The Gordon Schools Huntly Aberdeenshire Council 19 June 2007

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1. Background

The Gordon Schools was inspected in January 2007 as part of a national sample of secondary education. The inspection covered key aspects of the school's work at all stages. HM Inspectors evaluated how well the school was raising achievement for all pupils, taking into account the extent to which pupils' learning needs were met by the curriculum and teaching. They also analysed pupils' attainment in examinations (see Appendix 3), the school's processes for self-evaluation and innovation, and its overall effectiveness and capacity for improvement. HM Inspectors focused particularly on English, mathematics, geography, and chemistry and S1/S2 science.

The inspection team also evaluated aspects of the school's progress in implementing national recommendations related to improving aspects of school meals provision.

HM Inspectors observed teaching, learning and achievement in lessons and other contexts and examined pupils' work. They analysed responses to questionnaires issued to a sample of parents and pupils and to all staff. They interviewed groups of pupils, including members of the pupil representative council, and staff. Members of the inspection team also met the chairperson of the School Board, a representative of the parent-teacher association (PTA) and a group of parents.

The Gordon Schools is a non-denominational school serving the town of Huntly and the surrounding rural area. At the time of the inspection, the roll was 862. The percentage of pupils entitled to free school meals was below the national average. Pupils' attendance was above the national average. The Curriculum Support Unit within the school provided for nine pupils aged 4-18 with a range of severe and complex needs.

A new headteacher had taken up post just prior to the inspection. A depute headteacher had been acting headteacher for two months following the retirement of the previous headteacher.

¹ See Appendix 2

² Throughout this report, the term 'parents' should be taken to include foster carers, residential care staff and carers who are relatives or friends.

2. Key strengths

HM Inspectors identified the following key strengths.

- The school's very positive atmosphere.
- Excellent provision of enterprise activities for pupils, supported by very strong links with local businesses and industries.
- The high level of involvement of subject teachers in supporting pupils with individualised educational programmes (IEPs).
- Very effective promotion by staff of pupils' broader achievements and personal and social development.
- Strong links with parents and the local community.

3. How well does the school raise achievement for all?

To evaluate how well the school was raising achievement for all, HM Inspectors considered the extent to which the learning needs of all pupils were met through the curriculum and teaching. They evaluated the effectiveness of the school in promoting the learning and personal development of all pupils in lessons and in other, broader contexts. They also considered the standards attained in specific aspects of learning.

Curriculum

The quality of the curriculum was good. Particular features included the following.

- At S1, pupils developed a broad range of skills through the programme of work in information and communications technology (ICT). They did not have enough opportunities to apply these skills effectively across different subjects.
- Curricular links with associated primary schools were too limited in most subjects to ensure that S1 pupils built steadily on their prior learning.
- Some aspects of the curriculum were not delivered efficiently. At S1/S2, pupils
 experienced too many different teachers each week, and some subjects had too many
 shared classes at S1 to S4.
- Curricular and vocational guidance had major strengths.
- At S3 to S6, curricular options, including vocational ones, offered pupils a high degree of personalisation and choice. Courses provided in each subject enabled pupils to progress steadily from year to year.

- Pupils at S5 and S6 benefited from a range of enrichment activities which developed their life skills and core skills for National Qualifications.
- The programme of personal, social and health education (PSHE) was mostly well developed.
- All pupils benefited from the good amounts of time given to physical education at S1 to S4. The subject was taken by a minority of pupils at S5/S6.
- The school had won national recognition for the very high quality of its work in developing pupils' enterprise skills, including the Motorola National Award for Excellence.

Teaching and meeting pupils' needs

Teaching was good overall. In most cases, teachers provided pupils with clear explanations and directions. They supported individual pupils and small groups effectively. Pupils experienced a broad range of teaching approaches across the school. In a few subjects, insufficient time was given to whole-class teaching. Teachers' use of questioning was mostly good. It was very good in a minority of lessons where all pupils were involved and open-ended questions were used to challenge and develop pupils' understanding. Almost all teachers corrected and commented on pupils' work well. A few were using very good strategies to involve pupils more actively in evaluating their own work. Across the school, the amount and frequency of homework lacked consistency.

