

25 January 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 Bellsbank Primary School and Early Childhood Centre (ECC), 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 virtual meeting. Our engagement helped us learn more about how children and their families have been supported through the COVID-19 pandemic. We also heard about approaches that have been working well to support children's health and wellbeing, learning and progress. We discussed with the headteacher, depute 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**

The headteacher has managed effectively periods of school closure and remote learning whilst maintaining a strong commitment to school improvement. Senior leaders and staff support and inspire children and families to maximise their potential. Staff feel well supported by the headteacher and depute headteacher. There have been no significant staffing challenges during the pandemic and since the original inspection. A key priority is the ongoing development of the outdoor spaces to support healthy eating, children's sense of place in their community and the importance of physical activity.

Throughout the pandemic, senior leaders and staff have prioritised keeping the school community safe and secure, building upon well-established nurturing relationships. They have worked collaboratively to develop effective communication approaches to support ongoing engagement with families. These approaches help to provide reassurance and ensure a shared understanding of COVID-19 guidance. Regular wellbeing 'check-ins' for all families helped to identify where support was required for digital and remote learning. Senior leaders and staff created a detailed plan and held online parental workshops to support children and families with access to digital devices and online learning platforms. Physical 'learning packs' for all children were prepared and sent home to support learning that was not online.

The headteacher is committed to having children at the heart of everything that the school does. Staff strive to create a child centred environment where children's individual needs and circumstances are always taken into account. Senior leaders and staff recognise parents as partners in their child's education and, as such, should be kept informed and actively involved in discussions and decisions. Staff gather children's views, questions and issues to clarify and address difficulties and challenges. The pupil council, Parent Council and other committees have remained an important element in gathering children's views to support recovery.

To support recovery and children's reconnection with the school and ECC, the curriculum has been reviewed regularly to support balance and responsiveness to children's experiences, needs and family circumstances. Senior leaders and staff recognise that high levels of wellbeing and engagement lead to improved attainment. There remains an appropriate focus on the mental, emotional, social and physical wellbeing of children and their families. The school staff use the principles of nurture effectively, alongside the inclusion of the rights of the child throughout the school environment. This helps children and families to feel included and valued in discussions and approaches to support learning.

Pupil Equity Funding has been used to appoint additional staff and embed a joint teaching approach across the school. This supports the nurture principles and helps children to reconnect with the school environment. In addition, the school prioritised a focus on developing children's future skills to build resilience and prepare children for life and work. Senior leaders have identified the need to develop effective feedback strategies, based on educational research, to improve further children's understanding about what they are learning.

Senior leaders and staff recognise the importance of effective partnerships in supporting recovery, helping to identify wellbeing concerns and address gaps in children's learning. Staff are committed to maintaining and developing further partnerships with home link staff, health professionals, educational psychologists, sports coaches and the voluntary sector.

### **Progress with recommendations from previous inspection**

There has been good progress in developing clear leadership for improving outcomes for all children across the primary school and ECC. Senior leaders have created an effective and collaborative approach to the leadership of school improvement priorities.

Senior leaders and staff have been embedding useful processes to monitor and track children's progress over time. These approaches directly influence improvement priorities. For example, the current focus on writing is based on staff use of data showing lower levels of attainment in this curriculum area. Senior leaders and staff communicate effectively with parents and carers, adapting and modifying different ways to gather views, opinions and information about children's achievements outside school. These approaches have supported effectively parents and carers to improve outcomes for children and shape school improvements.

Since the original inspection, staff have undertaken significant work to strengthen the curriculum through the development of clear progression frameworks. A refreshed curriculum rationale is now in place that reflects the shared values of the school community. Senior leaders and staff plan to revisit the curriculum rationale in partnership with all stakeholders to ensure that it supports the school to raise attainment in a post-COVID school community. This should ensure children and families understand the purpose of the curriculum at Bellsbank Primary School and ECC, and how it links to the local community. Senior leaders and staff have created policies across all curriculum areas, alongside new planners and frameworks that increasingly support staff to plan together. Senior leaders, teachers and support staff are now well-placed to continue to improve the curriculum.

Staff have taken very positive steps to improve learners' experiences of high quality learning, teaching and assessment. Overall, learning is planned at the right level of difficulty for children. There is a calm, more settled environment in the new school building. The headteacher is creating and supporting an ethos of trust and joint working amongst staff to facilitate use of the open plan environment to develop shared approaches to learning and teaching. This is being taken forward as COVID-19 guidance permits. Staff engage in professional learning linked to improving learning and teaching approaches. There is a developing focus on children leading their own learning.

The headteacher outlined how COVID-19 disruptions to learning through periods of school closure and remote learning have significantly impacted the pace of learning and overall attainment for the majority of children at Bellsbank Primary School and ECC. Staff use of local authority tracking and monitoring systems is supporting teachers to make more accurate judgements of children's progress. The newly developed curriculum policies outline what is expected from all staff in undertaking assessments and ensure a shared understanding and consistent approach. Senior leaders plan to continue to review assessments to ensure children are fully involved in any feedback. This will support children to understand how to lead their own learning and know when they have been successful. This should ensure all children receive the support they need to make the best possible progress in their learning.

### 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 addressed the recommendations from the original inspection successfully. As a result, we will make no more visits to the school in connection with the original inspection. East Ayrshire 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.

Louise Phillips  
HM Inspector