

Sustaining Improvement Inspection of Down High School, Downpatrick (441-0085)

In the last inspection held in October 2012, Down High School was evaluated overall as very good. A Sustaining Improvement Inspection (SII) was conducted on 10 March 2016. The purpose of the SII was to evaluate the extent to which the school was capable of demonstrating that it had sustained its capacity to effect improvement through self-evaluation and effective school development planning. The school was asked to select from the current priorities in the school development plan (SDP) two key areas to demonstrate to the ETI the effectiveness of the school's actions to continued improvement.

The two key areas identified by the school for the inspection were:

- to improve academic outcomes, particularly with regard to lower achieving GCSE pupils, through the dissemination of the most effective practice in learning and teaching, with a particular emphasis on developing a collegial culture of self-evaluation; and
- to develop the school's capacity to use Information and Communication Technology (ICT) to enhance learning, including a focus on pupils' programming skills, in response to a regional employability deficit.

Key findings

In the first key area, the school's analysis of data on examination performance demonstrates a clear upward trend in the pupils' attainments at GCSE level. Since the last inspection, the percentage of pupils attaining seven or more GCSEs or equivalent at grades A* to C, including English and mathematics, has risen steadily from 94.7% to 97.7%. There is an effective use of data across the school to determine the pupils' progress in their learning, the outcomes achieved and to identify those pupils who require intervention and support.

The school has made good progress in monitoring the effectiveness of learning and teaching, providing effective feedback to middle leaders and staff, and on the dissemination of the good practice identified. All of the lessons observed during the inspection were effective, with a majority of them being very effective (very good or outstanding). The very effective practice was characterised by clear learning intentions, relevant and real life contexts to actively engage the pupils in their learning and the effective integration of ICT to develop their knowledge and understanding, and broaden their learning experiences.

A robust culture of self-evaluation has been established across the school, underpinned by careful analysis and use of data, monitoring of the effectiveness of learning and teaching and opportunities for pupils to discuss and evaluate their progress at designated school improvement days. Good collaborative working between the academic and pastoral staff ensures that those pupils at risk of underachieving are identified and supported to progress in their learning. Appropriately, the school have identified that further improvement on the outcomes attained by the post-16 pupils is required and, importantly, this is an identified target within the current school development plan.

With regard to the second key area, a well thought out strategic approach to the use of ICT to enhance the pupils' learning is being implemented. The evidence is clear that the pupils are using ICT confidently and competently to extend their learning; they use well and value, for example, the school's evolving virtual learning environment. Through an effective use of ICT, the pupils are provided with learning opportunities which support their acquisition and application of higher level skills and to promote positive dispositions towards their learning. Appropriate emphasis has been given to developing the expertise of staff to more effectively plan for and integrate the use of ICT to enhance learning. Subject teachers have adapted

their schemes of work to identify where ICT is being incorporated within the planning to support the pupils' learning. In addition, the school has invested in resourcing to support the development work in ICT through the use of contemporary technology. The school has developed the curriculum for ICT, across the key stages, to good effect through the introduction of appropriate and coherent provision which is aligned well to current labour market information.

Conclusion

Down High School continues to demonstrate a high level of capacity¹ for sustained self-improvement in the interests of the pupils. The ETI will continue to monitor how the school sustains improvement.

¹ From September 2015, the overall effectiveness of a school previously evaluated as outstanding/very good/good will now be evaluated as having high capacity for sustained improvement/capacity for sustained improvement