

Report of a Primary Inspection

St Patrick's Primary School, Belfast
DE Ref No 103-6698

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Education and
Training Inspectorate
Empowering Improvement

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1. INTRODUCTION

A. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

St Patrick's Primary School is a maintained co-educational school located in the New Lodge area of North Belfast. It was established in September 2013 as a result of an amalgamation of Edmund Rice Primary School for boys and Star of the Sea Primary School for girls. A new state-of-the-art building opened in September 2021. There are 18 classes in the school including a Department of Education (DE) funded nurture class, the 'Sunshine Room' that supports children with emotional needs. There is an enrolment of 417 children who come from the surrounding area, just over three-quarters (76%) of whom have free school meals entitlement. One-third of the children have been identified as having special educational needs (SEN). The number of children with statements of special educational need has been increasing significantly as indicated by the rise over the last four years from nine to 32 children. Just over one-quarter (25.6%) of the children enrolled are newcomers.

The school offers wraparound care, a breakfast club and an extensive range of afterschool clubs, including a homework club which are all well attended. The school has a long-established shared education partnership with Seaview Primary School, this year's priorities being in the development of the schools' provision for literacy and using information communication technology (ICT). The school has achieved a number of awards over the last three years including the Spirit of Catholic Education Award* in 2024, Eco-Schools Green Flag Award* in 2025, gold status in the Investors in Mental Health Award* 2024-25 and Royal Horticultural Society level 2 School Gardening Award*. The school has recently received the Hope Award 2025 from Families First* and been shortlisted for the 2025 ICT Excellence Awards*.

B. VIEWS OF PARENTS, LEARNERS AND STAFF

The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) issued online confidential questionnaires to year 7 children, all parents and staff in advance of the inspection. A summary of the questionnaire responses, including a small number of issues raised, was shared with the principal and members of the board of governors.

Almost all of the year 7 children responded to the questionnaire, over one-half of whom provided written comments. All of the children who responded indicated that: in school they learn how to understand their feelings and how they should act upon them; the teachers and other adults in school treat them with care and respect; the teachers and assistants help them when they find it difficult to learn; and they are encouraged to set targets that help them improve their work. The groups of children who spoke to inspectors spoke positively of their enjoyment of learning and having responsibilities in the various aspects of school life.

Twenty-three percent of families (70 parents/carers) responded to the online questionnaire, over one-quarter (27%) of whom provided written comments. Almost all of the parents indicated that they are happy with their child's learning experience in St Patrick's Primary School and their child is happy in school, is making good progress in their learning and has opportunities to take part in activities, visits and afterschool clubs.

Almost all of the teaching staff (18) responded to the online questionnaire and indicated that their professional skills, understanding and knowledge are valued, and that they have opportunities to share them with others. In addition, most (13) of the teaching staff provided written comments, and identified, in particular, high levels of respect and support for all in the school community. Most of the learning assistants and support staff responded to the questionnaire. They reported that they are aware of the school's safeguarding and child protection procedures, and almost all of them indicated that they had benefitted from recent professional development opportunities.

C. THE PROCESS OF INSPECTION

The ETI worked alongside St Patrick's 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 identify, celebrate and embed success; and
- grows and develops an inclusive community of learning.

2. SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

- St Patrick's Primary School's vision and values, founded in the Edmund Rice Schools Trust Charter, drive fully all aspects of the life and work of the school and inspire the children to **Dream, Believe, Achieve**.
- The recent priorities in the school development plan, informed by wide consultation, are highly strategic, wholly appropriate and have impacted positively on the development of the curriculum and the standards achieved by the children.
- Robust monitoring and evaluation processes are well established across the school. The scrutiny of a range of qualitative and quantitative data supports the identification of appropriate key priorities for school improvement; the implementation of which is supported by staged continuous professional learning.
- The children are kind, respectful and enthusiastic learners who are proud of their achievements and those of their friends; they love their school.
- A safe and nurturing learning environment has been created across the school which is underpinned by the positive relationships at all levels and the holistic approach to the promotion of the emotional health and well-being of the whole school community.

