

11 June 2013

Dear Parent/Carer

**Galashiels Academy
Scottish Borders Council**

Recently, as you may know, my colleagues and I inspected your child's school. During our visit, we talked to parents and young people and worked closely with the headteacher and staff. We wanted to find out how well young people are learning and achieving and how well the school supports young people to do their best. The headteacher shared with us the school's successes and priorities for improvement. We looked at some particular aspects of the school's recent work, including partnership working, the impact of the baccalaureate on motivating young people at S3 and the impact of distributed leadership on school improvement. As a result, we were able to find out how good the school is at improving young people's education.

How well do young people learn and achieve?

Most young people enjoy school and are keen to learn. They behave well in class and around the school. In most classes, they listen attentively and respond suitably to their teachers. They work well together in pairs and in groups, supporting each other to learn. When given the opportunity, young people enjoy being independent and taking responsibility for their own learning. In a few lessons they are able to assess their own work, reflect on their learning and consider how they can make progress. In some lessons young people's learning is too passive and they need more opportunities to be active and think for themselves. In these lessons, they are unsure how to improve their learning. A more consistent approach is required across the school to help all young people develop their independent learning skills. Young people in the additional support needs (ASN) department feel safe and well cared for in school. They participate effectively in a range of activities which are developing their confidence and social skills.

Young people are achieving well in many sports as individuals and team members. They take great pride in representing their school and community at local and national level. Young people, particularly those in the senior stages, are encouraged to take on leadership roles and develop their citizenship skills. This includes acting as buddies, peer mentors, sports captains and Sports Leaders. Young people develop their skills in performance by participating in many cultural and music events. A wide range of activities, based on partnership working within the local community, enhance young people's learning experiences and help them develop a range of skills including enterprise and employability skills. The school recognises and celebrates the achievements of young people, including through the S3 baccalaureate, award

ceremonies, newsletters and the local press. There is scope to develop further opportunities for accreditation of young people's personal achievements. The school needs to further develop the range of evidence gathered to ensure that all young people are making appropriate progress across all aspects of their learning from S1 to S3. Attainment in national qualifications, overall, is below national averages and below schools serving young people with similar needs and backgrounds. There is scope for more young people to achieve better qualifications. Almost all young people leaving school go on to higher education, further education, employment or training.

How well does the school support young people to develop and learn?

In the majority of lessons, teachers provide a range of activities which are well matched to most young people's needs. However, arrangements for meeting the needs of all young people need to be improved and made more consistent. In some lessons, teacher-led approaches fail to meet the needs of all learners and the pace of learning is too slow, particularly for higher-achieving pupils. Overall, teachers need to provide tasks and activities that help all young people make better progress in their learning. They need to share with young people consistently higher expectations of what they can achieve. The school recognises the need for further work to improve attendance. Guidance staff work hard to meet the needs of the most vulnerable young people. Support staff, including additional needs assistants, help young people to make progress in their learning. Young people with additional support needs would benefit from individualised programmes of learning with clear targets for improvement. These targets should be discussed and developed with the young people, their parents and their teachers. Staff across the school would benefit from more advice on strategies and approaches to meet the learning needs of all young people and from more opportunities to share effective practice in this area. In the ASN department, teachers and support staff know the young people well and provide well-judged support.

The curriculum provides a broad general education from S1 to S3, taking account of Curriculum for Excellence advice and the views of staff, young people and parents. Teachers have worked to develop courses which provide more relevant and interesting learning for young people. The school should continue to review its arrangements at these stages to ensure that young people build on their prior learning and achievement and make appropriate progress by the end of S3. From S4 to S6, the curriculum provides young people with a range of opportunities for gaining appropriate qualifications and for developing skills required for life and work. The school works well with a range of partners who make positive contributions to young people's learning. This includes the School Plus programme at Borders College, the S3 Pathways programme with community learning and development (CLD) and work with Youth Voice to build young people's confidence. Arrangements to support young people as they move from primary to secondary are enhanced through work with CLD. Young people in the additional support needs department would benefit from a wider range of learning opportunities to provide appropriate progression in their learning.

How well does the school improve the quality of its work?

Staff across the school are involved in a range of evaluative activities to support improvement. Teachers reflect on their lessons and discuss and share good practice

at their regular department meetings. Staff are promoting school improvement through their work in “teacher learning community” groups and by observing each other in lessons. They are leading a range of working groups taking forward school improvements. Staff have been developing approaches for monitoring young people’s progress in their learning. These need to be improved in order to raise attainment. The views of young people and their parents are sought through focus groups and questionnaires. The school has innovative plans for improvements to the curriculum from S4 to S6 to meet the needs of young people more effectively. The senior leadership team are introducing more consistent school wide approaches to self-evaluation. In taking this forward, they need to ensure the work has an impact on improving young people’s learning and achievement.

This inspection of your school found the following key strengths.

- The work of committed staff in providing a variety of learning opportunities for young people through the curriculum.
- The school’s innovative approaches to planning for S4 to S6, including through partnership working.
- Young people’s sporting achievements.

We discussed with staff and the education authority how they might continue to improve the school. This is what we agreed with them.

- Raise expectations across the school to improve attainment and achievement.
- Further develop a culture and ethos of inclusion to better meet the needs of all young people.
- Build on existing effective practice to improve the consistency of young people’s learning experiences.

What happens at the end of the inspection?

As a result of our inspection findings we think that the school needs additional support and more time to make necessary improvements. Our Area Lead Officer, along with the local authority, will discuss the most appropriate support in order to build capacity for improvement, and will maintain contact to monitor progress. We will return to the school within 18 months of the date of this letter to consider how the school has improved. We will then issue another letter to parents on the extent of these improvements.

Carol McDonald
HM Inspector

Additional inspection evidence, such as details of the quality indicator evaluations, for your school can be found on the Education Scotland website at [http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/inspectionandreview/reports/school/primsec/Gala shielsAcademyScottishBorders.asp](http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/inspectionandreview/reports/school/primsec/Gala%20shielsAcademyScottishBorders.asp).

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