

Independent schools

Education Scotland inspects a small sample of independent schools each year. The inspection sample covers age 3-18, boarding and day schools, preparatory and primary schools, Steiner schools, international schools, Ministry of Defence schools and faith schools. Inspectors also carry out quality improvement and professional engagement (QUIPE) visits and inspections of newly registered schools. During the period January 2012 to June 2016 we carried out 10 inspections, 25 QUIPE visits and 9 post-registration inspections.

Inspectors found that learners in independent schools are generally highly motivated and responsible, with a positive attitude towards learning. Early learning and childcare settings provide high-quality experiences for younger children. Almost all schools have embedded a culture of self-evaluation and reflection across staff teams. These effective approaches were leading to very positive outcomes for learners, particularly in examination results and in securing positive destinations. There is now a need for schools to track more systematically the skills for learning, life and work that children and young people gain through the extensive and varied out-of-class activities.

How well do children and young people in independent schools learn and achieve?

In almost all schools, a key strength was found to be the motivation and positive attitudes of learners of all ages. In the most effective practice, inspectors noted that children and young people had regular opportunities to collaborate and share their learning with their peers, and were clear about their own targets and next steps in learning. In most schools, we saw learners benefit from ready access to digital technology which enhanced their learning. However, we found the quality of learning and teaching varied across and within departments in the majority of schools. There is scope for staff to share highly-effective practice in learning and teaching more widely. This should include taking an outward-looking approach, for example by visiting other schools.

We highlighted the importance of pupil voice as an improving feature in independent schools. In almost all schools, learners had worthwhile opportunities to influence aspects of school life, for example through committees and focus groups. They should now have more say in shaping and leading their learning in classes.

High numbers of children and young people achieved very good or excellent standards of attainment in most schools and, in almost all schools, young people performed well or very well in examinations. Schools were providing learners with extensive and rich opportunities to achieve more widely by participating, for example, in sports, musical, cultural, outdoor residential and international experiences and this continues to be a key strength of the sector.

How well do independent schools support children and young people to achieve?

Overall, inspectors saw children at nursery and primary stages benefit from stimulating and nurturing environments for learning. Many young people at the senior secondary stages spoke highly of the commitment of their teachers to providing them with individualised, tailored support when they needed it. We found that children and young people had highly-supportive relationships with teachers and other adults, such as staff in boarding houses.

Overall, we found that staff in independent schools worked with parents, partners and agencies effectively in order to support individual learners. In almost all schools, staff were embedding the principles of Getting it Right for Every Child successfully. In the best practice, we noted that children and young people had a well-developed sense of their own health and wellbeing and could articulate their own strengths and needs. Most schools reviewed and refreshed their programmes and courses for personal and social health education regularly. However, inspectors identified weaknesses in approaches relating to child protection and safeguarding in a few schools. This included staffing issues such as disciplinary procedures and safe recruitment practices.

The vision and aims of individual independent schools influence whether or not they implement Curriculum for Excellence. We have found that in almost all schools, staff reviewed the curriculum regularly. In the best examples, leaders have involved whole school communities in revisiting the rationale for the curriculum to meet the needs of children and young people successfully. As a result, we have found that a growing number of schools were widening the learning pathways available to young people at the secondary stages, including offering new courses and subjects. Schools offered Scottish or English-based examinations and qualifications, or a blend of both. A few schools provided young people with the opportunity to undertake the International Baccalaureate. Over the period of this report we increasingly observed schools taking a closer look at the breadth of experiences for young people at the early stages of secondary education in order to provide more opportunities for learning in depth. Schools have provided learners with high-quality opportunities for personal achievement to develop skills in leadership and citizenship through the life of their school and community.

Inspectors found that in schools providing 3-18 provision, children were generally very well supported to make a smooth transition from early learning to primary school, and from primary to the secondary stages. However, there is still room for schools to build on children's prior learning more effectively as they make transitions from stage to stage.

How well do independent schools ensure continuous improvement?

Leadership of change and improvement in independent schools was found to be a strength. In a very few schools we identified weaknesses in the arrangements for governance and in approaches to communicating with and engaging parents.

In most schools senior leadership teams have developed good or better approaches to planning for improvement, based on accurate self-evaluation. In those schools sampled, we found that almost all young people went on to secure a place at university or college. There is scope for the majority of schools to improve how they involve learners, parents and their partners in identifying and reviewing priorities for improvement.

Overall, staff in independent schools have benefited from regular opportunities to engage in high-quality, career-long professional learning to improve their practice. We found that most schools tracked the academic progress of children and young people well. There is now a need for schools to track equally well the skills for learning, life and work that children and young people gain through the extensive and varied out-of-class activities that are often such a strong feature of the sector.

Children leading their learning



In the nursery class in Beaconhurst School, Stirling, young children have a genuine voice and are leading aspects of their own learning and development in innovative ways. For example, children told staff they were keen to improve their own cycling skills. Staff skilfully supported children to develop their own plan of action to help them to learn to cycle safely and effectively. As a result, children assessed risks, learned about bike maintenance and road safety and evaluated their own cycling

skills in a meaningful and highly relevant way. They recorded their own learning independently in floor books and in their own learning journey folders. Their resilience and motivation to learn has resulted in all children in their pre-school year being able to cycle around the school grounds, safely and unaided by adults.

Health and wellbeing - meeting the needs of the school community

George Heriot's School in Edinburgh was founded in 1628 to educate the sons of vulnerable widows. Nearly 400 years on, the school provides very high-quality learning experiences and personalised support for its current community of children and young people, including around 80 boys and girls who have lost their mother or father.



George Heriot's School has gained national recognition as a Rights Respecting School. As a result of their highly-effective work in this area, the school has a particularly strong focus on supporting vulnerable groups of learners and their parents/carers.

As well as bespoke programmes which deal with the issues of bereavement and loss, staff at George Heriot's have established support groups which deal with many other areas of health and wellbeing relevant to the school's community. For example, there is a flourishing Young Carers' group which offers mutual support for children and young people and a very active LGBT group. Parental workshops are offered regularly on areas including 'Mindfulness', 'Raising Teens', 'The Teenage Brain' and on-line safety. There is a very strong emphasis throughout the school community on the importance of mutual respect and of the empowerment of children and young people.