

**Firrhill High School
The City of Edinburgh Council
22 April 2008**

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1. The inspection

HM Inspectorate of Education (HMIE) published a report on the inspection of Firrhill High School in June 2006. Working with the school, the education authority prepared an action plan indicating how they would address the main points for action identified in the original HMIE inspection report.

HM Inspectors revisited the school in January 2008 to assess the extent to which the school was continuing to improve the quality of its work, and to evaluate progress made in responding to the main points for action in the initial report.

2. Continuous improvement

Since the inspection report was published in June 2006, the school had continued to improve its overall effectiveness. The morale of staff and pupils was high. Staff supported an impressive range of out-of-school activities. Pupils were courteous and well behaved and almost all wore school uniform. Many achieved well in music and sport, most notably in the junior and senior bands and in hockey and football. There was a shared sense of pride in the achievements of the school and a strong sense of identity. Pupils were encouraged to take on a range of responsibilities including mentoring, paired reading and buddying. A significant number were developing their leadership skills through *Community Sports Leadership Awards*, the *Common Purpose Programme*, involvement in school committees and the pupil and senior student councils. Approaches to quality assurance were now more systematic and rigorous. The school had made significant improvements to the provision and use of information communications technology (ICT) to support learning and teaching. Staff had benefited from a range of in-house training and opportunities to share good practice. They appreciated the timely support and advice from the school-based ICT technician. A number of initiatives were having a beneficial impact on pupils' health and achievements. These included health promotions and the *Hungry for Success* initiative, Eco School work, the development of Mandarin as a language choice and a range of vocational opportunities for pupils in S3/S4. Attendance rates had improved and the quality of pupils' attainment in examinations continued to be above national levels, particularly at S5/S6. Overall, the school, supported by the education authority, had demonstrated a strong capacity for improvement.

3. Progress towards meeting the main points for action

The initial inspection report published in June 2006 identified six main points for action. This section evaluates the progress made with each of the action points and the resulting improvements for pupils and other stakeholders.

3.1 Ensure more consistency in learning and teaching and make effective use of the existing good practice.

The school had made good progress with this main point for action.

Staff were making sustained efforts to embed aspects of the national *Assessment is for Learning* (AiFL) development programme into their practice. In particular they focused on developing a wider range of approaches to teaching and learning. Members of the senior management team monitored the effective implementation of key features of the AiFL programme as part of their series of classroom visits. Teachers made good use of their professional development activities to improve teaching approaches and the quality of pupils' learning. They now explained more clearly to pupils what they were expected to learn and used open questioning effectively to develop pupils' thinking. They also provided constructive advice to pupils on how to improve the quality of their work. Across the school, many staff now gave a higher priority to involving pupils in active and interactive learning. They made effective use of ICT, including the use of interactive whiteboards and other equipment. Whilst most teachers provided opportunities for pupils to work in pairs or small groups on stimulating and challenging tasks, others had not yet fully embraced the changes required in their teaching approaches.

3.2 Improve standards of pupils' behaviour.

The school had made very good progress with this main point for action.

Following wide consultation with staff, a school working party had produced a new policy for promoting positive behaviour across the school. Most staff and pupils now clearly understood their roles and responsibilities under the code of conduct. Regular assemblies and notices ensured that both staff and pupils implemented the code consistently. Staff volunteers, including learning assistants worked with members of the senior management team to increase levels of supervision at lunch time and in corridors at changeover times. Pupil behaviour both in the class and around the school had improved. A pupil support base had been established and had had a significant impact on addressing pupils' learning, social and emotional needs. The base had a clear focus on individualising approaches to meeting needs whilst maintaining a strong focus on achieving identified learning targets. Referrals to the base were monitored regularly by members of the senior management team. An emphasis on restorative rather than punitive approaches was contributing to a reduction in referrals.

3.3 Develop more consistent, clearer and higher expectations of pupils' attainment.

The school had made very good progress with this main point for action.

Throughout the school, staff now placed a much greater emphasis on improving the attainment of pupils. Most were tracking pupils' progress more effectively and identifying problems of under-achievement early. The school had made a good start to using a new management information system to track attainment in S1/S2. Annual review meetings between members of the senior management team and principal teachers focused on pupils' examination results and set out strategies to address any deficiencies in pupil attainment. Classroom observation visits by members of the senior management team focused on the degree of pace and challenge for all pupils. In addition, senior managers used the

information gathered to ensure that good practice within the school was shared. Staff were encouraged to observe other members of staff teaching and many had benefited from these opportunities. As part of the raising attainment agenda the school had strengthened a “praise system” in S1/S2 whereby pupils’ achievement was recognised and celebrated. Pupils responded positively to this and had been motivated to do well. Staff were also developing a positive rewards system for pupils from S3 to S6. Assemblies were reinforcing the school’s emphasis on consistent standards and expectations.

