

3 February 2015

Dear Parent/Carer

**Oldmachar Academy
Aberdeen City 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 arrangements to meet the needs of young people who require additional support, opportunities for young people and staff to develop leadership skills and the range of pathways for young people in the senior school. 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?

Almost all young people are well-behaved and enjoy school. They wear their new school uniform with pride, reflecting the strong sense of community which exists within the school. During lessons, most young people listen attentively and respond well to their teachers' questions and instructions. When given opportunities to work collaboratively or independently on challenging tasks, most young people work well and achieve success. For example, young people in S1 became deeply engaged in analysing a short movie clip and extended their understanding of how film producers communicate with an audience. Overall, young people are often too passive in their learning. They need increased responsibility to lead their own learning and to engage in activities that require deeper thinking. The school plans to address this through supporting more staff to lead cooperative learning techniques. Young people are increasingly aware of their own progress and next steps, particularly in subjects where they have targets that they have helped to set. This good practice needs to be developed more consistently across the school. In a few lessons, young people are skilled at assessing their own and others' work and have a good understanding of how to improve. Many teachers provide high-quality oral feedback which young people find very helpful and encouraging. However, the quality of teachers' written feedback is not of a consistently high enough standard and does not always give young people the detail they require. Young people with additional support needs usually receive well-judged feedback which helps them to improve their work.

In almost all classes, there is a positive ethos and young people benefit from mutually respectful relationships with staff. Staff increasingly use restorative approaches to

ensure the few young people who demonstrate challenging behaviour during lessons remain engaged with their learning. Relationships between staff and young people are, in the main, mutually respectful. As a result of the new Pupil Council, young people feel more able to influence decisions which affect them. Young people benefit from a range of lunchtime and after-school clubs which support them to develop their skills in sporting and cultural activities which interest them. Young people at S5 and S6 have a range of opportunities for leadership through which they increase their confidence and develop important skills for learning, life and work. For example, a few have achieved accreditation as Sports Leaders. As part of this programme, they increase their coaching skills working with younger children in local primary schools and at local sports clubs. A small number engage with local companies to learn more about science and engineering, hospitality and health care. They demonstrate confidence when talking about the benefits of these opportunities to learn and achieve beyond the classroom. Young people are developing a strong sense of social awareness through their fund-raising and charitable activities such as the annual 'Can-Can' project which supports local elderly residents with food parcels and helps them feel valued by the young people in their community. Young people from S1 to S3 also benefit from a few planned opportunities to extend their skills and achievements. For example, all young people in S3 recently enjoyed the Heartstart emergency first aid programme. We have asked the school to further develop its approaches to planning, monitoring and tracking young people's achievements. There is a need to take more account of young people's achievements out of school and to ensure they continue to build on their achievements as they move through the school.

From S1 to S3, subject teachers confidently use a range of approaches to assess young people's work and monitor their progress. In the lessons we observed, most young people were working at an appropriate level and coping well with the tasks set. Almost all young people with additional support needs are progressing well from their prior levels of attainment. The school is not yet tracking young people's progress from S1 to S3 across all curriculum areas. However, staff are increasing their confidence using new systems and this will help ensure that all young people are attaining as highly as possible. In 2014, most young people in S4 and S5 who were presented for the new National 4 and National 5 qualifications achieved well. In the majority of subjects, all young people achieved a pass at grade A-C at National 5 level or equivalent. At Higher level, this was achieved in a few subjects. However, overall the school's performance in key measures has decreased in recent years. The school recognises the need to address this through a consistent and planned approach to raising attainment across all stages including in literacy and numeracy. There is scope for increased attainment at all levels in a range of subjects where a significant number of young people gained no award. Almost all young people secure a positive destination when they leave school, with a significantly higher percentage going directly into employment rather than to further or higher education.

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

In the majority of lessons, teachers set open-ended tasks and activities which young people can respond to at their own level. There is scope to extend this good practice more widely across the school to encourage young people to be more active in their learning. For some young people, teachers provide additional support or challenge through further explanations and questioning throughout lessons. However, higher

attaining young people would benefit from increased levels of challenge in many classes. Across the school, staff at all levels are very committed to improving outcomes for young people with additional support needs and vulnerable young people. Guidance staff have developed effective systems for early identification and response to a range of needs. Young people would like more direct contact with these staff, for example within the health and wellbeing programme. Support for learning staff and a few class teachers provide well-targeted day to day support for those with additional support needs, both individually and in small groups. Teachers would like more information about appropriate support strategies to help them to meet young people's needs more effectively. The school nurse, in partnership with support staff, provides a range of highly valued support for vulnerable young people and families and contributes strongly to health and wellbeing programmes. The school has been working to enhance the targeted support it provides for a few vulnerable young people from across Aberdeen City through further development of the learning centre and nurture space. Staff, parents and young people need a better shared understanding of the aims and purposes of the range of specialist support across the school. This will ensure young people who require additional support have their needs met through the most appropriate use of resources available. Arrangements to provide nurture programmes within the school are being reviewed.

