

Summarised inspection findings

Mearns Academy

Aberdeenshire Council

20 January 2026

Key contextual information

School Name:	Mearns Academy
Council:	Aberdeenshire Council
SEED number:	5252032
Roll (November 2025):	669

Mearns Academy is a non-denominational, comprehensive secondary school located in Laurencekirk, Aberdeenshire. The headteacher has been in post for seven years. He is supported by three deputy headteachers.

In September 2024, 12.5% of pupils were registered for free school meals.

In September 2024, 0% of pupils lived in the 20% most deprived data zones in Scotland. 22.4% of pupils lived in the 20% least deprived data zones in Scotland.

Attendance is generally in line with the national average. Exclusions are generally below the national average. In September 2024, 12.5% per cent of pupils were registered for free school meals. In September 2025, the school reported that 29% of pupils had additional support needs.

1.3 Leadership of change

good

This indicator focuses on collaborative leadership at all levels to develop a shared vision for change and improvement which is meaningful and relevant to the context of the school within its community. Planning for continuous improvement should be evidence-based and linked to effective self-evaluation. Senior leaders should ensure the need for change is well understood and that the pace of change is appropriate to ensure the desired positive impact for learners. The themes are:

- developing a shared vision, values and aims relevant to the school and its community
- strategic planning for continuous improvement
- implementing improvement and change

- Almost all young people and staff demonstrate the values of respect, wellbeing and ambition through their everyday interactions. Learning takes place in calm and respectful environments and young people know well how to support their own wellbeing. Senior leaders have led stakeholders well through consultations to decide, evaluate and refine the school's values. This includes the school's mission – it aims to inspire to through challenge and opportunity. The values and mission have been embraced by the community and are central to the strategic direction of senior leaders which supports staff and young people to be ambitious.
- The headteacher is very well respected and leads the school community in a calm and highly supportive manner. The headteacher and other senior leaders consult with staff on the school improvement plan (SIP). It reflects local and national priorities well. Senior leaders identified the need to have a more focussed approach to school improvement planning and undertook professional learning regarding strategic planning. They have worked effectively with middle leaders by using a range of data and self-evaluation activities to identify more streamlined priorities. Helpful standards and qualities reports identify progress on improvement priorities. Senior leaders discuss the SIP with staff, members of the pupil council and the Parent Council. Feedback from staff supports senior leaders to finalise the SIP. Planning for the spending and evaluation of Pupil Equity Funding (PEF) is informed well by senior and middle leaders' knowledge of young people's needs and socio-economic circumstances.
- Senior leaders' very successful work on wellbeing and inclusion exemplifies the strength of their approach to strategic improvement planning. Senior leaders' successful planning and actions have supported young people's wellbeing and inclusion to be central to the work of staff and partners. As a result, young people benefit from a range of supportive approaches and relationships which support their wellbeing effectively. Respectful relationships between young people and with school staff ensure all members of the community are included in all aspects of school life.
- Teaching staff focused on a recent SIP priority to enhance the curricular offer for S6 learners with a clear focus on raising attainment. As a result of the successful culture for change established by the headteacher and senior leaders, this is beginning to lead to a wider offer of courses for senior phase learners. Senior and middle leaders should continue to monitor closely the impact these changes have on attainment.
- Senior leaders continue to develop effective and appropriate self-evaluation processes. There are robust quality assurance activities in place that use a wide range of data to support

decisions. Middle leaders have adopted similar quality assurances procedures when evaluating faculty improvement plans (FIPs). As a result of this, middle leaders align FIPs closely with the SIP and there is a shared understanding of the whole school improvement journey.

- Teachers and staff at all levels are proactive in leading on SIP priorities as Mearns Improvement Leads (MILs). This supports leadership at all levels and there is a clear sense of ownership for all staff to drive improvement across the school. Most staff feel that they have the opportunity to lead on projects. As a result, the majority of teachers do lead on projects and activities. Staff feel empowered to suggest possible MIL projects and feel well supported by senior leaders to contribute to the school improvement journey. For example, staff have developed their own, bespoke system for the classroom called 'classroom portal'. This began as a way to share information around individual young people's learning needs. Portal now continues to grow as a tool to allow staff to increase their knowledge, and therefore more finely attune their supportive actions, of young people. Senior leaders should consider the balance of leadership projects and how well these match with SIP priorities.
- Young people participate actively in leadership activities through groups such as the pupil council and a variety of committees. Young people consult with peers to identify key discussion points and meet regularly with lead teachers. Young people involved with these groups feel that teachers listen to their suggestions for improvement. There is scope for staff to ensure the changes enacted by these groups are shared more widely. This will support more young people to recognise the impact they are having on school improvement.
- Young people in the senior phase have a wide variety of opportunities to develop their leadership skills and contribute to school improvement. The majority of senior phase learners have led on activities such as paired reading and volunteer as class helpers in almost all curricular areas. A few work regularly with teachers to plan the ways that they can support young people in classes. This is helping volunteers develop communication skills and empathy. Young people across the school are supported well by class helpers in a variety of ways such as one-to-one support in their learning. A few young people in the senior phase are leading a consultation exercise to gather young people's views on learning and teaching at Mearns Academy. This is increasing young people's participation in whole school improvement.
- All teaching staff participate in annual professional review and development. Staff identify areas of school and faculty development improvement priorities that link well with their own development priorities. Teachers use the General Teaching Council for Scotland (GTCS) professional standards during review discussions. Senior and middle leaders monitor the progress of projects and teachers' development priorities through helpful mid-year reviews. Staff find these reviews supportive and help them to maintain focus on their own targets. These approaches to monitoring progress support staff to ensure change is sustained and built upon. Moving forward, senior leaders should consider how to develop a clearer overview of all staff improvement activities.
- Staff welcome opportunities to collaborate with colleagues beyond the school. This collaboration includes with other primary and secondary colleagues from the local authority, college staff and local employers. Senior leaders prioritise time for professional learning activities. Staff are encouraged to participate in external professional learning and a few staff work with external exam bodies.

