

Report of a Primary Inspection

Sacred Heart Primary School,
Dundrum

DE Ref No 403-6133

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Education and
Training Inspectorate
Empowering Improvement

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Throughout the report the use of an asterisk * denotes further information included at Appendix 2.

1. INTRODUCTION

A. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Sacred Heart Primary School is a co-educational, Catholic maintained primary school situated in the village of Dundrum in County Down. The children who attend the school come from the village and the surrounding rural area. The school's enrolment has increased by over 300% over the past five years and stands currently at 125 children across five composite classes. There are a small number of newcomer children who attend the school. Just over 27% (34) of the children have free school meals entitlement and 19% (24) have been identified as having special educational needs (SEN). The staffing complement consists of the principal, who took up post in January 2021, five classroom teachers, 13 classroom assistants, and the wider staff team.

There is a breakfast club and an after-school club on the school premises both of which are very well attended. The school has a well-established Shared Education partnership with a local special school. The school engages very actively in a number of cluster groups across a range of primary schools and one post-primary school.

The school has achieved recently awards and external accreditations that include: Northern Ireland Forest School Status (Elder Award)* and Scoil Spreagtha* for its promotion of the Irish language. The staff and children are working currently towards a fourth consecutive Eco Schools Green Flag*.

B. VIEWS OF PUPILS, PARENTS AND STAFF

The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) issued online confidential questionnaires to the children in year 7, parents and staff in advance of the inspection. A high-level summary of the questionnaire responses, including any concerns raised, was shared with the principal and a representative of the board of governors. Where the responses raised in the questionnaires align to the findings of this inspection, they are referenced within the main body of the report.

C. THE PROCESS OF INSPECTION

The ETI worked alongside the Sacred Heart Primary 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 define, celebrate and embed success; and
- grows and develops an inclusive community of learning.

2. MAIN REPORT

A. SETTING THE VISION

The school's vision, encapsulated in its motto "Striving for Greatness Together", is understood clearly and embraced by the school community. This shared ethos is reflected in the inclusive and supportive culture of the school, where excellent relationships among children, staff, parents and governors are underpinned by collaboration, mutual respect, and a collective commitment to continuous improvement and the children's success. The school leadership is reviewing currently the vision to ensure it remains responsive to the evolving needs of the children, staff, and wider community.

In response to a significant increase in enrolment over the past five years, the principal and governors have established successfully a new staff team and management structure. The collegiate team is developing leadership capacity through evolving roles and responsibilities, ensuring the school remains well-positioned to meet the changing needs of its community.

Self-evaluation processes are developing well. The children's voice, captured through focus groups led by the principal and curriculum co-ordinators, alongside robust analysis of assessment information, has informed directly the school improvement targets set out in the current action plans. While these plans identify appropriate priorities, the targets now require refinement to ensure they are manageable and allow for more effective monitoring of impact.

The principal has participated recently in training provided by the Education Authority and developed a structured roadmap for a three-year school development plan. The planned engagement with the school community, ahead of the November 2025 launch, will be key to ensuring the plan provides a clear strategic direction for the school community.

The school governors are highly supportive, visible, and take great pride in the school's achievements and ethos. They are deeply committed to the school's development and bring a broad range of expertise, including financial, educational, and legal knowledge. They are proactive in accessing relevant training and are well-informed about the work of the school through regular updates from, and active engagement with, curriculum co-ordinators.

B. IMPLEMENTING AND IMPROVING TO ACHIEVE THE VISION

Across the school, very positive relationships between the staff and children underpin a highly supportive learning environment. These relationships contribute significantly to the children's well-being and engagement and promote a climate conducive to effective learning.

During lessons, the teachers share and revisit success criteria and learning intentions, which enables all of the children to understand what is expected of them throughout the lesson. Effective differentiation ensures that the children are challenged appropriately and supported to make good progress in their learning.

The classroom assistants are deployed strategically and work discreetly with the children to provide highly effective individual and group support. Active and practical approaches to learning are used effectively to promote high levels of enthusiasm and engagement among the children. The school has identified appropriately the need to review whole-school planning for learning, including across composite classes, to improve further progression.