Over recent years, the school has regularly included young people and their parents in work to design, review and further develop the curriculum, taking account of Curriculum for Excellence. Young people experience a broad curriculum from S1 to S2. They begin to specialise in some areas of the curriculum in S3. This approach enables young people to follow their own interests and to study some subjects with increased depth before choosing courses for national qualifications in S4 to S6. As a result, most young people remain motivated and continue to make progress. From S1 to S3, young people have opportunities to link their learning across subject areas through choosing interdisciplinary projects which staff from different curriculum areas plan and deliver together. The school plans to review these projects to ensure they meet young people's needs fully and effectively. Staff have a clear understanding of their role in developing young people's literacy, numeracy and health and wellbeing across all subjects. They now need to develop approaches to assessing young people's progress in these areas to ensure they make suitable progress. Young people at S5 speak highly of the 'Fit for Fifth' programme. It provides good opportunities for them to participate in physical activity beyond school and increases their independent living skills through practical cookery sessions.

Across the senior phase, young people's learning is enhanced through short course options such as parenting, creative cookery, photography, financial education and the Building the Learning Power programme which provides mentoring support for a targeted group of young people. Many of these courses lead to further accreditation. The school recognises the need to raise young people's awareness of the range of skills they are achieving across their learning so they can continue to build on them as they move through and beyond school. Partnership arrangements with North East College and with other schools in Aberdeen City enable young people to study a wider range courses, including Advanced Higher courses and skills for work courses. Young people in S6 are also able to study through the Baccalaureate programme in science.

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

In a very short time, the newly-appointed headteacher has gained the respect of staff, young people, parents and partners. Everyone speaks highly of the start she has made to building relationships and getting to know the school and its community. Staff report improvements in teamwork and increased morale. In recent years, the school has undergone significant changes in leadership and staffing at all levels. As a result, there has been limited progress overall with many of the school's improvement priorities. Recently, the entire school community undertook a 'Stop-Start-Keep' exercise which has resulted in an accurate overview of the school's strengths and improvement priorities which the senior leadership team plan to use to shape the future direction for the school. The school should continue to build on this approach to self-evaluation with partners across the wider community. This will ensure that the school continues to identify its strengths and areas for improvement effectively. Most staff respond positively to leadership opportunities and demonstrate commitment to improving their own work. They share ideas and provide support to each other. There is a need to develop more formal arrangements for them to work in teams to share practice and take forward aspects of the school improvement plan. Staff value young people's feedback and their engagement in improving the school. The Pupil Council has been re-established and young people across the school have begun to see this as a way of sharing their views. Within the school community, there is a strong sense of making a fresh start under the direction of the new headteacher and high levels of commitment to moving the school forward. Key priorities now include increasing young people's achievement, including attainment in national qualifications, and ensuring consistently high quality learning experiences across the school.

This inspection found the following key strengths.

- Well-behaved young people who show pride in their school.
- Almost all young people secure a positive post-school destination.
- The recent 'Stop-Start-Keep' exercise which engaged staff, young people, parents and partners in reviewing the school improvement priorities.
- Staff who demonstrate high levels of commitment to the young people in their care.

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

- Further improve the range of provision for young people who require additional support with their learning to ensure all young people have their needs met.
- Ensure consistently high quality learning experiences across the school to increase young people's achievements, including their attainment in national qualifications.
- Continue to improve the curriculum to ensure appropriate progression in literacy and numeracy and health and wellbeing.

What happens at the end of the inspection?

We are satisfied with the overall quality of provision. We are confident that most of the school's self-evaluation processes are leading to improvements. Our Area Lead Officer will work with Aberdeen City Council to build capacity for improvement and will

maintain contact to monitor progress. Parents will be informed of the extent to which the school has improved.

Patricia Watson
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/OldmacharAcademyAberdeenCity.asp>

If you would like to receive this letter in a different format, for example, in a translation please contact the administration team on the above telephone number.

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