**Northern Ireland Council for IntegratedEducation – NICIE**

**Excellence in IntegratedEducation Award**

**School: Strangford College, Carrowdore, Newtownards, Co Down**

**Assessors: Patricia Murtagh, Gary McFadden, NICIE Professional Associates.**

**December 2021**

**Introduction**

Strangford College opened in September 1997 guided by NICIE, following an initiative in 1996 by parents supported by All Children Together (ACT) to set up an Integratedpost primary school in the North Down and Ards area. Strangford was awarded grant-maintained status by the Department of Education in September 1999**.** The College is situated in the village of Carrowdore with plans currently at an advanced stage for a new building on the current site. The College is led by its Principal Mrs. Clare Foster.

Strangford College caters for students aged 11-18 with a current enrolment of 836. Of its current student population 27.27% are entitled to Free School Meals and 14% are at Stages 1-5 on the Special Educational Needs register.

**Assessment Process**

The College was well prepared for the assessment for the Excellence in IntegratedEducation Award with the assistance of Mary Potter, NICIE. The Principal and the leadership team were fully committed to the process. Extremely helpful written and video material was provided as evidence. Whole staff time was set aside to focus on the life of the College ethos and the key areas relevant to the award.

The assessors visited the College on December 6th 2021 and had a two-hour meeting with Mrs. Clare Foster, Principal, Dr Aidan Lennon, Vice Principal, Mrs. Leah McBride Vice Principal and Mrs. Jane Flaherty Senior Leader, Ethos and Inclusion. The meeting allowed time for discussion and questions and written material was submitted to support the application.

A second meeting by Zoom took place on December 14th 2021. Pre-prepared video material was viewed by the assessors followed by time for questions based on the written and video evidence submitted. This meeting was attended by all the participants in the first meeting. In addition, the meeting was attended by Mrs. Nadine Dorrian, Assistant Vice Principal, Head of Pastoral Care, and Kellie Armstrong, MLA, Governor and parent. Mr. Karl Beare facilitated the ICT element of the meeting for the College. The videos and discussion that followed were exceptionally helpful given that Covid restrictions limited the direct contact that the assessors could realistically have directly in the College.

The impression the assessors gained through the process was of an open, friendly, professionally and enthusiastically led Integratedschool, confident in its ethos and eager to share a full range of the aspects of its life with us. Questions that were asked were answered with an impressive amount of detail. The evidence pointed to strong, healthy relationships between students, staff, parents and governors.

**Equality**

The leadership, management, governance, ethos and teaching and learning of the College fulfils the principle of equality required for the Award.

The College works hard to ensure a balanced school population that is in line with the NICIE statement of Principles. The local demographics are a challenge in this regard as only 13% of the population identify as Catholic. In this context, it is a testament to the efforts of the College that the current student population is 20.57% Catholic, 43.42% Protestant and 36% Other. The College works hard to develop its links with partner Primary schools and is aware of its need to attract students from the Catholic community through personal contact and events such as the Primary Principals’ Lunch which it hosts annually. Currently the teaching staff is 23% Catholic, 51% Protestant and 26% Other. The Board of Governors is 36% Catholic, 28% Protestant and 36% Other. The Non-Teaching Staff, drawn from the immediate local area, is overwhelming Protestant. It is notable that the College is a welcoming, well-respected part of the community, highly valued by the local population for the diversity that its ethos brings to the village. The College makes a full effort to recruit strategically to help ensure a balance in applications. Advertisements are placed in NICIE, Education Authority and the Job Finder websites.

Strangford College progresses the maintenance and development of its Integratedethos. The Vice Principal, Dr Aidan Lennon, oversees the induction of new staff. Directed time sessions are set aside for this purpose, resources for which are accessible on the One Drive. Work is done with a focus on the staff booklet, the College’s Mission Statement, its credo “Inspire, Achieve, Excel”; NICIE’s Statement of Principles and the College Values – ‘High Expectations, Inclusivity, Integrity, Kindness, Resilience, Respect and Trust’. Key College policies such as the ‘Behaviour for Learning Policy’ are also worked through with new staff.In addition to the care taken with induction, the College pays ongoing attention to the development of its Integrated ethos in all areas of school life and has used preparation for this award as a useful tool. NICIE’s Anti-Bias workshops and on-line training on Autism are examples of work in this regard. Most recently in August 2021 a session on Talking About Differences took place using the film by Paddy Kielty as a focus for thought and discussion.

