

Summarised inspection findings

St Combs School

Aberdeenshire Council

16 May 2023

Key contextual information

St Combs School is situated in the rural village of St Combs in Aberdeenshire Council. At the time of the inspection the school had 68 children working across four classes. The headteacher has been in post since 2012. Almost all children live in the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation deciles five and six.

1.3 Leadership of change

satisfactory

This indicator focuses on collaborative leadership at all levels to develop a shared vision for change and improvement which is meaningful and relevant to the context of the school within its community. Planning for continuous improvement should be evidence-based and linked to effective self-evaluation. Senior leaders should ensure the need for change is well understood and that the pace of change is appropriate to ensure the desired positive impact for learners. The themes are:

- developing a shared vision, values and aims relevant to the school and its community
- strategic planning for continuous improvement
- implementing improvement and change

- There is a very supportive ethos and culture in St Combs School and a strong appreciation of the local heritage. Children, staff and parents are highly aware of their cultural identity and have a sense of belonging to the school and wider community. Staff ensure that children have regular meaningful opportunities to learn in Doric, the local dialect. Most children and staff model the school values effectively in their daily interactions with each other. As a result, relationships between staff, children, parents and partners are positive. However, the school values are not yet embedded fully into practice and leading to sustained change and improvement which is meaningful and improving outcomes for children. The headteacher and staff should ensure the school values, vision and aims underpin all aspects of the life and work of the school.
- Children across the school are kind and confident. They are keen to undertake leadership roles and implement change across the school. Children have a few purposeful opportunities to lead their own learning within their class. Each class of children very recently looked at one theme of 'How Good is Our School?' as part of the 'Noo wir Spikkin' pupil voice groups. They shared their ideas with the rest of the school during an assembly. This work is beginning to provide children with useful opportunities to influence change. There is a need to increase the pace of this work to implement children's plans and ideas and provide them with a greater role in leading change. As a start, the headteacher should work with staff to resume pupil groups such as the Eco Schools and rights respecting club as soon as possible. This will enable children to influence change and improvement across the school in meaningful ways.
- The headteacher encourages staff to share their professional learning and to make best use of their skills and interests. Staff lead on aspects of school improvement such as writing and science. A few teachers recently delivered a useful staff training session on the use of digital technology. The headteacher should provide all staff with further opportunities to lead aspects of school improvement to improve the quality of leadership at all levels. All staff work well as a team. They identify that their next step is to use the design principles of Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) to improve the quality of learning and teaching. Teachers have very recently started to work with colleagues in cluster schools to improve their approaches to learning, teaching and assessment. This work is still at the very early stages. The headteacher and all staff should seek more regular opportunities to work with colleagues

across the local authority and nationally. This will help them to develop further their knowledge of highly effective and creative teaching approaches.

- The headteacher works collegiately with all stakeholders to evaluate the life and work of the school. They use 'How Good is Our School?' (4th Edition) regularly to review their work and plan for continuous improvement. Staff set school improvement priorities based clearly on improving children's experiences and outcomes. Although aspects of the priorities have started this session, they are still not impacting fully on children's outcomes. Overall, there is a need to increase the pace of change and set more ambitious timescales to take forward school improvement priorities. Staff are committed to the process of change and are well-placed to be more aspirational about what they can achieve.
- The very active Parent Council takes forward aspects of school improvement enthusiastically. For example, parents are currently creating rhyme bags to support children's literacy skills at early level. The headteacher, together with all stakeholders, should continue to monitor and evaluate regularly the progress made towards improvement priorities.
- The school has received additional funding from the Pupil Equity Fund (PEF). The headteacher allocates this funding effectively to support children with their emotional health and well-being and to raise attainment in literacy and numeracy. These interventions are helping children to overcome gaps in learning and improve their emotional wellbeing.

2.3 Learning, teaching and assessment

satisfactory

This indicator focuses on ensuring high-quality learning experiences for all children and young people. It highlights the importance of highly-skilled staff who work with children, young people and others to ensure learning is motivating and meaningful. Effective use of assessment by staff and learners ensures children and young people maximise their successes and achievements. The themes are:

- learning and engagement
- quality of teaching
- effective use of assessment
- planning, tracking and monitoring

