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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

**Thornhill College
Derry**

Inspected: March 2009

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 CONTEXT

Thornhill College is situated on the Culmore Road on the outskirts of the City of Derry and draws its pupils from a wide area as well as from the city itself. Over the past three years, the enrolment has declined slightly. Over the same period, almost 100% of the year 8 pupils obtained grades A or B in the Transfer Procedure. Almost 19% of the pupils are entitled to free school meals.

1.2 FOCUS

The inspection focused on learning and teaching, and leadership and management at all levels across the school, and in addition specialist provision in English, science and mathematics. The inspection also evaluated the school's provision for pastoral care, including child protection. A summary of the main findings for the subjects under focus is shown in Appendix 1.

In June 2008, the school was selected to take part in the Specialist Schools' Project beginning in September 2008. The project aims to develop the concept of specialist schools tailored to meet the particular needs of Northern Ireland's education system. As part of the inspection, the school's provision for their specialist status in mathematics and physics was evaluated.

1.3 THE VIEWS OF THE PARENTS, GOVERNORS, PUPILS AND TEACHERS

The arrangements for the inspection of pastoral care and child protection included the completion of questionnaires by a sample of parents, as well as meetings with the board of Governors (governors) and with groups of pupils from years 8, 12, 13 and 14. Prior to the inspection, 280 questionnaires were sent to a sample of the parents of the pupils attending the school; 120 (42%) of the parents responded, and 55 of these provided additional written comments. The responses from the questionnaires, and the comments from the parents indicated, in the majority of cases, strong satisfaction with the work of the school. In particular, the parents mentioned the good standards of education the pupils receive and the quality of pastoral care.

The governors expressed their strong support for the work of the school, they indicated the significant role they play in the life of the school, and the procedures which are in place to keep them well informed about all aspects of school life.

Almost half of the teachers and a small number of the support staff completed a confidential questionnaire. Overall the majority of the teachers and support staff who completed the questionnaire expressed their satisfaction with all aspects of the work of the school. A minority of those teachers who responded expressed their concern about the need for better communication between senior managers and staff.

In discussions, the pupils talked enthusiastically about the comprehensive year 8 induction programme and the excellent support and guidance provided by their teachers whom they found to be approachable and caring. The pupils report that they are aware of what to do if they have any concerns about their personal safety and well-being.

The Education and Training Inspectorate (the Inspectorate) has reported to the Principal, and a representative of the governors, the few areas of concern emerging from the questionnaires and the discussions.

2. THE QUALITY OF THE PUPILS' WORK

2.1 ACHIEVEMENTS AND STANDARDS

The pupils respond positively to the high expectations of their teachers and, when given the opportunity, demonstrate very good levels of independent learning. The school offers a comprehensive range of subjects at both General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) and General Certificate of Education (GCE) Advanced (A) level and is currently broadening its provision with the addition of a number of applied and vocational subjects in collaboration with other organisations.

The standard achieved by the pupils in GCSE examinations is well above the average for similar Northern Ireland (NI) selective schools. In 2008, almost all pupils achieved GCSE grades A*-C in at least seven subjects, including English and mathematics. The GCSE results at grades A*-B have shown a steady improvement over recent years; almost all are within or above five percentage points of the NI average. A significant minority are more than five percentage points above the respective NI averages.

Over the last three years, the percentage of pupils achieving three or more GCE A Level grades A-C has shown clear improvement and the achievement for 2008 is just above the NI average for similar selective schools. Most subjects are within or above five percentage points of the NI average. The senior leadership team has recognised the need for improvement in a minority of subjects and appropriate strategies for further improvement have been identified and are being implemented.

More details about the subjects under focus are given in Appendix 1.

2.2 THE QUALITY OF TEACHING AND LEARNING

The quality of most of the teaching observed ranged from good to very good; a minority was satisfactory; and a small number of lessons were outstanding.

In the most effective practice, the lessons were characterised by:

- teachers identifying and sharing the learning intentions at the start of the lessons;
- teachers making good use of information and communication technology in the teaching and learning;
- teachers using questioning effectively to promote and develop the pupils' thinking skills;

- the good start made to connecting learning in one subject with that in other subjects; and
- the well-planned lessons to incorporate a range of challenging and relevant learning opportunities which engaged the pupils throughout the whole session.

In the less effective practice pupils were not given sufficient opportunities to engage with and actively contribute to the learning process.

