

Learning  
together

# Learning Together: Lessons about school improvement

An HMIE report on how schools get better



**HMIE**

improving Scottish education  
leasachadh foghlam na h-Alba

# **Learning Together: Lessons about school improvement**

**An HMIE report on how schools get better**

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## FOREWORD

I am pleased to be introducing the second edition of this report as one of the first publications to appear in my time as Senior Chief Inspector. The inspectorate has a unique level of access to seeing, at first hand, how schools and teachers across Scotland are responding to the day-to-day challenges of improving the quality of what they provide for learners. I believe we have a responsibility to make the knowledge that we gain from that access more widely available across the system, so others can take learn from it and improve their own practice as a result.

The reports in the *Learning Together* series are designed to serve exactly that purpose, by drawing out lessons from real examples of schools which have been successful in driving forward improvement.

This particular report is based on evidence from our ‘follow-through’ programme. ‘Follow-through’ inspections take place when an initial inspection has identified some important weaknesses. They involve an extra level of extended engagement between HMIE and the schools. It is good to see that many of the schools in this situation have been able to make very substantial improvements in the period following their initial inspection.

To produce this report we analysed around 300 HMIE follow-through inspections which were carried out between 2005 and 2008. For this latest edition, we also updated the evidence base with some more recent findings. The results are very encouraging. With support from their local authorities, many schools had addressed key weaknesses effectively and brought the quality of what they were providing up to at least a satisfactory level, often better. The experience of these schools provides important insight into ways in which staff can bring about significant improvements in a relatively short space of time.

We can learn a great deal from their experience. Although there is no single recipe for success, there are consistent ingredients. The first is a clear recognition amongst staff of the need for improvement. The second is the development of a culture of high expectations, where high standards are pursued consistently and relentlessly for all young people. The third is the use of self-evaluation to focus development activity and energy on the areas which make the greatest difference for learning and learners. And perhaps the key ingredient is effective leadership – leadership which secures the strong engagement of all staff in the endeavour to improve with a strong determination to succeed.

Whilst this report shows how ingredients like these have led to improvement in schools which have had specific weaknesses in the past, many of the same ingredients are needed for successful implementation of *Curriculum for Excellence* now and in the future. It is partly for that reason that I thought it would be particularly timely to issue a second edition now, as schools are busy preparing for the next phase of implementing the new curriculum framework later this year.

I would encourage everyone in schools and local authorities to take time to give serious consideration to the lessons highlighted in this report. I trust you will find them useful as you plan, with your partners, to improve quality and outcomes for your learners.

Dr Bill Maxwell  
HM Senior Chief Inspector

## Section 1: Introduction

Follow-through visits are a well-established part of the process of HMIE inspection of schools. Since 2003 we have revised the arrangements for follow-through to achieve an increasingly proportionate approach. From then, our engagement with a school following inspection has been directly related to the school's overall performance and its capacity for improvement. This proportionate approach allows our resources to be targeted on direct involvement where it is most needed and can have most impact. We carry out follow-through visits to schools around two years after the original inspection. In some cases we carried out interim follow-through inspection visits within one year.

This report is mainly based on an analysis of the progress found in over 300 HMIE follow-through inspections on which reports were published between 2005 and 2008. The work was undertaken in schools in which we had previously identified important or major weaknesses in key aspects. In those follow-through inspections we found much evidence of improvement and were able in most cases to disengage from further inspection activity in connection with the original inspection. This report identifies the key factors which led to improvement. It also draws on evidence from other HMIE tasks which identified successful approaches to school improvement.

We think that the key improvement factors which we have identified are relevant and applicable to all schools. We therefore believe that education authorities will be able to use the advice as they work to improve their schools, sustaining high performance and helping good schools to become even better and to demonstrate all the features which are required for *Curriculum for Excellence*.

In this section we set out some key statistics about school improvement. The next section sets out general factors which are important in ensuring that schools improve. The following sections contain detailed and specific advice about key levers for improvement related to the ten dimensions of *Journey to Excellence*. We include a number of case studies of improvement in individual schools.

### **Follow-through decisions and the factors influencing them**

From 2005 to 2008, the overall proportion of inspections of primary schools in which HMIE follow-through was necessary was 20%. HMIE follow-through was necessary in 33% of secondary schools and 29% of special schools inspected.

Follow-through took place when we found important or major weaknesses in key aspects of a school's work. Among the most significant factors were the quality of the school's self-evaluation processes and the quality of leadership. If there were weaknesses in these aspects then the school's capacity for improvement was low. The extent to which pupils' learning needs were met, and the quality of pupils' learning experiences were important factors too, as were the quality of a school's curriculum and learner attainment.

More recently, the proportion of schools in which HMIE carry out follow-through has fallen to around 10% of all schools inspected. This reduction has come about because

we decided to be more proportionate in our inspections and carry out follow-through in a smaller proportion of schools. As a consequence we are now able to focus our resources more closely and carry out interim follow-through visits within one year in almost all schools which require follow-through.

### **Findings in follow-through reports**

In follow-through inspections in primary schools from 2005 to April 2008, we judged that, in most cases (86%), the school had improved to at least a satisfactory standard and further inspection was not required. This represents considerable improvement. Only 14% of those schools required further follow-through visits. Overall then, only around 3% of all primary schools<sup>1</sup> inspected were not at a satisfactory standard at the time of the original inspection or by the time the follow-through inspection was carried out.

