

21 May 2019

Dear Parent/Carer

Edinburgh Steiner School, Edinburgh

HM Inspectors recently visited Edinburgh Steiner School. The visit was part of our quality improvement and professional engagement visits with independent schools which complement the general programme of inspections. The approach allows us to maintain our knowledge of schools in the independent sector throughout Scotland, and provides assurance to parents on the school's capacity for evaluating its own work and making improvements which have a direct impact on the quality of experiences for its children and young people. Our visit was based on the school's self-evaluation and priorities identified for school improvement. During our visit, inspectors talked to staff, parents, children and young people and worked together with the school's management group about the planned developments to ensure outcomes for children and young people continue to improve.

How well does the school ensure outcomes for children and young people continue to improve?

Edinburgh Steiner School provides a welcoming and friendly environment to learn for children and young people. There is a strong emphasis on the importance of relationships across the school. Almost all staff know children and young people very well and have positive relationships with them. This allows the majority of children and young people to feel well supported and ready to learn. Overall, the children and young people we spoke to during our visit were very confident, articulate and proud of their school. They feel that the school's ethos and teaching approaches help them to develop as valued individuals. Young people contribute to the life of the school in a range of ways, for example by acting as buddies and mentors for younger children, and in preparing school lunches. There is scope for the school to seek the views of children and young people more formally. Staff should continue with plans to set up a pupil council. Children and young people have much to contribute to improving their school.

Overall, children and young people benefit from positive and interesting learning experiences. Music, movement and singing is an important part of school life. At all stages, children and young people develop confidence as they perform in plays and musical shows. They have the opportunity to be part of the orchestra or choir. Across the school, learning and teaching is underpinned by the Waldorf Steiner philosophy. Children and young people value the practical and creative skills for life that are taught through cookery, woodwork, handwork and art classes.

Children in the kindergarten classes are relaxed, settled and enjoy their play. They show familiarity with the rhythm and routines of the session and are motivated by the range of interesting experiences, both indoors and outside. Practitioners observe children carefully and respond sensitively, where appropriate, to support their confidence, development and participation. The kindergarten team have identified the need to continue to review the curriculum on offer for older children. This will help to provide increased challenge in learning and responsibility for children who are ready for this.

In the lower school, children normally move through classes 1 to 8 with the same teacher. As a result, teachers know children very well as individuals. Teachers plan contexts for learning that they know will motivate and interest children. In almost all classes in the lower school, children benefit from active and engaging approaches to learning. Overall, tasks and activities allow children to generate ideas, share their learning with their classmates and respond creatively. There is scope to ensure that more able children are consistently challenged in their learning. In almost all classes in the lower school, teachers encourage children to be respectful and kind to one another through a positive approach to classroom and behaviour management. The school's leadership group is aware of the need to ensure that this positive approach is adopted in all classes.

In the upper school, young people are friendly, courteous and articulate. They have respectful and positive relationships with their teachers, class guardians and staff. They identify strongly with the school's ethos and values. Overall, young people engage well in their learning. In the best lessons, teachers use highly effective questioning and learners challenge each other's thinking. Young people are motivated by such interactive teaching approaches. In the majority of lessons we observed in the upper school, the pace of learning could be improved to ensure that all learners remain fully engaged and challenged.

Across the kindergarten and school, most children and young people make good progress in their learning. In the kindergarten, children develop their early literacy and numeracy skills through play and by exploring the natural environment. In the lower school, children have good opportunities to develop their reading, writing and numeracy skills through main lessons. By learning these skills through interesting topics, children are able to make connections in their learning, and in almost all classes, children are motivated to do well. In woodwork and handcraft lessons, children apply their knowledge of shape and measure. Most develop resilience and patience as they create their individual pieces of work over an extended period of time. In the upper school, young people engage enthusiastically in personalised projects. They ably conduct research linked to these projects and use journals regularly to record and reflect on their learning. Young people in classes 10, 11 and 12 study a range of qualifications and awards. Almost all young people perform very well in these, and the school's data shows that this continues to improve year on year. The careers education teacher works very closely with all young people in the upper school to help them plan for their futures. Young people move on from Edinburgh Steiner School to a variety of positive destinations including universities, colleges, employment and well-planned gap years.