- Senior leaders have a clear vision and understanding of Developing the Young Workforce (DYW) priorities. Teachers and senior leaders work collaboratively with key partners such as Skills Development Scotland (SDS), the DYW coordinator and the careers advisors to develop the curriculum in line with DYW priorities. The SIP and almost all FIPs include reference to DYW priorities and meta skills development.

2.3 Learning, teaching and assessment

good

This indicator focuses on ensuring high-quality learning experiences for all children and young people. It highlights the importance of highly-skilled staff who work with children, young people and others to ensure learning is motivating and meaningful. Effective use of assessment by staff and learners ensures children and young people maximise their successes and achievements. The themes are:

- learning and engagement
- quality of teaching
- effective use of assessment
- planning, tracking and monitoring

- Positive relationships between staff and young people are evident in almost all classes. The respectful, calm and supportive learning environment reflect well the school's vision, mission and values. Staff deal well and restoratively with the few instances of dysregulated behaviour among young people. Almost all young people feel comfortable to ask questions and seek support when required. Young people appreciate the support they receive from their teachers within and beyond the classroom. Senior leaders use staff and other resources skilfully to support young people who need this. Young people and staff identify very strongly and positively with the culture of the school.
- Almost all teachers have participated well in planned professional learning to support the recently refreshed Mearns Academy learning, teaching and assessment framework 'My Future, My Learning'. This framework is supporting improvements in a range of aspects of learning and teaching and builds upon already well-understood and in place practices and expectations. This whole school approach, developed in partnership with young people, is supporting better a shared understanding among staff of the structure of a lesson. It is also supporting more consistent experiences for young people across lessons. A few young people already talk confidently about the refreshed version of 'My Future, My Learning' and how this is supporting them to understand better how and what they are learning.
- Almost all teachers have a clear understanding of the needs of individual young people from detail shared via the school's bespoke 'classroom portal'. The portal is being used very effectively to plan strategies to support identified young people with additional support needs. However, a minority of lessons are directed to the whole class and are not sufficiently differentiated to meet the needs of all learners, in general. In a minority of lessons where pace is brisk, young people are more engaged and successful in their learning. Senior leaders should work with teachers to focus on improving levels of both pace and challenge in learning across the school. Teachers are well-placed to use information about individual young people on the classroom portal to take this work forward.
- In most classes, teachers' explanations and instructions are clear and lessons are well structured. The majority of teachers use starters well to recap prior learning. This is helping young people to understand better and consolidate their learning. In most lessons, teachers share the purpose of learning and how young people will know if they have been successful. In most classes young people have opportunities to work collaboratively. When this work is well planned it promotes high levels of engagement, motivation and challenge. Strengthening a

shared understanding of high-quality learning and teaching strategies among teachers would support a more consistent and higher quality experience for all young people.

