

6 May 2014

Dear Parent/Carer

**Stranraer Academy
Dumfries and Galloway 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 the development of young people's citizenship skills in social subjects, and their higher order thinking skills across the school. We also explored the development of young people's leadership skills. 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?

Across the school, Learning Centre and Aird Unit, young people benefit from supportive and respectful relationships with each other and their teachers. Most feel safe and well cared for. They enjoy their learning, feel that they are getting on well with their school work and they get help when they need it. They value the extra support offered by their teachers through study classes and Easter School. In a few subjects, young people benefit from talking about their learning with their teachers, contributing to the planning of lessons and learning in real-life contexts. Overall, the quality of learning is not consistently high enough across the school. Young people need more opportunities to take on greater responsibility for their own learning. They do not always understand what they need to do to improve. They would welcome opportunities to have a greater say in the way they learn. Young people in the Learning Centre and Aird Unit assume responsibilities which take account of their needs. They would benefit from more opportunities to develop independence, make choices, express their preferences and contribute in lessons. Young people benefit from effective use of information and communications technology in a few areas of the school.

Young people are developing a broad range of skills for life and work by participating in enterprise, cultural, sporting, volunteering and leadership activities and events. Increasing numbers of young people are successful in having their skills recognised through awards such as Dynamic Youth and Sports Leadership Awards. A significant number of young people are developing positive attitudes, self-confidence and leadership skills through participation in The Duke of Edinburgh's Award scheme and

the Columba 1400 initiative. Young people's participation in groups such as the science club or charities group and in social subjects projects such as *Project Fish* or *Project Linda*, is developing their citizenship skills well. Such participation is developing their ability to research, analyse and evaluate topical issues. Young people at the upper stages have a range of opportunities to develop their leadership skills. These opportunities should be more available to young people at all stages so that they can develop their skills progressively. The school recognises the need to develop further its approaches to tracking and monitoring young people's achievements to ensure they all benefit from the opportunities on offer.

Most young people from S1 to S3, including those in the Learning Centre and Aird Unit, are making suitable progress. The literacy skills of a group of young people have significantly improved through involvement in the *Scotland Reads* programme. Young people's progress is tracked by individual departments. However, the school does not collate such information and therefore does not have a clear enough view of young people's attainment from S1 to S3. In recent years, the school's performance in national examinations from S4 to S6 has improved in a number of key measures, for example, the proportion of young people gaining a General award or better at Standard Grade by the end of S4. Its performance now broadly matches or is better than that of schools which serve young people with similar needs and backgrounds. The school needs to address under-performance in a few departments through more rigorous analysis of exam results and tracking of young people's progress. The school recognises that the number of young people moving on from school to enter employment, training, further or higher education in recent years has been decreasing and is taking a number of positive steps to address this.

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

Most teachers plan lessons carefully. However, too many lessons are teacher-led and on these occasions, young people are not engaged enough to ensure that they remain focused on their learning. In many lessons observed, the pace of learning was too slow and did not meet young people's needs. Teachers need to ensure that they plan suitably challenging activities for higher-attaining young people. Teachers across the school need to have consistently high expectations of what young people can achieve. The school's commitment to caring for and supporting young people, including those in the Learning Centre and Aird Unit, is commendable. Young people who require additional support with their learning are identified early and pupil support staff provide them with effective support. Support for learning staff share helpful advice and strategies for supporting individual learners. The pupil support team work with various partners including speech and language therapists, visual impairment specialists, and autism outreach workers to support young people with diverse needs. Support plans to help those with additional needs should be reviewed with a wider range of staff and partners and could contain more specific learning targets to enable young people to understand their progress better. There is scope to improve the overall coordination of pupil support to enable strategies to be put in place sooner and for resources to be targeted more efficiently.

Teachers have planned courses and programmes taking account of Curriculum for Excellence advice. Young people in S1 and S2 benefit from a broad curriculum.

At S3, young people have opportunity to make choices and deepen their learning across different subjects. Not all young people at S3 are currently continuing to experience a broad enough curriculum. There is a need to plan the development of young people's literacy, numeracy and health and wellbeing better across the curriculum. Teachers are making good progress in planning courses at S4 to prepare young people for the new National Qualifications. The school is continually reviewing and developing its curriculum. A few young people are able to study for a limited number of vocational courses through college links. The school makes arrangements such as video-conferencing to offer a range of Advanced Highers. There is much scope however, to improve the range of courses and experiences for young people from S4 to S6, including those in the Learning Centre and Aird Unit, to cater for differing needs, interests and aspirations. A few subject departments such as science and home economics are developing stronger links with primary schools which is helping young people to build on what they have already learned when they enter S1. We have asked staff to improve arrangements for supporting young people in the Aird Unit as they move on from school. The school recognises the need to ensure that there are appropriate arrangements in place for religious observance.

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

The school has a range of approaches for evaluating the quality of its work. These include the use of surveys, reviewing examination results with departments and classroom visits by senior managers to observe learning. The school is aware that it needs to do more to seek out and take into account the views of pupils and parents. In some faculties, staff are highly reflective and their planning for improvement is having a positive impact on young people's experiences. Overall however, whole-school approaches to monitoring and improving the quality of young people's learning and achievements are not effective enough. Staff visit colleagues' classes, mainly within their own department, to share good practice. We have asked the school to share good practice across the school better to ensure that young people's learning experiences are of a more consistently high standard. For example, the development of young people's higher order thinking skills led by the English department needs to be extended across the school so that young people benefit more widely from this approach.

There is a strong sense of community across staff, young people and parents. Staff readily give of their own time to provide a range of out-of-class activities to enable young people to achieve more widely. There is scope for them to develop their leadership skills further and take on roles and responsibilities across the school. In his time in post, the headteacher has led improvements in morale, teamwork across the school and links with key partners in the community. Over recent years, the number of young people excluded from school has fallen significantly. Depute headteachers are committed to improving the school. Each brings individual strengths to the senior management team (SMT). The SMT need to work together to ensure that they complement each others' strengths better, develop a shared approach to improvement and provide a clear direction to staff across the school. With support from Dumfries and Galloway Council, the school has the capacity to improve further.

This inspection found the following key strengths.

- Improvements in important aspects of performance in recent years, including the impact of the *Scotland Reads* programme on the development of young people's literacy skills.
- The important contribution of pupil support and additional support needs staff to meeting young people's needs.
- The sensitivity of staff in the Aird Unit and Learning Centre to young people's health and learning needs.
- The sense of community among young people, staff and parents.

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

- Continue to improve the consistency of the quality of learning and teaching and to raise expectations of what young people can achieve.
- Develop effective ways of tracking, monitoring and reporting young people's progress and achievements across the curriculum, to ensure they attain as highly as possible.
- Improve the impact of self-evaluation on the quality of the curriculum and young people's learning and achievement.
- Improve teamwork and leadership of senior managers to provide a clear sense of direction.

What happens at the end of the inspection?

We are satisfied with the overall quality of provision. We are confident that with support from Dumfries and Galloway Council and Education Scotland, the school will be able to make further agreed improvements. Our Area Lead Officer along with Dumfries and Galloway Council, will discuss the most appropriate support to build further capacity for improvement and will maintain contact to monitor progress. Parents will be informed of the extent to which the school has improved.

Marie McAdam
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/StranraerAcademyDumfriesandGalloway.asp>

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