- The children enjoy writing; they write confidently, creatively and with purpose. Writing across the school is of a high standard.
- Digital technology is integrated effectively across the curriculum, with well-planned progression and inclusive practices that develop successfully the children's digital skills and creativity.
- A review of assessment for learning has begun recently and the approaches to marking and feedback have been agreed collectively. The school plans to develop further these approaches and to assess robustly the impact on the children's learning.
- All children are respected and valued by the staff in a spirit of inclusion. Effective interventions and strategies ensure that the children are well supported to overcome any barriers to learning and as a result they are ready to learn and are making good progress.
- All staff, teaching and non-teaching, are encouraged and supported through provision of a comprehensive and strategically planned programme of staff professional learning which includes, for example, the sharing of good practice days, team-teaching and the sharing of staff expertise.

Area for action as identified by the school:

- to develop further a whole school understanding of, and consistent approach to assessment for learning, to support and empower the children to improve their work.

3. MAIN REPORT

A. SETTING THE VISION

St Patrick's Primary School's motto: Dream, Believe, Achieve, emanates from the five key elements of the Edmund Rice Schools Trust Charter: 'Have courage; the good seed will grow up in the children's hearts later on'. The school vision and values place a relentless focus on the holistic development of the children through striving for a consistent, focused approach to teaching and learning, and a caring school community where children are encouraged to take responsibility for their own behaviour and learning. Working in partnership with parents and carers, the school nurtures a Christian spirituality where the children actively work for social justice and take on leadership roles. All of the staff stated in the online questionnaire that they feel they contribute well to achieving the vision.

The school is in the first year of a three-year school development plan (SDP) which was informed appropriately by robust self-evaluation of the previous interim one-year SDP, analysis of a range of data and consultations with the children, parents, staff and board of governors. The recent priorities for school improvement are highly strategic, wholly appropriate and have impacted positively on the development of the curriculum and the standards achieved by the children. There are well-established agreed whole-school processes for monitoring and evaluating all aspects of the curriculum.

The governors, who met with the inspectors, are committed to and very proud of the children and staff in the school. They have a skillset that brings balance and breadth of perspective to school development planning and the issues affecting the school. Through regular meetings, they are well informed about the work of the school and the progress the children are making.

B. IMPLEMENTING AND IMPROVING TO ACHIEVE THE VISION

Action plans are in place to guide the improvement work of the school across curricular and pastoral areas which focus and impact positively on the children's learning. Senior leaders gather first-hand evidence to measure the impact and progress of key priorities for development, work hard to foster a culture of openness and reflection and provide staff with opportunities to share effective practice across the school. The implementation of key priorities is supported by appropriately staged continuous professional learning.

The staff have worked hard to ensure a consistency of approach and rigor to planning and assessment of learning across all areas of the Northern Ireland Curriculum. They monitor and evaluate regularly the learning and teaching and use the extensive information obtained to establish key actions to ensure the children have access to appropriately challenging learning opportunities, and support when needed. Through this process the staff recognise the need to provide further opportunities for the children to engage in exploratory and investigative work. In addition, as part of the recent review of assessment and marking practices the staff have identified appropriately the need to now broaden the opportunities the children have to self- and peer-assess their work and have time to act on teachers' feedback to improve their work.

In the most effective lessons observed, the children engage well and are supported effectively to settle to their work. There is a clear focus on the promotion of subject-specific vocabulary, and the use of open-ended questions promotes successfully the development of the children's personal capabilities and thinking skills. The use of digital technology is integrated effectively across the curriculum and enhances the children's learning experiences. The planning supports well the progression of key digital skills, in particular, presenting, coding, and publishing. The children use confidently a range of digital devices, showing competent digital flexibility. The recent focus on digital art and design and managing data has extended the opportunities for the children to be creative and present data in a variety of forms. The school has identified appropriately the need to enhance provision in digital audio and storytelling, including film and animation, to broaden the children's experiences and skills in these areas.

