

23 January 2024

Dear Parent/Carer

In March 2023, HM Inspectors published a letter on St Duthus School. The letter set out a number of areas for improvement which we agreed with the school and The Highland Council. Recently, as you may know, we visited the school again. During our visit, we talked to children and 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 children and young people's learning and achievements. This letter sets out what we found.

Continue to improve learning and teaching.

All staff continue to show high levels of respect for each learner and the school's vision and values are becoming more evident throughout the school. This helps support the caring, learning environment in which children and young people learn. However, overall the school has made limited progress in this area. Most teachers are beginning to develop how they plan learning to meet the individual needs of children and young people more effectively. They need to continue to drive forward improvements in learning and teaching, ensuring this leads to continued improvements in children and young people's progress and achievements. In the majority of classes teachers plan learning, which meets children and young people's needs well. However, in a few classes, learning takes insufficient account of individual needs. As a result, children and young people do not always take part in their learning. Teachers need to improve further how lessons are planned to ensure they engage children and young people's interest. Teachers are developing their skills in using digital technologies to motivate and engage children and young people in lessons. Staff have undertaken a recent audit with the support of an external agency. This had identified a need to improve further how staff use digital and alternative and augmentative technologies to support learners to communicate. This is an important development, which will help children and young people to make choices and offer their views.

Improve assessment and provide reliable data which demonstrates that children and young people are making progress with their learning.

Teachers are beginning to use a range of assessments to gather information and data on what children and young people are able to do. Whilst the evidence gathered is valid and reliable, teachers have not yet gathered enough evidence to show accurately how well learners are progressing. Teachers are at the very early stages of using assessment evidence to support how they report on learners' progress. Teachers now need to use assessment information to plan lessons, which build more effectively on learners' prior skills and include appropriate levels of challenge. Overall, the school has made limited progress in this area.

Raise the attainment for all and ensure children and young people receive accreditation for their achievement and skills.

The school has made satisfactory progress in this area. All children and young people now access learning across all areas of the curriculum. They enjoy learning in areas new to them, such as science. Young people's attainment in the senior phase shows an increase in the number and level of qualifications they are achieving since the original inspection.

Staff are beginning to develop a better understanding of children and young people's attainment and achievement. Teachers are now exploring how children and young people's achievements can be celebrated and accredited through awards. For example, a few young people are currently working towards achieving a youth achievement award. Staff need to continue to develop how the school celebrates and recognises learners' achievements through as wide a range of ways as possible. This should include working more effectively with partners to support learners to develop their achievements in their local community.

Increase the involvement of parents, children and young people and partners in the work of the school and develop a shared understanding of wellbeing.

The headteacher and staff have made involving parents, children, young people and partners in the work of the school a future improvement priority. Staff have involved the school community in developing the school's values of 'Respect, Achievement, Community, Happiness and Compassion'. Although the school's values are increasingly evident across the school, there is still a need to ensure there is a consistent shared understanding of the uniqueness of St Duthus School. Overall, the acting headteacher and staff have made limited progress involving parents, children, young people and partners in the work of the school.

A few parents are now actively involved in the work of the school. The acting headteacher and staff work well in partnership with these parents to consider how to improve aspects of the work of the school. Parents are leading initiatives such as fundraising within the local community and agreeing with a local supermarket to make check outs more accessible for learners. The acting headteacher and staff should now develop the role of parents further. They need to ensure all parents have opportunities to be fully involved in, or be aware of, the school's improvement priorities. Staff have begun to develop approaches to communicate with parents more effectively. For example, staff are now using digital platforms and newsletters to share children and young people's learning. They should consider developing approaches to communication that parents find more easily accessible. Parents would benefit from the school signposting them to agencies and activities that children and young people can access when not in school.

Staff are at the early stages of supporting children and young people to explore what the wellbeing indicators mean to them. Learners are beginning to show awareness of what helps them feel safe and what activities they enjoy at home and school. Staff are helping learners connect the wellbeing indicators to the school's updated values. Staff should continue to build upon this positive start to support children and young people to understand their own wellbeing and what they need to do to be healthy and safe.

Work together to create leadership opportunities for staff.

Since the original inspection, the acting headteacher has made positive steps to build staff's confidence in helping to improve the work of the school. As a result, a minority of staff are taking on meaningful leadership roles across the school. The acting headteacher should now continue to build all staff's confidence in taking forward leadership roles. Staff are supported well by the acting headteacher to access a range of professional learning. They share their learning with each other, at times informally, to build capacity across the staff team.

Teachers have begun to make contact with local secondary schools to widen young people's opportunities to achieve qualifications. The acting headteacher, with the support of the local authority, should promote stronger links between staff in St Duthus School and local secondary school teachers. This has potential to support young people at St Duthus School to access a wider range of curricular areas and attain more qualifications.

What happens next?

The school has made insufficient progress since the original inspection. We will liaise with The Highland Council regarding the school's capacity to improve. We will return to carry out a further inspection of the school within 12 months of the publication of this letter. We will discuss with The Highland Council the details of this inspection. When we return to inspect the school we will write to you as parents informing you of the progress the school has made.

Graeme Gordon
HM Inspector