



*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**



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

Education and Training Inspectorate

Report of a Standard Inspection

**St Gemma's High School
Belfast**

Inspected: March 2009

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 CONTEXT

St Gemma's High School is a maintained, non-selective, school located off the Oldpark Road in North Belfast, providing education for 11-19 year old girls. The school serves an area which suffers from high levels of deprivation, unemployment and a wide range of social problems. The enrolment has declined over recent years and currently stands at 241. Most of the pupils who transfer to the school do not participate in the Transfer Procedure. Approximately 61% of the pupils are entitled to free school meals and the school has identified 71% of the pupils as requiring additional support with aspects of their learning.

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

The arrangements for the inspection included the opportunity for the parents, teaching and support staff to complete a confidential questionnaire prior to the inspection. Inspectors met with representatives from the Board of Governors (governors), and groups of pupils from years 8, 12, and 13.

One hundred and twenty questionnaires were issued to the parents, 43% were returned to the Department of Education (DE) and 18 contained additional written comments. Almost all of the responses from the questionnaires and the written comments from the parents were highly supportive of the work of the school. In particular, the parents highlighted the good care and support provided by the teachers, the attention given to the personal development of the pupils, and the high regard in which the school is held by the local community. The main concern expressed by a small number of parents was in relation to the appropriateness of the range of courses offered by the school.

Over three-quarters of the teachers and two support staff completed a confidential questionnaire, with nine providing additional written comments. The staff responded positively on a range of issues related to the work of the school in support of the local community, staff and management working well together in the interests of the pupils and the focus on the pupils' learning and well-being. A significant minority of teachers stated that the pupils had limited opportunities to take part in the decision-making process.

The Education and Training Inspectorate (Inspectorate) has reported to the Principal, and representatives of the governors, the issues emerging from the parents', teachers' and support staff questionnaires. Some of these matters are dealt with in the body of the report.

The governors expressed their strong support for the work of the Principal and her staff, and the very strong links with the local community. In addition, they commented on how the Principal keeps them informed regarding key developments in the school, including the pupils' progress and the school development planning process.

In discussions, the pupils talked enthusiastically about their school. In particular they appreciated the opportunities provided to travel and to take part in musicals and assemblies. The pupils reported that they get help from their teachers when required and that they are aware of what to do if they have any worries about their safety and well-being. A small number of the pupils in the post-16 provision said they would like to take on more responsibilities in the school.

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, science and modern languages and the provision for pupils with special educational needs and the arrangements for the inclusion of these pupils in all aspects of school life. 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 a range of other subjects. A summary of the main findings for the specialist subject areas under focus can be found in Appendix 1.

2. THE QUALITY OF THE PUPILS' WORK

2.1 ACHIEVEMENT AND STANDARDS

All of the pupils in year 12 are entered for five or more subjects at General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) level. Over the past three years the percentage of pupils obtaining grades A* to E in at least five or more subjects at GCSE is below the Northern Ireland (NI) average for similar non-selective schools. Additionally, the standards in English and mathematics are below the NI average. The need to improve achievement in public examinations has been identified as a priority in the school development plan and the inspection findings confirm that raising standards is an issue which should be addressed as a matter of urgency. More details of the examination results can be found in Appendix 4.

The choice of courses on offer at key stage (KS) 4 and particularly at post-16 is narrow and does not meet the needs of the changing profile of its pupils. The school has recognised the need to broaden the range of externally accredited courses offered.

2.2 QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

A majority of the lessons observed were good or better, with nearly all of the teaching being satisfactory. In the more effective practice, individual lessons were well planned to incorporate a range of relevant learning opportunities which engaged the pupils actively for the whole of the period. These lessons were characterised by the use of realistic contexts to motivate and challenge the pupils in their learning. In addition, time-bound and focused group work promoted effectively the pupils' talking and listening skills; the pupils effectively used planned opportunities to reflect on their learning and consider ways in which they might improve their understanding.

In the less effective practice, there was a lack of pace and challenge. The work was overly directed by the teacher, with closed questions that did not allow the pupils to organise their thoughts and ideas and provide more extensive answers. In these lessons, there is a need to provide a wider range of teaching strategies to stimulate further the pupils' interest, deepen their understanding and develop their skills.

There is a need to disseminate the existing good practice across the school by sharing effective strategies for learning and teaching, in order to engage and challenge all of the pupils.

2.3 PASTORAL CARE

The quality of the arrangements for pastoral care is very good. The many strengths include the strong sense of community, the caring and supportive ethos and the important attention given to the personal development and well-being of every pupil. The pupils are courteous and well mannered and high standards of behaviour are evident in the school. The pupils feel safe and report that they know what to do if they have any concerns. The Vice-principal with responsibility for pastoral care gives effective leadership and is supported well by the Principal, the members of the pastoral care team, the form teachers and the wider school community.