- Across the school, most teachers use questioning well to check knowledge and recall. In a minority of classes teachers use highly effective questioning to challenge young people and develop deeper thinking.
- All departments use digital technologies as a resource which can be used to support young people's learning in the classroom. Teachers use digital platforms effectively across the school to share resources and support learning. Young people feel that this information is helpful in supporting in their learning in class and at home. A minority of subject departments use digital technology as a tool to actively and effectively enhance young people's learning experiences within the classroom.
- Almost all departments have comprehensive assessment plans in place across the broad general education (BGE) and senior phase. In the senior phase, teachers make good use of National Qualifications (NQ) criteria to plan these assessments. This provides reliable information about progress and allows staff to share next steps. In the BGE, staff are beginning to use a wider range of assessment approaches. Most departments have developed criteria to exemplify what learners need to do to be successful. This is supporting young people to understand better how well they are doing and what they need to do to improve. A few departments are adapting assessments to meet the needs of young people at different stages of their learning which is providing better evidence of what young people know and can do.
- A minority of staff use formative assessment strategies and day to day learning responsively to adapt their teaching to better meet the needs of learners. Senior and middle leaders need to ensure teachers develop further their understanding of the relationship between checking for understanding, assessment and planning future learning. This will help to ensure teachers use assessment more effectively to improve learners' progress.
- Working together, teachers have established clear processes to verify assessment judgements. In the BGE, work to develop staff confidence about young people's progress is resulting in more reliable assessment judgements. This should be supported further by a whole school approach to moderation within, across and beyond the school. There is a need for moderation activities in the BGE to be more closely aligned with planning for learning.
- In the senior phase, most teachers have a clear understanding of assessment standards in National Qualifications and plan learning appropriately. A few staff undertake Scottish Qualification Authority (SQA) duties and participate in professional learning events relating to understanding standards. Participation in local authority professional subject groups (PSGs), also provide opportunities for teachers to work with colleagues beyond Mearns Academy to develop a shared understanding of national standards.
- Staff have successfully developed a shared language to describe progress across the BGE. As a result, most young people in S1 to S3 know the level they are working at and can talk about the progress they are making. In a minority of departments, young people benefit from structured opportunities to reflect on their progress and discuss this with their teacher. In the senior

phase, most young people discuss frequently their progress and what they need to do to improve.

- All curriculum areas track young people's learning in both the BGE and senior phase to monitor progress and attainment. Approaches and impact of this is variable across departments. In the senior phase, tracking data is used effectively by most departments to identify, at an early stage, young people who may require support or interventions. Teachers use this to undertake appropriate interventions in class and plan appropriate changes to learning. In the BGE, all curriculum areas have developed 'journey to senior phase' checkpoints across S1 to S3. This is helping them to identify young people not on track. This work is in the early stages and should be kept under review. Staff are not yet consistently using this information to plan learning or target support. There is a need to strengthen the link between tracking data and classroom practice to ensure it leads to improved outcomes for individual learners. In a few highly effective examples, teachers use BGE or senior phase assessment evidence very well to adjust their planned lesson to meet the needs of young people. This practice should continue to be shared more widely across the school to improve the quality of learners' experiences further. Senior leaders should also support a clearer, shared understanding of the roles and expectations of class teachers and faculty heads following tracking periods. This will support a more consistent approach to using data to inform well planned interventions and improvements in the classroom.

2.2 Curriculum: Learning pathways

- Staff and senior leaders work effectively with primary colleagues to support learners in their transition to secondary school. Teaching staff visit primary schools to build positive relationships. A few departments offer well considered transition projects which supports curricular transitions. There is scope for this to be extended further to more curricular areas. A few identified young people experience a highly effective enhanced transition programme which supports them well in S1.
- Learner pathways in S1 and S2 focus on delivering courses across all curricular areas and provide opportunity for progression in S3 where there is an opportunity for personalisation and choice.
- Senior leaders have recently reviewed pathways in the senior phase. This has led to a focus on widening the curriculum offer by increasing the range of Scottish Credit Qualification Framework (SCQF) courses, such as National Progression Awards (NPAs). In S4, all young people have the opportunity to study six qualifications plus an additional seventh subject which is described as a wider achievement award. Senior leaders should consider the value added for all young people undertaking these wider achievement awards. In S5, young people have the option to choose up to five subjects. To support an increased expectation in S6, staff and partners have introduced a growing range of NPAs, Foundation Apprenticeships and SCQF level 6 and level 7 qualifications. It is important that senior leaders maintain a strategic overview of curriculum developments which ensure progression pathways support all young people to maximise appropriately their attainment and achievement in their learning.
- There is a shared understanding across all departments of literacy, numeracy and health and wellbeing as a responsibility of all teachers. A strategic overview of how well young people are applying these skills and knowledge at appropriate levels across all departments should benefit progression in literacy and numeracy.
- All young people receive their entitlements to two periods of high-quality physical education. Young people experience timetabled religious and moral education (RME) lessons from S1 to S3. Senior leaders should consider how young people could better experience their entitlement to RME learning in the senior phase. Young people's entitlements to learning modern languages in line with the 1+2 language learning policy are met through the study of French and Spanish between S1 and S3.
- The library is a well-resourced, shared space with the local community. The school has its own protected access twice a week. There is a librarian post, which is currently vacant.

2.7 Partnerships: Impact on learners – parental engagement

- The parent council works well with senior leaders to support the school. The parent council has taken the lead in consulting parents regarding the use of mobile phones in school. Their feedback helped to inform an updated school policy regarding phones. Senior leaders consult the parent council on school improvement planning. There is scope for parents to be more involved in school improvement planning and in the strategic approach to PEF allocation.
- The parent council organises a wide variety of fundraising activities such as the well-supported sponsored walk. Funds raised then support many events and trips such as prizegiving and to offset the cost of a few trips. The parent council has established itself as a registered charity.
- Senior leaders communicate well with parents through regular newsletters and social media. The school website is well received and includes a variety of helpful information.
- Most parents feel comfortable in contacting staff and they are confident that staff will respond effectively to addressing any concerns. Most parents feel that they receive appropriate information regarding their child's progress.