In follow-through inspections in secondary and special schools over the same period, we found that in around three-quarters of all cases (73% and 75% respectively) further inspection activity was not required. This represents considerable improvement too. It means that fewer than 10% of secondary and special schools inspected were not at a satisfactory level at the time of the original inspection or by the time of follow-through.

In all sectors, only a very small number of those schools which required a further follow-through visit were unable to improve to a satisfactory standard by the time of the second follow-through visit.

From April 2008 to the present, the proportion of schools in which we were able to disengage from further inspection activity after a second, two-year follow-through visit has remained similar to previous figures – around 85% of primary schools and 71% of secondary schools. The number of special schools in which follow-through inspections were carried out over that period is too small to quote accurate percentages, but the number requiring a further follow-through visit was very small.

These more recent statistics indicate significant improvement in schools which previously had important weaknesses. It is to the credit of staff in these schools and education authorities that they worked effectively together and with partners to address weaknesses in provision and improve outcomes for their learners.

What has helped me most has been the continuing discussion with HMIE and my education authority about how to take the school forward, and now, the clear endorsement from the follow-through inspection that we are moving in the right direction and making very good progress. This is a huge boost to me and to the confidence of the staff.

**Headteacher of a primary school**

<sup>1</sup> We carried out follow-through inspection in 20% of primary schools inspected, and needed to undertake further follow-through inspection activity in 14% of those. Fourteen percent of 20% is around 3% of all primary schools inspected in the period. Similarly for secondary and special schools, 27% of 33% is around 9%, and 25% of 29% is around 7%.





## A CASE STUDY OF IMPROVEMENT IN A PRIMARY SCHOOL

At the time of the initial inspection a number of important weaknesses were found, including in meeting pupils' needs, leadership and self-evaluation. There were also weaknesses in the accommodation. The education authority provided strong support to help staff address all the main points for action. Following the retirement of the headteacher, a seconded headteacher worked with the school staff between the inspection and the summer holidays to prepare a thorough plan for improvement. An acting headteacher was appointed after the summer break to continue to lead the implementation of the improvement plan. Staff worked hard together, with strong support from the education authority, to address the main points for action. The acting headteacher was subsequently appointed to the post on a permanent basis.

Working with staff the acting headteacher identified ways in which to achieve the necessary improvements.

- Staff worked to improve the meaningful involvement of all stakeholders.
- The acting headteacher was successful in encouraging partnership and team work.
- She created staff time for professional discussion and sharing good practice.
- Staff were supported to experiment and take measured risks.
- Clear and effective channels of communication were established.
- Attention was focused on improving outcomes for all learners.
- Attainment and achievements were celebrated, and raising achievement became the key school priority.

Within a year, staff had implemented a number of approaches which were beginning to enable them to monitor pupil's progress in learning more effectively. The role of the support for learning teacher had been substantially amended to enable her to take more responsibility for helping teachers meet learners' needs well. The acting headteacher had implemented wide-ranging mechanisms for monitoring the work of the school and was providing strong visionary leadership during this period of improvement and change. Aspects of the accommodation had been upgraded. After a further year, HM Inspectors were able to disengage from any further inspection activity in connection with the original inspection.



## Section 2: General factors leading to school improvement

We found that the process of HMIE inspection often provided a spur to action for taking the school forward. Many staff felt that engagement with inspectors provided a clear agenda for action and a heightened sense of urgency about the need for improvement. Of course, schools do not need to wait until HMI visit. The improvement process begins with schools knowing themselves through rigorous self-evaluation activities and education authorities validating their findings. It is important for education authorities to promote a culture of self-evaluation in their schools and a commitment to improvement in response.

The inspection was a wake-up call to us. We had been led to believe that we were doing well. We were galvanised into action, and started to become more involved in talking about what we needed to do to improve. The education authority helped the headteacher to work with us to get the best out of every member of staff for the benefit of the learners.

### **A teacher in a special school**

Our evidence shows that acceptance by staff of the school's strengths and development needs, whether identified through inspection or self-evaluation, is a prerequisite for improvement. In schools where staff do not accept the nature and extent of weaknesses in the school's work, improvement is significantly slower. It is therefore important to ensure that all staff are involved in gathering a wide range of evidence on the school's performance, analysing the evidence to identify strengths and weaknesses, using benchmarks and comparisons where appropriate, and planning for improvement. The role of the education authority in moderating the school's view of itself is crucial. The involvement of stakeholders in preparing and implementing the school improvement plan is also an important factor.

While introducing a new headteacher or other staff can have a positive impact in schools which need to improve, training and support for existing senior leaders are often helpful in achieving school improvement. Overall, increased effectiveness of leadership at all levels is a key factor in improving the outcomes for learners. More detail about how leadership can be enhanced in schools is given later in this report.

Not surprisingly, effective challenge and support from the education authority for the school are important factors in improvement. The most effective approach is a proportionate one in which education authority resources and support are targeted on the schools where they are most needed, regardless of where a school might sit in the overall cycle of HMIE inspection.

The role of education authority quality improvement officers (QIOs) is central. Schools often benefit from QIO involvement which is matched to the need for support. Where improvement is most marked, education authorities have often provided support at all levels within the school. This support takes a number of forms, including working with

principal teachers, departmental staff and class teachers in primary, secondary and special schools to plan, implement and monitor improvements. In schools where there is most improvement there is an explicit, targeted and sustained focus on enhancing the key aspects of learning, teaching and achievement.