A key strength of the provision is the school's thematic planning approach, which is firmly rooted in the local context and enriched through well-established partnerships with community organisations and local businesses. The staff draw effectively on the unique geography and rich history of the area, such as Dundrum Viking festival, links with local restaurants, and learning experiences at Dundrum Castle, to create a World Around Us programme that is contemporary, relevant, and engaging. These opportunities are enhancing significantly the children's understanding of their environment, heritage, and local community. The children spoke confidently during the inspection, and in their written responses in the questionnaires, about their enjoyment of the topic-based activities and their appreciation of learning about the area in which they live. There is an increased focus on science provision, with a growing emphasis on investigative and enquiry-based learning. This approach supports well the development of the children's scientific thinking and encourages them to ask questions, explore concepts, and engage in practical experiences that deepen their understanding.

There has been a recent and purposeful focus on reading across the school. The introduction of an online reading programme, together with the refurbishment of the school library and investment in high-quality reading materials, has enhanced the children's enjoyment of reading and enabled the staff to monitor their engagement and progress more effectively.

The school has placed a renewed emphasis on the development of mental maths and problem-solving strategies. These approaches are embedded in meaningful contexts across the curriculum and provide the children with increased opportunities to develop their mathematical reasoning. As a result, the children are demonstrating greater confidence, independence, and fluency in applying their mathematical skills.

The increased use of C2K* applications enhance digital learning and supports well the development of children's digital skills, particularly in storytelling and managing data. From the foundation stage, the children are independent in accessing their online accounts using QR codes. They have a sound understanding of online safety, reinforced through whole-school initiatives. The staff have identified appropriately the need to develop planning to define more clearly skills progression across each type of information and communication technology (ICT).

Priority is placed on the development of the children's physical skills. During the inspection, the children spoke positively about the wide range of sporting activities and extensive use of outdoor spaces, recognising the benefits of fresh air and active learning for their well-being. Parental feedback from questionnaires also reflects high levels of satisfaction with the breadth of the physical opportunities provided to

the children. A comprehensive suite of safeguarding policies is in place and reviewed regularly to ensure a safe and supportive environment. The staff have identified appropriately the need to update the Complaints and Relationships and Sexuality Education policies to reflect current Department of Education guidance.

C. BUILDING EQUITY

The staff hold high expectations for every child and work in partnership with all of the children to set and monitor closely personal targets. In conversation with inspectors, the children articulated confidently their bespoke targets, how they were devised and what they will do to achieve them.

There are clear and well-embedded processes in place to identify children who have SEN, and the staff monitor diligently the children's progress. The personal learning plans for children with SEN are developed collaboratively with the child, their parents, and the staff, and guide effectively the additional support provided.

A comprehensive provision map is used well by all staff. When a specific need is identified, the relevant training is accessed and appropriate strategies implemented to support the child. This strategic and responsive approach provides timely support and equips staff appropriately with the skills and confidence to enable inclusion and progression for all children. All of the dedicated support staff have undertaken recent professional learning and provide consistent, effective pastoral and educational support.

All of the children who receive additional support with their learning have made progress towards achieving their targets which is testament to the commitment of the team. Parents, in their response to the questionnaires issued by the ETI, commented on the "outstanding support" the school provides for children with "extra" needs.

D. DEFINING, CELEBRATING AND EMBEDDING SUCCESS

The school community defines success as the care, consideration, and support the children show for one another as they strive for greatness together. Across the school, the children demonstrate consistently high expectations of themselves, evident in their pride in wearing the school uniform, their exemplary behaviour, their sustained attentiveness in lessons, and the quality of their work. They collaborate effectively with peers and sustain focus when working independently, demonstrating strong self-management, empathy, and mutual respect.

The children take increasing ownership of their learning by setting personal targets and recognising the relevance of key skills to their future aspirations. Most children engage confidently with adults and peers, and articulate and justify their thinking during group tasks and discussions. The children's increasing use of the Irish language, particularly when greeting others, contributes well to their language development and cultural awareness. The children write for a range of purposes and audiences and use regularly digital tools to create and present their work. To strengthen further the literacy outcomes, the children would benefit from increased opportunities to engage in poetry, improve their spelling, and produce extended pieces of writing.