A culture of keeping safe is evident across the school which is underpinned by the highly strategic, collegial and intentional promotion of the physical and emotional health and wellbeing of all. This is characterised, for example, through the attention that is given to embedding mindfulness practices across each key stage that support the development of the children's emotional awareness and resilience and equip them with practical skills to use at school and at home.

The children speak knowledgeably and confidently about the importance of engaging in physical activity and of following a healthy diet. The children across the school experience a progressive physical education (PE) programme across all areas of the PE curriculum. The wide range of enjoyable sporting and non-sporting extra-curricular activities support further the holistic development of the children and their ability to develop friendships, resilience and confidence.

C. BUILDING EQUITY

All children are respected and valued by the staff and a key focus for all staff is to ensure that each child is supported so that they are ready to learn. The staff have a clear understanding of how the social, emotional and wellbeing needs of children can impact on readiness to learn, and attitudinal assessments are used in Key Stage (KS) 1 and KS 2 to monitor and evaluate the children's attitudes to school and to learning.

The newcomer children are well supported to ensure their successful integration in the classes, with each child having a link learning assistant to support them in their acquisition of language and their learning. The children's progress is monitored closely using the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* through which individual targets are identified for each child. As a result, the children are all making progress and many of them are achieving well.

The children with SEN are well integrated into their classes. Technology is used very effectively to support these children, particularly in drafting and editing their writing. The staff use Individual Education Plans (IEP) to create targets for the children identified and their progress is monitored well. In the best practice, in most classes, the IEP targets are well considered and are refined or extended at each review stage. Some work has begun by the teachers to seek and record the views of the children and their parents on the children's interests and strengths; the school has identified appropriately the need to ensure that the views of the children and parents become an essential and integral part of the review process.

The school leaders have identified the need to improve levels of pupil attendance for a minority of the children. They work closely with the children whose attendance needs to improve and with their families to ensure there is support through the work of the Education Authority's education welfare officer and through the adjacent family hub. The attendance levels for most of these children have been improving. The school also highlights the importance of regular attendance by all children through the school's HERO (Here Everyday Ready Ontime) Award.

The children in the 'Sunshine Room' are well supported to manage their own behaviour and emotions, and be ready to learn. The staff successfully employ a range of strategies including the Theraplay* approach to build trusting relationships which extend beyond the children's time in the nurture room. The children who have reintegrated successfully into their base class can still access the nurture support when they need to.

D. DEFINING, CELEBRATING AND EMBEDDING SUCCESS

The children are enthusiastic, articulate and highly engaged in their learning; in discussions with inspectors, they were quick to list a wide range of curriculum areas and aspects of school that they enjoy. The children are kind and respectful, take turns, share resources and work cooperatively. Throughout the school, positive behaviour is promoted, and all staff have high expectations for the children's behaviour.

Writing across the school is of a high standard. From the foundation stage, the children see themselves as writers and write with confidence and purpose. As they progress through the school, they experiment with language and develop a good understanding of how to create mood and impact through their writing. By the end of KS 2, they can explain and use a range of stylistic devices such as similes, personification, rhetorical questions, and alliteration. While the children are practising cursive writing, this is not yet reflected consistently in their everyday written work across the curriculum.

Mathematics and numeracy standards throughout the school are effective. The children think flexibly, use correct mathematical language, justify reasons for using a particular operation, and can explain key concepts such as symmetry and the properties of 2D and 3D shapes. There is scope to enrich further the children's learning through a stronger emphasis on open-ended mathematical investigations to enable the children to explore ideas in greater depth, make and test predictions, and think creatively.

The children's digital competence is a notable strength. They use confidently a range of devices and apply appropriate technological vocabulary as they code, compose, create, and present content. The recent focus on digital art and design and managing data has extended the opportunities for the children to be creative and present data in a variety of forms.

The children's successes are celebrated consistently, both in class and through whole-school reward systems. In discussions with inspectors, the children talked positively about receiving awards in assembly for sharing, good behaviour, information and communication technology, and making good choices. There is a well-embedded culture of praise that encourages participation and perseverance.

