

24 June 2025

Dear Parent/Carer

In February 2020, HM Inspectors published a letter on Harlaw Academy. The letter set out a number of areas for improvement which we agreed with the school and Aberdeen City Council. We subsequently returned to the school to look at how it had continued to improve its work, and published another letter in November 2024. Recently, as you may know, we visited the school again. During our visit, we talked to young people and worked closely with the headteacher and staff. We heard from the headteacher and other staff about the steps the school has taken to improve. We looked at particular areas that had been identified in the original inspection and at other aspects of the school's work, as proposed by the headteacher. As a result, we were able to find out about the progress the school has made and how well this is supporting young people's learning and achievements. This letter sets out what we found.

Streamline approaches to improvement so that self-evaluation activities clearly identify priorities which will make the biggest difference to outcomes for young people.

A substantial amount of work has been undertaken since the last visit to develop the systems and processes needed to improve the school. The senior leadership team, most of whom have been appointed within the last two sessions, provide strong leadership to the school community. They have strengthened and streamlined quality assurance processes to identify the actions needed to improve the school. They are also supporting staff to use self-evaluation more effectively to review the impact of improvement actions. Staff are working more collaboratively and increasingly leading change through improvement groups. As a result, the climate for improving the school is developing well. Most of the school community report improvements in the ethos, leadership and whole school communication, with a growing momentum for change. A minority of staff and parents feel that communication at all levels within the school requires further improvement.

Senior leaders recognise that further work and time are required to see the impact of improvement actions on improving learners' experiences and attainment. They need to ensure that the areas for improvement identified previously continue to be progressed. They recognise that they also need to be responsive to emerging priorities for improvement arising across the school community. This includes developing further the ethos of high expectations and mutual respect, improving wellbeing and increasing provision for young people who require additional support with their learning. There is also a need to increase stakeholder involvement in identifying and progressing improvement priorities.

Continue to improve the quality of learning, teaching and assessment so that young people's experiences engage them and meet their needs. Develop more fully an ethos for learning with high expectations and mutual respect.

The staff learning and teaching group have worked well with colleagues to improve learning and teaching. Teachers benefit from a refreshed professional learning offer and are sharing effective practice more widely across the school. The staff working group has also led the

updating and implementation of a learning and teaching framework to agree the features of high-quality practice. This work is clarifying the expectations of learning and teaching to staff and is leading to a greater consistency in approach by staff in how they structure lessons for young people. Staff, as part of the improvement group, are developing a learning and teaching interactive toolkit. This is helping individual staff to improve their practice by seeking professional learning, bespoke to their needs. Senior leaders are supporting middle leaders to improve learning and teaching across departments.

There are positive relationships between most staff and young people and between the majority of young people. As identified, all staff need to work together to develop a climate of high expectations of young people's behaviour in classes and around the school. Staff need to address low-level disruptive behaviour and interruption to learning from a few young people. An important next step is for teachers to focus on improving the pace and challenge in lessons, so that all young people experience motivating learning that is well-matched to their needs.

Strengthen approaches to monitoring young people's progress across all subject areas so that staff at all levels have a clear overview of learners' progress. Continue to raise the attainment of young people at all stages.

Senior leaders and a staff working group have implemented a more robust system to gather an overview of young people's progress and attainment across all stages and areas of the curriculum. It is too early for staff to use this data to measure young people's progress over time. Senior leaders need to continue to embed this system so that it can be used to ensure young people attain appropriately over time.

Senior leaders have supported staff to understand how to use data more effectively to inform actions to support young people's progress. Staff are currently developing a consistent understanding in how to use data to plan support for young people who are at risk of not making expected progress. Staff have identified correctly that a next step is to measure the impact of their interventions in raising attainment.

Senior leaders and key staff are reviewing young people's curriculum through a working group. Staff are continuing to widen the pathways through the senior phase. As a result, an increasing number of young people are experiencing a greater range of options across the senior phase.

Senior leaders have worked well to develop an accurate self-evaluation of attainment in the senior phase. They recognise that there are weaknesses in overall attainment in the senior phase. They have implemented the required processes and strategies to raise attainment. More time is needed for these new processes and strategies to demonstrate improvements. Staff need to make improvements in young people's literacy and numeracy in S5 and S6. Young people's attainment over time in the senior phase continues to decline in many measures and remains an ongoing area for improvement. Senior leaders should continue to ensure all young people progress to a positive destination on leaving school in S5 and S6.

What happens next?

The school has made progress since the original inspection, particularly in leadership of change and approaches to quality assurance and self-evaluation. Developments to improve the quality of learning and teaching are sound but at an early stage of implementation. Young people's attainment in the senior phase continues to decline and there remains a need to ensure all young people progress to a positive destination on leaving school. The school needs more time and continued support from Aberdeen City Council to improve these aspects. HM Inspectors will continue to engage with the school and work closely with Aberdeen City Council to monitor and review ongoing improvement. We will carry out another inspection within 18 months. When we return to inspect the school, we will write to you as parents informing you of the progress the school has made.

Patricia Cameron
HM Inspector