In general, the schools involved in the follow-through process were not provided with substantial amounts of additional resources or allocated significant numbers of additional staff by the education authority. Where additional staff or resources were provided they were usually targeted for specific periods of time and for specific purposes.



### **A CASE STUDY OF IMPROVEMENT IN A PRIMARY SCHOOL**

At the time of the inspection, the school was found to be satisfactory overall, but with some important weaknesses in self-evaluation. The school did not know itself well and, as a result, the findings from the inspection were less positive than most staff were expecting. On the whole, staff had difficulty in accepting the findings and were unclear about how to improve. Both depute headteachers left their posts. The headteacher remained in post.

The Education Authority (EA) took strong and supportive action following the inspection. It deployed a quality improvement officer to work with the senior leadership team and staff. HMIE continued to engage with the school and EA to support ongoing improvement and monitor progress. The district inspector met with the headteacher and senior EA representatives to discuss the inspection findings and advise on strategies for improvement. The headteacher was, at that stage, unable to come to terms with the inspection findings and unwilling to see where improvements were needed.

The EA continued with focused support to the school. It supported staff to visit other schools to observe good practice and provided focused development activities to ensure that staff had the necessary training to help them to improve. The EA also supported the school to evaluate its work. Staff began to see where they had made improvements and there was a better understanding in the school about what needed to get better. The district inspector visited the school to talk with the senior management team and to visit classes. Staff were asked to volunteer to have a short visit and this process helped them see the original inspection in a more positive light.

Eighteen months later, the headteacher and staff had accepted the findings at the original inspection and had realised, through reflection and working with EA staff, what needed to be improved. There had been significant changes to staffing and the headteacher had found that the new staff group were keen to improve the school's provision and ensure high quality experiences for learners. There was a renewed enthusiasm and determination amongst staff, who were keen to demonstrate their new skills.

By the time of the HMIE follow-through inspection staff were very positive and proud of their achievements. The school had made good progress in each of the main points for action, notably in improving leadership and the quality of learning. Staff reported that dialogue with inspectors, EA officers and among themselves had supported their work and encouraged them to continue to improve. HMIE did not need to carry out any further visits in connection with the original inspection.

## Section 3 Specific factors leading to school improvement

### Improving learning and achievement

#### **Journey to Excellence Dimension 1 – the school engages young people in the highest quality learning activities.**

Learning as personal development, active learning, meeting children's learning needs.

#### **Journey to Excellence Dimension 2 – the school focuses on outcomes and maximises success for all learners.**

Planning and assessing the outcomes of learning, and reflecting on, recording and reporting success in achieving outcomes.

Improvement of the curriculum is often effected within the context of developing a shared understanding of the principles and purposes of the curriculum and how they are to be implemented. This understanding can be developed through rigorous and comprehensive whole-school review of the curriculum, with the involvement of all staff, and parents<sup>2</sup> and learners against the expectations of the curriculum. Schools which improve the curriculum apply the principles of curriculum flexibility and innovation effectively to meet the needs of all learners. They clarify study choices and progression routes, with the involvement of staff, learners and parents in the process. They broaden the range of activities for learners to achieve more widely in arts, cultural, sporting, citizenship, health and enterprise pursuits.

One of the most significant improvements which a school can make is to raise the quality of learning and teaching for all children and young people to a consistently high level. They can achieve this through more 'opening up' of learning, for example through observation and shared teaching sessions, or through discussions about the appropriateness of particular teaching approaches for their purpose. Better help for children and young people to develop their learning skills can also help to improve outcomes. In schools which improve the quality of learning and teaching, staff more consistently explain the purpose of lessons and the expected learning outcomes with learners at the start of each lesson and they review these at the end of the lesson effectively. They encourage note-taking and other organisational skills, and foster good homework habits. They encourage and support learners to learn independently and in groups, and to use information and communications technology (ICT) to help their learning, including undertaking projects and research and presenting their findings. They also improve the way in which learners are given advice about their strengths and what they need to do to improve their work.

<sup>2</sup> Throughout this report, the term 'parents' should be taken to include foster carers, residential care staff and carers who are relatives or friends.

There is strong evidence that improved assessment and tracking of learners' progress contribute to better learning and achievement. Staff in many schools which have improved implement more effective target-setting and monitoring for individual learners. In secondary schools they develop better linkages between pastoral staff and class teachers to improve staff knowledge of individual learners. Working with colleagues in primary schools they develop the way in which learners' progress is tracked from P6 through to S2.

The involvement of staff, learners and parents in the development of a clear understanding of what constitutes effective learning and teaching is important in bringing about improvement.

In improving schools, senior promoted staff lead the development and more consistent use of a whole-school learning and teaching approach which takes into account, among other things, the need for good ethos and expectations, appropriate pace and challenge, and positive behaviour.

Staff also increase the focus on the learning needs of individuals.

Positive approaches to improvement include the following.

