

14 March 2017

Dear Parent/Carer

**Alness Academy
The Highland Council**

In May 2015, HM Inspectors published a letter on your child's 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 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.

Improve learning and teaching to engage young people and support them in attaining as highly as possible.

Across the school, learning and teaching have improved. Learning is more active and young people have good opportunities in most classes to work collaboratively and lead learning. As a result they are more motivated and engaged. Staff have made good progress in sharing the purpose of learning with young people and what success looks like. Young people would benefit from more opportunities to reflect on the progress they are making. At present, young people in S1 to S3 do not have a good understanding of their progress and achievements in different subjects. In the senior phase, young people have a better understanding of how well they are doing and their targets in learning. Staff across the school are tracking progress in S1 to S3. They should now use this information to ensure that learning meets the different needs of young people. In too many classes young people were doing the same thing at the same pace despite a range of abilities. Some teachers still require to have higher expectations of what young people can achieve, to ensure appropriate progress is made before beginning the senior phase. Staff should build on the good progress made in developing learning and teaching and continue to work together to share practice. This will ensure young people experience consistently high quality learning experiences across the school.

Senior leaders have recently introduced new approaches to tracking and monitoring that will enable staff to monitor the pace of learning and attainment over time. The school still does not have a clear enough overview of young people's progress from S1 to S3 across all curriculum areas. In the senior phase, attainment in National Qualifications shows improvement in some areas as a result of more rigorous target setting and tracking at whole school level. However, it remains below that of young

people with similar needs and backgrounds in schools across Scotland. Raising attainment, particularly at National 5 and Higher levels, should be a continued focus for the school. The school has increased the number of young people moving to a positive destination after leaving school. While the proportion of young people entering employment remains high, there is still scope to increase the numbers of young people entering higher education.

Review and develop the curriculum to ensure it meets the needs of all young people.

The school has made some progress in developing the curriculum. In S1 to S3, young people continue to follow a broad general education with some good opportunities to make links in their learning across subjects through interdisciplinary learning. These have been well planned with a focus on skills development and opportunities for young people to achieve awards such as the John Muir and Crest awards. Overall, there is still a need to review the pace and challenge in learning in S1 to S3 and ensure young people learn across all curriculum areas. In the senior phase, too many young people are not able to make appropriate course choices. We have asked the school to increase choice and provide different pathways to support young people to achieve more highly. Senior leaders are taking forward plans to strengthen links with local businesses and other partners which are providing greater opportunities for young people to develop skills for work or achieve work related qualifications. The school continues to provide very positive experiences for young people through achievement opportunities such as the Rock Challenge and the Geoscience club both of which have received national recognition.

Develop self-evaluation further to ensure it leads consistently to improvements in young people's learning and achievements.

The school has continued to develop approaches to self-evaluation and these are now more focused on improving outcomes for young people. Staff review learning and teaching and have worked together to improve practice. Class teachers and faculty heads track progress across the broad general education and senior phase and are making better use of tracking information to set targets for improving attainment. Senior leaders and staff have identified good practice in other schools and used this to improve practice, for example, the strategies developed to improve attendance. They should continue to look outwards to other schools as they take forward school improvement. The school has increased opportunities for young people to offer their views through the newly established pupil groups such as the health and wellbeing and learning and teaching committees. However, young people would like more influence in the direction the school is taking. They do not yet feel like they have a voice in school improvement. The school should review the approaches it is using to enable young people and staff to identify wellbeing needs and plan to improve outcomes.

Continue to develop leadership to ensure staff at all levels take appropriate responsibility for improving young people's learning and achievement.

Across the school, there is a strong sense of staff working together to improve the school. Staff have good opportunities to take on leadership roles such as leading working groups, professional learning sessions or developing aspects of the curriculum. They have also shared practice with colleagues at the Highland Learning Festival. This is having a positive impact on motivation and improving practice. The headteacher continues to provide clear direction and leadership. She has used key aspects for development from the original inspection to create an improvement agenda which has been shared with the school community. The recently appointed deputy headteachers are supporting her well in their new roles. Pre-inspection questionnaires indicate that more could be done to develop communication and joint working to improve confidence in leadership at all levels. There is also a need for more leadership and direction from senior leaders to ensure that wellbeing and inclusion underpins the work of the school.

What happens next?

The school has made some progress since the original inspection. We will work with The Highland Council to support ongoing improvements and collaborate with the authority at their next review in 12 months time to share in the gathering of findings about how the school is improving. We will, along with the authority, provide a report for parents. This report will inform any decision made by Education Scotland regarding further engagement.

Mary Byrne
HM Inspector

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