The kindergarten's and school's improvement plans are well considered and beginning to lead to positive change. Over the past few years, staff have taken steps to use self-evaluation more effectively to inform their work. For example, staff in the kindergarten and school have begun to use national quality indicators to identify what is working well and what needs to improve. Most staff engage willingly in professional learning. Staff speak positively about their participation in weekly school meetings, courses they attend and training on in-service days. They feel these worthwhile activities are helping to develop their knowledge and understanding of children's and young people's learning needs. As staff have correctly identified, there is scope to increase the range and rigour of self-evaluation activities across the kindergarten and school. This should include the observation of learning and teaching. This will help the school to ensure that all children and young people receive consistently high-quality experiences, and have the best chances of success in their attainment and achievement.

The Board of Trustees provides strategic guidance and an appropriate vision for the future development of the school community. In the last year, trustees surveyed parents and staff in order to seek their views about aspects of school life. As a result, trustees and staff have made positive changes to the way that complaints are dealt with and logged. A minority of parents and staff have ongoing concerns about low morale and have a lack of confidence in the school's leadership and management systems. The school is aware of this, and has begun to review and reconfigure its arrangements for leadership and management. In keeping with the principles and ethos of Waldorf Steiner education, Edinburgh Steiner School operates a non-hierarchical leadership and management structure. Around one quarter of teachers are members of the College of Teachers (also known as 'College'). Almost all decisions relating to the running of the school are considered by College, and must be reached by consensus. The school's review of this leadership structure is a work in progress. At the time of our visit, it was too early to determine the positive impact of some recent changes. The school should continue to simplify and clarify the remits of individuals with responsibility, ensuring there are clear lines of accountability and transparency in decision-making.

Families are viewed as key partners in their children's education. Parents told us that they value the sense of community that the school fosters, and the opportunities they have to find out about their child's learning. They feel the key strengths of the school includes an individualised approach to education, that provides a 'gentle start' and that values creativity. Most parents feel that communication between school and home has improved.

Staff aim to meet the varying learning needs of children and young people. Parents and learners who require additional help are very positive about the assistance they receive from the support for learning department. In the kindergarten and the lower school, class teachers are responsible for supporting children, both emotionally and in their learning. At the senior stages, every young person has a guardian, and if necessary, a mentor to support them. The school's social inclusion team also has an important role to monitor and oversee appropriate support to individual children and young people. This range of intervention and support systems for learners needs to be better co-ordinated.

There are weaknesses in the school's arrangements for keeping children and young people safe. Areas for development have been agreed with the school and the Board of Trustees that need to be addressed as a matter of urgency. These include improving child protection procedures especially staff training, recording, quality assurance and monitoring procedures, to ensure they are effective and robust and in line with national guidance.

The school recognises that there are important issues that need to be attended to. In discussion with the Board of Trustees and school's leadership group, we have agreed the following steps that will form the basis of an action plan, to be taken forward without delay.

- Take action to improve the policies and procedures for safeguarding and child protection. Ensure these processes are understood and followed by all staff across the school, and shared with parents and learners.
- In line with requirements, the school and the Board of Trustees have taken action to make necessary changes in the roles of those leading on child protection. Child protection officers, safeguarding coordinators, pastoral and support for learning staff now need to

work more closely as one team, to ensure positive outcomes for children and young people.

- Trustees and school leaders should continue to improve and clarify the arrangements for all stakeholders to allow concerns and ongoing issues to reach successful resolutions.
- The Board of Trustees and school leaders should continue to improve the school's leadership and management systems to address fully the concerns of the school community.

What happens next?

The school has successfully maintained high standards of academic achievement over recent years and demonstrates capacity for improvement in most aspects of its work. However, there are important areas in which we are not confident at present, and need to see brisk improvement. Our link HM Inspector will maintain contact with the school and will visit the school again in June 2019 to check on progress. We will carry out a focused further inspection of the school by December 2019, when we will publish a further report to parents.

Lesley A Johnstone
HM Inspector