The College is a Rights Respecting School - Silver Award. Its aim is to work towards achieving the Gold Award. This award is both a further recognition of the importance of the principle of equality inherent in its practice and an incentive to develop this principle further.

The College is aware of the importance of Mental Health and Well Being for staff and students. Recently a staff post for ‘Well Being’ has been created and a policy ratified.

The school curriculum of the College is structured with the aim of providing equal access and opportunity for all its students to achieve their full potential. Strangford admits a proportion of students (35%) using in the main current selection tests. The remainder are admitted without reference to academic criteria. In addition, the school administers base line tests to its students as part of the induction process. This process enables the College to achieve and maintain a full all-ability student population. In Key Stage 3 the students admitted through academic selection are taught discretely, with the rest of the students in all ability classes. There is fluid movement between the two cohorts with care taken to ensure that this is handled sensitively and that it is appropriate to the needs of the student. The College maintains a full range of subject choices in Key Stages 3, 4 and 5 which cater for the interests and strengths of its students. The College has been successful in retaining a high proportion of its students for an impressive variety of subjects in Years 13 and 14.

Issues which may be divisive, sensitive or culturally controversial are dealt with as they arise or as part of the curriculum across the subject areas. Exemplars were given as evidence from a range of departments and included ‘Black Lives Matter’ events. It was impressive to note that staff were proactive and creative in this regard.

College structures support its aim of ensuring that students are treated equally and are given every opportunity to thrive. Care is taken to provide induction programmes for students at the beginning of Years 8 and 13 and students transitioning from Year 10 at the beginning of Key Stage 4. The College’s Learning Cycle is in place for all students to aid their progress. Parents have digital access to the academic aspects and other areas of their children’s progress e.g., behaviour and rewards received. Input has been developed to stretch the more able student through specific teaching strategies. English as an Additional Language (EAL) support is provided for students as required. Learning Support is coordinated across the departments and with the requisite outside agencies. Currently 120 students are on the Special Educational Needs Register across Stages 1-5. The College currently has 35 Learning Support Assistants.

The College, recognising the particular needs of some boys, runs a mentoring programme to assist them as they engage with their education. A link has also been established with QUB, focused on students who do not have a family history of attending university. It operates under the strap line of ‘most able, least likely’ and uses connection to QUB’s facilities, especially sporting facilities as a ‘hook’ to help encourage those students to fulfil their potential.

Strangford College regularly runs a programme of extra-curricular activities which caters for a range of interests for the students. Sessions take place in a variety of sports and other activities.

The students are supported pastorally through Year Heads and Form Tutor teams. All staff have pastoral responsibilities for the social, moral, academic, and spiritual development of the students in their care. Teachers in their role as Form Teachers take specific pastoral responsibility for their Form Class.

Additional support for the students is provided by the Chaplaincy Team and Young Life International.

The College’s Safeguarding Team is led by Mrs. G Gibson, Designated Teacher and is comprised of 5 other members of staff who serve as Deputy Designated Teachers. Posters are displayed identifying the team for students and staff. Staff and students are aware of how they should respond to safeguarding issues.

The College has a Students’ Council with representatives from each class which meets every six weeks. Students are encouraged to take leadership roles and express their views and ideas and those of the classes they represent. They also give input into school policies and procedures. The Principal often attends these meetings. Additionally, the Principal meets every three weeks with the Head Boy/Head Girl team.