3.4 Improve attainment at S1/S2.

The school had made very good progress with this main point for action.

The school had strengthened working links with its associated primary schools in order to build more effectively on pupils’ prior learning. Staff in guidance and support for learning had well-established links to ensure a smooth transition for the most vulnerable learners. These included a popular and well-organised *Holiday Headstart* summer school. Headteachers and staff from the associated primary schools met regularly and had agreed an effective cluster curriculum plan for English, mathematics, science and modern languages. This had resulted in progressive programmes between P6 and S2 in these subject areas. A common focus on ICT and health was driving improvements in the current session. As a result of these developments, staff had adapted the curriculum to better meet the needs of pupils as they moved from P7 into S1. The school should build on these examples of good practice to ensure that effective curriculum and assessment links are developed across all subjects. Teaching staff had taken important steps to review the S1/S2 curriculum against the four capacities and draft outcomes for pupils set out in the national *Curriculum for Excellence* development. This had resulted in timetable changes and well-considered plans to develop aspects of literacy and ICT skills across the curriculum from August 2008. Staff were preparing to deliver an interdisciplinary week for S1 pupils in early February on a thematic study of South Africa. This study would allow pupils to apply their knowledge and skills in an integrated way, across subject boundaries. As a result of these and other developments, a higher proportion of pupils were reaching appropriate levels of attainment in reading, writing and mathematics by the end of S2.

3.5 Improve the corporate effectiveness of promoted staff.

The school had made very good progress with this main point for action.

The headteacher was strongly committed to developing the capacity of staff and actively promoted leadership for learning. She modelled effective practice for staff and shared with them insights from a recent visit to the Leadership Institute in Ontario. The headteacher and the newly formed senior management team successfully encouraged staff to develop their own practice and engage in professional discussion and debate. Staff had responded positively and felt valued by the open, collegiate approach. Six new project leader posts had been introduced in 2007 and had ensured that a focus on improving learning and teaching was central to curriculum delivery. Individual members of the new senior management team (SMT) were adjusting well to their revised roles and responsibilities. A significant number of principal teachers and other staff played an important role in leading well-focused working groups and in the day-to-day running of the school. Many had benefited from a range of opportunities for professional development to the benefit of pupils. Pupils too had been encouraged to take responsibility and a leadership role in a number of areas. Overall, there

was a strong sense of leadership and direction at different levels across the school and a shared confidence in the corporate effectiveness of promoted staff.

3.6 Build on current practice to improve self-evaluation.

The school had made very good progress with this main point for action.

The headteacher and the senior team worked energetically with staff to develop a culture of self-evaluation. Together, they had developed a more coherent and systematic approach to monitoring and evaluating the work of the school. Effective strategies included school-based in-service to share good practice, observations, ‘with a purpose’, of learning and teaching by staff at different levels and focused sampling of pupils’ work. Senior staff collated the key findings from class visits and discussed these with principal teachers. As a result, staff were developing and sharing strategies for more effective questioning, appropriate use of praise and increased pace and challenge. Teachers were becoming more reflective about their teaching and some were involving pupils in evaluating aspects of learning and teaching in their subject. The headteacher had introduced a series of quality assurance discussions between principal teachers and the link member of the SMT. These had helped to improve communication and the sharing of information about the work of departments. Discussions included a rigorous analysis of examination results, reasons for strong or weak performance and where appropriate, agreed strategies for improvement. The development of a whole-school approach to tracking and target-setting would assist the school to develop further its approaches to monitoring and quality assurance.

4. Conclusion

The school had responded very well to the main points for action of the HMIE report and had further improved important aspects of provision. Under the leadership of the new headteacher the school’s capacity to improve had been increased. As a result of the overall very good progress made by the school, supported by the authority, HMIE will make no further visits in connection with the report of June 2006.

Fiona Carlisle
HM Inspector

22 April 2008

How can you contact us?

If you would like an additional copy of this report

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If you have a concern about this report, you should write in the first instance to our Complaints Manager, HMIE Business Management and Communications Team, Second Floor, Denholm House, Almondvale Business Park, Almondvale Way, Livingston, EH54 6GA. You can also e-mail HMIEcomplaints@hmie.gsi.gov.uk. A copy of our complaints procedure is available from this office, by telephoning 01506 600200 or from our website at www.hmie.gov.uk.

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