



**Alford Academy  
Aberdeenshire Council  
10 February 2009**

This report tells you about the quality of education at the school. We describe how young people benefit from learning there. We explain how well they are doing and how good the school is at helping them to learn. Then we look at the ways in which the school does this. We describe how well the school works with other groups in the community, including parents<sup>1</sup> and services which support young people. We also comment on how well staff and young people work together and how they go about improving the school.

Our report describes the 'ethos' of the school. By 'ethos' we mean the relationships in the school, how well young people are cared for and treated and how much is expected of them in all aspects of school life. Finally, we comment on the school's aims. In particular, we focus on how well the aims help staff to deliver high quality learning, and the impact of leadership on the school's success in achieving these aims.

If you would like to learn more about our inspection of the school, please visit [www.hmie.gov.uk](http://www.hmie.gov.uk). Here you can find analyses of questionnaire returns and details about young people's examination performance. Where applicable, you will also be able to find descriptions of good practice in the school and a report on the learning community surrounding the school.

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this report, the term 'parents' should be taken to include foster carers, residential care staff and carers who are relatives or friends.

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### **1. The school**

Alford Academy is a non-denominational school which serves the town of Alford and the surrounding rural area. The inspection was carried out in November 2008 at which time the roll was 543. Young people's attendance was above the national average in 2006/07.

## **2. Particular strengths of the school**

- High levels of attainment and achievement by young people.
- Very good examples of curriculum innovation to meet young people's needs.
- Very effective support for learners, including those with additional support needs.
- A strong sense of community within the school.
- Very positive links with the local community.
- Clear leadership and strong staff teamwork.

## **3. Examples of good practice**

- Effective partnership working in meeting young people's needs.
- The 'Classroom at Sea' residential sailing experience.
- The Rural Skills course, linking education to the local economy.

## **4. How well do young people learn and achieve?**

### **Learning and achievement**

Young people in the school are very well motivated and interested in learning. They respond well to the varied teaching approaches provided in most classes and work well in groups and individually. Most are performing very well in classwork across the school, through listening attentively and concentrating on the tasks in hand. In some subjects, they need more opportunities to take responsibility for their work and to think independently and creatively. The school now needs to build more on the good practice that is evident in many classes.

Young people are benefiting from the very wide range of sporting, cultural and community-based activities offered by the school. These include instrumental tuition, film production, events weeks, residential learning and international links with Alaska, Germany, Malawi and Peru. Participation in The Duke of Edinburgh's Award has increased greatly over recent years. Groups of young people have gained success in a range of other awards, including John Muir Awards for conservation and Royal Yacht Association certificates. Many are developing direct experience of responsible citizenship and leadership through the student council, the youth forum, the house system and through senior pupil responsibilities, committees and buddying schemes. Some are offering excellent support for other pupils, such as peer listening and tutoring in the piping class and badminton club. Overall, young people across the school are developing the personal skills at the heart of the national programme, *Curriculum for Excellence*.

Most young people in S1 and S2 are progressing well from their previous levels of attainment. From S4 to S6, they achieve very well in examinations. Results are consistently better than for young people with similar needs and backgrounds in other schools. Learners with additional support needs are making very good progress towards their targets and are very positive in their attitudes to learning and personal development. A high percentage of young people enter higher education. The school has put in place a range of suitable steps to improve examination performance further, particularly at S5.

### **Curriculum and meeting learning needs**

The curriculum offers suitable breadth, balance and choice for learners at all stages and is being improved steadily to meet their needs more fully. The school is in the process of re-developing S1 courses to include the skills set out in the national programme *Curriculum for Excellence*. Some S1 courses are particularly well planned, as in English, science and the social subjects. Overall, staff still need better awareness of what pupils learn in the associated primary schools. At S3/S4, vocational learning is developing well through effective

partnership with colleges. This includes a rural skills course, planned on site to meet local circumstances. Learners with additional support needs follow carefully planned individualised programmes. The school has improved the S5/S6 curriculum significantly to offer increased opportunities for leadership, study skills and community involvement. Overall, there are numerous promising examples of good links between subjects, with opportunities for pupils to apply their skills in new areas. The school has suitable plans to change the timetable, which currently does not offer enough time for physical education.

Staff are strongly committed to supporting young people's learning and personal development. Most ensure a suitable pace of learning and provide activities and resources which are designed to meet the range of learners' needs. Staff, including the senior management team, know individuals very well and are aware of their learning needs. There is very good communication between the support for learning team, the guidance team and other staff throughout the school. The support for learning team offers high-quality help to individuals and groups with additional needs, including those who attend the support base. The team coordinates well the production of individualised educational programmes (IEPs) and pen portraits of learners. These contain very useful information about learners' needs and on strategies to support their learning. The house system offers effective support and encouragement for young people, who feel that they know their guidance teacher well and are well supported. Very well-planned links with associated primary schools help learners coming into S1.

