

28 March 2023

Dear Parent/Carer

In September 2019, HM Inspectors published a letter on Ballater School. The letter set out a number of areas for improvement which we agreed with the school and Aberdeenshire Council. We subsequently returned to the school to look at how it had continued to improve its work, and published another letter in February 2022. Recently, as you may know, we visited the school again. During our visit, we talked to children 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 and at other aspects of the school's work, as proposed by the headteacher. As a result, we were able to find out about the progress the school has made and how well this is supporting children's learning and achievements. This letter sets out what we found.

Raise attainment for all children, with a specific focus on increasing the pace of learning and the challenge in classwork. This includes having higher expectations and standards for all children, including those in the nursery, to attain more in their learning.

Since the original inspection, staff across the school and nursery have taken part in professional learning to refresh their approaches to learning, teaching and assessment. Teachers have adopted new and effective planning formats, programmes of work and teaching techniques to help children to achieve more. Teachers now plan lessons that are appropriately challenging for all children. Teachers and nursery practitioners share together what is working well and agree aspects for further development, during regular staff meetings. Staff should continue with their plans to research good practice beyond their own school and nursery team.

Staff have improved the standards of attainment in literacy and numeracy in the last few years, despite the challenges of the pandemic. The headteacher has introduced more rigorous approaches to check on the progress that children are making. Teachers have grown in confidence in making accurate judgments about children's progress in literacy and numeracy. The school's more robust assessment data shows that most children are on track to achieve expected national levels this year. Around one third of children across the school require additional support with their learning. They are benefiting from helpful, targeted input from teachers and pupil support assistants.

This year, teachers have successfully introduced a new approach to teaching writing. Children's written work is now of higher quality. Children are very proud of their achievements in writing. They talk confidently about their strengths and what they need to do to improve. Teachers are also using new approaches to teach numeracy. There are early signs that children are making better progress and that they have a better understanding of mathematical concepts.

In the nursery class, practitioners continue to have caring and nurturing relationships with children. They have worked successfully together to ensure learning spaces meet children's

varied interests and needs. The outdoor environment offers exciting opportunities for children to explore and be creative. The team has improved their skills in using questions to support and extend children's learning. Practitioners plan real-life opportunities for children to develop their early literacy and numeracy skills through play. Children demonstrate and apply these skills very well across the nursery day. For example, they use their own checklist to carry out the outdoor risk assessment each morning. They write signs for their pretend shop and count the right number of bowls and spoons for the snack table.

The headteacher should work closely with staff to lead learning, teaching and assessment. The staff team should agree a shared understanding of what constitutes high quality learning and teaching and apply this in their work. The headteacher should work with staff to make sure that all school improvement activities lead to improved outcomes for all children.

The headteacher and staff are working successfully as a team to make improvements to learning and teaching. Teachers have recently refreshed the child-friendly version of 'what my learning looks like at Ballater School'. This is helping staff and children to understand more clearly their roles and responsibilities in learning and teaching. As a result, children's learning experiences are of higher quality across the school. Staff have improved how they give feedback to children on their learning. They carry out regular check-ins during lessons and use questions well to assess children's understanding. Children appreciate the helpful written comments that teachers give them about their work. As a result, children are more confident in their learning, and they are taking increasing responsibility for their work. Children are now ready to be more involved in assessing their own learning, and the work of their classmates.

Staff have continued to develop successful approaches to interdisciplinary learning. They plan blocks of learning, based on motivating key questions, across the curriculum. Children help to shape what they learn by identifying what they already know, and what they want to find out about. They very much enjoy learning 'in the zone' each week, to focus on finding the answers to their key questions. Teachers and nursery staff should build on the current transition arrangements for children moving into P1. This would help to ensure that children continue to make strong progress in their learning when they move from nursery to P1.

What happens next?

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

Lesley A Allan
HM Inspector