A notable feature in the College is the team of Anti-Bullying Ambassadors who are a visible presence, particularly at break and lunch time in their distinctive ‘blue hoodies’. In addition, they run a weekly ‘drop in’ supported by two members of staff. They are trained by staff in the College’s Anti-Bullying Policy and play a leading role in the annual Anti-Bullying Week events. They give reports to the Board of Governors and take part in the Northern Ireland Ambassadors meeting in Stormont each year.

The College has a Gay Straight Alliance (GSA) Group which runs a weekly drop in.

The Board of Governors are an integral, vital part of the life of Strangford College. As part of the assessment, we had access to Mrs. K. Armstrong, MLA, who spoke enthusiastically about the College and the role of the Governors therein. The College has 14 governors chaired by Mr. R. Murray OBE. They meet monthly, alternately as a full board or by sub-committee. The Principal attends monthly. Other members of staff and students attend by arrangement to give reports and discuss issues. It was clear that the governors fully support the life of the school. There remained a clear impression of a group of governors that both encourages and holds the Principal and staff to account where appropriate.

Strangford College focuses on its core message, values and achievements in promoting its profile with it parents and the wider community. The College maintains an informative website and has a presence on Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram and Pinterest. Additionally, it communicates with parents via billboard, newsletters and through its prospectus. Material is produced for local newspapers. In all this, proper attention is given to GDPR regulations.

**Faith and Values**

The school website describes the history of Strangford College and highlights the importance of the Integrated ethos in the day-to-day student experience. The mission statement is welcoming of all “students of different abilities, religions and cultural backgrounds” and denotes that they will be “educated together in a caring, trusting and inclusive community”. The college values are clearly featured and focus on both achievement and inclusivity. The logo on the school crest is “Under the sign we are strong” and reflects the unity of purpose of the whole school community.

All staff participate in professional and personal development opportunities. Effective use has been made of NICIE ‘Anti Bias’ training for example which challenges underlying bias and identifies how this impacts our daily life. The Vice Principal is responsible for induction training for new staff which involves development of their understanding of the Integrated ethos as well as strong pastoral support where necessary. It is notable that regular staff training days each year are given to revisit the Integrated ethos.

Strangford College has a clear Christian ethos which is enriched by the religious diversity of the community. The school foyer for example has an Advent candle display and the school chaplain has recorded short videos for the school Facebook to explain the symbolism of the lighting of each candle in preparation for Christmas. Alongside this is a Jesse tree with its ornaments providing imagery which can be further discussed and explained. Opportunities to develop a further understanding of other faiths and none have been developed, for example through participation in Humanism training led by NICIE and in students sharing their faith and values with peers.

College assemblies are led by staff and students around key themes and festivals including Ash Wednesday. Several of these themes come from the Values Calendar for example and from ‘Rights Respecting Schools’ work. All are welcome to share their beliefs, as are public representatives from a range of faith backgrounds. Students are encouraged to participate, and all are invited to pray or reflect as they are most comfortable.

Information sent home, the school website and an active social media presence keep parents and the wider community informed about the values of the school and the daily activities which reflect the Integrated ethos where possible. Testimony from a parent who is also a governor describes the rich and vibrant school community in which students are inspired to have “an open and honest curiosity about the religious beliefs and values of others.” She reflected on the effect of this ethos at governor level and how under the strong committed chair the school has been led through difficult times.

Religious Education has recently been re-named Religious Studies (RS) to reflect the planned programme of study which explores other religions and beliefs. In recent years, the opportunity to take Open College Network (OCN) in this subject has offered engagement with a wider perspective of religions which ensures a rich discussion. As part of a Shared Education project Strangford’s partner school St Columba’s has followed this path also.

At Key Stage 3 students follow modules on Judaism, Hinduism and Islam. Educational visits have been made to local faith centres on a church trail. Students are all encouraged to share their beliefs and ‘everyone has a voice’. The RS curriculum is shared with parents on the school website where religion is described as “a force for unity and positive relationships rather than barriers.”

Theschool Chaplaincy team is active in Strangford College and is made up of a Roman Catholic representative, a Church of Ireland (COI) minister and a Young Life outreach worker who spends time with the young people at break and lunch building relationships and giving guidance and support. The COI minister is also a school governor and participates fully in the life of the College.

