

20 December 2016

Dear Parent/Carer

Hamilton College

HM Inspectors recently visited Hamilton College. The visit was part of our quality improvement and professional engagement visits with independent schools which complement the general programme of inspections. The approach allows us to maintain our knowledge of schools in the independent sector throughout Scotland, and provides assurance to parents on the school's capacity for evaluating its own work and making improvements which have a direct impact on the quality of experiences for its young people. Our visit was based on the school's self-evaluation and priorities identified for school improvement. During our visit inspectors talked to staff, children and young people and parents, and worked together with the Principal and senior staff about the planned developments to ensure outcomes for children and young people continue to improve.

How well does the school ensure outcomes for children / young people continue to improve?

Across the nursery, junior and senior stages, children and young people are polite, friendly, articulate and confident. At all stages, almost all learners engage enthusiastically in their learning and are keen to do well. They benefit from very positive and supportive relationships with staff, in keeping with the Christian values and ethos of the school. Young people at the secondary stages particularly appreciate the additional help from teachers in their coursework and in preparing for examinations. At all stages, children and young people are independent learners and respond very positively to the school's expectations for them to take responsibility for their own learning. Across the school, in most lessons we observed, learners were engaged and on-task. In the best lessons, children and young people collaborate well, share their learning with their peers and are clear about their own targets and next steps in learning. Staff are keen to have more opportunities to share best practice in learning and teaching and to visit other classes and schools. This will help to improve further the quality and consistency of learning and teaching across the school. Through participating and achieving in a wide range of sporting, musical and cultural activities, children and young people are developing important personal and social skills. They particularly value the skills they gain through the many trips on offer to them. Young people take pride in representing their school whilst competing in local and national competitions with notable success. They take on roles of responsibility willingly across the school such as school captains, house captains, buddies and representing their peers in the various pupil councils and committees. Participation in the school's unique personal achievement award, 'Hamilton College Diploma', is

motivating young people to achieve, developing their resilience and is encouraging them to reflect on the skills they are developing and plan their own progress. The school should continue to review the best way to record and celebrate children's and young people's personal and wider achievements and the important skills for learning, life and work that they develop as a result of taking part in the wide range of out-of-class activities.

The nursery playrooms and junior classes are vibrant and stimulating places to learn. In the nursery, children are very motivated and participate enthusiastically in a range of worthwhile learning experiences. They are developing their independence very well as they select activities and resources with confidence. Nursery staff have successfully developed the use of e-learning journals to document children's learning experiences and achievements. As a result, children have frequent opportunities to celebrate and talk about their learning with staff and their parents. In the nursery, children benefit from real-life opportunities to develop and apply their early literacy and numeracy skills. Through play and familiar nursery routines, they are learning to count and use their knowledge about numbers, for example in counting and recording the number of children attending each day. They make signs for displays around the playrooms and label their own art work. Children benefit from daily opportunities to learn, play and investigate outdoors. Nursery staff's active promotion of natural materials to stimulate children's play is leading to children's natural curiosity and creativity skills developing very well. Learning is firmly centred on children's interests. During our visit, children were fully engaged in designing and building their own shelters for animals and birds.

Motivating and relevant learning is planned well by teachers across the junior stages. All children have targets for aspects of their learning that they identify along with their teachers. At all stages, children reflect on their learning each week and record how well they are getting on in their learning journey books. At J6 and J7, children spoke very positively about 'study zone' time each week, when they can reflect on their learning and spend time on an area of their own choosing. As a result, children in the junior school are developing a very good awareness of their strengths and next steps in learning. The school's own data shows that across the junior stages, most children achieve national expectations in reading, writing and mathematics. In all classes, a few children exceed these expectations. The leadership team in the junior school are taking forward plans to improve levels of attainment further. In literacy, children talk confidently about their personal targets, for example to 'up-level' their own writing by using more sophisticated vocabulary. Active approaches to learning, such as literature circles and paired-reading are working well to develop children's confidence in reading aloud. Across the junior school, standards of children's written work is consistently high. Junior school staff are working well together to refresh the programme for mathematics and approaches to how this is taught. Children are playing an important role in adding their suggestions and ideas to improve their learning in mathematics, through having a say in the junior school curriculum committee and pupil council. At J6 and J7, children benefit from regular opportunities to learn in the secondary English and mathematics departments. They feel that this strengthens their understanding in these subjects and is preparing them well for S1.

