

Report of a Post-primary Inspection
Cookstown High School

February 2025



Contents

1. INTRODUCTION.....	1
A. BACKGROUND INFORMATION	1
B. VIEWS OF PUPILS, PARENTS AND STAFF.....	1
C. THE PROCESS OF INSPECTION	2
2. SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS.....	2
3. MAIN REPORT	3
A. SETTING THE VISION.....	3
B. IMPLEMENTING AND IMPROVING TO ACHIEVE THE VISION.....	3
C. BUILDING EQUITY	5
D. EMBEDDING SUCCESS.....	5
E. GROWING A COMMUNITY OF LEARNING	6
F. CHILD PROTECTION	7
4. GOING FORWARD.....	7
5. APPENDICES	8
APPENDIX 1: QUANTITATIVE TERMS	8
APPENDIX 2: NOTES.....	9

Throughout the report the use of an asterisk * denotes further information included at Appendix 2.

1. INTRODUCTION

A. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Cookstown High School is a controlled, co-educational, all ability 11-18 school that traces its origin back to 1806. Situated in the spacious Coolnafranky Demesne, not far from the town centre, the school attracts pupils from the town and the surrounding, mostly rural, areas of Mid-Ulster. The current enrolment is 883 pupils, having increased from 809 in 2019. There are 124 pupils in the sixth form and 28 pupils in the learning support centre (LSC).

Twenty-one percent (186) of the pupils have free school meals entitlement and 11% (147) of the pupils have been identified as having special educational needs (SEN). In addition to the 28 pupils in the LSC, 33 pupils have a statement of SEN. The school has 25 newcomer pupils from a diverse range of linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

The school has a longstanding shared education partnership with the neighbouring maintained post-primary school and collaborates with other schools within the Dungannon and Cookstown Area Learning Community (ALC).

B. VIEWS OF PUPILS, PARENTS AND STAFF

The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) issued online confidential questionnaires to pupils, parents and staff in advance of the inspection.

Fifty-seven percent of pupils (504) across all year groups responded to the questionnaire, and a small number provided additional written comments. Almost all pupils reported that they are treated with care and respect and that they are encouraged to set their own learning goals. The individual concerns that pupils shared with us were discussed with the principal and three representatives of the board of governors.

Eighty-five parents/carers (14%) responded to the questionnaire and 50 provided written comments. Most respondents reported that they are aware of the school's vision, their child has opportunities to take part in educational visits, they are content with the subject choices provided and their child is making good progress. In the written comments, the parents/carers told us about their child's enjoyment of school and expressed their satisfaction with the learning experiences and support provided by the staff.

Just over half of the staff responded to the questionnaires, with 16 providing written comments. Almost all staff reported that they are both clear about, and contribute to, the school's vision. The written comments highlighted the staff's support for the pupils and for one another, the professional learning opportunities and the school's links with the community.

In addition to the positive views about aspects of school life, parents and staff raised concerns referencing matters such as communication, behaviour management and aspects of learning and teaching; these were discussed with the principal and three governors.

C. THE PROCESS OF INSPECTION

The ETI worked alongside Cookstown High School to consider how well the school:

- has identified and articulates its vision;
- prioritises actions to achieve the vision;
- overcomes the main challenges it faces;
- monitors and reviews progression to identify, celebrate and embed success; and
- grows and develops an inclusive community of learning.

2. SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

- The school's focus on developing the pupils' character supports the holistic vision: **to empower pupils to achieve their personal and academic potential** and reflects the school motto: **Virtus cum Scientia** (Character through Knowledge).
- To achieve the vision more fully, it will be important to develop further self-evaluation processes with more robust and rigorous arrangements, at all levels, for monitoring and evaluating the impact of the actions for improvement.
- The pupils are friendly, well-behaved, respectful and ready to learn, when given the opportunity, they work well in pairs and in groups.
- The pupils are supported to make informed choices and keep themselves and others safe; they enjoy experiential learning, putting their knowledge and skills into practice as active citizens.
- There is inconsistency in the planning, teaching and assessment for successful learning; it will be important to disseminate the more effective practice in line with the school's aim: **to provide high quality learning and teaching.**
- The curriculum is informed by the pupils' abilities, interests and aspirations, and prepares them well for the next stage of education, training or employment.

- The pupils in the learning support centre (LSC) benefit from an inclusive curriculum that blends individualised learning and support in the centre with regular interaction in the mainstream school.
- The school liaises well with the primary schools to plan for the smooth transition of all pupils and monitors closely their progress from their individual starting points on entry into year 8.
- The school leadership values learning both with, and from, others, and encourages, supports and facilitates creative and collaborative approaches to staff professional learning.
- At the time of the inspection, the evidence provided by the school demonstrates that the arrangements for child and adult protection align to the current statutory guidance.

