

20 January 2015

Dear Parent/Carer

St Margaret's School for Girls, Aberdeen

HM Inspectors recently visited St Margaret's School for Girls. 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 and young people and worked together with the headteacher 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?

Children and young people are very proud of their school. At all stages across the school and nursery, their behaviour and attitude to learning is outstanding. The school motto 'tenez ferme' is reflected in the commitment they demonstrate in their sporting achievements, high-quality musical and drama performances, and in how they demonstrate a positive approach to their learning. Children and young people are friendly, polite, helpful and committed to St Margaret's vision and values, which are promoted very well through the school house system. These values promote a sense of community and identity and encourage girls to have a sense of loyalty to the school and to each other. In addition, the school fosters in all learners a strong and important sense of local and global citizenship.

In the nursery, children are becoming involved meaningfully in their own learning through the introduction of learning journeys and through the use of floor books. They are developing their independence very well through nursery routines such as snack time and self-registration. They apply their early literacy and numeracy skills in real-life contexts very well by helping to make signs and charts around the playroom. At the junior and senior stages, learners at St Margaret's achieve very well across their learning. The school has maintained consistently high levels of attainment and success in examination results in all areas of the curriculum in recent years. In the junior school, children benefit from well-planned interdisciplinary topics which link aspects of their learning together very well. At the senior stages, learning for many young people is enriched through programmes and activities specifically designed to

develop their skills for learning, life and work. For example, the recently introduced skills course at I Senior stage provides opportunities for girls to improve their presentation skills and note-taking techniques. Another course helps to prepare girls at the IV Senior stage to cope with dealing with the pressures of study and to develop important thinking and reasoning skills. The school should now continue with their plans to develop further approaches to promoting the higher order thinking skills of all learners. In the best learning across the junior and senior stages, tasks and activities provoke analysis, evaluation and a creative response from learners. In these lessons, children and young people are encouraged to think for themselves, discuss, debate and problem-solve in groups and in pairs. The school should ensure that this good practice is now disseminated more widely across all stages and departments.

Learning beyond the classroom is a very important part of life at St Margaret's. For example, an extensive programme includes Forest Schools visits for children in junior classes and a visit to the beach and garden centre as part of their science work. At the senior stages, girls enjoy learning about the DNA of strawberries through science coursework provided by a local university. Others visit the British Museum in London to learn in depth about Greek and Roman history. In addition the music and drama departments provide a range of inspiring opportunities for girls to perform in a variety of productions and ensembles. Learners gain a variety of skills such as team-building and research skills, historical knowledge and enhanced linguistic skills from their participation in a variety of residential trips at home and abroad. A commendable range of sporting, musical and other worthwhile activities are on offer to all learners as after-school activities each week.

The school has effective approaches in place to keep children and young people safe. Across the school, learners say they feel very well cared for. Overall, they believe that they are treated fairly and with respect by other pupils and staff. Learners benefit from very effective transition arrangements as they move through the different stages of the nursery and school. Positive and supportive relationships between learners and teaching and non-teaching staff were evident in almost all interactions observed by inspectors during the course of the visit. In response to their own recent survey, the school has taken action to review their anti-bullying strategy, and have involved learners directly in this process. For example, children in the junior classes have created informative anti-bullying posters and older girls wrote and performed at an assembly a drama sketch that highlighted extremely well the dangers of cyber-bullying. The school should now continue with its plans to review and strengthen the current arrangements for health and wellbeing across the school.

There is a positive and growing ethos of teamwork and professional collegiality across the school and nursery. Staff are very well supported by the school to participate in a range of career-long professional learning opportunities. This is leading to improvements, for example in approaches to outdoor learning. Important work has been undertaken in a short space of time by the headteacher and senior leaders to establish stronger and more focused approaches to self-evaluation at all levels across the school. As a result, all teams and individual staff are involved effectively in evaluating aspects of provision and reflecting on their own classroom practice. This is leading to improvements in the way that staff track progress in learning across the school and in giving learners more of a say in decision making.

Staff seek the views of children and young people on aspects of their school's work, such as through questionnaires and through the work of the eco committee and pupil council. There is scope to capitalise now on pupils' analytical and communication skills by involving them more directly in evaluating their experiences in classes and activities. Overall, parents are very supportive of the work of the school. They are pleased that the parent forum has become a more focused and worthwhile mechanism to listen and take account of their views. The school leadership team should now press ahead with their plans to develop a stronger and more proactive approach to involving parents as partners in their children's learning, and to keep under review approaches to communication between home and school.

In the short space of time since her appointment in May 2014, the headteacher has established sound working relationships across the school community and has gained the respect of staff, children and young people and parents. She is very knowledgeable, reflective, extremely well organised and has established a clear focus on securing improvements for learners. The School Council provides supportive and thoughtful governance and direction to the school. Through their commitment to working closely together, the senior leadership team is having a positive impact in ensuring there is a strengthened focus on self-evaluation and continuous improvement across the whole staff team. Overall, these strengthened approaches to self-evaluation, and the systematic and inclusive improvement planning process, are leading to consistently better outcomes for learners across the school.

We are confident the school has the necessary arrangements and procedures in place to ensure continued improvement in the quality of education provided. The school and School Council will inform parents about the school's progress as part of its arrangements for reporting to parents on the progress of the school.

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HM Inspector

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