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*The Education and Training Inspectorate -
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Providing Inspection Services for
**Department of Education
Department for Employment and Learning
Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure**



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

Education and Training Inspectorate

Report of a Standard Inspection

**Downshire School
Carrickfergus**

Inspected: April 2009

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 CONTEXT

Downshire School is a controlled, co-educational, 11-18 non-selective school. It is situated in Carrickfergus and draws its pupils from the town and the surrounding area. The enrolment has fluctuated slightly over the past five years and currently stands at 775. Over the past three years approximately 28% of the intake did not participate in the Transfer Procedure and 66% obtained grades C or D. Approximately 13.5% of the pupils are entitled to free school meals and the school has identified 2.18% of the pupils as having special educational needs. Currently there are five pupils with English as an additional language.

1.2 THE VIEWS OF PARENTS, TEACHERS, SUPPORT STAFF, GOVERNORS AND PUPILS

The arrangements for the inspection of pastoral care and child protection included the opportunity for the parents, teaching and support staff to complete a confidential questionnaire prior to the inspection, as well as meetings with representatives from the Board of Governors (governors) and groups of pupils from years 8, 12, 13 and 14. One hundred and sixty-two questionnaires were issued to parents; 40% were returned to the Department of Education (DE) and 34 contained additional written comments.

The responses from the questionnaires, and the comments from the parents, were almost unanimously affirmative of the work of the school. In particular, the parents highlighted the good levels of individual support that their children receive, the supportive and approachable teachers, the development of the pupils' self-confidence, the very approachable and dedicated Principal, the wide range of extra-curricular activities, and the very high regard in which the school is held in the community.

Over half of the teachers completed a confidential questionnaire, with ten teachers providing additional written comments. Thirteen support staff completed a confidential questionnaire, with one providing an additional written comment. Both sets of responses were almost entirely positive citing, in particular, the high quality of the working relationships throughout the school, the strength of the pastoral care provision and the strong focus on the celebration of the pupils' achievements.

The governors expressed their commitment and strong support for the school, highlighting the Principal's leadership; the hard work and dedication of the staff; the links with the community and other organisations; and the pupils' good achievements.

In discussions, the pupils talked enthusiastically about the opportunities that are available to them within the school and of the approachable and supportive teachers. They indicated that they know to whom they should turn if they have concerns about their work, personal safety or well-being.

The Education and Training Inspectorate (Inspectorate) has reported to the Principal, and representatives of the governors, these very positive comments and the very few issues of concern emerging from the questionnaires and interviews.

1.3 FOCUS

The inspection focused on the quality of the learning, teaching, leadership and management at all levels across the school and, in addition, on the provision for pupils in English, mathematics, and business and enterprise. The school's provision for pastoral care and the arrangements for child protection were also evaluated. As additional evidence for the inspection, inspectors observed classes in most of the other subjects. A summary of the main findings for the specialist subject areas under focus can be found in Appendix 1.

In June 2008, the school was selected to take part in the Specialist Schools' Programme, beginning in September 2008. The programme aims to develop the concept of specialist schools tailored to meet the particular needs of Northern Ireland's (NI's) education system. As part of the inspection, the school's provision for their specialist status in business and enterprise was evaluated.

2. QUALITY OF THE PUPILS' WORK

2.1 ACHIEVEMENTS AND STANDARDS

Across the school, almost all pupils display an interest in their work and participate enthusiastically in the wide range of extra-curricular activities. They co-operate well with their teachers and, when given the opportunity, engage collaboratively in their learning through group and paired work. The pupils display good levels of confidence and it is evident that almost all enjoy their time in school.

Almost all of the pupils in year 12 are entered for five or more subjects at General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) level. Over the last three years, there has been a significant improvement in the percentage of pupils gaining five or more GCSE grades at A*-C and the overall standards achieved are above the NI average for non-selective schools. In 2008, more than 52% of the year 12 pupils achieved GCSE grades A*-C in five or more subjects and the percentage of pupils receiving GCSE grades A*-C in five or more subjects including English and mathematics was above the corresponding NI average for similar non-selective schools. The school has identified underachievement in a minority of subjects at GCSE level and needs to take further action to address this issue.

In 2008, a majority of the year 14 pupils achieved General Certificate of Education (GCE) Advanced (A) level grades C or above in three subjects. This is above the NI average for non-selective schools. All pupils achieved grade E or above in at least two subjects taken at post-16 level. More details of the examination results can be found in Appendix 3.

The school provides a wide range of subjects at GCSE level. At post-16 level the school currently offers a small number of subjects; however, additional options are provided by the school's collaborative arrangements through the Carrickfergus Learning Community Partnership.

2.2 QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

The quality of nearly all of the teaching observed ranged from satisfactory to very good: a majority was good or better; a few lessons were outstanding and a small number were inadequate. In the best practice observed, the teachers and the pupils interacted well with each other; good planning ensured that a range of strategies were used to engage the pupils actively in their learning and the teachers used skilful questioning that developed the pupils' thinking skills and encouraged extended responses. The use of information and communication technology (ICT) greatly enhanced the learning. In the less effective practice, the lessons were characterised by poor classroom management, an over-emphasis on whole-class activities with limited opportunities for pupils to contribute or engage meaningfully. The low level tasks lacked pace and challenge; insufficient account was taken of the range of abilities within the class.