2.4 CHILD PROTECTION

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

2.5 SPECIAL EDUCATION NEEDS

The teachers are committed to supporting the pupils with special educational needs and ensuring that they participate in the lessons. There is a need for the senior management team to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of the Individual Education Plans (IEPs) and intervention strategies that support the learners' progress. The IEPs do not include sufficiently specific, measurable targets that are linked appropriately to the individual learning needs of the pupils.

The arrangements for supporting those pupils at risk of marginalisation are very good. The school promotes a culture of inclusion and takes consistent and appropriate action to support pupils at risk of falling behind their peers or dropping out of school. Significant attention is given to nurturing the pupils' emotional development, providing a sound basis for them to learn successfully and to feel included.

3. LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT

The school is led by a caring and dedicated Principal, who has been in post for 21 years. She places a strong and effective focus on the pastoral care of the pupils and has worked very hard to introduce and oversee initiatives that have improved the life-chances of the pupils.

The Principal is ably supported by a long serving Vice-principal and three senior teachers, who are hardworking and committed to the work of the school and the local community.

Almost all the subject leaders have worked very hard to promote improvement and to manage the changes of the revised Northern Ireland Curriculum (NIC). A good start has been made to this important work although there is a need for all levels of management to take a more rigorous and action-focused approach to monitoring and evaluating the outcomes.

There is a need to develop further a culture of self-evaluation at all levels within the school to inform the school development planning processes and promote whole school improvement, in order to meet more fully the requirements of the School Development Plans Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2005.

4. SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS

4.1 The main strengths of the school include:

- the quality of the majority of the teaching observed during the inspection;
- the effective ethos and working relationships that focus on the holistic development of all the pupils;
- the very good standards of behaviour of the pupils;
- the very good pastoral care and support that is matched well to the pupils' needs and reduces barriers to their learning; and
- the very good and consistent action taken to support pupils at risk of falling behind their peers and dropping out of school.

4.2 The areas for improvement include the need to:

- raise the standards the pupils attain in public examinations;
- review and develop the leadership and management roles at all levels to focus more specifically on developing more rigorous self-evaluation processes leading to improvement; and
- review the curriculum provided to increase the range of options available to the pupils and provide flexible pathways to further study based on effective external partnerships.

CONCLUSION

In most of the areas inspected the quality of education provided in this school is satisfactory; the strengths outweigh the areas for improvement in the provision. The inspection has identified important areas for improvement in standards 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 organisation's progress in addressing the areas for improvement.

Science

The main strengths of the science department include:

- the good working relationships between the teachers and the pupils;
- the learning environment which is enhanced by a variety of displays and commercial posters;
- the good beginning made to implementing the revised NIC;
- the uptake of science at KS4; all pupils study either single award or double award science;
- the use of the interactive whiteboard to enhance the pupils learning; and
- the links developed with outside agencies which expand the pupils' perspective on science.

The areas for improvement include the need for the teachers to:

- employ a wider range of teaching and learning strategies to stimulate the pupils' interest in science and to improve the standards achieved;
- use a greater variety of strategies to monitor and evaluate the extent of the pupils' learning and to imbed the process of self-evaluation in the department; and
- devise an action plan for science that addresses the areas for improvement identified in the inspection.

Modern Languages

The main strengths of the modern languages department include the:

- supportive ethos and very good working relationships at all levels;
- positive response of most of the pupils to learning languages;
- effective strategies to promote talking and listening;
- good opportunities to enhance and extend the pupils' learning experiences beyond the classroom; and
- clear commitment of the teachers to the ongoing work of the modern languages department.

The areas for improvement include the need for the teachers to:

- develop further the strategies to enable the pupils to work more independently; and
- strengthen the arrangements for monitoring and evaluation to inform the work of the department and improve the standards achieved by the pupils.

English

The main strengths of the English department include:

- the strong ethos of support for the pupils;
- the very good working relationships between staff and pupils;
- the hard work and commitment of the staff; and
- the good start to the revision of departmental planning.

The areas for improvement include the need for the teachers to:

- improve the standards achieved by pupils in public examinations in English;
- make more effective use of data to plan more coherently and effectively for improvements in overall standards; and
- develop a more rigorous self-evaluation, in particular, using the outcomes from monitoring and evaluating the pupils' progress to effect improvement.

APPENDIX 2

HEALTH AND SAFETY

- There is a need to check the security arrangements for the external door that leads to the fitness suite.

ACCOMMODATION

- There is a need to re-connect the gas supply to the science laboratories.