- Identifying best learning and teaching practice and sharing it with all staff.
- Leadership of a more systematic and rigorous approach to developing active engagement by children and young people in their learning and improving achievement.
- Improving the provision and use of ICT to enhance the quality of learning.
- Earlier identification of underperforming learners and the provision of targeted support for them.
- Better differentiation of tasks, activities and resources for learners.
- More direct involvement of learners in devising, planning and monitoring their own learning.
- Clearer identification by all teachers of the expected learning outcomes for groups and individuals, and rigorous monitoring of the achievement of these outcomes.

The original inspection report made for uncomfortable and disappointing reading, but we soon recognised that we had to get on with improving things. Now we are pleased that we did. The school has been transformed. The children are achieving more than they did before.

**Teacher in a primary school**

Improvements in learners' achievements come about through processes which lead to improved learning experiences for them. For example, better identification and sharing by staff of good practice in learning and teaching, within the school and in other schools, often leads to better achievement. Good practice often includes better questioning by teachers to rehearse and take account of prior learning, and to promote independent thinking skills. Encouraging better dialogue between teachers and learners, and among learners as they work in groups to solve problems and develop critical thinking skills, is an important factor in improving learners' achievement.

Other successful approaches include the following.

- Improving the pace of learning through setting more challenging expectations, more effective planning of lessons by teachers and better involvement of learners.
- Targeting and focusing input from support for learning staff more effectively.
- More effective use of homework, through broadening the range of types of task, providing better differentiated tasks, and discussing learners' work more effectively with individuals and groups to highlight strengths and areas for improvement.
- Encouraging and embedding pupil mentoring schemes and similar approaches to providing support.
- Sharpening the focus on the development of learners' literacy and numeracy skills across the curriculum.
- Ensuring that learners understand their next steps in learning and see purpose and relevance in the tasks they are given.



#### **A CASE STUDY OF IMPROVEMENT IN A PRIMARY SCHOOL WHICH DID NOT REQUIRE A FOLLOW-THROUGH INSPECTION**

The primary school was inspected and was found to provide children with a good and improving standard of education. Some aspects were very good, and no significant weaknesses were found. Nevertheless, the headteacher and staff seized on the opportunity the inspection provided to confirm some of their plans for improvement. The headteacher was firmly of the view that the identification of strengths and areas for development had been invaluable in taking the school forward.

Particular factors relating to the improvements implemented include the following.

- Staff were accepting of the findings of the inspection.
- They were strongly committed to working together to improve the areas required.
- The inspection gave the senior management team and staff confidence to move forward and to address key areas.
- It encouraged staff to develop their professional skills and to become involved.
- It encouraged a certain amount of measured risk-taking.
- Strong leadership ensured that staff had guidance, direction and involvement in the process.

In particular, staff took the opportunity to improve the learning experience of children at P1 and P2 in line with recommendation in the inspection report which stated that the school should take account of the need to: *increase opportunities for children at P1 and P2 to learn through play, exercising choice and taking responsibility for aspects of their own learning.*

Over the course of the year following the inspection, staff revamped the P1 experience. Many activities did not require textbooks or workbooks and children were able to make choices and work together on tasks in class. The school had also taken the step to retain 'free play' for the first half hour of every day at this stage. This was done deliberately to provide children with opportunities to make choices, develop important social skills and skills in working together. Across the school, within all activities children were consulted with and their views were used to influence future planning. All staff in the school had adopted this approach and there was a willingness to change practice. Staff felt very positive about the experience. In particular they signalled that strong leadership had been essential in taking the school forward and improving learners' achievements.



#### **A CASE STUDY OF IMPROVEMENT IN A PRE-SCHOOL CENTRE**

The education authority, working with staff, prepared an action plan indicating how the recommendations identified in the integrated HMIE/Care Commission inspection report would be addressed. Staff worked hard to fulfil the recommendations set out in the inspection report and to improve the quality of education which the centre provided. The manager, who had been appointed shortly after the publication of the original report, gave strong leadership and direction to the nursery team. Working with staff she set out a clear vision for the centre and worked out how to identify strengths and areas for improvement. Together with the depute manager and nursery staff, she had a positive impact on the quality of children's learning experiences. The nursery's approaches to monitoring and evaluating the quality of the service improved significantly. Audit activities, staff appraisals, formal observations of the playrooms and staff development contributed to an appropriate emphasis on children's learning. Clear development priorities were outlined in the nursery's development plan.

As a result of the significant improvements since the original inspection, no more inspection visits were planned for this centre. Staff had clearly taken on board the recommendations made in the original report and had demonstrated a commitment to improving the overall quality of provision in the centre for all learners.



Particular drivers of improvement in this centre included the following.

- Staff accepted and embraced the areas for improvement given during the discussion of inspection findings.
- Strong leadership from the manager ensured that staff were going in the right direction.
- Remits and responsibilities for all staff were defined effectively.
- A team approach to developing the curriculum was implemented.
- Staff used a refined planning system which focused on outcomes for children and concentrated on what made a difference for the learner.

Staff were very clear that they had benefited from the whole experience and that they were responsive to change, particularly where they saw that the required changes would impact positively on children's learning experiences and achievement.

## Improving the way in which staff work with others

### **Journey to Excellence Dimension 5 – works in partnership with other agencies and its community.**

The school in its community, working with partners to meet the needs of all children and young people, multi-agency approaches to improve learning, leadership and coordination.

### **Journey to Excellence Dimension 6 – works together with parents to improve learning.**

Developing parents' support for their children's learning, active involvement of parents in school activities, collaboration and representation.