Overall, the provision for meeting pupils' learning needs was good. Pupils valued the support, including additional revision sessions, which many subject teachers provided. Many teachers had consulted with support for learning staff regarding suitable teaching resources. However, they did not always use different resources effectively enough in class to help meet the range of pupils' needs. Effective arrangements were in place to address the needs of pupils experiencing difficulties in their learning. These included carefully-adjusted timetables and the provision of vocational options at S3/S4. Pupils who were under-achieving were clearly identified and offered additional support. The school had introduced some good strategies to try to improve the attainment of boys. IEPs were used very effectively to support pupils with specific needs. Class teachers assisted willingly and effectively in six-weekly reviews of pupils' progress towards their personal targets in their IEPs. Other pupils, who did not require IEPs, were often unsure about their personal attainment targets. Staff provided good support for pupils with English as an additional language. The large and experienced team of support staff worked very effectively as a team to provide the most appropriate support for pupils. They used a wide range of effective links with external support services in meeting pupils' needs. Plans were in place to augment this support through Integrated Community School funding. The school required a better policy on pupil support to clarify practice and the various roles and responsibilities of staff.

Meeting the needs of pupils in the Curriculum Support Unit

The curriculum in the unit met pupils' severe and complex needs very effectively. Staff made good use of a modified 5-14 curriculum, National Qualifications and, where appropriate, a sensory approach to learning. They used IEPs to provide a wide range of suitable learning experiences for pupils and provided high levels of support to promote pupils' progress in learning. They maintained productive communication with parents through daily home-school diaries. Senior pupils benefited from flexible support during their transition to college, and when they attended. Therapy services and the educational psychologist provided effective support for pupils and valuable advice to staff.

Learning and personal development

The overall quality of pupils' learning was good. Almost all pupils were well motivated. They worked enthusiastically when they were actively involved in their learning. They cooperated well when working in groups. Pupils were developing good practical skills in a number of subjects and showed confidence in using appropriate equipment. Despite good examples in some departments, pupils had too few opportunities to use ICT to support their learning. The pace of work was mostly good. In a few cases, teachers structured lessons effectively by giving pupils deadlines to complete tasks. Teachers' expectations of pupils' progress tended to be lower at S1/S2. At these stages especially, some pupils were not achieving their full potential. The network librarian made important contributions to developing pupils' learning skills and meeting the needs of specific groups.

Pupils were friendly, courteous and helpful, and related positively to one another. Across the curriculum, they were often involved in decision making and discussion of various ethical and social issues. Pupils were highly positive about the influence of the extensive extra-curricular activities on their personal development. They benefited greatly from participation in competitions, sports, enterprise activities, industry visits, trips abroad and giving public performances. The school was reviewing its already significant contributions to developing skills of citizenship. More than 40 pupils from all year groups provided a very good service to their peers through the pupil representative council. Pupils from S3/S4 acted as guides on parents' evenings and had supported P7 pupils attending an Industry Day. Those studying social and vocational skills, and senior pupils taking the Duke of Edinburgh Award scheme, provided services for senior citizens in the community. Senior pupils showed maturity and felt well prepared for future life. They had wide-ranging responsibilities, including serving as prefects, sports and house captains, and by acting as 'buddies' and classroom helpers for younger pupils.

Learning and personal development of pupils in the Curriculum Support Unit

The quality of pupils' learning and personal and social development in the unit was very good. Almost all pupils interacted well with staff. Staff involved a network of support partners in providing a wide range of community activities for pupils. Swimming and riding activities, for example, increased pupils' self-esteem and enabled them to interact positively with adults and peers. Enterprise activities enabled the younger pupils to make choices and take responsibility. In their citizenship work, pupils learned about personal safety, responsibility for others and the importance of knowing about community support services. The older pupils undertook an appropriate and challenging range of Access courses, along

with the Caledonia Award, which developed their life skills. College courses provided vocational taster programmes and a growing understanding of the environment, all of which supported pupils' readiness for adulthood.

English

Teachers engaged pupils well in their learning. They explained new work clearly and generally questioned pupils effectively to develop their understanding. Increasingly, they were sharing lesson objectives with them. Homework was usually appropriate. Teachers met pupils' differing needs well from S3 onwards. At S1/S2, the overall pace of learning was too slow and pupils were not challenged enough. Almost all pupils worked hard. Pupils collaborated well in groups and had some good opportunities to learn independently. Several pupils from S3 onwards engaged regularly in debating and public speaking and had won considerable success in regional and national competitions.

