



**Mearns Academy
Laurencekirk
Aberdeenshire Council
15 March 2011**

HM Inspectorate of Education (HMIE) inspects schools in order to let parents¹, young people and the local community know whether their school provides a good education. Inspectors also discuss with school staff how they can improve the quality of education.

At the beginning of the inspection, we ask the headteacher and staff about the strengths of the school, what needs to improve, and how they know. We use the information they give us to help us plan what we are going to look at. During the inspection, we go into classes and join other activities which young people are involved in. We also gather the views of young people, parents, staff and members of the local community. We find their views very helpful and use them together with the other information we have collected to arrive at our view of the quality of education.

This report tells you what we found during the inspection and the quality of education in the school. We describe how well young people are doing, how good the school is at helping them to learn and how well it cares for them. We comment on how well staff, parents and young people work together and how they go about improving the school. We also comment on how well the school works with other groups in the community, including services which support young people. Finally, we focus on how well the school is led and how staff help the school achieve its aims.

If you would like to learn more about our inspection of the school, please visit www.hmie.gov.uk. Here you can find analyses of questionnaire returns from young people, parents and staff, and details about young people's examination performance. We will not provide questionnaire analyses where the numbers of returns are so small that they could identify individuals. Where applicable there will also be a report on the learning community surrounding the school.

¹ Throughout this report, the term 'parents' should be taken to include foster carers, residential care staff and carers who are relatives or friends.

Contents

1. The school
2. Particular strengths of the school
3. How well do young people learn and achieve?
4. How well do staff work with others to support young people's learning?
5. Are staff and young people actively involved in improving their school community?
6. Does the school have high expectations of all young people?
7. Does the school have a clear sense of direction?
8. What happens next?

1. The school

Mearns Academy is a non-denominational school which serves the town of Laurencekirk and the Mearns area. The roll was 605 when the inspection was carried out in January 2011. Young people's attendance was in line with the national average in 2009/2010.

2. Particular strengths of the school

- The outstanding leadership of the headteacher.
- Mature, confident and responsible young people.
- Partnerships with community groups and other services.
- Highly effective arrangements to support vulnerable learners.
- Staff commitment to continuously improving the work of the school.
- The high-quality service of the library and its contribution to learning.

3. How well do young people learn and achieve?

Learning and achievement

Almost all young people are confident and highly motivated to learn. At all stages, they engage effectively in a variety of interesting activities, including events outwith school. For example, a group of young people benefited from a trip to the Aberdeen Word Festival. In classes, young people have many opportunities to work creatively with each other to complete tasks. They are learning to communicate effectively with others. The librarian provides motivating resources to support young people in their subject learning. For example, S3 pupils watched part of the American president's speech to Congress to help them reflect on presentations. In most lessons, young people use information and communications technology well to enhance their learning. Increasingly, young people are involved in discussing learning and planning how to improve. Staff could usefully share best practice in helping young people set targets more effectively. At all stages, young people feel safe and well supported by the school.

Young people have achieved notable success in a range of local and national events, including being previous UK winners of the Oil and Gas Academy Petro Challenge. Many young people achieve widely and develop new skills through sporting, musical or cultural activities such as the school show, cross country running and inter-house events. Young people at S3 successfully took part in a drama event at Dundee Rep theatre. The Active Schools coordinator has established access to a wide range of additional sporting activities. The school recognises the need to ensure all young people feel motivated to take advantage of such opportunities. Many young people are maturing as leaders through prefect duties or serving on committees such as the eco committee. The school has achieved green flag status. Almost all young people at S4 benefit from work experience which develops their confidence and skills for the workplace. Young people are growing into their role as citizens through organising charity events and fundraising. They have well-developed social skills and feel the school is helping them become more confident.

By the end of S2, young people consistently make very good progress in reading, writing and mathematics. The school has worked hard to build more effectively on what young people have learned at primary school. By the end of S4, young people increasingly meet or exceed predicted attainment levels based on earlier progress. Performance has been consistently above or in line with national averages at almost all key measures of attainment. There were very significant improvements in 2010, particularly at Credit level. The percentage of those at S4 gaining awards in key national examinations has been steadily above that of schools serving those with similar needs and backgrounds. In addition, a good number of young people have achieved success in Skills for Work courses. By the end of S6, performance at Higher and Advanced Higher levels has been above or in line with the national average. Those who require additional support in their learning make good progress. Almost all young people move on to positive destinations on leaving school.

Curriculum and meeting learning needs

The school provides a broad curriculum which reflects the school's aims and staff have reviewed the curriculum to take account of *Curriculum for Excellence*. A few teachers have started to link learning across subject areas. The school has planned a whole-school field study project for young people in S1, to include the opportunity of achieving a John Muir Trust Award. The innovative S1 reflection period has the capacity to help young people's understanding of their own learning but needs a clearer structure. At S1/S2, a health and leisure course successfully promotes healthy lifestyles. The school needs to plan more effectively for literacy and numeracy across the curriculum. From S3, the school provides a wide range of courses leading to National Qualifications. Close links with college and Community Learning and Development staff have provided opportunities for achievement in a range of more practical, skills based courses. Provision at Higher and Advanced Higher levels is extended through, for example, links with college, The Open University and other schools. The school recognises the need to extend the range of practical courses at S5/S6. Staff organise a broad range of trips and visitors to enhance the curriculum. At all stages, the school provides appropriate high-quality physical education. Personal and social education offers good opportunities for young people to discuss issues of relevance to them but staff should review provision for religious and moral education at S5/S6. The school needs to finalise plans for the senior phase of *Curriculum for Excellence*.