A strong caring ethos is dominant throughout the college led by the work of the pastoral team. A popular example of their inclusive approach is the success of the Gay Straight Alliance group which meets regularly, supported by staff and informed by working with Cara Friends. A safe environment has been created in Strangford College for all students to express their views and feelings in the knowledge that they will be accepted and nurtured.

It was notable that there is a robust pastoral team accessible to staff and students alike which has an ever-open door policy to deal with issues students and staff may have themselves or equally concerns they may have for others. An email system has been set up to ensure that there is an open pathway of communication. The pastoral head will follow up any queries or concerns raised through this medium.

**Parental Involvement**

In common with most Integrated schools, parents were integral to the establishment of Strangford College and remain fully represented on the Board of Governors where six members have parental connections to the College. Full reference to balance is followed regarding their appointment.

Prospective parents are made formally aware of the Integrated balance of the College through the admission criteria, information given on the College’s website and on Open days. The criteria and ethos of the College are also made explicit during parental induction.

The College has a Parents’ Council in which every parent in the school is encouraged to be active. A smaller core group of seven, representative of a full range of year groups and chaired by Mr. Scott Craig, meets monthly on the same evening as Board of Governors meetings. Ms. Aurora Cachorro is the staff link to the Council. The Principal also attends periodically. Parents’ Council assist with fund raising and are active in organising events such as the Hallowe’en Disco, Quiz Night and the Christmas Fair. Reflectors for school bags were provided by the Parents’ Council to augment students’ safety on dark nights. Parents’ Council are encouraged to raise issue with the College. Most recently discussions have taken place regarding buses and the school’s toilets. Parents are consulted regularly by the College regarding school policies. For example, they participated in discussions resulting in proposals to make school uniform gender neutral.

In addition, the school organises focus groups for parents and hosts Parents’ Meetings for each year group annually. The College encourages parents to be involved in their children’s learning through e.g., a Learnspark Parent Session organised by Mrs. Leah McBride. On-going day to day information is available to parents digitally via the dashboard app. Parent meetings specific to a student’s needs are organised as required. The College provides interpreters for non-English speaking parents.

**Social Responsibility**

Strangford College shares its ‘curriculum map’ with parents and the school community on its website. The information accessible there outlines the range of subjects available to students and draws out the school’s commitment to social responsibility with an emphasis on diversity and well-being. The exploration of world faiths is an important part of Religious Studies and there is a senior leader responsible for ethos. There is evidence of a global and local perspective in several subjects including Art and Music.

There is a strong commitment to ensuring each student reaches their full potential in every area of their academic and vocational life. The College uses a bilateral entrance procedure, and this ensures a diverse student body in the school. A blended approach to examination choice works effectively. It is important to leadership that “no young person ever feels second best.” There is provision to support those with English as an additional language (EAL) and there is consistent review of student progress to put support in place where necessary. There is a ‘Study Hall’ facility in which there is a combination of pastoral and educational support for certain students identified by their teachers.

It was apparent that there is a real investment in the students’ well-being and the College employs a counsellor who is accessible to all. There are several programmes which develop the young person as an individual, enhancing their social skills, decision-making processes and self-awareness. A useful example of this is the ‘Made for More’ programme for Year 8 students which aims to develop identity and confidence, recognizing that “everyone matters: everyone’s life has value.” Connections have been made with various organisations including PSNI, churches, local foodbanks, and through Shared Education with local schools.

The leadership team of Strangford College is clear in its message to the staff, students and the parent body. This is that all will achieve to a high level not just in their academic or vocational outcomes but also as young citizens ready to play their part in society. Opportunities to develop leadership qualities in the young people are apparent through School Council, GSA leaders and Anti Bullying ambassadors. Staff can work through ‘Pathways to Leadership’ programmes with support from senior colleagues. They can also be co-opted on to the senior leadership team to be part of whole school decision making. Strategic planning for the college is also informed by consultation and recognition of student voice.