Overall, the quality of teaching and learning was good and meeting pupils' needs was adequate. Attainment was adequate. Particular features included the following.

- At S1/S2, the majority of pupils were attaining appropriate national levels in reading. Less than half were doing so in writing. Pupils made insufficient progress from their prior learning. The school did not have reliable information about attainment in listening and talking.
- At S3/S4, the proportion of pupils achieving Credit awards at Standard Grade was above the national average.
- At S5/S6, the proportions of pupils entered for Higher and Intermediate 2 were below and well below the national averages, respectively. The proportion attaining A-C grades was generally above the national average at Higher, but below the national average at Intermediate 2. Almost all pupils entered for Advanced Higher had attained A-C grades.

Mathematics

Teachers generally gave clear explanations and used homework well. They sometimes used ICT in teaching, but a shortage of equipment prevented the department from building on this good practice. Teachers did not engage individual pupils sufficiently through effective questioning. They did not always set high expectations of pupils' work rate and presentation of their work. Overall, the pace of learning was too slow and tasks often lacked challenge. A significant number of pupils enjoyed and were successful in mathematics competitions.

Overall, the quality of teaching, meeting pupils' needs and learning was adequate. Attainment was weak. Particular features included the following.

- At S1/S2, the majority of pupils attained appropriate national levels. The proportion attaining these levels had recently improved.
- At S3/S4, pupils performed notably less well in mathematics than in their other subjects. The proportion of pupils attaining Credit awards at Standard Grade was in line with the national average.

• At S5/S6, the proportions of pupils entered for Higher and Intermediate 2 were well below national averages. The proportion attaining A-C grades was in line with the national average at Higher. It had decreased from well above to below the national average at Intermediate 2. Most pupils entered for Advanced Higher had attained A-C grades.

Geography

Teachers used a variety of approaches to help pupils learn. They gave clear explanations and questioned pupils thoroughly to check their knowledge and understanding. Teachers knew their pupils well and provided good support for their learning. Pupils at S1/S2 did not always receive sufficient challenge. In almost all lessons pupils were engaged and worked hard to complete classwork. They worked successfully on collaborative and individual tasks. Staff provided a range of fieldwork activities in most years which enabled pupils to develop independent thinking, presentation and social skills.

Overall, the quality of teaching, meeting pupils' needs and learning was good. Attainment was good. Particular features included the following.

- At S1/S2, pupils were making good progress in their coursework.
- At S3/S4, the proportion of pupils attaining A-C grades at Intermediate 2 was broadly in line with the national average. The majority of pupils presented for Intermediate 1 had attained A-C grades.
- At S5/S6, the proportion of pupils attaining A-C grades at Higher was above the national average. At Advanced Higher, the proportion was consistently well above the national average.

Chemistry and S1/S2 science

Teachers made the subject interesting. They provided very clear explanations and corrected pupils' work carefully. They did not use whole-class teaching and searching questioning often enough. Teachers supported pupils very well, but did not always challenge them sufficiently, especially in S1/S2 science. Pupils worked well and cooperated effectively in groups. They were actively involved in learning through well-chosen tasks. Their interest was stimulated through industrial visits, talks from university speakers, and entry to science-based competitions. Homework was used well in chemistry. In S1/S2 science, teachers did not encourage pupils enough to take responsibility for revising work at home.

Overall, the quality of teaching, meeting pupils' needs and learning was good. Attainment was good. Particular features included the following.

- At S1/S2, most pupils showed good knowledge and understanding of coursework. Their problem-solving skills were less good. Some pupils were not achieving their full potential.
- At S3/S4, the proportion of pupils attaining Credit awards in Standard Grade chemistry was above the national average and improving.

• At S5/S6, the proportion of pupils attaining A-C grades in Higher chemistry was in line with the national average. The majority of pupils presented for Intermediate 2 chemistry attained A-C grades. Almost all pupils studying Advanced Higher attained these grades.

Attainment

Information about the subjects inspected has been given earlier in the report. Across the school, particular features of pupils' progress, results in examinations and other qualifications, including those awarded by the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) within the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF)³ for the three year period 2004-2006, are included below.

