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*The Education and Training Inspectorate -
Promoting Improvement*



Providing Inspection Services for
Department of Education
Department for Employment and Learning
Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure

Education and Training Inspectorate

Specialist School Inspection (Cohort 1)

**Ashfield Girls' High School
Belfast**

January 2010

BACKGROUND

Ashfield Girls' High School took part in the first cohort of the Specialist Schools' pilot project, with a specialism in information and communication technology (ICT). The school received a budget of £296,400 over the four years of its designation.

The Minister for Education announced, on 22 April 2009, that schools in the first cohort of the Specialist Schools' pilot project would have the opportunity to apply for an extension of their designation for a fifth year.

"...subject to the school demonstrating that there has been improvement since their designation began in September 2006".

The school was asked to provide the Department of Education (DE) with an evaluation report summarising how it improved during its specialist status in the period since September 2006 (representing some 85% of the initial designation period), and with reference to its prospects for the remaining period; together with a school development plan (SDP) for the proposed extension year 2010-11.

INTRODUCTION

In January 2010 the Education and Training Inspectorate (Inspectorate) conducted an inspection for the purpose of quality assuring the school's self-evaluation report and its SDP for 2010-11.

In a specialist school baseline inspection report provided by the Inspectorate in October 2006, the school was advised, for the purpose of showing improvement more clearly, to review the targets set in order to demonstrate how:

- strategic management of the specialist school status can envision, guide and support staff. There is a need to facilitate staff in decision making, target setting, evaluating, action planning and sharing of good practice; and
- the targets have the potential to drive whole school improvement and raise the standards achieved by the pupils in external examinations. The targets need to reflect more closely the current and predicted levels of performance.

In response, the school made reductions in the whole-school targets set in their original bid to align these more closely to the abilities of the relevant year groups of pupils.

The Inspectorate continued to monitor progress and, in January 2009, carried out a follow-up visit which found that, while ICT remained a curricular strength, inadequate progress had been made in addressing the two areas for improvement (above).

Furthermore, the Inspectorate recommended that that the school needed to:

- devise action plans for the targets which have been missed (and need to be revised) with a clear focus on learning and teaching and on monitoring the progress of pupils to address low and under-achievement;
- evaluate how ICT can be used to improve learning and teaching and the standards achieved by the pupils in all subjects; and

- review the roles and responsibilities of the co-ordinator and key heads of department within the specialist school project.

It was also indicated that the school and the departmental development planning needed to be developed further to focus more strongly on self-evaluation as a means to bring about improvement.

The annex attached provides a summary of:

- the number of pupils studying the specialism of ICT and the standards which they attained in the first three years of specialist status compared with non-selective schools; and
- a summary for the same period of whole school results in General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) examinations and General Certificate of Education (GCE) Advanced (A) Level examinations, compared with similar non-selective schools.

THE SPECIALISM

The annex shows that all pupils study ICT at GCSE level. The school broadened its post-16 curriculum offer by introducing a vocational advanced level in Applied ICT, which is now the most popular course and is taken by half of the pupils.

While there has been some variation in performance at GCSE level the overall trend in the specialism is one of improvement when compared with the period prior to specialist status with the school exceeding its targets.

The key strengths of the specialism include:

- the significant uptake by the pupils of the ICT programmes;
- the underlying trend of improvement in performance at GCSE, with good levels of achievement in ICT qualifications at both GCSE and A level;
- the effective integration of ICT into learning and teaching in a majority of the lessons observed;
- the investment in a good range of ICT resources and aids to support learning and teaching across the school as a whole; and
- the recent move into a radical new school building design with ICT networking and resourcing at its core.

While the quality of teaching is good in the majority of lessons, there is some inconsistency in the effectiveness with which ICT is used to support learning and teaching. The senior leadership team (SLT) needs to ensure better evaluation and sharing of good practice of the use of ICT to support learning and teaching and promote improvement in the standards achieved across subjects.

The school has identified appropriately the need to introduce, in the near future, a formal accreditation for the pupils' ICT skills in key stage (KS) 3.

Standards in the specialism are rising overall compared with the Northern Ireland (NI) average for similar schools. The school has, overall, demonstrated good improvement in the specialism since the start of designation.

WHOLE-SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

In connection with its specialist status the school set out to raise standards across the school as a whole.

The strengths of the whole school plan include:

- the improving trend of performance in grades A*-C obtained in five or more GCSEs, including English and mathematics;
- attainment in three or more A levels at grades A-C which is consistently above the NI average for non-selective schools; and
- the specialism of ICT pervading the ethos of the school and enhancing its reputation in the local community.

The annex shows that while there has been variation in the improvement in performance at GCSE level, the percentage of pupils attaining grades A*-C in at least five subjects is above the corresponding NI average in two of the three years. There is, however, variation in the standards achieved by the pupils in a majority of subjects at KS4. The SLT has identified appropriately the need to improve achievement overall.

The school has demonstrated satisfactory improvement over the period of designation. The Inspectorate will monitor and report on the school's progress in addressing this area for improvement.

COMMUNITY PLAN

The school reports that it has established a range of links with local primary schools, the local community and local business.

The range of benefits have been reported which include:

- staff training opportunities in ICT for teachers in the partner primary schools;
- technical assistance in ICT;
- the application of ICT to support teaching of French and science for primary pupils; and
- the embedding of the use of ICT in extra-curricular activities.

