

25 April 2023

Dear Parent/Carer

In November 2019, 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. 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.

Senior leaders use an increasing range of activities to identify the school's strengths and weaknesses, including seeking the views of stakeholders. From these activities, senior leaders identify school improvement priorities. A significant group of teaching and support staff do not feel involved in identifying school improvement priorities. Teachers work in groups to achieve the school priorities. Recently, these groups produced new policies and systems aimed at improving learning and teaching. The majority of staff feel that these have been issued too quickly and that communication at all levels could be significantly improved. It would be beneficial to revisit, refine and further embed these practices to ensure that all stakeholders have the opportunity to engage in more meaningful consultation. Senior leaders should ensure that already identified priorities are taken forward by all staff. Going forward, senior leaders should increase the engagement of all staff and stakeholders in devising priorities, leading change and evaluating the progress of the school improvement plan. Senior leaders need to simplify and streamline school improvement priorities to take account of staff morale and manage carefully the speed of change.

Senior leaders introduced systems to monitor the quality of improvements. This is beginning to clarify expectations and increase accountability, especially for middle leaders. Senior leaders are supporting middle leaders to use data better to inform and evaluate their work. Middle leaders are also supported to work with others across the school to improve their faculties. As a result, most middle leaders are implementing more robust approaches to measuring their faculty's performance.

Young people report improvements in the range of ways their views are sought. They describe the difference giving their views has made in improvements to outdoor spaces and to the security of the building. Pupil council representatives report back to their peers during classes and assemblies. However, a significant number of young people do not feel that they are listened to, or that meaningful consideration is given to their opinions. This is leading to a few young people feeling that their rights and dignity are not respected. Senior leaders should extend opportunities for young people to lead change. Young people's leadership

roles should focus on improving learning and the curriculum as well as the wider life of the school.

A wide range of partners provide targeted support for individual young people or support whole school improvements. For example, they help support young people's engagement with school, wellbeing and positive destinations. Partners describe a culture where staff want to improve learners' experiences. Partners would appreciate more opportunities to work with staff to plan and evaluate their work to improve the school.

Senior leaders support staff with relevant professional learning opportunities. Staff engage well with the General Teaching Council for Scotland professional update process. As a result, teachers use evidence-based approaches to improve their practice as they work together on research projects. Teachers worked well together to develop a learning and teaching framework which is used to reflect on and improve their practice.

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.

Senior leaders and teachers use the recently shared learning and teaching framework to help them know what is working well and what needs to improve. Teachers feel there are clear expectations of the standards of learning and teaching required. They should ensure these standards apply in classroom practice across all departments. Teachers recognise the need for variety of teaching strategies and more consistent lesson planning. In almost all lessons, staff share the focus for learning and what successful learning will look like. Teachers should continue to develop teaching strategies that support the learning of all young people.

Teachers have used work with external partners to develop their skills to help young people express themselves more clearly. Young people use these skills well to express their views on their learning experiences. Teachers should continue to share their learning and practice across all staff.

Young people explain clearly what they enjoy about lessons and explain what they are learning in class. They understand what they have been asked to do in most lessons and link this with prior learning. Almost all young people engage in learning and in a few lessons, learn independently. Teachers use a variety of methods to provide feedback to pupils on their learning and progress. However, most young people are unable to identify what their next steps in learning are. Feedback is more structured in senior phase, but the quality of feedback across the school is inconsistent. Teachers should ensure that feedback is of higher quality and young people clearly understand their next steps in learning.

Senior leaders observed all teachers to identify areas of strengths and where improvement is needed in learning and teaching across the school. They identified that pace of learning is too slow in most classes. This slow pace of learning is more evident in lessons in the broad general education (BGE). Too often, tasks are too easy for young people. A few staff set high expectations of young people in lessons and provide tasks and activities that are at a suitable level of difficulty. In these lessons, all young people are engaged in their learning. All teachers should ensure that tasks and activities are set at the right level to engage and motivate all young people.

All young people access digital technology which is used well to support their learning. A few teachers use applications such as translation software to ensure young people access the curriculum in their first language. All staff should consider how to use digital technology to support the needs of all young people better.

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 have created a range of spreadsheets to check the progress of individuals and groups of young people. Guidance staff play a key role in analysing and using this information. This is leading to a greater understanding of staff's individual roles in providing learning environments and experiences that engage young people.

In addition, senior leaders are at an early stage of developing a system to track and monitor the progress of young people across all subject areas in the broad general education. Teachers are increasingly confident in judging young people's progress against national standards. This will help to ensure that the information used in monitoring this progress is robust.

Teachers are beginning to record target and working grades for young people in the senior phase. This leads to discussions between young people and their teachers about what these grades mean, and if any additional support is required to help young people achieve them. Currently too many young people do not yet consistently have a good understanding of where they are in their learning and what they need to do to improve. Teachers should ensure that young people have appropriate targets which they understand and know how to achieve.

Principal teachers of faculties have each developed systems to check the progress of individual young people and of classes. This information is shared routinely at meetings with their link deputy headteacher. Additional support is put in place for young people when it is needed. It will be helpful if all staff can now have a clearer overview of the progress young people are making in their learning across all subjects.

Staff are continuing to focus on literacy and numeracy skills which is leading to improving attainment. Attainment across the school for specific groups of young people is also improving. Staff should continue their focus on raising attainment, including the number and level of qualifications for young people.

The number of young people remaining at school has improved consistently from 2016/17 for S4 to S5, and from 2018/19 for S5 to S6. Young people who do stay on to S6 achieve more qualifications. The percentage of leavers making positive choices beyond school in 2020/21 is improving.

What happens next?

The school has made some progress since the original inspection. We will ask for a report on progress within 12 months of the inspection. This report will inform any decision made by Education Scotland regarding further engagement. This may include another inspection visit. When such a decision is made, we will write to you again detailing the improvements the school has made and outlining any further action, agreed with Aberdeen City Council that we intend to take.

Frances E. Graham
HM Inspector