In general, there is a need to develop further and more consistently throughout the school, a wider range of teaching and learning strategies in order to challenge all of the pupils. The school has identified the need to disseminate the existing good practice across the school through the sharing of effective strategies for learning and teaching, in order to engage the pupils more actively in their learning.

More detailed evaluation of the subjects under focus is provided in Appendix 1.

2.3 PASTORAL CARE

The quality of the arrangements for pastoral care in the school is very good. This is demonstrated through the commitment and dedication of those staff with key responsibility for pastoral care and child protection, the exemplary behaviour of most of the pupils who display a clear sense of pride in being members of the school community and in the recent development of the positive behaviour policy and the Life Skills Programme.

2.4 CHILD PROTECTION

The school has very good arrangements in place for safeguarding pupils. These arrangements reflect the guidance issued by DE.

3. MANAGEMENT ARRANGEMENTS

The quality of the leadership provided by the Principal is good. The Principal has been in post for three years having formerly been the Vice-principal of the school and she is a highly committed, dedicated and professional leader. She has a broad and strategic vision for the school, based on the school's shared pursuit of personal excellence and mutual respect for all. Since taking up post, and within very challenging circumstances, she has made a good start towards identifying the key areas for development.

The management teams have a strong sense of collegial responsibility. There is a need, however, to clarify the roles and responsibilities, to build the capacity of the senior management team, and to extend the role of senior and middle managers in monitoring and evaluating provision, in order to secure whole-school improvement.

The school has made a start to self-evaluation. There is now a need to prioritise the areas for development, establish associated action plans and make more extensive use of the available performance data, including DE benchmarking information. It will be important that the interpretation and dissemination of this data informs appropriately the quality of the school's provision and assists in effective target-setting in order to raise further the standards.

There is very good communication between the Principal and the governors; the governors are hard-working and highly committed to the whole-school community. They are well informed about school developments and are appropriately involved in decisions regarding the strategic direction of the school.

The school development plan (SDP) sets out agreed priorities for improvement and complies fully with the requirements of the Education (School Development Plans) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2005 Order. The SDP will need to be reviewed in light of the inspection findings.

4. SPECIALIST SCHOOL

The business and enterprise, and physical education/sports studies are areas of clear curricular strength, with good levels of attainment; the school has begun to use the business and enterprise, and physical education/sports studies specialism to develop existing links with other schools, and the wider community, including business and industry. For the purposes of showing improvement more clearly the school needs to review the targets set in order to demonstrate how the strengths in the specialist areas have the potential to promote quality teaching and learning and whole-school improvement. The Inspectorate will continue to monitor the work of the school as part of the Specialist Schools' Programme.

5. SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS

5.1 The strengths of the school include:

- the exemplary behaviour of most of the pupils who display a clear sense of pride in their school community;
- the good working relationships between the teachers and the pupils and the commitment of the staff and the governors to the care and welfare of the pupils;
- the quality of the teaching which was good or better in the majority of the lessons observed;
- the good standards achieved by the pupils in most subjects at GCSE level;
- the commitment and dedication of the Principal to the life and work of the school and the support she provides for the staff and the pupils; and
- the sound links with other education providers, and agencies in the local and wider community, to enhance the provision for the pupils.

5.2 The areas for improvement include the need:

- to review roles and responsibilities at all levels in order to manage change and effect whole-school improvement; and
- for more rigorous monitoring and evaluation to strengthen the school's strategic planning and development.

6. CONCLUSION

In most of the areas inspected the quality of education provided in this school is satisfactory; the strengths outweigh areas for improvement in the provision. The inspection has identified areas for improvement in leadership and management which need to be addressed if the needs of all the learners are to be met more effectively. The Inspectorate will monitor and report on the school's progress in addressing the areas for improvement.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS FOR THE SUBJECT AREAS UNDER FOCUS

English

The strengths of the work include:

- the good working relationships between pupils and staff, with a high standard of behaviour observed in all classes;
- the achievement of pupils in GCSE English, with a consistently higher percentage at A*-C than the NI average, and 100% of pupils scoring A*-C grades in GCSE English Literature;
- the good standard of extended writing, in a range of genres, in pupils' notebooks and on display;
- the quality of the teaching, most of which was good; and
- the start made by the Head of Department to reviewing the Key Stage 3 schemes of work and improving the use of data to support improvement.

The areas for improvement include:

- raising the percentage of pupils scoring top grades at GCSE; and
- establishing and implementing a consistent marking policy in line with assessment for learning.

Mathematics

The strengths of the work include:

- the good working relationships that are resulting in good levels of behaviour and pupil's attention;
- the commitment of the teachers to the pupils as evidenced through, for example, the after-school support sessions;
- the quality of teaching which was good or better in most of the lessons observed;
- the provision for the pupils who require additional support with their mathematics;
- the initiatives to promote an interest in and enjoyment of mathematics; and
- the start made to developing the financial capability of the pupils.