## **5. How well do staff work with others to support young people's learning?**

Staff in the school work very well with other agencies to support young people's learning and personal development. They have very good links with social work services and community learning and development staff. Consultation with health partners outside the school is effective. In particular, the school is strongly supported in its health improvement agenda by the NHS health improvement team, mental health workers, the family support worker and school nurses.

The school is also working well to improve its partnership with parents in supporting young people's learning. Parents feel welcome and that home-school communication is interesting and informative, through the well-constructed website and prospectus. The school links very well with a wide range of individuals and organisations in the wider community, including local businesses, the Cairngorms National Park Authority, the SpeyGrian Trust for outdoor learning, local artists, sports clubs, the community police and the library service. The school is responsive to issues raised by the community.

## **6. Are staff and young people actively involved in improving their school community?**

Young people and staff are highly committed to improving their school. Young people are encouraged to take part in decision making and to take responsibility through improvement teams and consultative groups. Their involvement in mentoring and buddying strengthens the sense of community. The senior prefect team works closely with the senior management team to improve the school. All S6 pupils are encouraged to contribute to the life of the school through taking part in school committees, including charity, community, book and common room committees. The student council makes an important contribution towards improving the school community and environment.

The school is improving its arrangements for quality assurance. Staff are highly committed to self-evaluation and further improvement. Quality assurance arrangements have been reviewed recently and now focus clearly on the quality of young people's learning and achievement. Staff use detailed analysis and discussion of examination results and other information about young people's performance when making up departmental improvement plans. The school collects and makes good use of feedback from parents, pupils and the wider community. In some subjects, staff are collecting young people's views on the quality of their learning experiences and what might be done to improve these. The senior management team and principal teachers follow a programme of observing learning and

teaching across subjects. Groups of staff also discuss and share good practice, for example in the use of information and communications technology. The school now needs to use the existing good practice as a prompt for further staff development and to extend its arrangements for tracking learners' progress more systematically.

## **7. Does the school have high expectations of all young people?**

The ethos of the school is very positive. Young people are well behaved and have very good relationships with staff. Staff have high expectations of learners. The school as a whole expects young people to contribute to its improvement and the sense of community it is building. Almost all young people feel safe and well cared for and that they are treated fairly and with respect. Around a third of those consulted feel that staff should talk to them more about how they could improve their learning. The school provides appropriate opportunities for religious observance. The school has a clear race equality policy, with the values of equality, fairness and respect promoted well through courses and learning activities. The school is not fully accessible to users with disabilities. In several areas, the quality of accommodation currently restricts the quality of young people's learning experiences. However, the education authority has plans to build a new school for the Alford community.

## **8. Does the school have a clear sense of direction?**

The headteacher has been in post for a year, following a period as acting headteacher. She has a clear and accurate view of where the school needs to improve, while building well on its current successes. She has succeeded in developing very effective teamwork with her new senior management team and with staff, many of whom are involved in leading improvements in the school. The school improvement plan has suitable priorities. The arrangements for identifying the school's strengths and areas for improvement are now established and are increasingly improving the ethos of the school and the sense of partnership with parents and young people.

## 9. What happens next?

As a result of the very good quality of education provided by the school, we will make no further visits in connection with this inspection. The education authority will inform parents about the school's progress as part of the authority's arrangements for reporting to parents on the quality of its schools.

We have agreed the following areas for improvement with the school and education authority.

- Continue to develop the curriculum to meet young people's needs.
- Continue to improve self-evaluation and quality assurance to impact on the quality of young people's learning.

Quality indicators help schools, education authorities and inspectors to judge what is good and what needs to be improved in the work of the school. You can find these quality indicators in the HMIE publication *How good is our school?*. Following the inspection of each school, the Scottish Government gathers evaluations of three important quality indicators to keep track of how well all Scottish schools are doing.

Here are the evaluations for Alford Academy.

<b>Improvements in performance</b>	<b>very good</b>
<b>Learners' experiences</b>	<b>good</b>
<b>Meeting learning needs</b>	<b>very good</b>

We also evaluated the following aspects of the work of the school.

<b>The curriculum</b>	<b>good</b>
<b>Improvement through self-evaluation</b>	<b>good</b>

**HM Inspector:** Lachlan MacCallum      10 February 2009

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This report uses the following word scale to make clear judgements made by inspectors.

excellent	outstanding, sector leading
very good	major strengths
good	important strengths with some areas for improvement
satisfactory	strengths just outweigh weaknesses
weak	important weaknesses
unsatisfactory	major weaknesses

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