2.1 Safeguarding

- The school submitted self-evaluation information related to child protection and safeguarding. Inspectors discussed this information with relevant staff and, where appropriate, young people. In addition, inspectors examined a sample of safeguarding documentation. Areas for development have been agreed with the school and the education authority.

3.1 Ensuring wellbeing, equality and inclusion

very good

This indicator focuses on the impact of the school's approach to wellbeing which underpins children and young people's ability to achieve success. It highlights the need for policies and practices to be well grounded in current legislation and a shared understanding of the value of every individual. A clear focus on ensuring wellbeing entitlements and protected characteristics supports all learners to maximise their successes and achievements. The themes are:

- wellbeing
- fulfilment of statutory duties
- inclusion and equality

- Warm, caring and respectful relationships are evident across the school community. Almost all young people feel safe and that they are treated fairly and with respect. Young people feel they have someone they can speak to if they are upset and have nurturing spaces in the school they can go to. This helps them feel secure and looked after.
- Almost all young people and staff demonstrate a shared understanding of wellbeing, which is reflected in the school's inclusive and supportive ethos. Young people in S5 and S6 contribute very effectively to promoting wellbeing by delivering peer-led lessons on mental health within the BGE and also undertake peer mentoring. As a result of this strong and shared understanding, most young people identify very clearly their own wellbeing needs and how to support them. For example, young people talk confidently about how to maintain positive relationships and how to stay safe when online.
- Almost all young people engage in twice-yearly wellbeing surveys through personal and social education (PSE). This enables pupil support staff to respond effectively with highly effective targeted check-ins and interventions where appropriate. Feedback from these surveys has led to meaningful changes. These changes include the introduction of well-used digital matrix codes for guidance self-referral, enhanced counselling provision and new PSE topics. Senior and middle leaders use this wide range of information very well to support individual young people. For example, identifying and responding to young people who do not feel safe. Middle leaders also use this wide range of information to adjust their PSE courses responsively. As a result, already well-planned and progressive programmes of learning take account of emerging needs and issues. As a result of effective staff use of wellbeing information, positive outcomes for individual young people and cohorts of them have increased. Senior leaders and staff should continue their wellbeing improvement journey by reviewing and aligning the wellbeing and mental health strategies to ensure a yet more effective whole-school approach.
- Senior leaders plan very effectively with partners to identify and respond to the needs of young people requiring additional support. Staff implement a wide range of targeted interventions well, including anxiety and stress management, bereavement support, and therapeutic input, to promote wellbeing. Partners such as counsellors, health professionals and the school nurse collaborate closely with staff to address the physical and emotional needs of learners. These approaches have led to improved outcomes for most identified young people. For example,

their attendance, increased engagement in learning or additional support or their enhanced resilience. Senior leaders and pupil support staff monitor very effectively the impact of these interventions at individual learner level. As a next step, senior leaders should continue with the implementation of capturing a whole school overview of all young people receiving wellbeing interventions and consider how this can also affect attainment.

- Senior leaders have begun to work collaboratively with staff to implement a new classroom framework which supports inclusive learning environments. Departments have reflected on classroom spaces and made purposeful adaptations, including calm corners, reading areas, consistent routines and sensory spaces. Staff have introduced a range of wellbeing strategies such as fidget tools, visual timetables, wellbeing check-ins and wobble chairs to support emotional regulation. As a result, young people benefit from the calm and supportive ethos this creates and respond positively to the inclusive approaches in place. Senior leaders and staff should now continue to build on this work to further enhance inclusive classroom practice across the school.
- Staff benefit from a well-structured professional learning programme focused on wellbeing and safeguarding, which underpins the school's core values of respect and wellbeing. The programme includes key themes such as supporting learners with additional needs, assessment arrangements, Getting It Right For Every Child and child protection. As a result, staff demonstrate a strong understanding of the barriers to learning faced by identified young people and show increased confidence in fulfilling their statutory responsibilities. This contributes very well to the high level of staff understanding across the school and supports a strong universal offer of inclusive and responsive learning environments for almost all young people.
- Pupil support staff use robust systems and processes very well to assess, plan and review the needs of young people requiring additional support. Pupil Support Teachers, Pupil Support Workers and Support for Learning staff work collaboratively to identify barriers to learning and develop detailed plans with measurable targets. Where appropriate, young people and parents contribute to planning, ensuring they are involved in decisions about support. As a result, learners feel listened to, included and well supported. Different staff use high-quality information available on classroom portal about individual young people. very well. Class teachers use this information well to support young people in their learning, and other staff are able to use this as an overview to consider further interventions or support. For example, relating to attendance, participation, additional support needs or medical history. Pastoral staff use this system well to consider regularly teachers' evaluation of the effectiveness of support strategies. As a result, this allows further advice and support measures to be tailored and responded to very effectively, particularly for young people with additional support needs. This includes classroom advice relating to learning and also other interventions. Senior leaders should ensure that all staff continue to work collaboratively and receive professional learning from the Additional Support for Learning (ASL) staff. This will continue to develop staff confidence in adapting teaching and learning approaches to meet the diverse needs of learners.