- All staff know children and their families very well. There are positive and respectful relationships between children, staff and visitors to the school. Older children support younger children very well through paired reading and shared learning times. These relationships are leading to confident learners who value their experiences in their school. Children across the school are keen to do well in their learning and report that they enjoy school and feel included.
- All staff should continue to develop a shared understanding of high-quality learning and teaching. In a few lessons, the purpose of learning is clear, and children know what they need to do to be successful. However, this is not yet of a consistent high quality in all classes. Teachers should check if learning intentions and measures of success link clearly to the CfE experiences and outcomes. In addition, teachers need to set learning activities that provide all children with the right level of support and challenge. They should challenge children's thinking and understanding more often by using higher order questions regularly.
- The staff team use seven learning dispositions which include 'curious crabs', 'independent iguanas' and 'resilient rhinos' to support children to understand themselves as learners. Children link their work to the four capacities of CfE. Older children describe clearly why they are an effective contributor or successful learner. Staff should now embed this language further with all children and encourage them to create learning targets. This will help children to recognise their next steps. As planned, the headteacher and staff team should introduce learning journals to capture children's learning journey through the school.
- Most children understand the routines and expectations that teachers set. Children are beginning to choose contexts for learning through discussion with teachers. For example, in P6/7 children choose what they want to learn about Scottish history. Children have opportunities to extend their learning through set tasks and the use of digital applications in numeracy and spelling. Staff should provide children with more opportunities to choose and lead their own learning and increase the pace of lessons. This will ensure that children spend more time on purposeful learning and are fully engaged and motivated by learning contexts.
- Play opportunities in P1/2 are at the very early stages of being developed. All staff would benefit from further professional development in this area. The headteacher and staff should refer to national guidance on the principles of play pedagogy. This guidance will support their planning of experiences to ensure there is balance between adult and child-initiated learning. A first step would be to consider the classroom environment and the extent to which the experiences offered promote children's curiosity and independence.
- Teachers identified the need to improve children's attainment in literacy. In response, they developed useful evaluative grids that help children to self and peer assess their writing successfully against set criteria. Children at early level use a modified version of these grids

very well to reflect on their writing. This work is helping children across the school to identify their next steps. Individual writing targets would support children further to set ambitious goals for themselves. All staff now need to review approaches to reading. They should ensure that all children have regular opportunities to read for pleasure. An evaluation of how the school library is used would support this work. Staff should include children's involvement in selecting new books and ensure a wide range of diverse reading materials is available.

- Teachers plan learning for children across all curricular areas and over different timescales using the CfE experiences and outcomes. They assess children's progress in literacy, numeracy and health and wellbeing using a range of assessment tools including the National Benchmarks. Teachers should now extend the range of assessment evidence to assess children's breadth, depth and application of learning. This would provide them with evidence of whether children can transfer their skills across the curriculum.
- Staff have regular informal discussions as well as more formal opportunities to reflect on the quality of learning and teaching. They support each other well to develop their practice. For example, they share development and training opportunities such as training in coding and in providing children with writing feedback. This is leading to greater consistency in these areas. Teachers have recently started to reengage in professional learning and moderation with colleagues from cluster schools following the COVID-19 pandemic. This is beginning to help them to have a greater understanding of national standards within CfE levels. Teachers would benefit from further moderation opportunities, within and outwith the school and local authority. This will build teachers' confidence in their judgements around children's achievement of a level.
- Teachers and the headteacher regularly discuss the progress of individual children and class year groups, including children who require additional support with their learning. If children are not making expected progress, a range of interventions are put in place. These include spelling and reading programmes which are planned with additional support staff. The headteacher recognises there is a need for teachers to provide more focused support in class for children with additional support needs. Teachers should now ensure they plan and deliver learning to meet the needs of all learners. Further staff development on staged intervention processes and the use of universal strategies to support children's additional needs in class will help them with this. Support staff are an integral part of the school. They have recently received useful professional learning on strategies to support individual children. All staff would benefit from further training on specific strategies to address children's barriers to learning.
- There is a well-planned transition process in place to support children's wellbeing when they move into P1 and onto S1. An important next step is to ensure any children who require support with their learning have appropriate planning in place for transition to ensure their learning needs are met in a new setting.