STATISTICAL INFORMATION

- 1.1 i. School: St Gemma's High
 ii. School Reference Number: 123-0173
 iii. Age Range: 11-18
 iv. Status: Roman Catholic Maintained
 v. Date of Inspection: W/C 02.03.09
 vi. Area of Study: Standard Inspection

1.2 Intake/Enrolment

School Year	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09
Year 8 Intake	44	36	32	30	27
Total enrolment	278	269	262	241	239

1.3 Attendance

Year 2007/08	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	Average 2007/08	NI Average 2006/07
% Attendance	91.5	91.2	87.7	92.3	86	89	0	90	90

- 1.4 i. Total Number of Teachers: 18 iii. Contact ratio (percentage of timetabled time in direct class contact): 0.79
- ii. PTR (Pupil/Teacher Ratio): 13.28 Number of Teachers involved in Area of Study: 18 (Focused only)

Year 2008/09	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	TOTAL
Enrolment: Girls	27	33	31	41	47	44	16	239
Enrolment: Total	27	33	31	41	47	44	16	239
PTR	10.65	13.02	11.12	15.16	12.36	16.51		

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

Year 13	78.1	NI Av Year 13	37.4
Year 14	32.7	NI Av Year 14	25.2

1.6 Leavers Destinations

2006/07	Year 12	NI%	Year 13/14	NI%
Total Number of Leavers	4		47	
Another School	25%	11.1	4.25%	2
Employment	50%	12.4	61.7%	19.5
Full-time Further Education	0%	37.2	14.89%	21
Full-time Higher Education	N/A	N/A	10.6%	42
Full-time Training	0%	30.1	4.25%	6.6
Seeking Employment/Unemployed	0%	4.1	0%	4.3
Unknown/Long Term Sick/Pregnant	25%	4.9	0%	4.6

1.7 NAME OF SCHOOL: St Gemma's High School, Belfast

SCHOOL YEAR: 2008/2009

GCSE	2006	2007	2008
Percentage of Year 12 taking GCSE in at least 5 subjects	98	100	100
Percentage of Year 12 obtaining Grades C or above in at least 5 subjects	16	6.90	4.76
Percentage of Year 12 obtaining Grades C or above in at least 5 subjects including English and mathematics	10	6.90	2.38
Percentage of Year 12 obtaining Grades E or above in at least 5 subjects	62	55.17	52.38
GCE A2 level or equivalent	2006	2007	2008
Percentage of Year 14 obtaining Grades C or above in at least 3 A2 levels	31.25	0	0
Percentage of Year 14 obtaining Grades E or above in at least 2 A2 levels	100	100	66.6

EXAMINATION RESULTS

Table 1 showing GCSE subject results, over the three years ending in June 2008, in comparison with the respective Northern Ireland (NI) averages

	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	Spanish*		English Literature Sociology* Sport/PE Studies*	Art and Design	Biology Business Studies Double Award Science 1 st Subject English French Geography History Home Economics Irish Mathematics Religious Studies Single Award Science
GCSE A*-C	Spanish*				Art and Design Biology Business Studies Double Award Science 1st Subject English English Literature French Geography History Home Economics Irish Mathematics Religious Studies Sociology* Single Award Science Sport/PE Studies*

* less than 30 candidates over last 3 years

Table 2 showing the spread of the NI subject averages which have been used in the determination of Table 1.

	100% - 96%	95% - 86%	85% - 76%	75% - 66%	65% - 0%
GCSE A* - E	Art & Design Biology Double Award Science 1st Subject English Literature	Business Studies English French History Home Economics Irish Religious Studies Sociology Spanish Sport/PE Studies	Geography Mathematics Single Award Science		
GCSE A* - C		Biology	Art & Design English Literature	Double Award Science 1st Subject Irish Religious Studies Sociology	Business Studies English French Geography History Home Economics Mathematics Single Award Science Spanish Sport/PE Studies

Table 3 showing A level subject results, over the three years ending in June 2008, in comparison with the respective Northern Ireland (NI) averages.

	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
GCE A-C					English Literature

Table 4 showing the spread of the NI subject averages which have been used in the determination of Table 3.

	100% - 96%	95% - 86%	85% - 76%	75% - 66%	65% - 0%
GCE A-C					English Literature

Tables 3 and 4 showing results for Occupational Studies in 2007 and 2008

2007

	Single Award Level 2	Double Award Level 2
Pupils entered (11)	7	1
Percentage	63.63%	9%

2008

	Single Award Level 2	Double Award Level 2
Pupils entered (9)	5	0
Percentage	55.5%	0%

Tables 5 and 6 showing results for Key Skills Communication 2007 and 2008

2007

	Achieving level 1	Achieving level 2
Pupils entered (9)	7	0
Percentage	77.77%	0%

2008

	Achieving level 1	Achieving level 2
Pupils entered	N/A	N/A
Percentage	N/A	N/A

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