Area for action

- to improve the planning, teaching and assessment for successful learning to ensure consistently high-quality learning experiences for all pupils.

3. MAIN REPORT

A. SETTING THE VISION

The school's vision: **to empower pupils to achieve their personal and academic potential**, is underpinned by the Christian faith and the values of **Excellence, Opportunity** and **Support** for all. The focus on character education, aligned with the school's motto **Virtus cum Scientia** (Character through Knowledge), fosters the holistic development of the pupils as they progress through the school, instilling in them a sense of duty and responsibility.

The leadership embraces learning with and from others, with a strong focus in the school development plan on the professional growth and development of staff to enable them **to provide high quality learning and teaching**. In order to achieve this aspect of the school's vision more fully, it will be important to develop further self-evaluation processes with more robust and rigorous arrangements, at all levels, for monitoring and evaluating the impact of the actions for improvement.

The governors bring a wide range of skills and experience to their role. They are well informed about the life and work of the school, the current priorities, challenges and opportunities. The governors who met with us praised the leadership and staff and expressed their pride in the school and its place in the community.

B. IMPLEMENTING AND IMPROVING TO ACHIEVE THE VISION

The planning, teaching and assessment were effective in promoting successful learning in a majority of the lessons. The most effective lessons were characterised by highly respectful and supportive relationships, skillful and appropriately challenging questioning, purposeful and contemporary resources and a variety of retrieval strategies which enabled pupils recall and build upon previous learning.

These lessons were well paced and well planned to meet the needs of the pupils. Where the learning was less successful, there was over-direction by the teacher, insufficient account taken of the range of ability of the pupils, closed activities, such as copying down work, and an over-reliance on the use of booklets and worksheets.

Across the lessons observed, there was variation in the assessment for, and of, learning; less effective questioning techniques stifled opportunities for purposeful pupil talk and meaningful feedback, including through self and peer assessment. As identified by the school, the learning environment in the classrooms is variable and could be developed to stimulate and further enhance engagement and motivation in learning.

It will be important to disseminate the more effective practice across the school in order to improve the quality of the learning and teaching and the development of the pupils' oracy skills and independence, in line with the school's aim **to develop young people who are independent learners.**

The pupils expressed their appreciation for the kind, friendly and approachable teachers who support them with their work and are helping them to develop their character. The pupils told us they like to engage actively in their learning, enjoy practical activities and would like more opportunities in lessons to work in pairs or in groups.

The school works with a range of outside agencies to support the preventative curriculum and provide tailored programmes for pupils at risk of disengaging from learning. The pupils learn about keeping themselves and others safe and the importance of a healthy lifestyle across a range of subjects, in assembly and form class and through extra-curricular activities. In the questionnaires, almost all pupils reported that they have regular opportunities to exercise. The pupils benefit from developing skills in digital safety, with a focus on being kind and safe online, they are encouraged to adopt healthy habits, for example, in the use of their phones, and make informed decisions to manage risk.

A particular strength of the provision for learning for life and work (LLW) is the inclusion of the Community of Lifesavers Education Programme*. We observed how the pupils enjoyed putting their knowledge and skills into practice as active citizens in an emergency through experiential learning enhanced by high quality resources. The pupils would benefit from this active, experiential learning applied consistently across all form and LLW classes.

In mapping the school's relationships and sexuality education policy across the key stages, the pupils' views should inform better the learning strategies and issues addressed, inclusive of differing perspectives.

The broad and balanced curriculum is informed by the pupils' abilities, interests and aspirations, and prepares them well for the next stage of education, training or employment. The pupils told us that they appreciate the school's flexibility in accommodating their preferred subject combinations. The curriculum offer meets

the requirements of the entitlement framework at key stage (KS) 4 and at post-16 the curriculum is further enhanced through opportunities for the pupils to learn and develop essential life skills which include financial awareness and survival cookery. In 2024, almost half of the pupils progressed from year 12 to year 13 and almost all of year 13 pupils progressed to year 14.

The provision for careers education, information, advice and guidance (CEIAG) is complemented by a commercial programme which would benefit from further monitoring to ensure there is sufficient progression in the pupils' skills development as they move through the key stages.

C. BUILDING EQUITY

The pupils told us how they learn about the importance of treating others with respect and checking on their own bias and prejudices. The school prioritises building character and the pupils develop skills in resilience and perseverance that help them to engage well in their lessons and support them to overcome challenges. Going forward, developing the pupils' oracy skills further will be beneficial in supporting more holistic achievement within the growth of their character.

The school liaises well with the primary schools for the smooth transition of all year 8 pupils to establish individual starting points and to plan an appropriate curricular and care pathway for those who have additional needs. In our group discussions, the younger pupils highlighted their enjoyment of the induction activities and almost all year 8 and year 9 pupils who completed the questionnaire agreed that the school helped them settle in when they started.