The children's opinions are actively sought, valued and acted upon. A clear and purposeful rationale underpins the allocation of a wide range of children's leadership roles, including digital leaders, school council members, playground buddies and prefects. These roles are allocated with careful consideration of pastoral needs and strengths, contributing to the personal development of all the children. This approach builds the children's confidence and empowers them to take an active role in school life and develop leadership skills. The children clearly enjoy taking on the roles and as a result have a pride in themselves and what they have achieved.

E. GROWING A COMMUNITY OF LEARNING

St Patrick's Primary School is at the heart of its local community in North Belfast. The staff value immensely the meaningful partnerships that have been established, and continue to be fostered, with a wide range of partners, including parents and families, members of the local and wider community, the church, and a wide range of external agencies, businesses and organisations. Parents are supported and encouraged to participate fully in their child's learning and participation rates are very high at, for example, the 'Stay and Play'* days in foundation stage. Attendance is at capacity at the range of courses for parents hosted by the school which include: support on managing behaviour; leading healthy lifestyles; and guidance on parenting in a digital world. Partnerships with parents and with local post-primary schools, youth organisations and programmes, such as 'Reach Out*', support very effectively the year 6 and year 7 children to prepare for the next stage of their educational journey.

A vibrant community of learning now exists within the school which is underpinned by positive relationships and a culture of openness and trust. As a result of this, staff welcome the opportunity to learn from each other and are confident to share their own knowledge, learning and expertise during, for example, the sharing of good practice days.

The student council has actively participated, with two other primary schools, in debating and learning about social justice issues through the Edmund Rice Student Council Leadership Conference. The school raises funds and volunteers for a range of charities, including People's Kitchen*. A group of children, wanting to make a difference, petitioned Stormont on the issue of homelessness after developing awareness through their school project.

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. All of the children who responded to the questionnaire or spoke to inspectors indicated there are adults in school who they can talk to if they are worried.

4. GOING FORWARD

St Patrick's Primary School's vision '**The Seed will Grow**' is integral to and fully infused into all aspects of school life. The children are at the centre of decision-making within the school. The ETI, through the engagement of the district inspector, will continue to work with the school as it takes forward the area for action set out in this report and in sharing the example of highly effective practice from which others may learn. The aspect of practice which should be shared more widely is:

- the highly effective use of assistive technology which meets the diverse needs of the learners, including those with special educational needs and the newcomer children.

5. 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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Spirit of Catholic Education Award

The Spirit of Catholic Education Awards are presented annually in conjunction with Catholic Schools' Week to honour schools that demonstrate exceptional commitment to the values and ethos of Catholic education.

Eco Schools Green Flag

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

Investors in Mental Health Award

The Investors in Mental Health Award is an initiative developed by AWARE NI – the depression charity for Northern Ireland. The aim is to provide recognition to schools, businesses, organisations and community groups who are making a significant contribution to the promotion of positive mental health.

The RHS School Gardening Award

The RHS School Gardening Awards support pupil wellbeing in the following ways:

- Improved physical wellbeing through increased activity and encouraging healthy eating
- Improved emotional wellbeing through an increased connection with nature
- Building life skills such as teamwork, resilience and confidence

Families First

Families First is an events company that organises awards shows including Northern Ireland Primary Education Awards. Nominations are sought from families.

Digital Schools ICT Excellence Northern Ireland Award

The Digital Schools Awards Northern Ireland is a national awards programme which promotes, recognises and encourages best practice use of digital technology in primary schools.

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Common European Framework of Reference for Languages

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) is an international standard that describes language proficiency levels. It defines six levels of proficiency, from A1 (beginner) to C2 (proficient user), providing a common basis for understanding language ability.

Theraplay

Theraplay is a structured form of play therapy supporting adults and children to feel more connected. The aim is to enhance attachment, self-esteem and trust in others.

Stay and Play

An opportunity to connect with other parents/carers in a safe and happy environment for your child to play.

Reach Out

Reach Out are a counselling service to support your journey from trauma to recovery.

People's Kitchen

People's Kitchen support homeless and vulnerable people and help fight hunger and loneliness for locals in need.

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