At the secondary stages there is a calm and purposeful ethos for learning. Young people are well-behaved in classes and around the school. Young people listen well to their teachers, pay attention and stay on task. They can discuss how their listening

and talking skills are developing through peer presentations in a range of subject areas. They can describe how their digital skills are being developed across the curriculum and feel that this is an improving picture as the school builds capacity in this area. Teachers are well organised for lessons and provide clear explanations and instructions. They use questioning techniques well to evaluate young people's understanding. These techniques could be strengthened further to develop young people's higher-order thinking skills more effectively. Young people report that they discuss and set learning targets with some of their teachers. However, this feature of learning is not yet consistently effective across the senior school. Overall, there is scope for young people to have more say in shaping and leading learning in class. The school report that, year on year, young people perform well in national examinations at S4, S5 and S6. Almost all young people go on to university or college on leaving Hamilton College. Senior staff have identified the need to review how the progress of young people is tracked as they move through the school. A working group has been established to develop systems to identify any underachievement in learning promptly and to put interventions in place where required. We discussed with senior staff the need to now develop robust systems to measure and report on all young people's attainment, across all examination levels and stages. At present, the school's focus on reporting on the overall pass rates of young people in national examinations does not yet provide an accurate overview of the progress all young people make as they move through the senior school. The new leadership team have identified the need to review the curriculum, particularly at S1/2, and should continue to implement changes in line with their improvement plan.

Across the stages, the school is very successful at ensuring that children and young people who require additional support are fully included and supported in their learning. Nursery, junior and senior school staff work successfully together to support children and young people as they move from one stage to another and to meet children's and young people's learning needs. Parents of children and young people who need additional support work in partnership with school staff to plan their child's learning. Partner agencies provide staff with relevant strategies to help them support children and young people in their learning. There are robust and effective systems in place to keep children and young people safe at school. All staff are clear about their role in protecting children and young people. As a result, almost all children and young people say they feel well cared for at school and most feel that adults are easy to talk to if they need help.

At the time of our visit, there had been very recent and significant changes within the school leadership team. In addition, there had been a number of new teaching appointments made at the start of the school year. In a very short space of time, the new Principal has gained the trust of the whole school community. As a result, staff morale has significantly improved and there is evidence of a growing and re-energised collegiate approach to self-evaluation and school improvement. Although a number of parents have voiced concerns about recent changes, almost all parents feel happy with most aspects of the school's work. Almost all parents who responded to our questionnaire agree that their children enjoy school and are progressing well with their learning. All senior leaders have clear remits and are providing the Principal with valuable support. Vice Principals lead on important aspects of school life such as child protection and wellbeing and the academic life of the senior school. In the junior school, the headteacher has demonstrated strong and purposeful leadership in

improving the consistency of learning and teaching. The Board of Governors has taken proactive and decisive action to improve the leadership and strategic direction of the school. The Board and its Chair are working hard to achieve an appropriate balance of support and challenge to the school. They are keen to learn from staff at all levels and from children and young people, in order to improve their understanding of the work of the school, thus enabling them to make decisions in the best interest for every child and young person. The refocus of the Friends of Hamilton College parental group is a good example of the Board's appropriate aim to improve stakeholder communication and consultation. The school leadership team and Board of Governors demonstrate a clear commitment to continuing to improve the work of the school. Together, they have an accurate view of the strengths of the school and current areas for further improvement, based on sound self-evaluation. We have asked them to streamline the current improvement plan in order to focus clearly on a few main priorities.

We are confident that the school can improve its arrangements and procedures for ensuring continued improvement in the quality of education provided. We will make no further visits at this time. The Board of Governors will inform parents about the school's progress as part of their arrangements for reporting to parents on the quality of its school. Our link Inspector will maintain contact with the school to support and monitor improvements.

Lesley A Johnstone
HM Inspector

Additional evidence for your school can be found on the Education Scotland website at <http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/inspectionandreview/reports/school/primsec/HamiltonCollegeSouthLanarkshire.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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