The children have a good conceptual understanding of mathematical concepts and apply a variety of problem-solving strategies with resilience and persistence. They enjoy applying their mathematical skills in meaningful contexts, such as exploring two-dimensional shapes in forest school. They are socially responsible and environmentally aware, and contribute actively to ECO school initiatives, such as battery recycling, and community projects.

During the inspection, the children told inspectors that they value the feedback provided by the staff. In the questionnaire responses, all of the children reported feeling recognised and celebrated through the wide range of awards and certificates, which contributes to their enjoyment of school.

E. GROWING A COMMUNITY OF LEARNING

The skilful staff team strive to provide high quality learning experiences for the children. Shared responsibility and high expectations underpin practice across the school, reflecting a strong school community where respectful relationships and courteous interactions support a positive learning climate.

Professional development is prioritised and strategically planned for. The staff and governors seek actively opportunities for professional growth and development, enabling the school community to be responsive and adaptable to the children's needs.

The children's voices are valued and embedded within the school's culture. Valuable opportunities for participation, such as the school and Eco council, curriculum focus groups, and the Year 7 buddy scheme, enable the children to contribute meaningfully to decisions that affect them.

The practical and financial support provided by the 'Parents of Sacred Heart' group is closely aligned with the school's priorities and enhances significantly the provision. Targeted fundraising has enabled the purchase of ICT equipment, an outdoor reading area, and access to specialist services, including a speech and language therapist. These investments have enriched the curriculum and contributed to measurable improvements in the children's communication, confidence, and wider learning.

The school's external partnerships with local businesses and community organisations are well-established and used effectively to broaden and contextualise learning. Impactful initiatives such as Adopt a Spot*, intergenerational school performances, and shared sessions with a local special school provide meaningful real-world experiences that have had a profound impact on the children's empathy, tolerance and understanding.

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.

3. NEXT STEPS

Sacred Heart Primary School reflects its vision of “Striving for Greatness Together” through an inclusive, collaborative culture built on strong relationships and partnerships, high expectations, and a shared drive for continuous improvement.

The children thrive in a learning environment where the staff make excellent use of the local context to promote the children’s love of learning and pride in their community.

The next steps for Sacred Heart Primary School are to take forward the area for action. The District Inspector will monitor the school’s progress in addressing the area for action as part of ETI’s normal monitoring processes.

Inspectors identified an aspect of highly effective practice from which others may learn. The aspect of practice which should be shared more widely is:

- the contemporary and relevant World Around Us programme, rooted in the local context and enriched by extensive community links and partnerships.

4. APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1: QUANTITATIVE TERMS

In this report, proportions may be described as percentages, common fractions and in more general quantitative terms. Where more general terms are used, they should be interpreted as follows:

Almost/nearly all	-	more than 90%
Most	-	75% - 90%
A majority	-	50% - 74%
A significant minority	-	30% - 49%
A minority	-	10% - 29%
Very few/a small number	-	less than 10

APPENDIX 2: NOTES

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Northern Ireland Forest School Status (Elder Award)*

The NI Forest School Awards have been created to encourage local schools to take an innovative, educational approach to outdoor play and learning, encouraging and inspiring children through positive outdoor experiences.

Scoil Spreagtha*

‘Scoil Spreagtha’ is an accredited scheme, facilitated by Gael Linn, to recognise and celebrate efforts made by English-medium primary schools to encourage the use of Irish in the school environment. ‘Scoil Spreagtha’ in its design aims to inspire schools to showcase and expand their efforts to promote the use of Irish in the school setting. Participating schools have been furnished with a comprehensive suite of support resources to assist their efforts to receive accreditation as a ‘Scoil Spreagtha’.

Eco Schools Green Flag*

The Eco Schools Green Flag is an internationally recognised award for excellence in environmental action and learning.

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C2K*

C2K is a Northern Ireland-wide information and communications network operated on behalf of the Education Authority in the province.

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Adopt a Spot*

A community-based volunteer programme focused on promoting civic pride and encouraging collective responsibility for the environment.

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