

12 February 2019

Dear Parent/Carer

In December 2016, HM Inspectors published a letter on The Gordon Schools. The letter set out a number of areas for improvement which we agreed with the school and Aberdeenshire Council. Recently, as you may know, we visited the school again. During our visit, we talked to young people and worked closely with the headteacher and staff. We heard from the headteacher and other staff about the steps the school has taken to improve. We looked at particular areas that had been identified in the original inspection. As a result, we were able to find out about the progress the school has made and how well this is supporting young people's learning and achievements. This letter sets out what we found.

**Continue to improve the consistency and pace of learning and teaching across the school to enable all young people to experience high quality learning.**

Over the last two years there has been a focus on improving learning and teaching across the school. Teachers are working well together, to develop a shared understanding of high quality learning. Relationships between young people and staff continue to be positive. While most young people work well independently, they would benefit from more opportunities to take responsibility for their own learning. Through conversations with teachers about their learning, young people are becoming increasingly aware of how they are progressing and what they need to do next. This is not yet a consistent feature across the school, with a number of young people unable to identify their targets, or knowing what they need to do to be successful. Overall, while progress has been made there are still areas where improvement is required to ensure all young people receive a high quality learning experience. Going forward, senior leaders should ensure there is a strategic approach to improvement which leads to a shared understanding of what constitutes high quality learning, teaching and assessment.

**Improve teachers' understanding of their roles and responsibilities in supporting all young people to have high aspirations and the best understanding of their health and wellbeing. This will provide the best platform for all young people to achieve success.**

The school community is now ready to revisit its vision, values and aims. There is still a need to embed the school's vision 'Together Growing Succeeding' into the culture of the school and set health, wellbeing and the development of young people explicitly at the heart of the school. Concerns around how bullying behaviours are addressed remain an important area for improvement. Staff, parents and young people need to revisit the school's anti-bullying policy, to reflect better the school's stated values and aims. Young people would benefit now from clear agreed whole-school strategies which will offer reassurance and practical support.

Young people appreciate the efforts of teachers who are freely giving of their time to support them in their learning and with personal issues. Working collaboratively, staff are applying their skills to good effect to improve outcomes for young people in a number of programmes. A wide range of activities continues to be offered at lunchtime, after school and in partnership with the wider community. Young people are appreciative of the opportunities to take part in activities beyond the classroom and timetabled day.

**Build on the early developments started by the new headteacher to develop a shared understanding of strategies for raising attainment. Improve the use and tracking of assessment to help all young people make appropriate progress.**

Across the school, a range of approaches is being used to raise the attainment of young people. The importance of aspiring and achieving is emphasised regularly to young people at school assemblies. The focus on improving learning and teaching is a key aspect of the school's drive to raise attainment. Teachers offer support to individuals and groups at lunchtimes and after school. Young people are very appreciative of the support provided to improve their confidence as they work towards qualifications. The school has continued to increase the range of learning pathways in the senior phase to provide young people with different opportunities to attain well in qualifications. Courses are offered leading to qualifications ranging from SCQF level 1 through to SCQF level 7. Staff should continue to work together, and share their professional understanding of the data and strategies which will have the greatest impact on improving outcomes for all young people in The Gordon Schools.

**Develop all teachers' responsibilities in the process of tracking and monitoring young people's learning and skill development, particularly in literacy, numeracy and health and wellbeing. Teachers, particularly pastoral support staff, should use this process to help to raise expectations and improve attainment.**

Over the past two years, staff have worked to develop a school-wide system for monitoring the progress of young people from S1 to S3. Staff now have more confidence in the reliability of assessment evidence, particularly in literacy and numeracy. They are also planning to use Scottish National Standardised Assessment (SNSA) information to further support professional judgement. These developments have the potential to support staff to have a more thorough, rounded picture of each learner's progress, and plan the next steps to raise their attainment. The information is also needed to ensure young people are making informed choices when making decisions about learning pathways, including those leading to qualifications at the most appropriate Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) level.

The school continues to monitor effectively the progress of young people in the senior phase. Useful information about progress towards qualifications is recorded and used by guidance staff to inform discussions with young people about their progress and whether they need further support to succeed. There are some important improvements in attainment in the senior phase. This includes attainment in literacy and numeracy by the time they leave school. By S5 and by S6, attainment in National Qualifications has improved both at National 5 and at Higher. However, there remains headroom for the school to raise the attainment of some young people, particularly in a few subject areas and in the number and level of courses for which they are presented.

Evidence gathered during the inspection shows a need for senior staff to lead improvements in communication across the school. This includes a range of aspects which need to be dealt with in a more systematic manner. The gathering of evidence through self-evaluation processes needs to be more robust in order to better inform improvement activities. Senior leaders need to ensure they use this evidence to identify strategic priorities and agreed programmes of action.

### What happens next?

The school has made some progress since the original inspection and taken forward some important improvements. The school now needs time to evaluate these changes to ensure outcomes for young people are continuing to improve. As part of their on-going support, officers from Aberdeenshire Council will carry out a review of the school within one year. Inspectors from Education Scotland will join their team. A joint report will be published informing you of the progress being made by the school.

Carol McDonald  
HM Inspector