

8 February 2022

Dear Parent/Carer

Her Majesty's Inspectors of Education are currently carrying out visits to some schools and early learning and childcare settings across Scotland. When we wrote to you after the last inspection of Hawick High School, we said that we would engage with the school to report on progress. We recently engaged in discussion with staff and the local authority and carried out a visit to Hawick High School. Our engagement helped us learn more about how young people and their families have been supported through the COVID-19 pandemic. We also heard about approaches that have been working well to support young people's health and wellbeing, learning and progress. We discussed with the headteacher and local authority officer the school's progress in taking forward the recommendations from our original inspection. This letter sets out what we found during our visit.

Supporting children, young people and families through COVID-19

Parents and young people valued the home learning guidance and technical support offered by staff. Commendably, Scottish Borders Council provided all young people with a digital device prior to lockdown. This meant most young people were confident using digital platforms to support their in school and home learning. Staff benefited from professional learning from school digital leaders and the local authority.

Staff maintained regular contact with, and supported the wellbeing of, young people and families well. They arranged health and wellbeing challenges, pastoral staff carried out regular virtual check-ins and youth workers conducted door step visits. These helped young people and families feel cared for. As a result, positive relationships between support staff and families have developed further. The local authority offered young people additional mental health and wellbeing support through two new mobile apps and access to virtual mental health services. These provided, and continue to provide, young people with effective counselling and emotional wellbeing support.

Staff used an engagement tracker well to identify young people who were struggling with online learning and offered support to get them back on track. Staff used the school website effectively to maintain regular communication with the school community.

Since returning to school, all young people in S1 are receiving extra time in English and mathematics to focus on literacy and numeracy. A few young people are also receiving additional targeted support which is helping them progress further. Staff should continue to extend approaches to monitoring the progress of young people with identified gaps in their learning.

While COVID-19 mitigations remain, staff have offered effective virtual events, including primary transition events, assemblies and parents evenings. This is supporting a continued sense of school community.

Progress with recommendations from previous inspection

The previous inspection took place shortly before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. This has affected the pace with which senior leaders and staff have been able to address the recommendations from that inspection. However the headteacher and her team have implemented approaches which are beginning to address areas for improvement. Many of these approaches are showing the potential to lead to sustained improvements.

Senior and middle leaders are developing a more coherent approach to school improvement. Senior leaders have developed an improvement planning cycle to help them measure how much progress is being made in each area identified for improvement. Staff improvement teams have been re-established where teachers are working together to address improvement priorities. There are emerging signs of improvement but the impact is not yet clear. Senior leaders are involving middle leaders more in decision making in the school which has the potential to support strategic leadership moving forward. Senior leaders recognise that parents and young people need to be more fully involved in this process.

Across the school there is more consistency in the structure of lessons and in the quality of learning and teaching experiences for young people. Staff are developing new skills, using a wider range of assessments and are working together better to ensure national standards are applied when marking young people's work. A team of teachers are working together well to improve further the quality of learning and teaching across the school.

Staff are continuing to develop positive relationships with young people. This is leading to a calmer, more focused learning environment. Student support staff are helping some young people to feel more included. Staff are undertaking professional learning to understand better the needs of all young people. For example, all staff have participated in learning about nurturing approaches. Senior leaders should continue to monitor the impact of this and other whole school approaches for young people. Staff have the opportunity to use their professional learning to ensure young people's learning experiences are appropriately challenging. However, staff can better meet the needs of all young people by continuing to develop the range of tasks and activities used in classes. There remains a need to ensure all interventions used to support young people with additional support needs are appropriately planned, with targets set and regularly reviewed.

Senior leaders have re-structured the house system which is helping to create a sense of belonging and community within the school. The purpose of the house system is to improve communication, offer a structure for pastoral support and to allow the achievements of young people to be celebrated.

Senior leaders and staff have improved their approaches to checking the progress of young people, giving regular assessments and feedback to young people and updating parents on young people's next steps. These enhanced approaches are supporting improvements in attainment in the senior phase. Senior leaders recognise an important next step will be to develop similar approaches for young people in S1 – S3. Senior and middle leaders are also developing how they monitor and address the attendance concerns of a few young people. The challenges of COVID-19 have limited opportunities to assess the impact of this so far.

Attainment of young people in the senior phase is improving overall with young people achieving more qualifications at Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) level 4 – SCQF level 6. Young people in the senior phase are attaining well in literacy, and there have been improvements in numeracy. Senior and middle leaders are analysing attainment data more effectively to identify strengths and areas for improvement, such as the attainment of young people in S5. Senior and middle leaders should now consider how data is used to support improved attainment for young people in S1 – S3.

Senior leaders have made improvements to the curriculum, both in school courses and those delivered with partners, including Border College. These are impacting positively on attainment of young people in the senior phase. Staff should ensure all young people are offered courses which build on their previous learning and provide the opportunity to attain the best qualifications possible. As planned, staff should ensure all young people and parents understand the relevance of vocational courses which offer young people work-related skills.

What happens next?

Understandably, the school has been responding to the challenges resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. These have had a significant impact on the work of the school. Staff are implementing plans to support recovery. Staff have also been making progress in taking forward the areas for improvement from the original inspection. We recognise that the school needs some more time to implement fully its priorities for improvement. We have asked Scottish Borders Council to provide us with further information about the school's progress within one year of the publication of this letter. We will work together with local authority officers to agree what will happen next. Should we require another visit to the school, we will inform parents/carers. Scottish Borders Council will continue to inform parents about the school's progress as part of its usual arrangements for reporting on the quality of its education service.

Graham Parry
HM Inspector