

# Report of a Primary Inspection

Castle Gardens Primary School, Newtownards

September 2024



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# **1. INTRODUCTION**

## **A. BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

Castle Gardens Primary School is a co-educational, controlled primary school situated in Newtownards, County Down. The school was oversubscribed for its year 1 intake in 2024. Of the 355 children attending the school, around one-quarter are identified as having special educational needs (SEN); one-third have free school meals entitlement; and a small number are newcomer children. There are 16 classes, of which two are Specialist Provisions in a Mainstream School (SPiMS) classes to support children with speech and language needs.

A new vice-principal for teaching and learning was appointed in 2022 and the senior leadership team was restructured to appoint a senior leader to lead provision within each key stage (KS).

## **B. VIEWS OF PARENTS, LEARNERS AND STAFF**

The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) issued online confidential questionnaires to year 7 children, all staff and parents in advance of the inspection. A high-level summary of the questionnaire responses including the issues arising was shared, with the principal and representatives of the board of governors.

All year 7 children responded to the questionnaire. Their positive responses highlighted how they value being treated with care and respect. The children recognised that the school encourages them to eat healthily and engage in physical activity. Almost all of the children indicated that their teachers and assistants help them if they are having any difficulties. Inspectors also met with groups of children from years 3, 5 and 7 who shared many examples of how they enjoy their learning, their extra-curricular opportunities and that they know who to speak to if they have a concern.

Just under one-half of the parents responded to the questionnaire and almost all provided very positive responses. The written comments provided by over two-fifths of these parents highlighted how their children enjoy going to a friendly, caring, community school in which they learn in mutually respectful ways. The parents appreciate the school's proactive approach to communicating with them and the opportunities for their views to be listened to and acted upon. They also value the positive and the approachable staff who care deeply for the children and their education.

All teaching staff responded to the questionnaire and their positive responses highlighted their enjoyment in working in a school with a strong sense of community, their wide range of opportunities for professional learning and how their views are sought and acted upon. Almost two-thirds of the non-teaching staff responded positively to the questionnaires and a small number provided suggestions in the written comments on improving communication.

## **C. THE PROCESS OF INSPECTION**

The ETI worked alongside the 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**

- In partnering effectively with parents, the children thrive in a caring community through the outworking of the school's vision in "Building Together for the Future".
- There is an inclusive, family ethos across the school, which is characterised by the nurturing, safe environment and the positive working relationships at all levels.
- The cheerful, friendly and well-mannered children speak to each other kindly, answer questions enthusiastically, support each other compassionately and engage confidently with adults.
- The development of the children's emotional health and wellbeing is a key strength, including the effective partnership with parents.
- The learning and teaching was mostly effective, with examples of staff using probing questions to promote the children's curiosity, decision-making and problem-solving skills.
- The high-quality learning experiences in the speech and language SPiMS classes enable the children to progress well in their learning and development and integrate fully into mainstream classes with their peers as appropriate to their needs.
- The school's robust self-evaluation drives strategic decision making about well-informed areas for development.
- Harnessing support from multiple partners, agencies and key people from the wider community, the school enables the children to overcome barriers to learning, seek help, celebrate success, aspire for the future and enjoy learning with, and from, others.

- At the time of the inspection, the evidence provided by the school demonstrates that the arrangements for child protection align to the current statutory guidance. The ETI will monitor the progress in providing parents with a summary leaflet on the child protection arrangements on at least a bi-annual basis.

Area for consideration:

- it is now opportune to evaluate learning and teaching across the curriculum to improve further the quality of the children's active engagement in their learning.

### **3. MAIN REPORT**

#### **A. SETTING THE VISION**

In partnering effectively with parents, the school leadership and staff have created a caring community where the children thrive and are equipped for the future through the outworking of the school's vision in "Building Together for the Future".

Harnessing support from multiple partners, agencies and key people from the wider community, the school enables the children to overcome barriers, seek help, celebrate success, aspire for the future and enjoy learning with, and from, others.

The school's vision is informed well through the children's and parents' feedback through regular surveys and daily opportunities to provide ongoing feedback. A key strength is how feedback is used, and any issues are addressed promptly by the school's leadership through positive options and solutions. The robust analysis of quantitative and qualitative data drives appropriately the strategic direction for the school and the identification of well-informed areas for development.

The governors who have strong links with the wider community, are integral to the success of the school in achieving its vision in providing support and appropriate challenge. They place the children at the forefront of their decisions and prioritise appropriate support for the children's educational and emotional health and wellbeing needs.

#### **B. IMPLEMENTING AND IMPROVING TO ACHIEVE THE VISION**

In implementing the school's vision, the strategic and skilful review of the school leadership team has empowered improvement, in consultation with staff.

Collaborative planning between staff in each year group focuses well on differentiated strategies to support the children in their readiness to learn, managing their own behaviour and emotions, talking and listening skills, fluency in their reading and consistency in mathematical language.

Planning, teaching and assessment were mostly effective, with examples of the staff using probing questions to promote the children's curiosity, decision-making and problem-solving skills. Across the school, the staff modelled intonation, facial expression and clarity of speech to improve the children's social and communication skills. The children engaged in well-paced learning activities in pairs and groups with



opportunities for their active engagement and to review their work through peer and self-assessment. They responded well to their differentiated learning, working independently and with others in taking turns, listening well to instructions to progress their work, and asking questions. It is now opportune for the middle and senior leaders to evaluate learning and teaching across the curriculum to improve further the quality of the children's active engagement in their learning.

