

18 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 Harlaw Academy, 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 Harlaw Academy. 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 new 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

COVID-19 has had, and continues to have, a significant impact on staffing and attendance of young people. Senior leaders experience daily challenges to ensure that all classes are covered by teachers and that young people experience continuity in their learning. Most staff implemented the delivery of the curriculum online from late March 2020. Arrangements were put in place to ensure that young people had access to appropriate digital technology. The school then focused on building staff capacity to deliver online learning.

Staff introduced a number of important measures designed to support young people. These included seeking the views of learners and parents to identify strengths and areas for improvement; ensuring regular contact with young people; and improving communication with the school community. In addition, personal and social education courses and programmes were revised to better meet the needs of learners.

Registration time has been re-introduced this session to help to provide a daily routine and to ensure that young people have the opportunity to build strong relationships with one specific member of staff.

Progress with recommendations from previous inspection

The new headteacher took up post in March 2020, three weeks prior to the first national lockdown. He reviewed and refreshed the remits of the senior leadership team and re-structured the pupil support faculty. These actions are leading to greater clarity in areas of responsibility and better access to support for young people. The school improvement plan now provides greater clarity on the schools areas for improvement. This is set around improving the culture and the breadth of the school curriculum. However, progress with these areas of work has, understandably, been impacted by COVID-19.

Senior leaders now need to improve significantly their approaches to monitoring and evaluating the work of the school. Measures introduced to date, are not yet sufficiently

rigorous or used consistently across the school to impact fully on young people's experiences. Staff need to be able to evaluate the difference they are making to help young people achieve as highly as possible.

There are emerging signs of an improving culture and a climate for purposeful learning in place. This is based on strong, respectful relationships between staff and young people, and young people themselves. Most young people respond well to teachers' guidance and instructions. Staff are currently developing a promoting positive relationships policy. Positive and productive relationships have been built with the Parent Council.

Teachers and young people use digital technology well to support learning within and outwith the classroom environment. This is helping young people who are unable to attend school to continue with their learning at home. For a few young people, this is also supporting the development of their organisational and independent learning skills.

Young people, in the majority of lessons, are clear about the purpose of their learning activities and what success looks like. They do not always understand what they need to do to improve. Young people would benefit from more conversations with teachers about their progress. Where these conversations are happening, young people are more aware of what they are good at and how they can improve their work. There is stronger practice of this in the senior phase in S4 to S6. In a few strong lessons, teachers have high expectations, share clear purposes for learning and tasks and activities are set appropriately for each young person. In these lessons, young people are motivated, engage well and, through effective questioning, are encouraged to think deeply about their learning. In too many lessons however, young people are not sufficiently challenged or motivated to learn. Across the school, teachers need to take steps to ensure learning activities are planned to meet the different needs of all young people. Young people's learning experiences across the school are too variable overall. There is strong practice in a few departments that staff could build on. Teachers should now work together to be clear about what effective learning, teaching and assessment looks like.

Senior leaders have developed methods of gathering together information about young people's progress from a range of sources in the senior phase. This includes information about a young person's predicted and attained grade in National Qualifications. This information is helping teachers to check that their professional judgement of attainment is reliable. Middle and senior leaders now need to continue to develop further this approach, to include a wider range of data, and also introduce similar approaches in the broad general education. The school should continue to develop approaches to assess and monitor young people's progress from S1 to S3 to ensure young people at these stages attain as highly as possible.

There are some signs of improving attainment in the senior phase. Staying on rates and initial learner destinations to university, college and into the workplace are improving. The percentages of young people leaving school with qualifications in literacy and numeracy at SCQF level 4 or better are also improving. From S4 to S6, attainment in National Qualifications remains below that of young people with similar needs and backgrounds. Teachers now need to ensure that they have a better understanding of where young people are in their learning and how to measure the impact of any additional support. Staff should also encourage and enable young people to have higher aspirations by ensuring that courses

and programmes are sufficiently challenging. Senior leaders and staff do not yet have a clear enough overview of young people's progress from S1 to S3, across all curriculum areas. Senior leaders are aware that teachers need to continue to raise the attainment of all young people and secure stronger achievement in national examinations. Staff should continue to raise expectations of what young people can do and achieve.

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 prioritising their plans to support recovery. As a result, the school needs more time to take forward the recommendations from the original inspection. We will carry out another visit to the school within one year of the publication of this letter. When we carry out another visit, we will write to you informing you of the progress the school has made.

Frances E Graham
HM Inspector