2.3 PASTORAL CARE

The quality of the arrangements for pastoral care in the school is outstanding. This is evidenced by:

- the well conceived links between pastoral care and the management and leadership of learning which is central to the highly supportive, caring ethos of the school;
- the very good use made of all aspects of pastoral care in informing and supporting target-setting by pupils in collaboration with their teachers, which is contributing to school improvement and to the raising of pupil achievement; and
- the excellent leadership provided by the Vice-principal for pastoral care; and the very good quality of relationships throughout the school.

2.4 CHILD PROTECTION

The school has very good comprehensive arrangements in place for safeguarding pupils which reflect the guidance issued by the Department of Education.

2.5 PROVISION FOR PUPILS IDENTIFIED AS NEEDING ADDITIONAL SUPPORT FOR THEIR LEARNING

The school provides very well for the small number of pupils who need additional support with their learning. The special educational needs co-ordinator works very effectively with the individual class teachers, parents and other agencies in providing the necessary support for those pupils who need additional support with their learning.

3. MANAGEMENT ARRANGEMENTS

The Principal has been in post since January 2002 and during that time she has demonstrated very good leadership skills identifying and sharing with staff a clear vision for the future work of the school. A clear distributive leadership structure has been established to lead and manage further development within the school.

The culture of self-evaluation is well-established in most areas throughout the school. Excellent use is made of the analysis of internal and external data. The work of the Vice-principal, Heads of Junior, Middle and Senior School is rigorous and systematic,

providing clear evaluation and identifying further action to be taken in all aspects of learning. This effective strategic way of working needs to be developed in other priority areas, for example, to disseminate the good planning and teaching which exists in many departments and areas of the school.

The school has given good attention to, and is working systematically towards meeting fully the School Development Planning Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2005.

4. SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS

The main strengths of the school include:

- the quality of teaching, most of which is good or very good;
- the outstanding quality of the leadership and provision for pastoral care within the school;
- the excellent behaviour of the pupils;
- the rigorous monitoring of the pupils' progress which has improved teaching and learning;
- the very good leadership provided by the Principal; and
- the hard-working and committed teachers.

In the areas inspected, the quality of education provided by this school is very good. The school is meeting very effectively the educational and pastoral needs of the learners and has demonstrated its capacity for sustained self-improvement.

Mathematics

The school has identified appropriate and measurable targets for improvement to demonstrate:

- that mathematics is an area of clear curricular strength, which has rising levels of attainment at Key Stage 3, GCSE and GCSE Additional levels;
- how the strengths in mathematics have the potential to promote quality teaching and learning and whole-school improvement;
- how they will use mathematics to develop existing links with other schools, higher education and the wider community, including business and industry;
- viable financial planning to allocate funding;

The strengths of the provision for mathematics also include:

- the quality of teaching, most of which ranges from good to very good;
- the good range of curricular and extra-curricular opportunities for the pupils to engage enthusiastically in their learning;
- the good progress in developing target-setting, monitoring progress and tracking the performance of KS3 and KS4 pupils to promote improvement; and
- the good leadership provided by the Head of Department supported ably by the Head of Junior mathematics and the members of the Department.

For the purpose of showing improvement more consistently the school has reviewed appropriately the targets set for GCE A level mathematics and it needs to bring about improvement at this level. The Inspectorate will continue to monitor the work of the school as part of the Specialist Schools' Project.

Physics

The school has identified appropriate and measurable targets for improvement to demonstrate:

- that physics is an area of clear curricular strength, which has rising levels of attainment at all levels;
- how the strengths in physics have the potential to promote high quality teaching and learning and whole-school improvement;
- how they will use physics to develop existing links with other schools, higher education and the wider community, including business and industry;

- viable financial planning to allocate funding;
- the quality of teaching of physics, most of which ranges from good to very good;
- the outstanding range of curricular and extra-curricular opportunities that enable the pupils to engage enthusiastically in their learning; and
- the excellent progress in developing target-setting, monitoring progress and tracking the performance of the pupils to promote improvement.

Science

The strengths of the work in science, more widely, also include:

- the displays of pupils' project work and competition entries in the science department that create an ethos which portrays science as an exciting activity, related to everyday life;
- the effective strategies used to increase the pupils' engagement with science;
- the high quality of the learning and teaching in science lessons and the good standards attained by the pupils in public examinations;
- the excellent leadership within all areas of the science department and the strong sense of collegiality amongst the science teachers and the technical staff;
- the effective strategies used to promote the pupils' interest in science, including the broad post-16 science curriculum which meets the needs of a wide range of pupils;
- the arrangements in place to monitor and evaluate the pupils' learning, including the progress made in embedding the process of self-evaluation as an aid to effective learning; and
- the use of a range of data to promote improvement in the pupils' performance in science.