The Personal Learning Plans are well informed and identify strategies that include classroom and learning adaptations designed to meet the individual needs of the pupils. The use of these plans, as observed in lessons, was too variable in how well learning was differentiated and adaptations made. According to internal data provided by the school, a majority of the pupils with SEN attain or exceed the expected outcomes.

The LSC is an effective and valued hub that supports its pupils well. It eliminates barriers to learning for the pupils and promotes inclusion of opportunity across the school. The pupils benefit from an inclusive curriculum that blends individualised learning and support in the centre with regular interaction with their peers in the mainstream school. The staff are attentive, know the pupils well and provide close support. The pupils attain well, as reflected in the quality of the work in their folders.

D. EMBEDDING SUCCESS

The pupils benefit from a range of rewards including for attendance, positive behaviour, academic success and effort. The school magazine, external awards and social media are used effectively to celebrate the current and former pupils' wider achievements and personal successes. The pupils spoke positively about the various extra-curricular opportunities which enable them to succeed, develop new skills and have a go at something new. Staff who met with us expressed their pride in the pupils' successes and how links and partnerships with others, including business, sporting and agricultural organisations, provide the pupils with opportunities to experience success beyond the classroom.

The pupils are friendly, well-behaved, respectful and ready to learn. When given the opportunity, they work well in pairs and in groups and participate actively in their learning through challenging one another to justify their ideas, asking interesting and relevant questions and communicating with confidence.

The regular assessment points throughout KS 3 enable the school to measure the pupils' progress well. The successful and well-established mentoring programme for year 12 and year 14 pupils has led to improved outcomes. In 2024, most of the year 12 pupils (84%) who attained five GCSE (or equivalent) qualifications at grades A* to C achieved in line with their ability. Over the last three years, the school has successfully closed the gender gap through a range of effective strategies. The school now needs to focus on improving further the number of pupils attaining five GCSE (or equivalent) qualifications at grades A* to C, including English and mathematics (68% in 2024), which was below the school's internal predictions. In 2024, a majority of the year 14 pupils (59%) attained three A Level (or equivalent) qualifications at grades A* to C, and almost all (92%) progressed to higher education, further education or apprenticeships.

Promoting good attendance across the school is prioritised and strategies to promote better attendance are beginning to impact positively on the whole-school attendance figure which is slightly above the corresponding Northern Ireland average for post-primary schools.

E. GROWING A COMMUNITY OF LEARNING

By year 14, the pupils develop their wider skills through pupil-led support such as mentors for learning, library, wellbeing and addressing bullying. They understand well the need to have initiative in preparation for life and work, including participation in activities across the school and in the community. The pupils from the school council shared practical examples of the successes of their advocacy; some of which align with whole-school priorities, such as motivating and rewarding better pupil participation and behaviour. They identified the need to raise the profile of the council across the school and discussed ideas on how communication of their work can be improved further. Through the student council, the pupils are asked to provide their views and feedback on a range of policies. It is opportune to now extend the opportunities for pupil feedback on their learning experiences across the curriculum.

The school leadership values learning with, and from, others and encourages, supports and facilitates creative and collaborative approaches to staff professional learning through a wide range of internal and external networks, including with the ALC. The staff are empowered to take responsibility for their own professional growth and development; learning and teaching working groups facilitate reflection, discussion and the sharing of good practice. Furthermore, staff from a range of subjects are supported in collaborating with their shared education partners.

F. CHILD PROTECTION

At the time of the inspection, the evidence provided by the school demonstrates that the arrangements for child and adult protection align to the current statutory guidance. The pupils told us that they feel safe in school and know how to access support, if needed.

4. GOING FORWARD

The holistic development of the pupils of Cookstown High School is at the core of the school's vision, placing equal value on personal development and academic achievement. The focus on developing the pupils' character fosters a sense of duty and responsibility, evident in the pupils' behaviour, interactions with others and contribution to school life. More robust and rigorous arrangements for monitoring and evaluating the actions for improvement will help the school achieve its vision more fully.

ETI will monitor the progress of Cookstown High School in addressing the area for action set out in this report. There will be a progress inspection.

5. APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1: QUANTITATIVE TERMS

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%

APPENDIX 2: NOTES

Page 4

Community of Lifesavers Education Programme

CCEA partnered with the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service, the Department of Education (DE) and the EA to create the [Community of Lifesavers Education Programme](#) (COLEP) to support schools in their delivery of content in Learning for Life and Work at Key Stage 3. Modules include equipping pupils with knowledge and skills in Cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR), Automated External Defibrillator (AED) awareness and responses to allergic reactions. Resources are contained within CCEA'S COLEP hub.

© CROWN COPYRIGHT 2025

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