- The ASL team adopts a pupil-centred planning approach, working in close partnership with parents to review regularly and meet learners' needs. Daily team meetings enable teachers and pupil support assistants (PSAs) to share information and coordinate support effectively. Young people who receive further enhanced support access a full curriculum, with targeted support in literacy, numeracy and personal development leading to appropriate qualifications in the senior phase. Young people are supported well in mainstream classes, which promotes inclusion and enhances social development. Subject teachers make effective use of primary-trained teachers to support early-level learners. They support staff to adapt learning and teaching to better meet the needs of learners. These approaches contribute to appropriate learning and positive progression for identified young people.
- Senior leaders and pupil support staff work together effectively to identify and support young people at risk of disengagement or exclusion. They implement well-planned, personalised arrangements that meet individual needs. Teachers respond sensitively to the challenges faced by a few learners and confidently apply de-escalation strategies when required. These approaches contribute very well to an inclusive and positive learning environment, where young people's needs are met well. For example, teachers' implementation of a well-considered and successful strategy around support and de-escalation within school has led to a reduction in exclusions.
- Staff have established a well-planned pastoral transition programme between local primary schools and Mearns Academy. Almost all young people benefit from opportunities to build relationships with peers and key secondary staff through a range of activities and visits. Effective arrangements are in place to support identified children requiring enhanced transition, including specialised input from health professionals. The P7 Club, curricular and pastoral visits, and other transition supports help young people to settle quickly into secondary school. These approaches promote a sense of belonging and contribute positively to learners' wellbeing during the move to S1.
- A major strength of the school's work is their support for young people who are young carers and who are care experienced. They receive high-quality care through one-to-one support, group support, emotional support and a wide variety of experiences beyond the school. These well-planned experiences include support and activities during the school holidays. All young carers are offered a young carer's statement and care experienced young people are considered for a co-ordinated support plan. The aspiration of meeting 'the promise' for care experienced young people is well advanced in Mearns Academy. All care experienced young people are considered for a Co-ordinated Support Plan (CSP). Staff devise highly individualised plans for each care experienced young person and young carer. This is resulting in positive outcomes for young people such as an improved pattern of engagement and attendance as well as improving attainment and a strong sense of belonging to the school. Identified young people feel they are looked after well, cared for and are understood. Staff are increasing almost all young people's understanding of different experiences in life, such as being a young carer. As a result of this improved understanding, an increasing number of young people now identify themselves as young carers and receive appropriate support.

- Inclusion and diversity is a major strength of the school. Staff provide meaningful opportunities across the curriculum for young people to explore issues relating to equality and diversity. Learners engage with protected characteristics through subject lessons including in RME, PSE, and social subjects, which promotes effectively understanding and respect. Assemblies further enhance this work by offering real-life context. Almost all young people benefit from a well-considered series of regular assemblies which allow partners and young people to share personal experiences which foster empathy and deepen awareness of the challenges others face. This growing understanding of diverse lived experiences include speakers of English as an additional language, disability, LGBTQ+ issues, neurodiversity and also experiences of young carers.
- The school community further celebrates diversity through a range of well-planned events, including the successful and high-profile equalities fair. This promotes inclusion and gives S3 learners a platform to campaign for change. For example, these events have supported young people to speak confidently about their ability to challenge discrimination. This has also led to staff making changes to lessons and courses to addressing emerging issues and more prominently foreground diversity issues. As planned, senior leaders should continue to work with staff across the school to strengthen and their own courses' visible commitment to inclusion and diversity issues. This will strengthen further the school's commitment to equality and inclusion.
- Staff continue to enhance young people's understanding of children's rights through planned learning experiences and professional development. The UNCRC pupil group meets regularly to lead and evaluate the school's approach to embedding rights-based practice. The pupil rights ambassadors play key leadership roles in this work. There is scope to extend this opportunity to a wider group of learners to ensure greater sustainability and deepen young people's participation. Young people demonstrate a clear understanding of their own rights and those of others. As a result of the school's UNCRC work, they show increased respect for diversity and a strong sense of belonging to the school.
- The school submitted information relating to compliance with the revised Nutritional Regulations 2020 and key duties as required by the Schools (Health Promotion and Nutrition) (Scotland) Act 2007. The Health and Nutrition Inspector (HNI) discussed this information with relevant staff and young people. In addition, the HNI examined documentation relating to the effectiveness of whole school approaches to improving the health and wellbeing of young people through food in school. Minor areas for improvement have been agreed with the school and the school meals provider.

