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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)

**St Mary's College
Derry**

January 2010

BACKGROUND

St Mary's College took part in the first cohort of the Specialist Schools' pilot project, with a specialism in Science. The school received a budget of £364,400.00 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 in December 2009 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 the strengths of this work can be used to bring demonstrable improvement across the school; and
- how the work will be monitored and evaluated.

On the basis of the three self-evaluation reports provided subsequently by the school to the Department, and two further inspection visits, the Inspectorate continued to monitor the progress made by the school as part of the Specialist Schools' project. This monitoring indicated that the school had begun to address the above issues through a developing culture of self-evaluation. In particular, the school had a clear recognition of the need to continue to focus on improving standards in literacy and numeracy.

A visit by the district inspector and a specialist inspector of science in March 2009 found that science remained an area of curricular strength and good progress had been made in almost all of the areas for improvement identified during the baseline inspection. However, for the purpose of showing further improvement the school needed to continue to target, monitor and review the standards achieved across the school.

The annex attached provides a summary of:

- the number of pupils studying for the specialism of science 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 non-selective schools.

THE SPECIALISM

The annex shows that the school has been successful in broadening its curriculum offer by introducing applied courses in science which are appropriate for the needs and abilities of the pupils. Since the start of designation the uptake of science by St Mary's College pupils more than doubled at key stage (KS) 4, exceeding the targets set by the college.

In the last two out of three years of designation the school has exceeded its own targets and exceeded significantly, in all three years, the Northern Ireland (NI) average for science in other non-selective schools. At post-16 level the school met its own targets in the last two out of three years and, in all three years, exceeded the NI average for other non-selective schools. All of the pupils entered achieved the equivalent of two GCE A-level passes at grades A-E.

The key strengths of the specialism include:

- the standards achieved by the pupils in external examinations;
- the extent to which the science courses offered to the girls are evaluated and modified on a regular basis to ensure that the courses match effectively to their needs;
- the good quality of the teaching in the lessons observed;
- the quality of leadership and management within the science area; and
- the uptake of science at GCSE level; it is exceptional that all pupils are now following a double award science course.

The school has demonstrated outstanding improvement overall in science since the start of designation. Standards are above the NI average for non-selective schools.

WHOLE-SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

A key element in the specialist schools' project is the raising of the overall standards achieved by the pupils in all of their subjects.

The annex shows that the school has exceeded its GCE A level targets since the start of designation. Results in two or more A levels at grades A-E are above the standard for similar schools in two of the three years.

The percentage of pupils obtaining grades A*-C in five or more subjects at GCSE is significantly above the NI average for non-selective schools. The percentage obtaining grades A*-C at GCSE in five or more subjects, including English and mathematics, was above the NI average for non-selective schools in the first two years of designation.

The school has demonstrated good improvement overall in whole school results during its participation in the programme.

COMMUNITY PLAN

The school is able to demonstrate through a wide range of qualitative and quantitative measures that it has developed effective links with the local community, including the local primary and post-primary schools and community groups.

The key strengths of the community plan include:

- the number of pupils from other schools in the Area Learning Community and feeder primary schools, participating in the science and careers fairs hosted by St Mary's College; and
- the number of local employers participating in a series of events hosted by the school.

The school has demonstrated good improvement through its community plan over its period of designation as a specialist school for science.

LEADERSHIP AND SELF-EVALUATION

Throughout the period of designation the school produced self-evaluation reports which were found by the Inspectorate to be effective in supporting the development of the whole-school self-evaluation processes.

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

- the committed and effective leadership of the Principal to the process of school improvement and its link with specialist status;
- the rigorous approach taken to self-evaluation resulting in progressively more appropriate, and rigorous, targets being set and achieved;
- the approaches made by the Principal and senior management within the school to strengthen the links between the school and the local community; and
- the overall improvement in the standards attained by the pupils.

The senior management is aware of the need to make the specialist agenda of science an integral part of the school development planning leading to improved standards in GCSE English and mathematics.

At the time of the Inspectorate's visit in January 2010, the school was preparing a detailed, well-informed SDP including more appropriate, revised targets, implementation strategies and priorities for action for the proposed one year extension of specialist status. The Inspectorate recommends that the target of further improving standards in GCSE English and mathematics is addressed explicitly in the SDP.

CONCLUSION

In the whole school plan and the community plan the improvement in quality and standards is good. Furthermore, in the specialist plan, improvement in quality and standards is outstanding.

SPECIALISM**Double Award Applied GCE A Level Science A-C**

	2007	2008	2009	2010
No. of students	18	18	21	14
Target %	98	62	80	66
Actual %	94	65	83	
Difference	-4	+3	+3	
NI average for non-selective schools	28	32	52	

GCSE A*-C Science (Double Award)

	2006/7	2007/8	2008/9	2009/10
No. of students	54	60	66	80
Target %	80	75	80	80
Actual %	94	78	84	
NI average for non-selective schools	74	76	76	

GCSE A*-C Science (Single Award)

	2006/7 Year 1	2007/8 Year 2	2008/9 Year 3	2009/10 Year 4
No. of students	90	20	22	0
Target %	40	65	70	
Actual %	51	80	77	
NI average for non-selective schools	32	53	55	

BTEC First Certificate Level 2

	2007/8 Year 2	2008/9 Year 3	2009/10 Year 4
No. of students	55	53	55
Target %	60%	75%	80%
Actual %	81%	91%	

WHOLE-SCHOOL

5+ GCSEs A*-C

	2007	2008	2009	2010
No. of students	144	135	141	139
Targets %	61	60	62	60
Actual %	56	70	70	
Difference %	-5	+10	+12	
NI average for non-selective schools	45	50	49	

5+ GCSEs A*-C including Mathematics and English

	2007	2008	2009	2010
No. of students	144	135	141	139
Target %	not set	35	21	36
Actual %	34	34	21.3	
Difference %		-1	+0.3	
NI average for non-selective schools	29	30	30	

2+ A Levels A-E

	2007	2008	2009	2010
No. of students	62	72	65	55
Target %	90	90	93	94
Actual %	97	93	98	
Difference	+7	+3	+5	
Average for similar schools	94	93	89	

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