

**Melvich Primary School
Thurso
The Highland Council
19 December 2006**

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1. Background

Melvich Primary School was inspected in September 2006 as part of a national sample of primary education. The inspection covered key aspects of the work of the school at all stages. It evaluated pupils' achievements, the effectiveness of the school, the environment for learning, the school's processes for self-evaluation and innovation, and its capacity for improvement. There was a particular focus on attainment in English language and mathematics.

HM Inspectors examined pupils' work and interviewed groups of pupils, including the pupil council, and staff. Members of the inspection team also met the chairperson of the School Board, representatives of the parent-teacher association (PTA) and a group of parents¹.

The school serves the village of Melvich and the surrounding area. At the time of the inspection the roll was 27, including five children in the nursery class. The proportion of pupils who were entitled to free school meals was well below the national average. Pupils' attendance was in line with the national average.

The school had not had a permanent headteacher for the past two years. Between the retirement of the previous permanent headteacher in June 2004 and the appointment of the current headteacher, the school had been led by a number of acting headteachers. At the time of the inspection, a new, permanent headteacher had been in post for five weeks. She was headteacher of a group of three local primary schools, including Melvich Primary School.

The work of the nursery class was not included in this inspection.

2. Key strengths

HM Inspectors identified the following key strengths.

- The commitment of teaching staff during a period of discontinuity.
- Approaches adopted by the new headteacher and staff to improve pupils' learning experiences.
- Productive relationships between staff and parents, and the important part played by the school in the local community.

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

3. What are the views of parents, pupils and staff?

HM Inspectors analysed responses to questionnaires issued to all parents, P4 to P7 pupils, and to all staff. Information about the responses to the questionnaires appears in Appendix 2.

Parents were very positive about many aspects of the school's work. All thought teachers set high standards for pupils' attainment and that their children were treated fairly in school. A minority of parents had concerns about recent discontinuity in staffing, particularly its effects on the management and leadership of the school. Pupils were very positive about the school. They reported that teachers expected them to work as hard as they could, and that the school helped them to keep themselves safe and healthy. Almost all staff were very positive in their responses and in discussion. They thought that teachers set high standards for pupils' attainment and that pupils were enthusiastic about learning. A few felt that communication amongst staff had not always been effective.

4. How good are learning, teaching and achievement?

Pupils' learning experiences and achievements

The quality of the curriculum was weak. There had been a lack of sustained attention to the development of the curriculum. Teachers provided a generally broad curriculum for pupils. Regular input from visiting teachers of music and physical education (PE) helped enhance the range of pupils' learning experiences. Good use of a range of visits and visitors helped teachers provide appropriate depth to aspects of the curriculum. Led by the new headteacher, teachers had started to review and improve how they planned suitably progressive experiences for all pupils. This, however, was at an early stage of development. Overall, pupils' learning experiences lacked progression and were too restricted, with insufficient attention to, for example, the development of citizenship and enterprise skills. The curriculum in reading was based on too limited a range of resources and experiences. The quality of teaching was adequate. Teachers had had limited opportunity to take part in appropriate staff development experiences. However, both class teachers had worked hard to ensure that their teaching met the needs of pupils. They had established positive and productive relationships with their pupils. Their explanations were clear and helpful. They ensured that pupils understood the tasks set and what was expected of them in their work. Homework was regular and, increasingly, well organised. Use of information and communications technology (ICT) in teaching was too limited. Teachers did not yet share learning intentions openly with pupils nor did they summarise key learning points at the end of lessons.

The quality of pupils' learning experiences was adequate. At times, the pace of individual lessons was brisk. Almost all pupils were well motivated and keen to learn. Older pupils responded well and thoughtfully in well-managed class discussions. In P1-4, pupils' learning was enhanced through active opportunities to reflect on their ideas and experiences. At P5-7, pupils made good use of clear criteria to help them develop their writing. During PE lessons, pupils cooperated very well together, learning to work for the benefit of a team. Pupils' use of ICT in their learning was too

limited. Across the curriculum, they did not yet have a clear enough understanding of what they needed to do to make further progress in their work. The pace of learning did not always offer consistent and sufficient challenge for a few pupils.

The school had taken some positive and effective steps to help develop pupils' wider achievements. Most pupils were confident and cooperated well with each other and with adults. The new headteacher had improved how the school consulted pupils. As a result, pupils felt that they now had good opportunities to contribute to the life of the school. Members of the pupil council had recently reviewed the school rules. Pupils regularly participated in local competitions in a range of relevant areas. As part of their preparation for transfer to Farr High School, older pupils benefited from an annual residential experience aimed at helping them to get to know their new classmates. Pupils were aware of the needs of others and, with their parents, had helped to raise significant sums of money for charity. Overall, however, pupils did not yet have sufficient and sustained opportunities to exercise responsibility in the school.