3.2 Raising attainment and achievement

good

This indicator focuses on the school's success in achieving the best possible outcomes for all learners. Success is measured in attainment across all areas of the curriculum and through the school's ability to demonstrate learners' achievements in relation to skills and attributes. Continuous improvement or sustained high standards over time is a key feature of this indicator. The themes are:

- attainment in literacy and numeracy
- attainment over time
- overall quality of learners' achievement
- equity for all learners

Attainment in literacy and numeracy

Broad general education (BGE)

- Senior leaders report that in 2024/25, almost all young people achieved Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) third level or better in literacy by the end of S3. Most young people achieved CfE fourth level in literacy by the end of S3. These levels of achievement have been broadly improving since 2018/19. In 2024/25, most young people achieved CfE fourth level in numeracy by the end of S3. These levels of achievement have been broadly sustained since 2021/22.
- Teachers work with colleagues from local primary schools on literacy and numeracy, which supports the transition of learners to secondary school in these areas. Teachers' work with colleagues from primary schools enables senior and middle leaders to evaluate the progression of young people from primary school through the BGE, using a range of evidence. This shows that young people are making positive progress from their transition to secondary school. Teachers should engage more widely in work with colleagues from other secondary schools to improve further the reliability of their assessment judgements. This should also help improve appropriate pace and challenge for all learners in literacy and numeracy.

Senior phase

Leavers

- Most young people left school with SCQF level 5 or better in literacy and in numeracy in 2023/24. This level of attainment has been sustained to be significantly higher or significantly much higher in both literacy and numeracy than the virtual comparator (VC) over the last four years. A minority of young people left school with SCQF level 6 or better in literacy in 2022/23 and 2023/24. The percentage of young people achieving this level is lower than in previous years. It is now significantly much lower than the VC in 2023/24, having been significantly lower in 2022/23 and in line in 2021/22. Senior leaders acknowledge the importance of ensuring all young people remain robustly challenged in their learning. A minority of young people left school with SCQF level 6 or better in numeracy in 2023/24. This has remained broadly line with VC for the last five years. Young people who require additional support have attained along broadly similar levels upon leaving school over this time. However, attainment in SCQF level 6 numeracy for young people who require additional support has been inconsistent.

Cohorts

- Senior and middle leaders should continue or revisit plans to robustly introduce more opportunities for young people to achieve literacy and numeracy qualifications at SCQF level 6

as they move through the school. This should help a wider range of young people to attain in these areas at this level.

- In S4 and by S5, based on the S4 roll, most young people achieved SCQF level 5 or better in literacy in 2024/25. This has been broadly sustained since 2020/21. Having previously been significantly higher or significantly much higher than VC, this level of attainment has been in line with VC since 2023/24. By S5 and by S6, both based on the S4 roll, a minority of young people achieved SCQF level 6 or better in literacy 2024/25. This level of attainment has risen to be in line with VC for young people by S5, based on the S4 roll, in 2024/25. For the four years prior to 2024/25, young people by S6, based on the S4 roll, attained in line with VC. However, in 2024/25, young people still attain literacy at this level significantly lower than VC by S6, based on the S4 roll.
- In S4 and by S5, based on the S4 roll, most young people achieved SCQF level 5 or better in numeracy in 2024/25. This has been broadly sustained since 2020/21. This level of attainment was in line with VC for young people in S4 in 2024/25, having previously been higher or significantly much higher than VC since 2020/21. By S5, based on the S4 roll, this level of attainment has been significantly higher or significantly much higher than VC since 2020/21. By S5 and by S6, both based on the S4 roll, a minority of young people achieved SCQF level 6 or better in numeracy between 2020/21 and 2024/25. This level of attainment has been in line with VC since 2022/23 for young people by S5 and in line with VC since 2021/22 for young people by S6, based on the S4 roll.
- Attainment at National 5 (N5) and Higher English is broadly in line with national averages. There is scope to improve the quality of passes at both levels. Attainment at N5 mathematics has improved to being broadly above the national average. Attainment at Higher mathematics has declined to being broadly below the national average. An increasing number of young people are being entered for N5 applications of mathematics. There is scope to improve the quality of passes in S5 and S6 for N5 applications of mathematics. There is no double presentation of mathematics and applications of mathematics.

Attainment over time

Attendance

- Attendance of young people in 2023/24 is in line with the national average. This has remained broadly consistent in 2024/25. Senior leaders introduced a new attendance system in 2024/25 to monitor individual and cohort patterns more closely. Pupil support staff use this data to implement targeted interventions and analyse trends. Personalised pathways, support from external agencies, and access to nurture spaces have helped a few young people re-engage with school, resulting in improved attendance. Senior leaders should continue to review the use of part-time timetables for a few young people. Proactive and well-considered approaches by staff to inclusion, support and restorative practices have successfully reduced the number of young people excluded from school by 2024/25.