Liaison and cooperation within and beyond schools is important in improving the curriculum, learning and achievement. For example, closer liaison between teaching, pastoral and support for learning staff in secondary schools, and between different groups of staff in primary schools, can be effective in improving outcomes for learners and helping them to improve their learning skills. The development of common approaches between secondary schools and their associated primary schools in relation to numeracy and literacy programmes and use of knowledge about children's and young people's prior learning can bring about greater benefits for learners by improving progression. The provision of a wider range of opportunities to develop skills for learning, life and work, enhancing study opportunities through cooperation between secondary schools, local colleges and employers, helps to improve and broaden outcomes for learners.

Other positive factors for improvement include the following.

- Joint staff work to improve programmes, courses and progression opportunities for learners to make better links between different curriculum areas, and to improve use of ICT.
- Better multi-agency approaches to supporting learners with additional support needs, in which roles and responsibilities are agreed and clearly understood and communication between agencies is effective.
- Improving the effectiveness of links between special schools and mainstream schools and mutual sharing of good practice to meet children's and young people's learning needs more effectively.

The establishment of clear and shared policies,<sup>3</sup> monitoring of their implementation, and systematic planning for improvement often lead to better outcomes for learners. For example, the development of whole-school policies on support for learning and support for learners, accompanied by clear structures and procedures which specify the respective roles and responsibilities for all staff, are important levers for improvement where these are put effectively into practice. Effective integration of pastoral support and support for learning structures and procedures, and careful planning, development and monitoring of personal, social and health education programmes, courses and activities are important too.

<sup>3</sup> 'Policies' need not mean extensive documents, although clear written advice is often useful. More important is a shared understanding of aims, and a commitment to achieving them.

A key challenge facing our school is to bring about whole school improvement as soon as possible, but in such a way as to ensure that the improvements are deeply embedded in the work of the school and can be sustained. We will need to work with others to do this effectively. I realise that there are a number of issues to be considered, including leadership, staff morale, how to involve parents, and balancing external pressure against the internal capacity for change.

**Headteacher of a primary school**

Better joint working involving agencies, different groups of staff, and also parents and their children, is often a crucial factor in improvement. Improvements often come about through establishing clarity in the roles of external support agency staff. Multi-agency and multi-disciplinary approaches to supporting learners who are not attending school, including home visits, can be productive, as can mentoring and buddying schemes involving more senior learners supporting younger and vulnerable ones. The provision of study support, Easter and summer schools and summer activity programmes, can lead to improved outcomes for some learners. Overall, a clearer focus on individual learners is critical in improving outcomes for them. Early identification of needs and provision of targeted support to underperforming and vulnerable learners is essential. Reward schemes and appropriate recognition and celebration of learners' successes and achievements can motivate all learners.

Improved support for staff be an important factor in improving learners' achievements. A clear lead from senior education authority officers in regard to training and personal development activities for all staff is critical. Suitable staff training and awareness-raising in pastoral support and support for learning, and support on specific aspects such as autism and behavioural difficulties, can bring about improvements through greater professional knowledge and understanding.

Parental engagement and involvement is a crucial factor in improvement. One key lever is improving consultation and communication with parents on key aspects of the life of the school, including important curricular developments.

Regular engagement with parents through the use of electronic communication, and the provision of regular newsletters, is helpful, as is the establishment of appropriate school-parent forums, including parent teacher associations and parent councils.

Parents appreciate clear reports on the progress of their children and flexible opportunities to discuss their children's progress with key staff. Other successful approaches to improvement include the following.

- Improving induction arrangements, including the direct involvement of parents in their children's transition from pre-school to P1, or P7 to S1.
- Involving parents more systematically in developing individualised educational programmes and in setting targets for their children's progress.
- Provision of regular drop-in events and opportunities for parents to meet the staff and discuss developments.
- Provision of suitable opportunities for parents to access key staff regarding their children's progress and support needs.
- Better provision of support for parents to help them be involved in their children's learning.



## A CASE STUDY OF IMPROVEMENT IN A SPECIAL SCHOOL

The school provides education for children and young people aged three to eighteen years with additional support needs arising from complex learning difficulties. At the time of the initial inspection there had been staffing difficulties, as the deputy headteacher was absent and a principal teacher post was vacant. Filling these vacancies was part of the first steps towards improvement.

Following the original inspection the headteacher steadily established a clearer sense of direction for the school. Staff responded well to opportunities to take on greater responsibility for developments. The management team agreed clearer descriptions of their individual responsibilities and by implementing these remits provided more effective support to the headteacher and staff. Their observations of learning in classes and the advice they gave to teachers helped to improve the quality of teaching. The quality of the curriculum was improved in a range of ways.

- Bringing the length of the school day into line with mainstream schools, and providing two hours of good quality physical education for all learners.
- Improving breadth through agreed frameworks for all classes.
- Better application of national advice on elaborating the curriculum for those with more complex needs.
- Reviewing and improving personal and social education.
- Providing progression and certification opportunities at appropriate points through National Qualifications or the Awards Scheme Development and Accreditation network (ASDAN).