English language

The overall quality of attainment in English language was adequate. Most pupils were achieving appropriate national levels of attainment in reading and writing. A minority of pupils at some stages were attaining national levels earlier than might normally be expected. Pupils who were experiencing difficulty in their classwork were receiving appropriate support and, overall, were making good progress. Most pupils listened well to instructions and spoke confidently with the teacher and other adults. A few were not skilled at listening to others. Pupils' skills in group discussion were insufficiently developed and required improvement. Most pupils read fluently, several with good expression. At P7, pupils talked confidently about features of the books they had read. Pupils wrote for a range of purposes and in an increasing number of styles. Their progress in writing was not, however, consistently good across the stages.

Mathematics

In mathematics, the overall quality of attainment was good. Most pupils were achieving appropriate national levels of attainment. At some stages, a few pupils achieved these levels earlier than might normally be expected. Pupils requiring additional support were making appropriate progress in their classwork. Across the stages pupils were able to identify and interpret a range of graphs. They had not, however, developed appropriate skills in the use of computers to collate and display information. Most pupils carried out written calculations confidently. Pupils' skills in mental calculation were good, overall. These included a sound grasp of number bonds in the early stages. Most pupils demonstrated a good understanding of appropriate aspects of shape and measurement. A few pupils lacked a sufficient grasp of angles and their properties. Pupils were not sufficiently confident in using an appropriate range of strategies to solve problems.

5. How well are pupils' learning needs met?

Overall, staff met the learning needs of pupils adequately. In her short time in post, the headteacher had prioritised the need to support staff in how they addressed pupils' needs. Tasks set were well matched to the needs of most pupils. Teachers knew the pupils as individuals and regularly adapted their teaching approaches to support pupils in their learning. Teachers recognised the broad range of learning needs in multi-stage composite classes and sought to ensure appropriate challenge for all. However, weaknesses in the curriculum, including a lack of progression in learning experiences, impacted upon teachers' ability to meet the learning needs of pupils fully. Staff did not always offer sufficient challenge to ensure that the most able pupils achieved to their potential. The part-time support for learning teacher worked cooperatively and effectively with class teachers to offer support and challenge in pupils' writing. Support staff provided helpful additional assistance for a range of pupils. Staff had developed effective links with a number of agencies, including speech therapy, to help them provide targeted support for pupils.

6. How good is the environment for learning?

Aspect	Comment
Pastoral care	The quality of pastoral care was good. Staff knew pupils very well and were responsive to their social, emotional and physical needs. The school had well developed approaches to deal with incidences of bullying. All pupils who responded to the questionnaire felt that staff were good at dealing with bullying. With the support of the headteacher, staff implemented effectively the school's approaches to ensuring child protection and were aware of their responsibilities as part of this. Adult supervision of pupils during interval was limited. The headteacher had begun to review this situation and to take steps to address the concerns of some parents. The school placed an increasingly strong emphasis on health promotion. This included participation in a range of events designed to introduce pupils to a number of sports and activities and the active promotion of healthy eating. Older pupils were developing useful skills in personal safety.

Aspect	Comment
Quality of accommodation and facilities	<p>The overall quality of accommodation and facilities was adequate. Staff and pupils had access to a suitable range of provision including a large general purposes room and a separate dining area. Staff, including visiting teachers, made good use of the accommodation in their interaction with pupils. The headteacher and staff had recently taken effective steps to improve the appearance of the school and to ensure a more attractive learning environment for pupils. Further work was required to ensure a consistently attractive environment. Large parts of the playground surface were uneven and required upgrading. This was a potential hazard for pupils during play. The headteacher had correctly identified the need to review building security arrangements. This review was being undertaken. Access for those with physical disabilities was restricted.</p>
Climate and relationships, expectations and promoting achievement and equality	<p>The climate in the school was positive. Teachers displayed a high level of care and respect towards children. Pupils were considerate towards each other, and towards staff and visitors. There was an improving sense of teamwork in the school. Staff reported that the appointment of the new headteacher had contributed positively to their improving morale. Expectations of pupils' behaviour were good. However, teachers' expectations of pupils' progress were not consistently high enough. Prior to the appointment of the headteacher, assemblies and opportunities for religious observance had been too infrequent. This was now being addressed. Pupils were treated fairly at school. The school did not, however, promote pupils' understanding of race equality and diversity through the curriculum sufficiently consistently.</p>

Aspect	Comment
Partnership with parents and the community	The school's partnerships with parents and the wider community were good. The headteacher had taken immediate and effective steps to improve the school handbook. Communication between school and home was effective and improving. Staff consulted parents appropriately on sensitive health issues. Regular newsletters were informative and helpful to parents. A new homework guide for parents provided useful information on what parents should expect in terms of homework. It also offered helpful hints in how to support their children in this work. The school did not yet share with parents how they could fully support their children in their learning. Parents supported the school well. The PTA organised a number of popular social and fundraising events. Members of the recently reformed School Board had been involved in the appointment of the new headteacher. The school had established effective and mutually supportive links with the wider community. Local groups made regular use of the school's community room.