Parents are kept informed about the ethos and policies of the school from the open days and staff are readily available to parents to discuss any issues. There is an emphasis on developing a social conscience amongst students and several charity events occur over the school year at both a local and global level. The Covid pandemic has raised awareness of challenging situations for families in the school community where extra support is needed also. A trained member of staff can signpost parents on to appropriate support services. The school is an important part of the local community and is a significant employer in the village. The community currently uses the College facilities but notably this will be further developed when the new build is complete. The facilities will be ‘state of the art’ and plans for community access are included in the architect’s plans even at this stage.

The school reaches out in many ways to share the Integrated ethos with others. The Principal is Chair of the Association of Principals in Integrated Schools (APTIS). Shared Education projects have allowed both students and staff to work with others and to develop a deeper understanding of each other. An example of this is the Gaelic games project the ‘Chu Chulainn’ initiative which linked the College with two other local schools through sport. There is a principals’ lunch held annually, to which a large number of primary school principals from the school’s catchment are invited. This is an important event in which the Principal describes and demonstrates clearly what it means to be an Integrated school and how new students are welcomed and supported through transition. Taster days are arranged for many of the local primary schools. Strangford College is heavily oversubscribed and is highly regarded in the North Down area.

The school has a Pastoral Care policy in place. A Pastoral head works conscientiously to develop and support the student and staff body through an open-door approach. There has been a recent appointment of a ‘Mental Health and Wellbeing Coordinator’ who is currently reviewing policy and procedure in this area. The Principal is accessible to the school community and beyond. She is visible in the school and an integral part of daily school life.

School discipline is good, and the approach described in the “Behaviour for Learning Policy” is centred around positive encouragement and reward. Positive attitudes are promoted through clear expectations and high aspirations. The aim is to develop a “high degree of self-respect and mutual respect.” Although there are clear sanctions laid out there is an emphasis placed on the student’s responsibility for self with an aim to nurture citizenship and care for others.

 The school had a calm and orderly atmosphere during the visit and the students who contributed to the video presentation were articulate and clearly very committed to the values of Strangford College. They feel they have a voice and have recently, with the support of governors, clarified the uniform policy to ensure that girls can wear trousers if that is their choice. The various student associations bring ideas and suggestions for consideration to leadership level. There is a real sense of commitment to the development of caring and competent young people who will work to benefit their community.

An ethos of equality and fairness is experienced and promoted and testimonies from the pupils in film footage evidenced their passion to be recognised and celebrated for who they are. The GSA is a good example of the complete acceptance of all students and the clear motivation of staff to give each student a safe place to be themselves. Children with additional needs and those with disabilities are an integral part of the rich diversity in Strangford College.

The College has worked towards several awards including the Diana Award and Rights Respecting School Award. They currently have the silver award in RRS and are progressing to attain the Gold. This is a useful example of a whole school approach to highlight respect for human rights and for the rights of all individuals.

**Opportunities for Development**

* Continue to monitor and improve the religious balance in staff and students.
* Manage and develop the new College building and site.
* With reference to above, develop a coherent programme of community outreach and use of College premises.
* Enhance and develop connections to the Catholic Church with a plan in place for sacramental preparation as required for Strangford students.

**Summary**

A thoughtful and comprehensive approach to integration is infused through school policy and practice and is evident in the daily life of the school. A clear understanding and commitment to the school ethos was evident in conversations with the Principal and key staff at Strangford. This was further enhanced and enriched in the supporting video about school life which featured staff, students and governors. A positive shared ethos and practice is well-established, giving the College a powerful sense of common purpose.

We want to thank the Principal, the students, staff, governors and parents of Strangford College for the work they are doing. We wish them well for the future

**IT IS RECOMMENDED THAT STRANGFORD COLLEGE BE AWARDED THE EXCELLENCE IN INTEGRATEDEDUCATION AWARD**

**Assessors**

**Gary McFadden and Patricia Murtagh, NICIE Professional Associates.**

**December 2021.**