At the time of the inspection the school was still agreeing targets with key partners for the school year 2009-10. The SLT recognises the need to identify and agree appropriate measures which will enable the school and its partners to show improvement arising from the community plan.

LEADERSHIP AND SELF-EVALUATION

The school has had a number of significant changes in the senior leadership team over the period of designation, including the absence for a lengthy period of the previous Principal, which, together with the move to a new school building, has slowed the rate of development and school improvement through the specialist plan.

The newly-appointed Principal, who has been in post since September 2009 has a clear vision for the future development of the school and in that time has taken appropriate action to address all of the issues identified and recommendations made by the Inspectorate (summarised in the Introduction section of this report) in order to bring about improvements in self-evaluation.

The key strengths of leadership and self-evaluation in the school are the:

- effective leadership of the Principal;
- recent review of management and leadership arrangements, with regard to specialist status;
- new internal appointments of key staff with clear roles and responsibilities and a focus on improvement in teaching and learning; and
- developing use of data analysis to inform target setting and planning.

It is encouraging that the school has now completed a self-review of its whole school ICT plan and has applied for the award of the Becta ICT Mark.

At the time of the Inspectorate's visit in January 2010, the school was preparing, through appropriate consultation, a detailed SDP which contains targets, implementation strategies and priorities for action for the proposed one year extension of specialist status.

The Inspectorate recommends that the SDP for 2010-11 should address the issues identified here.

CONCLUSION

In the specialist plan the improvement in quality and standards is good and in the whole school plan it is satisfactory; the strengths outweigh the areas for improvement in the provision.

The SLT has identified appropriately the need to address the degree of variation in achievement at KS4 and, in particular, to improve the standards achieved by the pupils in a majority of the subjects. The SLT is also taking appropriate action to ensure better consistency in the use of ICT resources to support teaching and learning.

The Education and Training Inspectorate will monitor the organisation's progress in addressing these areas for improvement.

ICT SPECIALISM**GCSE Full Award in ICT grades A*-A**

| | 2007 Year 1 | 2008 Year 2 | 2009 Year 3 | 2010 Year 4 |
|---|------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|
| No. of students | 83 | 79 | 81 | 88 |
| Target % | 31% | 33% | 35% | 35% |
| Actual % | 34% | 22% | 38% | |
| Difference | +3% | -11% | +4% | |
| NI Average for non-selective schools | 27% | 23% | 30% | |

GCSE Full Award in ICT grades A*-B

| | 2007 Year 1 | 2008 Year 2 | 2009 Year 3 | 2010 Year 4 |
|---|------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|
| No. of students | 83 | 79 | 81 | 88 |
| Target % | 39% | 39% | 42% | 42% |
| Actual % | 58% | 39% | 46% | |
| Difference | +19% | = | +4% | |
| NI Average for non-selective schools | 46% | 44% | 47% | |

GCSE Full Award in ICT grades A*-C

| | 2007 Year 1 | 2008 Year 2 | 2009 Year 3 | 2010 Year 4 |
|---|------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|
| No. of students | 83 | 79 | 81 | 88 |
| Target % | 76% | 80% | 84% | 88% |
| Actual % | 87% | 75% | 90% | |
| Difference | +11% | -5% | +6% | |
| NI Average for non-selective schools | 79% | 77% | 80% | |

A Level Applied ICT grades A-C

| | 2007 Year 1 | 2008 Year 2 | 2009 Year 3 | 2010 Year 4 |
|---|------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|
| No. of students | 39 | 29 | 29 | 24 |
| Target % | 50% | 55% | 73% | 75% |
| Actual % | 44% | 67% | 76% | |
| Difference | - 6% | +12% | +3% | |
| NI Average for non-selective schools | Not available | Not available | 80% | |

WHOLE SCHOOL

5+ A*-C GCSE including English and Maths

| | 2007 Year 1 | 2008 Year 2 | 2009 Year 3 | 2010 Year 4 |
|--------------------------------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| No. of students | 104 | 118 | 99 | 107 |
| Target | None set | None set | 25% | 35% |
| Actual | 18% | 22% | 31% | |
| Difference | | | +6% | |
| NI Average for non-selective schools | 29% | 30% | 30% | |

5+ A*-C GCSE

| | 2007 Year 1 | 2008 Year 2 | 2009 Year 3 | 2010 Year 4 |
|--|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| No. of students | 104 | 118 | 99 | 107 |
| Target | 52% | 51%* | 52%* | 54%* |
| Actual | 62% | 47% | 59% | |
| Difference | +10% | -4% | +7% | |
| NI Average for similar non-selective schools | 45% | 50% | 49% | |

*Revised targets

3+ A Level A –C

| | 2007 Year 1 | 2008 Year 2 | 2009 Year 3 | 2010 Year 4 |
|--------------------------------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| No. of students | 41 | 39 | 52 | 41 |
| Target | None set | None set | None set | 55% |
| Actual | 45% | 65% | 55% | |
| Difference | | | | |
| NI Average for non-selective schools | 39% | 40% | Not available | |

2+ A Level A –E

| | 2007 Year 1 | 2008 Year 2 | 2009 Year 3 | 2010 Year 4 |
|--|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| No. of students | 41 | 39 | 52 | 41 |
| Target | None set | None set | 92% | 100% |
| Actual | 100% | 91% | 100% | |
| Difference | | | +8% | |
| NI Average for similar non-selective schools | 94% | 93% | 89% | |

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