7. Leading and improving the school

Appendix 1 provides HM Inspectors' overall evaluation of the work of the school.

Melvich Primary School provided its pupils with an adequate quality of education. Parents were very satisfied with most aspects of the school and had responded positively to the recent appointment of a permanent headteacher. Pupils felt safe and well looked after. Staff ensured that pupils were well cared for in school. However, the quality of education provided for pupils required further improvement. This included the need to improve the curriculum and aspects of learning and teaching. Attainment in English language was not sufficiently strong in a number of areas.

In her short time in post, the new headteacher had quickly established positive relationships with staff, pupils and parents. She had communicated clearly arrangements for the management of the school for those days when she was not present. She had started to involve the school community in identifying appropriate strengths and priorities for development. Staff had responded very positively to this and were keen to support the headteacher in improving provision for pupils. Overall, there had been important weaknesses in the leadership of the school over a period of time. The school had lacked a clear strategic direction. While school staff had worked hard to maintain and develop provision, there had been insufficient attention to improving the quality of pupils' learning and achievement. Over the course of this period, the school had not established and implemented sufficiently rigorous approaches to self-evaluation. This had resulted in insufficient support and challenge for staff and for pupils. As a result, progress in a number of areas, including how staff monitored pupils' attainment, had been hindered significantly. The headteacher

now required the active support of the education authority to develop the school's capacity for improvement and to ensure that identified improvements are addressed and overtaken.

Main points for action

The education authority, in liaison with HM Inspectors, should ensure appropriate support and challenge for the new headteacher to ensure continuous improvement in the school. The school and education authority should also take action to ensure improvement in:

- the quality of the curriculum;
- the support and advice provided for staff to help them improve the quality of learning, teaching and achievement for pupils;
- how pupils' attainment is monitored and progressed; and
- the condition of facilities for outdoor play.

What happens next?

The school and the education authority have been asked to prepare an action plan indicating how they will address the main findings of the report, and to share that plan with parents. HM Inspectors will engage with the school and the education authority to monitor progress. They will publish an interim report on progress within one year of the publication of this report. Thereafter, HM Inspectors will continue to engage with the school and the education authority in monitoring progress, and will undertake a follow-through inspection. This will result in another report to parents, within two years of the publication of this report, on the extent of improvement that has been achieved.

Peter McNaughton
HM Inspector

19 December 2006

Appendix 1 Indicators of quality

The sections in the table below follow the order in this report. You can find the main comments made about each of the quality indicators in those sections. However, aspects of some quality indicators are relevant to other sections of the report and may also be mentioned in those other sections.

How good are learning, teaching and achievement?	
Structure of the curriculum	weak
The teaching process	adequate
Pupils' learning experiences	adequate
Pupils' attainment in English language	adequate
Pupils' attainment in mathematics	good

How well are pupils' learning needs met?	
Meeting pupils' needs	adequate

How good is the environment for learning?	
Pastoral care	good
Accommodation and facilities	adequate
Climate and relationships	good
Expectations and promoting achievement	adequate
Equality and fairness	adequate
Partnership with parents, the School Board, and the community	good

Leading and improving the school	
Leadership across the school	weak
Self-evaluation	weak

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
adequate	strengths just outweigh weaknesses
weak	important weaknesses
unsatisfactory	major weaknesses

Appendix 2 Summary of questionnaire responses

Important features of responses from the various groups which received questionnaires are listed below.

What parents thought the school did well	What parents think the school could do better
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The school had a good reputation in the local community.• Teachers gave them helpful information about their child's progress.• They were made to feel welcome in the school.• Staff treated all children fairly.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• A minority of parents thought that school buildings were not kept in good order and that the school was not well led.
What pupils thought the school did well	What pupils think the school could do better
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Pupils were very satisfied with all aspects of the work of the school.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• There were no significant issues.
What staff thought the school did well	What staff think the school could do better
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Almost all staff were very satisfied with all aspects of the work of the school.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• There were no significant issues.

How can you contact us?

If you would like an additional copy of this report

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