BGE

- Senior leaders report that by the end of S3, almost all young people achieve CfE third level or better in almost all curriculum areas beyond literacy and English and numeracy and mathematics. The school reports that by the end of S3, most young people achieve CfE fourth level or better in most curriculum areas.

- Staff have recently reviewed how they evaluate and track young people's progression through the BGE. Teachers' professional judgements are increasingly reliable, but there are still inconsistencies with this. Senior and middle leaders should now ensure there is more consistency across all subjects as young people progress through the BGE. This should help to support more easily understood strategies to evaluate and improve outcomes for learners in the BGE.

Senior phase

Improving attainment for all

Leavers

- Based on average complementary tariff scores, the performance of the lowest attaining 20% of leavers has been significantly higher than VC between 2020/21 and 2022/23. It was in line with VC in 2023/24. The performance of the middle attaining 60% of leavers was significantly higher than VC in 2020/21 and 2021/22. It was in line with VC in 2022/23 and 2023/24. The performance of the highest attaining 20% of leavers has declined to being significantly lower than VC since 2021/22. Senior leaders acknowledge these changes in attainment for the highest attaining 20% of young people. As a result, they have instigated a renewed focus on increased challenge for young people with regard to classroom practice, course availability and timetabling of young people onto courses. Based on complementary tariff scores, the performance of leavers who required additional support has been broadly in line with VC since 2022/23.

Cohorts

- In S4 and S5, based on average complementary tariff scores and the S4 roll, the lowest attaining 20% of young people attained significantly higher or significantly much higher than VC between 2021/22 and 2023/24. In 2024/25, this was in line with VC. The lowest attaining 20% of young people in S6, based on the S4 roll, have attained significantly higher than VC since 2023/24. Teachers should monitor carefully any signs of decline in the attainment of the lowest attaining 20% of young people and take appropriate action. As young people move through S4-S6, based on complementary tariff scores and the S4 roll, the middle attaining 60% and highest attaining 20% of young people generally attain in line with VC. Teachers should also monitor carefully patterns in attainment among the middle attaining 60% and highest attaining 20% of young people in S5 and ensure they aim to maximise attainment of these groups. The highest attaining 20% of young people in S6, based on the S4 roll, have improved to be in line with VC in 2023/24 and 2024/25.

Breadth and depth

- In S4, rising numbers of young people are achieving five or more awards at SCQF level 5C or better and SCQF level 5A or better. The majority achieved five or more awards at SCQF level 5C or better in 2024/25 and an increasing minority at SCQF level 5A or better in the same year. Attainment at these levels remains in line with VC but has been notably improving since 2022/23.
- Senior leaders acknowledge there has been a decrease in recent years of the percentage of young people achieving at SCQF level 6 or better by S5, using complementary tariff scores and based on the S4 roll. The majority of young people achieved one or more awards at SCQF level 6C or better from 2021/22 to 2024/25. This is in line with the VC for the last three years. For three or more awards at this level, a minority of young people achieved at this level between

2020/21 and 2024/25, which is in line with the VC. For four or more to five or more awards, achievement at this level is now significantly lower than the VC, having previously being in line. A few young people achieved three or more to five or more awards at SCQF level 6A or better in 2024/25. This has been in line with the VC between 2020/21 and 2024/25 for these measures except for young people attaining three or more awards at level 6A or better. Attainment at this level has declined to be significantly lower than VC.

- The quality of young people's attainment by S6 at SCQF level 6 or better has been more in line with VC. By S6, a few young people achieved one or more awards at SCQF level 7C or better in 2024/25. This is now in line with VC in 2023/24 and 2024/25, having been previously significantly lower.
- Senior leaders recognise that there is room for significant improvement in the quality of attainment for young people at SCQF level 6, in particular. There is some evidence of early success in senior leaders' plans to address this through improved challenge in classroom learning, course availability and appropriate course choices. For example, in increased quality of SCQF level 5 attainment in S4 and more robust and challenging coursing for young people entering S5. In addition to careful monitoring by senior leaders of the changed curriculum offer and levels of classroom challenge, teachers will be supported by further refinement in the use of tracking and monitoring. This should be used to better identify cohorts of young people who would benefit from additional action to improve the quality of their attainment.

All SCQF courses

- Young people benefit from a wide range of available qualifications in addition to National Qualifications (NQs). For example, NPAs and skills development awards. These are supporting a larger group of young people to attain as they move through the school. Senior leaders should ensure that they continue to monitor closely the appropriateness and impact of these courses on young people's attainment. Nonetheless, there is increasing evidence of success in attainment in these courses, especially where young people are identified carefully as benefiting from presentation in these courses. For example, a minority of young people in the senior phase benefit from well-supported and successful attainment through Foundation Apprenticeships and partnerships with tertiary education institutions. Almost all young people presented for Foundation Apprenticeships achieve success and the majority progress into a modern apprenticeship in Aberdeenshire.
- Only a few young people are dual presented for the same National Qualifications at more than one level.