The Inspectorate will continue to monitor the work of the school as part of the Specialist Schools' Project.

English

Strengths of the work observed include:

- the teaching most of which is good or better;
- the improvement in standards in public examinations over the past three years;

- the range of remedial action being taken with girls in year 12 to raise standards in examination performance;
- the good start made to implementing the NI Curriculum and reviewing the schemes of work regularly;
- the very good working relationships established in every class; and
- the department's self-evaluation which, in the main, identifies appropriate areas for development.

Areas for improvement include:

- the need to establish and implement strategies to improve standards at GCE A Level; and
- the monitoring and evaluation of such strategies.

ACCOMMODATION

- School is short of science accommodation; an additional science laboratory is required.

STATISTICAL INFORMATION

- 1.1 i. School: Thornhill College
 ii. School Reference Number: 242-0052
 iii. Age Range: 11-18
 iv. Status: Voluntary Grammar
 v. Date of Inspection: W/C 09/03/2009
 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	207	201	202	202	201
Total enrolment	1,422	1,425	1,410	1,402	1,388

1.3 Attendance

Year 2007/08	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	Average 2007/08	NI Average 2006/07
% Attendance	97.3	95.2	95.2	94.4	96.3	95	92.4	95	95

- 1.4 i. Total Number of Teachers: iii. Contact ratio (percentage of timetabled time in direct class contact):
- ii. PTR (Pupil/Teacher Ratio):

Year 2008/09	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	TOTAL
Enrolment: Boys	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Enrolment: Girls	201	201	198	199	202	200	187	1,388
Enrolment: Total	201	201	198	199	202	200	187	1,388
PTR	17.1	17.1	17.4	15.17	15.2	12.7	12.4	

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

Year 13	1.0	NI Av Year 13	91.7
Year 14	93.6	NI Av Year 14	83.7

1.6 Leavers Destinations

2006/07	Year 12	NI%	Year 13/14	NI%
Total Number of Leavers	10		212	
Another School	50%	22.6	1%	1.3
Employment	0%	5	3%	5.1
Full-time Further Education	50%	54.4	8%	8.4
Full-time Higher Education	N/A	N/A	87%	81.7
Full-time Training	0%	11.7	0%	1.2
Seeking Employment/Unemployed	0%	1.9	0%	0.9
Unknown/Long Term Sick/Pregnant	0%	4.5	0%	1.3

1.7 NAME OF SCHOOL: Thornhill College, Derry

SCHOOL YEAR: 2008/2009

GCSE	2006	2007	2008
Percentage of Year 12 taking GCSE in at least 5 subjects	100	100	100
Percentage of Year 12 obtaining Grades C or above in at least 7 subjects	98.2	98	99.49
Percentage of Year 12 obtaining Grades C or above in at least 5 subjects	99.5	100	100
GCE A2 Level or equivalent	2006	2007	2008
Percentage of Year 14 obtaining Grades C or above in at least 3 A2 levels	73	71.81	76.92
Percentage of Year 14 obtaining Grades E or above in at least 3 A2 levels	92.8	91.49	96.7

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*-B	Business Studies Home Economics Child Development Latin Sport/PE Studies	Biology Double Award Science 1 st Subject Geography Information Technology Irish Physics Religious Studies	Chemistry Chinese* Drama English English Literature French German* History Mathematics Music Spanish		Additional Mathematics Art and Design Single Award Science
GCE A level	German** Information Technology Psychology Sport/PE Studies**	Chemistry Geography Irish Media Film and TV Studies** Physics Politics	Art and Design** Biology Business Studies Drama English Literature French History Music** Religious Studies Statistics	Home Economics** Spanish	Mathematics Sociology

* Denotes subjects which had a total entry of less than 30 pupils over 3 years.

** Denotes subjects which had a total entry of less than 20 pupils over 3 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*-C	Art & Design Biology Chemistry Chinese Drama English English Literature History Home Economics Home Economics Child Devt Information Technology Irish Mathematics Music Statistics	Business Studies French Geography German Latin Mathematics Additional Physics Religious Studies Science Double Award 1 st Subject Science Single Award Spanish Sport/PE Studies		Science Astronomy	
GCE A level	Ancient History	Art & Design Business Studies Chemistry Drama English Literature French Geography German History Irish Mathematics Media Film and TV Studies Music Politics Religious Studies Spanish	Biology Design and Technology Design and Technology Home Economics Information Technology Physics Sociology Sport/PE Studies	Statistics	Psychology

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