2.2 Curriculum: Learning pathways

- Teachers plan flexible learning across all curricular areas to develop children's literacy and numeracy skills. They use a combination of Aberdeenshire progressive curriculum pathways and school planning formats. As planned, teachers should now create a digital skills pathway to embed the use of digital technology to support learning and develop children's digital skills progressively.
- The curriculum reflects the school's individual setting very well. Local history projects and community events help children to understand their local community and heritage effectively. Children and school staff are proud of their local Doric dialect which is their third language. Children use this dialect successfully in speaking projects, and in some writing tasks.
- Children learn French as their second modern language and are developing their skills progressively in speaking and writing French. They would benefit from opportunities to explore French culture as part of this.
- Children experience two hours of quality physical education (PE) each week. Teachers plan PE lessons using progressive planners which link to National Benchmarks. They ensure a range of skills are taught and revisited over the year. Children also have opportunities to improve their physical fitness through the regular 'Quicker Quities' runs.
- The local minister regularly attends assemblies and has led learning on themes such as compassion and identity. Children learn about Christian values and are developing their knowledge of other religions as part of the religious and moral education (RME) curriculum. The headteacher should ensure the curriculum includes more opportunities for children to learn about diversity and difference.
- Pupils are beginning to have more choice in aspects of learning. For example, children select skills they would like to learn in their 'Knowledgeable New Tooners' (KiNT it) groups. They work together well across stages developing a range of skills such as coding and cooking. The headteacher should now track the skills children develop during these experiences to ensure they learn a broad range of skills.
- Children have useful opportunities to learn outdoors. For example, last session they in planted trees for the school wood although the number of outdoor learning opportunities can vary from term to term. The staff team should develop a progressive programme for outdoor learning incorporating sustainability as a more regular feature of the curriculum.

2.7 Partnerships: Impact on learners – parental engagement

- Almost all parents are happy with the work of the school. They are confident that if they raise a concern, it will be addressed promptly. Parents are kept informed of any barriers to learning their child has and permissions are sought before targeted support is provided. The headteacher now needs to ensure that parents and children's views are recorded on children's individual educational plans.
- Parents value the regular communication from the school. The headteacher communicates with parents in monthly newsletters, group call texts, emails and through the school website. A few parents would like more advance notice of school events.
- Almost all parents feel that their child is making progress in their learning. They enjoy 'share the learning' events where children showcase their learning to their families. A few parents are unclear about the ways in which their child is assessed and would like more regular information about their child's learning. Staff should now provide more opportunities for parents to learn alongside their child in school.
- St Combs School Parent Council work closely with the wider parent body of the school. They play a valuable role in supporting the life and work of the school. They provide funds for children to enjoy a broader range of learning experiences such as digital devices to support learning. The Parent Council supported children very effectively to learn about the local community during a village treasure hunt. Almost all parents feel encouraged to be involved in the work of the Parent Council.

2.1 Safeguarding

- The school submitted self-evaluation information related to child protection and safeguarding. Inspectors discussed this information with relevant staff and, where appropriate, children. In addition, inspectors examined a sample of safeguarding documentation. Areas for development have been agreed with the school and the education authority.

3.1 Ensuring wellbeing, equality and inclusion

good

This indicator focuses on the impact of the school's approach to wellbeing which underpins children and young people's ability to achieve success. It highlights the need for policies and practices to be well grounded in current legislation and a shared understanding of the value of every individual. A clear focus on ensuring wellbeing entitlements and protected characteristics supports all learners to maximise their successes and achievements. The themes are:

- wellbeing
- fulfilment of statutory duties
- inclusion and equality

- The headteacher and all staff provide a supportive and inclusive environment. Most parents and children feel that staff know children well as individuals and that children are treated fairly and with respect. Children across the school are happy, confident and friendly. Most children feel safe in school and know there is an adult they can talk to if they feel upset.
- Staff receive annual training on the principles of the Scottish Government's Policy 'Getting it right for every child' and are committed to supporting children's wellbeing. This session, the headteacher carried out a detailed survey of children's wellbeing using the wellbeing indicators. Staff analysed this information to identify individual children who require specific support in aspects of their wellbeing. A few individual children subsequently received helpful targeted support from a staff member to support their wellbeing effectively. This work is beginning to help children understand how the wellbeing indicators link to their lives. There is a need to support children's understanding further about the wellbeing indicators and ensure they are an integral feature of school life. The headteacher and all staff should now use this survey information about children's wellbeing more effectively to plan support for all children. This planning should take account of individual children needs, whole school or class themes which require targeted or universal interventions.
- Children enter St Combs School from several different early childcare providers and move from a small village school to the larger Fraserburgh Academy. Staff implement highly effective approaches to supporting children's wellbeing at times of transition into P1 and onto S1. As a result, almost all children adjust well into the new establishment. Children demonstrate successfully their high levels of resilience and ability to cope with change.
- Staff are committed to providing children with rights-based education based on the United Nations Rights of the Child. A whole school playground charter was developed several years ago. However, work to develop children's understanding of their rights is still at the early stages. In addition, displays state that children's rights are based on children fulfilling responsibilities which contradicts the principle that children's rights are unconditional. All staff should now work with children to help them gain a clearer understanding of their rights and what they mean for them in everyday contexts.
- During COVID-19, children missed opportunities to come together as a whole school. Staff are now resuming opportunities for children to participate in clubs and events. For example, through social sessions and an after-school dance club. These are developing children's physical and emotional wellbeing well. All children participated enthusiastically in the whole school performance of the play 'Abidy loves a Bairnie'. Children delivered this performance using their Doric dialect skills which is helping them to feel included in the local community.