Staff took effective steps to recognise and celebrate children and young people's achievements. They worked together to develop approaches such as 'star of the week' and literacy and numeracy awards. Staff worked to set higher expectations of children and young people as a result of their increased focus on learning and achievement. They consulted parents to set more challenging and practical targets for children and young people in their individualised learning programmes (IEPs). Overall, parents were helped to become more actively involved in their children's learning and the life of the school. Links with local mainstream primary and secondary schools were improved to the benefit of learners in the school, and speech and language therapists became more directly involved in planning with teachers to help children and young people. The headteacher ensured that other therapists and school staff worked more closely in partnership.

As a result of the re-vitalised teamwork among staff and with support from the education authority, the curriculum, teaching and quality of children and young people's learning and achievement improved. The school's capacity to improve had also been enhanced, and HMIE was able to disengage from any further inspection activity connected with the original inspection.

## Improving the school community through the active involvement of staff, children and young people

### **Journey to Excellence Dimension 7 – reflects on its own work and thrives on challenge.**

Continuing and critical enquiry, welcoming challenges, a collective commitment to improvement, continuing professional development, being data rich.

### **Journey to Excellence Dimension 8 – values and empowers its staff and young people.**

Having their capabilities extended, being empowered to influence the future development and direction of the school, giving learners a voice and enabling them to take responsibility, being encouraged through a vibrant and progressive school culture and climate.

The identification and spreading of good practice are important factors in improving the school community through self-reflection and the active involvement of staff and learners. Broadening the range and strengthening the rigour of monitoring and evaluation activities are often beneficial in bringing about improvement. Improvements can come about through taking account of the views of stakeholders, for example, by listening to the learners' views on the quality of learning and teaching and giving them opportunities to take responsibility.

We're so glad that you guys came to our school. We were in despair about the state of the place, but nobody listened to us. We thought that our futures were being ruined. Now we feel that we are part of the school. We are listened to. Look around the school, everyone is so proud to be part of it now.

**A young person in a secondary school**

When you came here two years ago you said that we were nice people and that was about it. But looking back we've come on a great journey over two years. We feel more a part of the running of the school. We're much more aware of what it's all about. It all comes together now.

**Teacher in a special school**

Senior leaders can offer much by promoting a self-evaluating culture in their schools and empowering staff to take responsibility and show leadership in improving the school.

Reciprocal visits, for example, across secondary school departments or between different schools, to identify and build on best practice in learning and teaching, can be powerful levers for improvement, as can regular meetings involving staff at all levels to discuss, identify and share best practice.

At all levels, systematic and rigorous analysis of a wide range of data and information on attainment and achievement, and acting upon the findings to implement improvements, are effective in bringing about improvement.

Effective approaches to self-evaluation and improvement include the following.

- Observation of lessons by peers and promoted staff, and provision of honest and helpful feedback in a supportive manner.
- Regular gathering of the views of stakeholders, including the views of learners on the quality of teaching, and using the information to guide planning.
- The involvement of external partner agencies in quality assurance and improvement planning.
- Shared development of a quality assurance calendar, and rigorous implementation.
- Staff meetings at various levels with clear tracking of action planning, and progress against action points.
- In primary schools, systematic involvement of senior staff in reviewing teachers' plans, sampling children's work and, as in other sectors, monitoring the quality of learning and teaching through direct lesson observation.
- Production of regular and objective school, and in secondary schools, department reports on standards and quality.





Improvement may require additional training for staff on self-evaluation and performance monitoring. Within education authority and school policies on improvement, a clear school policy and procedures on lesson observation can be very helpful. It is important that all teaching staff become familiar with relevant evaluation frameworks and approaches, including *HGIOS* and *Child at the Centre*. Support for the analysis and use of data for improvement, as well as the evaluation of learning and teaching, staff review and improvement planning, can yield benefits for learners. Education authority staff and other contributors can play an important role in training and supporting staff in these aspects.

Education authority and whole-school approaches to professional review and development, clearly geared towards improving staff effectiveness and providing opportunities for all to develop as teachers and leaders, can lead to improvement.

Effective approaches include the following.

- Improving the lead from the headteacher and senior staff in increasing the effectiveness and impact of the arrangements for continuing professional development.
- Improving staff engagement and ownership of staff development policies and activities, including staff involvement in development tasks and working groups.
- Implementation of staff development procedures in a more systematic and consistent fashion and including all staff.
- Matching staff development opportunities and activities more closely to staff review outcomes.
- Encouraging and facilitating staff to take greater responsibility for their own professional development.



## A CASE STUDY OF IMPROVEMENT IN A SECONDARY SCHOOL

At the time of the original inspection, the school was found to have important weaknesses in most aspects of its work including ethos, pupils' learning experiences, attainment and leadership, and major weaknesses in self-evaluation. The education authority took immediate action following the original inspection to support the school to improve.

Following the inspection, the education authority provided considerable additional support to the school to improve the way in which self-evaluation and improvement were carried out. Quality Improvement Officers worked closely with the headteacher, senior management team, departments and staff to support them in making the school better. HMIE continued to engage with the school and education authority to support improvement and monitor progress. The district inspector met education authority representatives and senior promoted staff in the school to discuss and advise on the way forward. The headteacher worked with staff to improve morale following negative reports in the local media and to encourage staff to work together more and discuss their teaching practice.

After a year the school's ethos had improved and staff were working better as a team. Staff had begun to improve learning and teaching and they were more involved in making decisions about the work of the school. The school had improved the way in which its work was monitored and evaluated, although the new systems were at an early stage of development. There was a need for further work to ensure impact on learners.