Overall quality of learners' achievement

- Across the school, young people are gaining life skills through participation in a wide range of activities within and beyond classes. These activities support effectively a vibrant culture of participation among learners. For example, young people benefit from involvement in activities and competitions such as high-profile interhouse events, a successful peer mentoring programme and debating, STEM and music contests. Most young people are involved in at least one of the wide range of clubs and activities offered by school staff. Increasingly, young people are starting and leading their own additional activities for peers. For example, in gaming, chess and badminton. This supports young people's skills in leadership. The strong partnership with Active Schools supports increasing numbers of young people participating in sport. Mearns Academy has the highest participation rate in

the local authority. These high levels of participation across a range of activities are helping young people to develop well their social skills, build confidence and improve their self-esteem.

- Staff track young people's participation in activities in or relating to school. They support identified young people well who may need additional support, encouragement or direction to appropriate activities. This targeted support is leading to increased engagement for identified groups of young people. Senior and middle leaders use their knowledge of young people well to ensure that an increasing group of young people who would benefit from specific outcomes such as increased confidence or collaboration benefit from this approach.
- Young people feel valued and included by staff and peers, as their achievements within and beyond school are recognised and celebrated regularly. These celebrations include assemblies, wall displays and social media posts. Staff have recently reviewed their 'Colours' scheme and recently introduced Values Awards. These allow young people to have a broader selection of achievements be celebrated across a wider range of the school population. These reformed approaches have allowed staff to consider more successfully different groups of young people such as young carers or young people who require additional support as they aim to ensure they are not disadvantaged. Young people and parents value these celebrations of achievement and involvement.
- Staff are in the process of developing a more meaningful understanding among young people of the skills they are developing in their learning. They would benefit from an increased understanding of these skills. Young people should also be supported to relate this to the skills they are developing in their participation activities. Staff should also consider how this process can incorporate a greater knowledge and understanding of young people's participation and achievements out with school. Staff are well-placed to develop further this work.
- A minority of young people in S4 to S6 achieve meaningful accreditation in award programmes. For example, sports development and leadership programmes. Senior leaders should explore further a wider range of available accredited youth awards. They should aim to ensure that the strong and successful culture of participation now also supports better raised attainment and achievement for young people. This should also give greater choice and recognition of young people's achievements.

Equity for all learners

- Senior and middle leaders use a range of data well to identify potential socio-economic barriers faced by young people and their families. As a result, senior and middle leaders target effectively identified young people to support their improved engagement in learning. For example, strategies such as a supported tutor classes or ongoing interventions and mentoring by partners, staff and peers to support identified young people through one-to-one or small group activities. These well-planned supports are leading to improvements in engagement, attendance or attainment for almost all identified young people. Pupil Equity Funding (PEF) is used well to support these strategies.
- Staff are skilled in supporting an increasing number of identified young people to widen the range and quality of their experiences and achievements as they progress through their time in school. For example, staff have worked very well with partners to ensure young carers,

care-experienced young people and learners identified as at risk of socio-economic disadvantage benefit from a wide range of cost neutral activities and trips within the school term and in school holidays. This supports improved outcomes for these identified young people. Staff have helped mitigate the impact of recent reductions to rural public transport networks with investment in school transport. This supports young people in more remote rural areas to better access after school activities and support classes. As planned, staff should continue to identify and develop further supports for young people.

- Staff have put in place helpful offers of universal support to promote equity. For example, a swap shop for school uniforms and a breakfast club help to address the cost of the school day. This universal focus helps staff to support individual young people affected by poverty who may otherwise have been missed. Staff also use their knowledge of identified young people and their families to provide financial support for activities such as school trips. Senior leaders should consider further approaches which promote a more equitable universal offer of such trips and experiences. Senior and middle leaders should also continue to consider ways to more effectively measure and monitor the impact of these universal supports upon outcomes for young people's attainment and achievement over time.
- Young people are supported well with their applications to college, employment, and university. For example, young people benefit from mock assessment activities and other events where they undertake employment role plays. This has helped support an increased understanding among young people of vocational and transferable skills and employability.
- Most young people remain at school for S5 and the majority remain for S6. From 2019/20 to 2023/24, almost all young people who left school entered an initial positive destination. This has been sustained in line with VC since 2020/21. The majority of young people leave school to go to higher or further education. A minority enter employment on leaving school and a few take up training opportunities.

Explanation of terms of quantity

The following standard HMIE terms of quantity are used in this report:

All	100%
Almost all	91%-99%
Most	75%-90%
Majority	50%-74%
Minority/less than half	15%-49%
A few	less than 15%

Other quantitative terms used in this report are to be understood as in common English usage.

On behalf of His Majesty’s Chief Inspector of Education in Scotland.