

1 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 Gilcomstoun School, we said 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 to Gilcomstoun School. 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 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

Senior leaders prioritised quickly what was required to support children and staff with the challenges of COVID-19. Senior leaders and staff made regular contact with children to check on wellbeing during periods of remote learning. They organised for children who missed their friends' company to meet together informally using digital technology. Children completed surveys based on national wellbeing indicators. Staff used this information to provide individual support to help children cope with the pandemic. During the first period of remote learning 'Wellbeing Wednesdays' were introduced. Following feedback from parents, this health and wellbeing focus became 'Feel Good Fridays' during the second period of remote learning. This aimed to reduce time on screen, with children engaging in learning outdoors and creative activities. Since returning to in-school learning, staff continue to increase learning outdoors to support all children's wellbeing.

Staff worked well together to share practice in the effective use of digital technology to support children learn from home. A full programme of online learning was offered across both Gaelic and English medium. Some children, who shared devices with other members of their family, were given a digital device or paper-based learning packs. This increased children's engagement with learning. Teachers of Gaelic Medium Education offered additional online live meets to help children retain their fluency in the language. At times, all children in Gaelic Medium Education were online together to support the community ethos they have created for learning through the medium of Gaelic. On children's return to in-school learning, teachers retained a focus on listening and talking in Gaelic. This is building children's confidence in their use of Gaelic, whilst supporting their skills in reading and writing.

All staff have monitored children's progress in learning since returning to school buildings. Teachers are aware of where children are in their learning. As a result, children who have English as an additional language are focusing on listening and talking, and reading and writing in English. Whilst learning remotely, parents very helpfully used children's first language to support literacy skills. Parents were not always able to support English language

learning. In both Gaelic and English Medium, additional staff are used to increase children's learning time with an adult on a one-to-one and small group basis.

Progress with recommendations from previous inspection

Senior leaders highlight the challenges of providing cover for teacher absences and periods of self-isolation. However, senior leaders continue to make progress with action points agreed with them as part of the original inspection. Senior leaders have clear leadership remits. They undertake a number of key activities to be confident in recognising what is going well in the school and what needs to improve. They capture the results of this in an improvement plan. This plan should continue to focus on raising attainment, delivering total immersion and realising the breadth of the curriculum.

Senior leaders meet teachers to discuss children's progress and agree how to help children make better progress. There remains potential for children's attainment to be better.

A deputy headteacher leads on early learning and childcare through the medium of Gaelic and English. There have been a few staff changes in early learning and childcare. The deputy headteacher supports new staff settle into their roles. In Gaelic Medium Education, staff have set up a playroom with children aged three to Primary 1 learning through immersion play. Currently, children do not receive total immersion in Gaelic. There should be a continued focus on actively recruiting staff in order that play is delivered through total immersion. Staff and senior leaders should continue using 'The Advice on Gaelic Education' to maintain and extend the improvements they are making. A deputy headteacher is part of a strategic leadership group whose remit is to advance high-quality 3-18 Gaelic Medium Education within the city. Currently, the group is improving children's continuation in Gaelic Medium Education as they move from primary to secondary school. Commendably, a teacher of Gaelic Medium Education at Hazlehead Academy offers effective activities with children in Primary 6 to prepare them for learning at secondary school. This session all Primary 7 learners continued with Gaelic Medium Education at Hazlehead Academy. The strategic leadership group should also ensure that staff are receiving specialist feedback on the Gaelic aspects of their work.

Staff place a high emphasis on literacy, numeracy and health and wellbeing through Gaelic and English. Throughout the challenges of COVID-19, staff have worked together safely to agree standards. They plan and share practice to ensure consistency of online and face-to-face learning across the school. Staff have changed their three-year curriculum plan to respond to the current COVID-19 challenges. They should now continue with plans to improve the curriculum. This needs to have a particular focus on developing relevant skills for learning, life and work through the medium of Gaelic and English.

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. They continue to make positive progress in successfully addressing the recommendations from the original inspection. As a result, we will make no more visits to the school in connection with the original inspection. Aberdeen City Council will continue to inform parents about the school's progress as part of its usual arrangements for reporting on the quality its education service.

Joan C. Esson
HM Inspector