

30 April 2019

Dear Parent/Carer

In January 2018, HM Inspectors published a letter following an inspection of Balwearie High School. The letter set out a number of areas for improvement which we agreed with the school and Fife 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. 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.

Identify key improvement priorities and maintain a strategic overview of the pace of change to ensure that it is manageable and sustainable.

Staff now have a clear understanding of the priorities they are working on in relation to improving the school. There is a large number of working groups and committees through which teachers are collaborating to take forward some key aspects of school improvement. These have been successful in engaging teachers across the school in leading improvement. Senior leaders and teachers have a better understanding of the needs of young people and how they are going to address them. They have developed systems to share information about potential barriers to learning. These are helping teachers to take account of these factors to address the learning needs of young people and improve their wellbeing. Although much has been taken forward since the first inspection, not all of the areas have been fully addressed. There is still a need to prioritise effectively the key areas for improvement.

As planned, develop a shared understanding across the school of what high-quality learning, teaching and assessment look like and ensure that these high standards are applied consistently. Continue to develop the promising approaches to monitoring and tracking young people's progress introduced by the new headteacher. A focus is needed, particularly from S1 to S3, to ensure all young people make appropriate progress.

Teachers are developing a better understanding of high-quality learning and teaching through their work in agreeing the 'Balwearie Learning Framework'. This is supporting a strong commitment to continue to improve professional practice across the school. A significant number of teachers are now involved in sharing their practice. They are leading professional learning sessions to support colleagues to make more effective use of a greater variety of teaching approaches. However, senior leaders acknowledge that the quality of learning and teaching across the school continues to be too variable. Teachers should continue to evaluate the effectiveness of their teaching approaches in improving outcomes for young people. In doing so they should take appropriate account of the views of young people. The school has developed a system to track young people's progress in learning in the senior phase. Approaches for checking the progress of young people in S1 to S3 across their learning are being developed. The school should continue with this development to ensure that teachers can support all young people to maximise their achievement.

As planned, review the S1 to S3 curriculum to ensure that young people benefit from receiving their entitlement to a broad general education.

We had asked school leaders to ensure that all young people receive their entitlements to a broad general education until the end of S3. They also need to address the narrowing of subject choice leading to qualifications and limited course options as young people move into the senior phase. Inspectors acknowledge that the focus for improvement has been on other areas identified during the inspection in 2017. However, steps should have been taken by school leaders to address this more effectively. We have received assurances from the school and local authority that this will now be done as a matter of priority.

Review practices and procedures to ensure the wellbeing and development of all young people. This would enable them all to feel safe and cared for. Strengthening 'pupil voice' across the school would be one approach to contributing to young people's wellbeing.

Staff have reviewed practices and procedures with the clear aim of ensuring young people's wellbeing and development. Teachers have begun to plan in a clearer way for young people who require additional support. They should now review the impact of this work and identify appropriate priorities to take forward. The school's newly devised, agreed and shared values provide a solid foundation to give a greater sense of direction and purpose to the school's work in this area. We have discussed with school leaders the need to take further measures to ensure all young people feel safe within the school building and the wider school environment. A number of approaches to strengthening pupil voice have been adopted. These include ways in which young people are more able to share any concerns they have. School leaders should continue to work to ensure young people are aware of what action has been taken in response to concerns they have raised. There is considerable scope to increase the influence of senior learners in improving the life and work of the school. They would welcome opportunities for increased responsibility and leadership across the school.

As identified by the new headteacher, the school should continue to develop strategies to raise attainment, particularly for the lowest-attaining groups of young people across all stages.

The school has taken a number of steps to support raising attainment. This has included the further development of systems to check the progress of young people, particularly at the senior phase. These systems are supporting teachers to take better account of young people's needs and take steps at an earlier stage to ensure they make appropriate progress in their learning. More targeted interventions are supporting individual learners and groups with identified needs. There is evidence that the attainment of young people in S5 improved in 2018. Senior leaders acknowledge the need to develop the curriculum further to broaden learning pathways at the senior phase to meet the needs of all learners more effectively. There needs to be a focus on ensuring that young people attain and achieve as highly as they possibly can on leaving school. In particular, there remains the need to continue to raise the attainment of the lowest-attaining young people. Teachers should continue their work to identify appropriate evidence which will demonstrate whether the strategies they are using are having the intended impact on raising attainment.

What happens next?

The school has made progress since the original inspection. We are confident that the school, with support from the local authority, has the capacity to continue to improve and so we will make no more visits in connection with this inspection. Fife Council will inform parents about the school's progress as part of its arrangements for reporting on the quality of its schools.

David Drysdale
HM Inspector