.1%	94.5%

Source: data as held by the school.

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 learners;
- 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 learners attending the school;
- equipment and resources are sufficient, safe and appropriate, including those related to fire safety; and
- learners get access to education on a full-time basis, with reference to learner 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 General Teaching Council of Northern Ireland or by the Department of Education. 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 learners' written work and held discussions with the learners, the teachers and staff with specific responsibilities.

Outcomes for learners

The learners in the foundation stage engage readily in their lessons and sustain their concentration for extended periods in play-based learning and in other areas of the curriculum. All of the learners in the primary classes interact well with their peers and work purposefully in group tasks. They are enthusiastic, willing to 'have a go' and prepared to ask questions. Their oral communication is particularly well developed.

Across all key stages, the learners behave maturely. They show a strong sense of personal responsibility, are sensitive to others, and appreciate the diversity and international dimension within the school enrolment. In discussions with staff, their peers and adult visitors, they listen respectfully to the views of others and articulate their own views clearly and confidently. Reflecting two of the Round Square ideals, environment and adventure, learners benefit from, for example, residentials for outdoor learning, trips to the Mourne and a vibrant Duke of Edinburgh's Award Scheme. Learners also benefit from engaging in the annual 'service week', where they develop their life skills through fund-raising for specific causes often initiated by the learners themselves; these important real-world learning experiences continue throughout the year.

By the end of key stage (KS) 4, most of the learners progress to post-16 study, with increasing numbers choosing to stay at Rockport for sixth form. Almost all attain five or more GCSE qualifications at grades A* to C, including English and mathematics. At A level in 2022, most of the learners attained three grades A*-C and almost all progressed to courses in higher education. Through the learners' achievements and well-developed skills in sport, particularly golf, they are regularly awarded scholarships to universities and colleges, particularly in America. In discussions with inspectors, the senior pupils expressed their appreciation of the guidance provided when making subject choices at KS 4 and post-16: they are well informed about the next stages of study and their future career aspirations.

Provision for learning

The school provides **efficient and suitable instruction** which meets the needs of all of the pupils.

All of the teachers hold third-level qualifications and teaching qualifications. Professional development is linked closely to the priorities in the school development plan and associated action plans.

The learners enjoy a broad and balanced curriculum at all key stages. In KS 2, KS 3, KS 4 and sixth form, there is an emphasis on physical activity and the development of sporting skills. The longer school day enables learners to benefit from more time in physical education and games lessons.

The timetable at KS2 is designed to help the learners prepare for the transition to the senior school, with specialist teachers taking classes in a range of subjects including mathematics, art and drama. At KS4, the school offers 21 subjects for GCSE, with learners taking up 18: there is a suitable blend of subjects in the arts, humanities, mathematics, sciences, digital technology and sport. In the eight years since the establishment of a sixth form, the post-16 curriculum has been extended: from the current offer of 16 subjects, learners take A level qualifications in 10 subjects and BTECs in a further two subjects.

The Faculty Leads have identified appropriately that there is inconsistent coverage of aspects of literacy and numeracy in the primary curriculum. It is recommended that there is consistent, robust monitoring and evaluation of progression and continuity in the content covered across the year groups to bring about further improvement.

There is effective support for learners who require additional help in aspects of their learning. The learning support co-ordinator and assistant co-ordinator work effectively with individual learners, especially in literacy and numeracy. With the implementation of the new SEND legislation and the rising number of learners requiring additional help in aspects of their learning, it is timely to review the current provision of one-to-one sessions with a view to complementing this approach with other equally effective models of support.

Most of the lessons observed were effective in promoting learning. The more effective practice is characterised by: positive working relationships, the teachers' effective use of questions, extended learner responses and well-planned opportunities for learners to work independently and collaboratively in lessons that had good pace.

While the small classes allow for greater individual attention for learners, the inspection has identified the need to develop further the teachers' planning to meet the learners' specific needs more effectively and to provide the levels of support and challenge required for the wide range of abilities in each of the classes.

The learners have access to full-time education, beginning at 8.55 am and ending at 2.00 pm for learners in year 1, at 3.00 pm for those in years 2 to 4 and at 4.00 pm for all others. Pupil attendance is very good. Homework club is available from 4.30 pm to 5.30 pm for all, from year 5 onwards, and is well attended by the learners.

Child Protection and Safeguarding

Based on the evidence available at the time of the inspection visit, appropriate arrangements for child protection and the safeguarding of learners are in place. The safeguarding team is committed to creating a safe and secure environment for all learners. Safeguarding training is up to date and provided annually for all staff. The child protection policy and associated safeguarding policies are updated regularly and reflect the most recent legislation and guidance. Evidence was provided by the school that Access NI vetting has been carried out for all members of staff. In discussions with pupils across the key stages, all stated that they feel safe and happy in school and know what to do if they have any concerns about their safety or welfare. In particular, they appreciate the positive relationships with the staff, the Round Square values they are taught, and the support they receive.

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 learners attending. The health and safety of the learners are given a high priority. While access to the school grounds is restricted to one gate and the rest of the grounds are secure, it will be important for the senior leaders and governors to complete an updated risk assessment of access to the school site and main buildings.

Summary of Key Findings

- Rockport School provides efficient and suitable instruction that is matched to the age, gender and ability of the learners.
- Based on the evidence available at the time of the inspection visit, there are appropriate arrangements for child protection and safeguarding of learners in place.
- The accommodation is suitable for a school and is appropriate for the age, gender and numbers of learners attending the school.
- The equipment and resources are sufficient, safe and appropriate, including those related to fire safety.

Conclusion

School Governance Team, on behalf of the Department, confirms that Rockport School may be re-registered as an independent school.

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