- There is a strong culture of collaboration with parents and partners to improve outcomes for children. Parents play a highly active role in supporting children's health and wellbeing. For example, parent volunteers deliver a 'Bikeability Scotland' course to children. As a result, children are developing a good understanding of how to cycle safely and improving their physical fitness.
- Partnerships are having a positive impact on children's wellbeing. For example, older children undertook training with the active school's team to become 'Playleaders'. They plan activities for younger children at break times. Children enjoy this role and are developing their organisational skills effectively. Children at the upper stages received valuable first aid training from health professionals. This developed their skills successfully in applying bandages, treating minor burns and administering cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR). Overall, these activities support children very well to be responsible citizens.
- Partnership working with the educational psychology service is developing older children's sense of self-awareness and social skills well. Children participate in an activity which is video recorded. They work with their teacher and the educational psychology team to review how well they interact with others during the task. This work is having a positive impact on children's social skills and contributing effectively to positive classroom relationships.
- Children experience a broad and well-planned health and wellbeing curriculum which is based on a three-year plan. They have valuable opportunities to think critically about the time they spend on the internet and how to keep themselves safe online. Parents are encouraged to talk with their children about their health and wellbeing through helpful online videos produced by the local authority.
- Staff have a strong understanding of their responsibilities in fulfilling statutory duties in relation to child protection and safeguarding. Staff work effectively with key partners such as sensory support staff, the educational psychology team and the support for learning staff to provide targeted support. The headteacher should ensure that all children and their parents are fully involved in decisions about how their needs will be met.
- Teachers very recently received helpful training on staged intervention processes for children requiring additional support. There is a need to ensure all staff develop their understanding of planning universal and targeted interventions for children requiring additional support. Staff should continue with planned further professional learning in this area. This will support them to take a holistic view of children's needs and their role in planning interventions which will make the biggest difference to children.
- Across the school, most children play together very well in the playground. The headteacher, rightly uses restorative approaches to support children to manage conflict. The majority of parents express that their child has never experienced bullying. Most children feel the school deals with bullying well. A few children and parents would like further clarity around the processes for dealing with incidents of bullying.
- Children are developing their understanding of the wider world. For example, the school collected funds for the Ukrainian Humanitarian Appeal. Senior leaders and staff should provide children with more opportunities to learn about themselves as global citizens. Children would benefit from more specific opportunities to learn about diversity and protected characteristics.

3.2 Raising attainment and achievement

good

This indicator focuses on the school's success in achieving the best possible outcomes for all learners. Success is measured in attainment across all areas of the curriculum and through the school's ability to demonstrate learners' achievements in relation to skills and attributes. Continuous improvement or sustained high standards over time is a key feature of this indicator. The themes are:

- attainment in literacy and numeracy
- attainment over time
- overall quality of learners' achievement
- equity for all learners

Attainment in literacy and numeracy

- Overall attainment in literacy and English and numeracy and mathematics is good across the school. The headteacher and teachers have an increasing understanding of individual children's progress towards CfE levels.
- Where children are working towards their own targets, the school can evidence children making good progress.
- The school submitted data for last session to show that overall, most children achieved expected levels in reading and numeracy. Across the school, the majority of children achieved expected levels in writing. Almost all children achieved expected levels of attainment in listening and talking.
- Teachers now need to engage further in moderation activities to ensure their assessment processes and professional judgements of children's attainment are accurate.

Attainment in literacy and English

- Most children are making good progress in literacy and English. A few children are working beyond expected levels of attainment.

Listening and talking

- At early level, almost all children share their ideas and interests with each other through class talks. They are starting to build their knowledge of rhyming words. They are not yet confident at hearing and repeating rhyming words. At first level, almost all children contribute confidently and listen appropriately in group discussions. They need further opportunities to develop their note-taking skills when listening to spoken texts. At second level, almost all children speak clearly and show respect when listening to others. They would benefit from further opportunities to present talks to a wider range of audiences.