After a further year, the school had regained the confidence of most staff and a significant number of parents who had removed their children from the school were happy for them to return. The education authority improved aspects of the building which enhanced the learning environment. Staff monitored the quality of learning more effectively, and the school's plans for improvement were more systematic. Inspectors were able to indicate that they would not undertake any further inspection visits in connection with the original inspection. The headteacher and staff reported that the original inspection and subsequent support work from the education authority and HMIE were real catalysts for change in the school. Many teachers had taken successful steps to improve their practice. The ethos of the school and behaviour of learners had changed significantly. Leadership had improved and this had resulted in improvements in outcomes for young people.

## Improving expectations of what all children and young people can achieve

### **Journey to Excellence Dimension 9 – promotes wellbeing and respect.**

Promoting positive relationships within a learning caring and inclusive school community, supporting children and young people, providing the whole school community with positive experiences that promote and protect their health, promoting positive healthy attitudes and behaviours.

### **Journey to Excellence Dimension 10 – develops a culture of ambition and achievement.**

Aiming high, enabling all children and young people to achieve, encouraging enterprising attitudes and behaviour.

Improvement of these key aspects of school life follows the pattern of other key areas – set the vision, agree values and aims, identify and agree strengths and areas for improvement based upon a range of evidence, produce clear plans for improvement, implement specific processes to lead to improved outcomes for learners, and evaluate progress rigorously, under effective leadership.

The establishment of a positive, values-driven ethos which places emphasis on the welfare and wellbeing of all learners, led by the headteacher but involving all, is central to bringing about improvements in these aspects. Beyond this, practical steps include the development and effective implementation of a whole-school policy and procedures on child protection and learner welfare, incorporating anti-bullying guidelines which clearly specify the roles and responsibilities of all staff. The provision of child protection and anti-bullying training for all teaching and support staff are important as part of this improvement agenda.

The development of mentoring and buddying schemes, particularly for younger and vulnerable learners, can be very beneficial. Improving learners' awareness of race, ethnicity and social diversity, and better promotion of equality and the positive aspects of diversity, can also bring benefits to the overall school ethos. The involvement, where appropriate, of social work, health and external agency personnel in ensuring the care and welfare of learners and in staff training, are often very helpful.

Schools employ a range of successful approaches to raising staff expectations of what every individual learner can achieve.

Staff engage routinely with learners in classes, personal and social education activities and assemblies, to generate and enhance their identification with the school and its values.

They sharpen the focus of school and year assemblies and other meetings onto achievement and the pursuit of excellence.

Staff and learner recognition and reward schemes are built more systematically into the work of the school.

Higher expectations are generated through approaches such as the following.

- Making the curriculum more learner-centred, characterised by choice, challenge, breadth and engagement.
- Provision of differentiated teaching materials to raise expectations of learners and staff, and focusing on the needs of all learners, including those with high prior attainment.
- The promotion of active engagement in learning, including where appropriate group work and highly interactive learning experiences.
- Setting high but realistic personal learning targets for all learners and monitoring their achievement rigorously.
- Analysing data on progress and achievement to identify issues which may need to be addressed, including the use of comparative data.



## A CASE STUDY OF IMPROVEMENT IN A SECONDARY SCHOOL

When the school was first inspected, a number of important or major weaknesses were found, including in leadership, ethos, the learning environment, support for young people and their achievement. The education authority had not been fully aware of the extent of these weaknesses, and, partly as a result, was having difficulty in supporting the school to improve. Low expectations among staff, learners and parents were a problem.

Following the inspection and the retiral of the headteacher, the education authority took decisive and successful action in seconding an experienced headteacher from another of its schools to lead the school as acting headteacher for six months. With the acting headteacher and involvement of staff they drew up a comprehensive and well focused plan for improving the school. In doing this they took account of advice from HMIE.

Within a year it was clear that the acting headteacher had been successful in working with staff to stabilise the school and in starting to improve the school's ethos. A new headteacher was then appointed. The school also became a School of Ambition as part of the then national initiative. This helped the school to improve itself further. Expectations of what all learners could achieve were raised.

Within a further year the new headteacher had successfully led staff in improving the curriculum and making support for learners more consistent. The education authority supported the school and the new headteacher well, for example, by filling teaching vacancies promptly and appointing a seconded depute headteacher to lead certain aspects of the school's development.

By a further year it was clear that the School of Ambition and other initiatives were having a positive impact. The headteacher and new staff at senior level were improving leadership and outcomes for learners. New principal teachers and newly qualified teachers were having a galvanising impact on the school. There was a much greater sense of pride in the school among staff, learners and parents. The learning environment had been transformed, and there were signs of attainment starting to improve. HMIE was able to disengage from any further inspection activity in connection with the original inspection.

## Improving the school's sense of direction

**Journey to Excellence Dimension 3 – develops a common vision across children and young people, parents and staff.**

The nature of the vision, creating the shared vision, sustaining the shared vision.

**Journey to Excellence Dimension 4 – fosters high quality leadership at all levels.**

Leading learning, building leadership at all levels, leading the school community, guiding change.