The areas for improvement include:

- the need to develop the level of questioning in order to elicit fuller responses from the pupils and engage them in greater mathematical thinking; and
- the monitoring and evaluation of the teaching and learning, including the level of challenge in the pupils' experiences, in order to raise the standards achieved by the pupils.

Business Studies

The strengths of the work include:

- the good provision of business related subjects in the school;
- the levels of achievement of the pupils in external examinations;
- the links that the department has developed with Young Enterprise Northern Ireland;
- the development of links with industry; and
- evidence of some good use of active learning strategies.

The areas for improvement include:

- to ensure more consistency in the quality and range of teaching approaches, particularly through well-planned group activities;
- to make more effective use of ICT in teaching and learning approaches; and
- to develop further the links that have been established with industry.

STATISTICAL INFORMATION

- 1.1 i. School: Downshire School v. Date of Inspection: W/C 27.04.09
 ii. School Reference Number: 321-0232 vi. Area of Study: Standard Inspection
 iii. Age Range: 11-18
 iv. Status: Controlled Secondary

1.2 Intake/Enrolment

School Year	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09
Year 8 Intake	157	143	158	135	148	142
Total enrolment	772	792	826	799	806	775

1.3 Attendance

Year 2007/08	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	Average 2007/08	NI Average 2006/07
% Attendance	92.5	91.5	90.4	88.4	90.5	95.3	95.1	91	90

- 1.4 i. Total Number of Teachers:

55.5

 iii. Contact ratio (percentage of timetabled time in direct class contact):

0.79

- ii. PTR (Pupil/Teacher Ratio):

13.95

Year 2008/09	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	TOTAL
Enrolment: Boys	70	79	72	83	59	12	5	380
Enrolment: Girls	72	65	61	69	80	26	22	395
Enrolment: Total	142	144	133	152	139	38	27	775
PTR	14.73	14.63	15.93	14.27	13.43	9.69	9.70	

1.5 Staying On Rate (2007/08) (Current year 13/14 as proportion of year 12 from 1/2 years previously)

Year 13	23.4	NI Av Year 13	37.4
Year 14	21.4	NI Av Year 14	25.2

1.6 Leavers Destinations

2006/07	Year 12	NI%	Year 13/14	NI%
Total Number of Leavers	106		42	
Another School	6%	11.1	5%	2
Employment	24%	12.4	17%	19.5
Full-time Further Education	23%	37.2	26%	21
Full-time Higher Education	N/A	N/A	26%	42
Full-time Training	36%	30.1	2%	6.6
Seeking Employment/Unemployed	2%	4.1	10%	4.3
Unknown/Long Term Sick/Pregnant	10%	4.9	14%	4.6

1.7 NAME OF SCHOOL: Downshire School

SCHOOL YEAR: 2008/2009

GCSE	2006	2007	2008
Percentage of Year 12 taking GCSE in at least 5 subjects	92	92	99.34
Percentage of Year 12 obtaining Grades C or above in at least 5 subjects	44	44.6	52
Percentage of Year 12 obtaining Grades E or above in at least 5 subjects	80.67	76.26	84.87
GCE A2 Level or equivalent	2006	2007	2008
Percentage of Year 14 obtaining Grades C or above in at least 3 A2 levels	43.59	19.05	55.88
Percentage of Year 14 obtaining Grades E or above in at least 2 A2 levels	100	95.24	100

EXAMINATION RESULTS

Table showing the GCSE and GCE A level subject results over the previous three years ending in June 2008, in comparison with the respective Northern Ireland (NI) averages

Table 1

	More than 10 percentage points above	Between 5 and 10 percentage points above	Within 5 percentage points	Between 5 and 10 percentage points below	More than 10 percentage points below
GCSE A*-E		Mathematics Religious Studies Single Award Science	Art & Design Business Studies Chinese* Design and Technology Double Award Science 1 st Subject Drama English English Literature Geography History Home Economics Child Development Media Film and TV Studies Music* Sport/PE Studies Statistics	Home Economics Office Technology	French Information Technology
GCE A level A-E	Health and Social Care Travel and Tourism		Applied Business Studies Art & Design* History* Media Film and TV Studies	Information Technology	Sport/PE Studies*

* Denotes subjects which had a total entry of less than 30 (GCSE) or 20 (GCE A level) over three years

Table showing the spread of the NI subject averages which have been used in the determination of Table 1.

Table 2

	100% - 96%	95% - 86%	85% - 76%	75% - 66%	65% - 0%
GCSE A*-E	Double Award Science 1 st subject English Literature	Art & Design Chinese Drama English French History Home Economics Home Economics Child Development Information Technology Media Film and TV Studies Music Office Technology Sport/PE Studies Statistics	Business Studies Design and Technology Geography Mathematics Religious Studies Single Award Science		
GCE A level A-E	Applied Business Studies Art & Design History Media Film and TV Studies	Health and Social Care Information Technology Sport/PE Studies Travel and Tourism			

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