The school meets the needs of learners very well, particularly those who are most vulnerable. Overall, staff provide interesting and relevant activities at an appropriate pace. In almost all lessons, teachers engage young people actively in learning and encourage them to achieve. In a few areas at S1/S2, lessons do not challenge young people's thinking enough. Regular homework tasks help young people make progress. Support for learning staff identify learners' needs very successfully and promote useful strategies to help them make progress in their learning. Support assistants give valued assistance in lessons. All young people benefit from high-quality

personal support and guidance from the support team. Young people are good at helping each other too. For example, senior pupils contribute to a lunchtime club for vulnerable young people.

4. How well do staff work with others to support young people's learning?

Staff use a range of approaches, including the school website, to communicate effectively with parents. The Parent Council supports the school very well. The school deals successfully with any concerns and has achieved the national Customer Service Excellence Award. Close links with primary schools ensure young people have a positive experience on entering S1. The school works very well with agencies such as the psychological service to provide appropriate support. Effective links with local businesses and a range of partner organisations help the school deliver broader learning opportunities, including work placements and youth work programmes. Partners plan with the school to meet the needs of young people. The school is very much part of the local community. For example, art students created impressive panels to decorate the local railway station.

5. Are staff and young people actively involved in improving their school community?

The headteacher has successfully created a culture of continuous improvement. Young people contribute to improving the school through, for example, the pupil representative council or the library committee. The school seeks their views on learning and young people know their opinions matter. A few would like more say in how they learn in individual classes. The school requests parents' views, and acts upon them. Staff improved homework based on comments from parents and pupils. Many staff run out-of-class clubs to broaden young people's learning. Teachers constantly update their practice by serving on working groups and sharing ideas with one another. The senior management team has created very effective processes to ensure they know the school well. These include visits to classes and rigorous analysis of performance data. This work has led to improved

learning and teaching. Currently, the school is investigating ways of improving arrangements for tracking young people's achievements.

6. Does the school have high expectations of all young people?

The school has a strong sense of community where people support each other and treat each other with respect. Young people respond very well to staff's high expectations of behaviour and attitude. Overall, teachers' expectations of what young people can achieve in lessons is high. The school has very effective systems to ensure the care and protection of its young people. Equality and diversity are promoted well. For example, young people at S5/S6 raised the profile of equality in a powerful assembly about a visit to Auschwitz. There are appropriate arrangements for religious observance. The school celebrates young people's achievements very well through, for example, praise slips and newsletters. Staff and young people are proud of the school which enjoys a very good reputation in the community.

7. Does the school have a clear sense of direction?

The headteacher is highly committed to the school. He successfully involved all staff and stakeholders in reviewing the school's vision, values and aims. This vision, and his leadership, are valued by all members of the school community. All staff have clear roles and responsibilities. The senior management team link closely with departments and they support staff very effectively in their work. Promoted staff work hard to develop the school's vision for learning in subject areas. All staff feel involved in driving the school forward and are positive about new initiatives. They recognise the value of professional development. The headteacher has effectively created a community of learners with a strong sense of purpose.

8. What happens next?

The inspection team was able to rely on the school's robust self-evaluation. As a result, it was able to change its focus during the

inspection to support further improvements within the school. The school provides a very good quality of education. Therefore, we will make no further visits in connection with this inspection. The education authority will inform parents about the school's progress as part of the authority's arrangements for reporting to parents on the quality of its schools.

We have agreed the following areas for improvement with the school and education authority.

- Continue to promote strategies to raise achievement.
- Finalise a strategic vision for the future development of *Curriculum for Excellence* in school and communicate this to staff and parents.

Quality indicators help schools, education authorities and inspectors to judge what is good and what needs to be improved in the work of the school. You can find these quality indicators in the HMIE publication *How good is our school?*. Following the inspection of each school, the Scottish Government gathers evaluations of three important quality indicators to keep track of how well all Scottish schools are doing.

Here are the evaluations for Mearns Academy.

Improvements in performance	very good
Learners' experiences	very good
Meeting learning needs	very good

We also evaluated the following aspects of the work of the school.

The curriculum	good
Improvement through self-evaluation	very good

HM Inspector: Fiona A Pate

15 March 2011

When we write reports, we use the following word scale so that our readers can see clearly what our judgments mean.

excellent	means	outstanding, sector leading
very good	means	major strengths
good	means	important strengths with some areas for improvement
satisfactory	means	strengths just outweigh weaknesses
weak	means	important weaknesses
unsatisfactory	means	major weaknesses

If you would like to find out more about our inspections or get an electronic copy of this report, please go to www.hmie.gov.uk.

Please contact us if you want to know how to get the report in a different format, for example, in a translation, or if you wish to comment about any aspect of our inspections. You can contact us at HMIEenquiries@hmie.gsi.gov.uk or write to us at BMCT, HM Inspectorate of Education, Denholm House, Almondvale Business Park, Almondvale Way, Livingston EH54 6GA.

Text phone users can contact us on 01506 600 236. This is a service for deaf users. Please do not use this number for voice calls as the line will not connect you to a member of staff.

You can find our complaints procedure on our website www.hmie.gov.uk or alternatively you can contact our Complaints Manager, at the address above or by telephoning 01506 600259.

Crown Copyright 2011
HM Inspectorate of Education