

19 November 2024

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 January 2022. We returned to the school again to look at how it had continued to improve its work, and published another letter in April 2023. 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.

There have been very few improvements across the school since the last further inspection. Staff remain unclear about current improvement priorities with a majority still feeling that they are not fully involved in devising and leading priorities. There remains a need for senior leaders to involve the school community to have a greater role in identifying, leading and evaluating school improvement. Senior leaders need to simplify and streamline school improvement priorities, so these are coherent and well understood across the school. They need to ensure that these priorities are clear and measurable in terms of improving learners' experiences.

The majority of staff continue to report that new policies and practices are implemented without notice or meaningful consultation. The majority of staff do not feel that their views on proposed changes to policies and systems are taken into account. Communication, particularly from the headteacher, requires significant improvement. This is having an adverse impact on a number of areas across the school, including staff morale. The local authority needs to take prompt and urgent action to address the significant weaknesses in the leadership of the headteacher.

Young people's views are increasingly sought with almost all faculty areas now gathering the views of their learners. However, young people are unclear how their views result in change across the school. They are generally unaware of the work or impact of the pupil council. There are a few leadership opportunities for a few young people, mainly in the senior phase. Young people need greater opportunities to lead change across the school, particularly linked to school improvement.

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.

Teachers are continuing to engage with the learning and teaching framework to improve their current practice. The implementation of the framework remains inconsistent and has not improved learners' experiences sufficiently enough. There are aspects of practice, such as questioning techniques, that are beginning to show positive impact. Teachers have welcomed 'Lunch n Learn' sessions and wider opportunities to work together. They would benefit from greater opportunities to work together to explore effective learning, teaching and assessment. Teachers should review how they meet the needs of young people in the class. Tasks and activities need to be set at the right level of difficulty for young people. There remains a need to develop more fully an ethos for learning with high expectations and mutual respect.

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.

There is a continued need to strengthen approaches to monitoring young people's progress across all subject areas. Staff at all levels do not yet have a clear overview of learners' progress. Young people are achieving at lower levels at Harlaw Academy across almost all national measures compared to learners with similar needs and backgrounds across Scotland. School performance for leavers in both literacy and numeracy shows a decline across a number of measures. There is no consistent improvement in literacy and numeracy performance at S4, by S5 or by S6. Young people who require additional support in their learning are also attaining less well. The percentage of young people attaining National Qualifications (NQs) at S4, by S5 and by S6 has also declined in recent years. In the last few years, fewer young people are moving into a positive destination after leaving school.

There is an urgent need to improve young people's attainment in the senior phase across all measures. Senior leaders need to review the number of courses young people are presented for in both S4 and S5, including dual presentation as the school is not following national guidance.

What happens next?

The school has made insufficient progress since the original inspection. We will liaise with Aberdeen City Council regarding the school's capacity to improve. We will return to carry out a further inspection of the school within 6 months of the publication of this letter. We will discuss with Aberdeen City Council the details of this inspection and how the local authority is supporting improvement. When we return to inspect the school we will write to you as parents informing you of the progress the school has made.

Guch Dhillon
HM Inspector