Reading

- At early level, almost all children use their knowledge of sounds and letters to read simple words. They make use of clues in stories effectively to make simple predictions about story endings. They now need to learn how to use books to find information. At first level, most children read with increasing fluency using strategies to decode unfamiliar words. They are developing a wide vocabulary and use grammar clues in reading. Almost all children at second level read new and unfamiliar texts fluently. They carry out online research to note-take key ideas successfully. At all stages, teachers should provide children with regular opportunities to explore different authors and texts. Children at first and second level also need more support to answer stage appropriate inferential and evaluative questions.

- Across the school, all children would benefit from further opportunities to read for enjoyment. Staff are well-placed to make better use of the well-stocked library to encourage children to read a range of texts and authors for pleasure.

Writing

- At early level, most children are beginning to copy and write simple sentences and talk about their ideas for writing. They would benefit from more opportunities to write during a variety of activities, and through play. At first level, most children write in a range of genres and styles including poems, reports and plays. They need more opportunities to apply their writing skills across the curriculum. At second level, most children are enthusiastic writers, they write successfully within a range of fiction and non-fiction genres. They should have more opportunities to review their writing and set personalised targets to improve their work further.

Numeracy and mathematics

- Overall, children's progress in numeracy is good. A few children are working beyond expected levels.

Number, money and measure

- At early level, children identify the number of objects in a group, count on and back to 20 and talk about smaller than and bigger than. They need further revision in using coins in calculations and to pay for items up to 10 pence. At first level, most children are confident at place value and calculations to 1,000. Children need more opportunities to discuss the strategies they use during written and mental calculations. At second level, most children round whole numbers to 100,000. Children apply their understanding of measurement and scale to complete scale drawings accurately. Teachers should ensure children have opportunities to revisit mathematical concepts regularly.

Shape, position and movement

- At early level, children recognise and describe common two-dimensional shapes. They are not yet able to recognise three-dimensional objects. At first level children name the properties of simple two-dimensional shapes and three-dimensional objects. They can tile shapes and recognise lines of symmetry. At second level, most children have a good understanding of the properties of circles. They can describe accurately the relationship between the radius and the diameter.

Information handling

- At early level, children answer questions from a simple diagram or graph. At first level, children can use simple graphs to answer questions. At second level, most children interpret and display data in a range of tables accurately. At early, first and second level, children require more opportunities to gather, sort and display data in a variety of graphs and charts using digital technology.

Attainment over time

- There are small numbers of children at each stage and as a result, attainment over time can fluctuate. The headteacher tracks the progress of all children as they move through the school. The school's data shows that most children are making good progress, and a few are making very good progress. The headteacher should now work with staff to analyse data over time to identify trends for cohorts of children.
- Children's attainment in the middle stages dips in writing and reading. The headteacher attributes this to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The staff have taken steps to address this and there has been a specific focus on improving writing. For identified learners, there is evidence of children making good progress because of these interventions.

- Staff track the progress of all children including those who require additional support with their learning. For a few children, additional support is put in place such as small group support or individual teaching. The headteacher should ensure there are clear measures of progress in place and that the impact of support is recorded clearly.

Overall quality of learner's achievements

- St Combs School celebrates learners' achievements at assemblies and on their 'Tree of Success' display. A few children can talk about how their achievements are linked to the four capacities of CfE and the school's seven learning dispositions. As identified, the staff team should now support all children to discuss and track the skills they are developing both within and out with school. This will help children to make links between their skills and the world of work.
- Children have many opportunities to be involved in the life of their school and community. They take part in community events such as a local art exhibition, beach cleaning and soup and sweets events. These activities build children's confidence and enable them to contribute effectively to their community. Children and staff have raised money for several charities. This is helping children to recognise their place in their community and understand how they can contribute to wider society.

Equity for all learners

- All staff know and support children and their families very well. They ensure no-one misses out on any experiences. The Parent Council is proactive in ensuring that all children participate fully in school life by organising regular fundraising events to pay for trips.
- The school uses PEF to pay for staff to support groups of identified learners with aspects of literacy, numeracy and health and wellbeing. The headteacher uses feedback and assessment information to measure the impact of this support. There is evidence that learners are making accelerated progress in social skills, spelling and reading and that identified gaps are closing.

Explanation of terms of quantity

The following standard Education Scotland terms of quantity are used in this report:

All	100%
Almost all	91%-99%
Most	75%-90%
Majority	50%-74%
Minority/less than half	15%-49%
A few	less than 15%

Other quantitative terms used in this report are to be understood as in common English usage.