Establishing clear, shared understanding of what the school is trying to achieve is important in setting out the school's direction of travel and improvement. As for other key aspects, leadership, self-evaluation and systematic approaches to planning for improvement are key factors. The development of a clear whole-school vision, values and aims is crucial, including an aim of high achievement shared amongst staff, parents and learners. Successful approaches to improvement often include the development and consistent application of a strategy for promoting positive behaviour, and increasing

Leadership is often improved through the provision of support for headteachers and others, and by improving teamwork in the school.

Improved communication and consultation between and among senior staff and all staff is very important.

More meaningful and focused involvement of all staff in self-evaluation and improvement activities, and better leadership of these activities, can bring about improvement for learners.

Successful approaches include the following.

- Provision by the education authority of mentoring, coaching, consultancy or associated one-to-one support to headteachers and other promoted staff.
- Visits by senior school staff and others to other schools to learn first-hand about best practice in leadership and management.
- Provision of professional development activities and training to senior staff, leaders at other levels, and aspiring leaders on leadership development.
- Involvement of all staff in working groups and other forums which have been charged with clear developmental remits, tasks and timescales.
- Greater recognition and celebration of best practice in learning and teaching.

Clarification of roles and responsibilities, and a more systematic focus on key priorities, are often helpful in improving leadership. For example, many schools improve by ensuring that senior staff remits reflect the school's priorities more accurately. Some improving schools make effective use of questionnaires, surveys and associated methods of seeking views from learners, staff and parents on leadership in the school, and use the results to implement improvements. There is often a closer focus by the senior management team on performance and quality improvement. In best practice, support staff are deployed to relieve management pressure and release senior teaching staff and others to lead and manage the improvement of learning and teaching more effectively.

The inspection provided a clear focus for improvement. Reviewing the evidence for the follow-through visit was a real morale booster for the staff because we could all see how much progress we had made. Now we can go on and continue to improve under our own steam. We know where we are going and we know how to get there.

**Headteacher of a secondary school**



## A CASE STUDY OF IMPROVEMENT IN A PRIMARY SCHOOL

When the school was first inspected, a number of important aspects were found to be unsatisfactory, including leadership, pastoral care and climate and relationships. There were important weaknesses in some other areas. The former headteacher had taken up a new post three weeks prior to the inspection and the deputy headteacher was acting headteacher at the time of inspection. The education authority took firm and successful action following the inspection and worked with HMIE to engage with the school to support improvement.

- The education authority immediately moved an experienced headteacher from another of its schools to lead the school as acting headteacher. A new headteacher took up post a few months after the inspection.
- A new deputy headteacher and new principal teacher were appointed, and they implemented a wide range of training and development activities for staff.
- The education authority drew up an appropriate improvement plan, and supported staff in implementing it, taking into account HMIE advice.
- Over the two years following the original inspection, the personnel on the senior management team changed completely and almost half of teaching staff changed. The education authority supported the school well to ensure continuity and progress.

Within the first year of improvement, the commitment of the new senior management team and staff in making improvements was clearly established. Staff recognised that the school was now a better place both for them and the children. The headteacher had concentrated appropriately on creating a positive climate, building relationships and promoting positive behaviour. Throughout this period staff benefited from support and advice from the education authority to improve the quality of learning and teaching. This support helped the school to make significant positive changes.

A year later, the headteacher and new staff at senior levels had improved leadership across the school and outcomes for learners, and teachers were having a more positive impact on the children's learning. The learning environment had been transformed, and attainment had significantly improved. All staff had a clearer understanding of where the school was going.



## Section 4: Conclusion

This report shows that many Scottish schools have been successful in making substantial improvements, leading to better outcomes for their children and young people. This is an important finding, because the education system as a whole faces challenges arising from significant longstanding problems and also from the need to achieve the aspirations of *Curriculum for Excellence* in every school and for every learner. The challenges include raising standards of achievement, particularly in literacy, numeracy and science, and providing better support for the substantial numbers of children and young people from vulnerable groups or disadvantaged backgrounds who do not sufficiently develop their personal capacities or achieve as much as they should.

This report indicates that, to achieve success in facing these challenges, schools and education authorities will need to consider how:

- all staff can be encouraged to embrace open and rigorous self-evaluation as the basis for improvement;
- professional development can achieve the greatest beneficial impact on children and young people's learning, for example through approaches which encourage openness and learning together;
- leadership capacity can be developed and sustained at all levels; and
- the beneficial impact of partnership working across services can be maximised.

This report also highlights some specific factors which have enabled schools with important or major weaknesses to improve to a satisfactory or better level. These schools and their education authorities have shown an encouraging capacity for improvement. Key levers for improvement included the following.

- Identification for strengths and areas for improvement through open and rigorous self-evaluation activities which involve all staff and partners, and clear plans for improvement.
- Acknowledgement of where improvement is needed.
- Shared, high expectations of what children should be achieving and of the quality of the experiences they should have.
- Monitoring and tracking children's progress and intervening early where necessary to help them to progress.
- Addressing inconsistencies in the quality of learning and teaching.
- Effective leadership at all levels, with a focus on improving the quality of learning and achievement for all learners.
- Enabling staff to work in partnership among themselves and with others, including parents and learners, to improve the school.

These factors are likely to lead to improvement in all schools.

As we enter a period where resources may become more scarce and the demands on our education system more compelling, the lessons we can learn about school improvement will be needed as never before. We hope that this report will help teachers, support staff and education authority officers in their endeavours.

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