Developing the children's emotional health and wellbeing is a significant strength of the curriculum provision, including the effective partnership with parents. The staff work proactively and consistently to provide a calm, nurturing start in the morning, ease transitions throughout the day and provide regular opportunities for physical exercise. With support from canteen staff, they ensure lunchtime is a nutritious and enjoyable experience. The children apply well-embedded strategies to promote their wellbeing and they can access support from a school-funded counselling service and other external support groups. The staff all have high expectations for the children's behaviour and, using trauma-informed practice, focus on empowering them to build resilience and manage their emotions when things don't go right and to deal with issues constructively. The children engage effectively in road safety education through the Active School Travel Programme, Cycle to School week, Be Bright to Be Seen, the Big Walk and Wheel and as a 'walking bus' to school.

The staff know the needs, interests and aspirations of the children well. They provide learning experiences beyond the classroom to better equip the children for the future. These include, exploring their cultural heritage, developing economic awareness, broadening their musical interests and understanding political representation.

### **C. BUILDING EQUITY, DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION**

There is an inclusive family ethos across the school, which is characterised by the nurturing, safe environment and the positive working relationships at all levels. The welcoming and well-resourced indoor and outdoor learning environment, which is maintained to a high standard, meets the children's multi-sensory needs. The teachers within the speech and language SPiMS classes provide the children with high-quality learning experiences; this allows the children to progress well in their learning and development and to integrate fully into mainstream classes with their peers as appropriate to their needs.

The children identified as having SEN are fully included in the life and work of the school and are making progress, from their individual starting points, in their learning and development. They respond appropriately to the skilful and sensitive support of the classroom assistants and are encouraged and enabled to make valuable contributions to the learning within their classrooms, participate in extra-curricular clubs and activities, and to take on meaningful leadership roles across the school. The children's personal learning plans make effective use of the views of the parents and children and show evidence of progression. The impact of strategies to support the children in their personal, social and communication development are evident in how quickly the children can manage their behaviour and emotions through positive support by staff and their own unique preferred strategies.

The children benefit from shared learning opportunities with other children from schools in Newtownards, including through the Northern Ireland Cross Community Angling project, the Sport Changes Life programme and support from the Peace Players. They also participate in the local projects to enhance the community which has included projects on reimagining wall murals. The school prioritises the children's participation in a wide range of sporting clubs and enrichment opportunities for their spiritual development, to nurture tolerance, be at ease with difference, and to build resilience, respect and mutual support for others.

#### **D. DEFINING, CELEBRATING AND EMBEDDING SUCCESS**

The children are cheerful, friendly and well mannered. They speak to each other kindly, answer questions enthusiastically, support each other compassionately and engage confidently with adults. Their educational progress, attendance, sporting and creative successes are celebrated daily, weekly and throughout the year through displays, the 'Hall of Fame', via social media, the local press and the annual calendar of house competition events. The children showcase their musical and acting talents through school productions, such as the recent 'Matilda Junior' production and a local dance competition. In trusting their teachers, the children are keen to 'have a go' with new approaches in their learning, mindsets and in developing wider skills, recognising that at times, success is achieved in small steps.

In raising the children's aspirations for success, past pupils and local celebrities provide role models. The experience of a past pupil, now Olympic champion, is used as a positive example to highlight to the children the importance of resilience, as the journey to success takes perseverance and effort. A local author inspired the children to become published authors resulting in the publication of two books of short stories written by year 6 children.

The children are making progress from their individual starting points, as evidenced by the range of qualitative and quantitative data monitored by staff and senior leaders. As the children progress through the school, they grow in confidence in reading aloud, engage well in whole-class discussion around the text and are developing effective understanding and use of their mathematical language.

#### **E. GROWING A COMMUNITY OF LEARNING**

The school fosters the wellbeing of staff and a strong community of learning through prioritising the personal and professional learning of staff. The staff feel valued and supported. In responding to the interests, needs and aspirations of staff, there are examples of professional learning including personal research, evidence-based observations, collaborative planning, mentoring, coaching and modelling of effective practice. Short videos on mathematical pedagogy are shared with parents to support them in working with their children at home. The staff participate in and contribute to professional learning networks including clusters with other senior and middle leaders.

Strong collaborative networks are a significant strength of the school. The children benefit from effective arrangements for transitions at all levels across the school. Proactive links with the pre-school, situated on the school's premises, and the local post-primary schools, equip the children well for transition. The opportunities for post-primary schools to showcase their provision informs better the children and their parents of pathways most suitable in meeting the children's unique personalities and learning needs. Staff collaborate well with others, including the Police Service of Northern Ireland, Social Services, churches, charities, sporting and community organisations to better meet the children's needs and raise their aspirations.

## **F. CHILD PROTECTION**

At the time of the inspection, the evidence provided by the school demonstrates that the arrangements for child protection align to the current statutory guidance. The ETI will monitor the progress in addressing the following area for action:

- to provide parents with a summary leaflet on the child protection arrangements on at least a bi-annual basis.

## **4. GOING FORWARD**

Castle Gardens Primary School enables the children to thrive in a caring community and to be equipped for the future through the outworking of the school's vision in "Building Together for the Future". Harnessing support from multiple partners, agencies and key people from the wider community, the school enables the children to overcome barriers, seek help, celebrate success, aspire for the future and enjoy learning with, and from, others.

The ETI, through the District Inspector, will continue to work with the school to take forward the areas for consideration in this report and to share examples of effective practice from which others may learn. The areas which warrant dissemination are: the strong community collaborative networks; and the effective partnership with parents in supporting the children's emotional health and wellbeing.



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