By the end of S2 attainment was adequate. Particular features included the following.

- The majority of pupils were attaining appropriate national levels in reading and mathematics, and less than half were doing so in writing.
- Across subjects, a lack of consistent challenge at these stages meant that some pupils were not progressing fast enough.

By the end of S4 attainment was good. Particular features included the following.

- The proportions of pupils attaining five or more awards at SCQF levels 4 and 5 were above national averages. Overall, the school performed better than similar schools at level 4, and in line with them at level 5.
- Pupils performed notably better in graphic communication and technological studies, and better in social and vocational skills, than in their other Standard Grade subjects. They performed less well in drama.
- The proportions of pupils attaining level 5 awards at Standard Grade were well above national averages in administration, craft and design and graphic communication.

By the end of S6 attainment was good. Particular features included the following.

- Pupils' performances at levels 5, 6 and 7 were above national averages, but had fallen at level 6. The school generally performed better than similar schools at level 5, and in line with them at levels 6 and 7.
- The proportion of pupils attaining level 5 was well above the national average in Intermediate 2 practical cookery. Presentations for Higher French and German were generally above or well above national averages, but the proportions attaining level 6 were below national averages.

³ Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) levels:

^{7:} Advanced Higher at A-C/CSYS at A-C

^{6:} Higher at A-C

^{5:} Intermediate 2 at A-C; Standard Grade at 1-2

^{4:} Intermediate 1 at A-C; Standard Grade at 3-4

^{3:} Access 3 cluster; Standard Grade at 5-6

Allowing for national differences in attainment, girls in the school performed better overall than boys. Recently, there had been some improvement in the attainment of boys at S4 and S5.

4. How good is the environment for learning?

Aspect	Comment
Pastoral care	The quality of pastoral care was very good. Parents and pupils valued the continuity of register teacher as they progressed through the school. Guidance teachers ensured that they were accessible to pupils at all times. Teamwork and communication between class teachers and pastoral care staff were very good. Guidance teachers knew their pupils well through teaching PSHE to their own pupil group and by attending relevant review meetings. Pupils were clear that any complaints they had would be handled sensitively. Appropriate care and welfare guidelines were available for staff, including very clear advice on dealing with bullying. Pupils were actively involved in consultation about healthy eating, including the planned refurbishment of the dining area. The school had informed the education authority about parents' and pupils' concerns about the safety of the school buses.
Quality of accommodation and facilities	 Accommodation was good. Particular features included the following. A pleasant reception area, spacious assembly hall, a well-used library, very good access to sports facilities, and attractive historical features. Generally good teaching areas, including modern science laboratories and an attractive art and design department. Good arrangements for school security, and suitable access for disabled users to most facilities. Difficult access to suitable ICT facilities for several subjects. Limited social areas for pupils and a small staff-room for the number of teachers. Some parts of the school were cold.

Aspect	Comment
Climate and relationships, expectations and promoting achievement and equality	The school was very welcoming. The morale of pupils and staff was high. Pupils behaved very well in almost all classes and around the school. They had numerous opportunities to give their views about the school, including their learning experiences and school lunch arrangements. The school gave high importance to broadening pupils' achievements. Assemblies provided appropriate opportunities for religious observance and were very well used to celebrate pupils' many successes. Guidance staff systematically recorded different aspects of pupils' achievement using the clear criteria set out in the school's Charter of Achievement. Teachers' expectations of pupils' attainment in classwork were less consistently high. Pupils had various opportunities to reflect on issues related to discrimination and equality. Well-chosen activities, including a Multicultural Day and Refugee Week, were used effectively to promote pupils' understanding of other religions and cultures. Staff were finalising a racial equality policy. Pupils new to the area were generally very well integrated. Staff showed positive attitudes to the inclusion of pupils with additional needs.

Aspect	Comment
Partnership with parents and the community	The quality of partnership with parents and the community was very good, with some excellent features. Particular features included the following.
	• Very effective communication with parents, including informative newsletters, helpful reports on pupils' progress, and advice about homework.
	A positive response by the school to a wide-ranging survey of parents' views about the school.
	• The support provided by the School Board and PTA, particularly in relation to pupils' health and safety.
	• Excellent links with local business, industries and organisations in supporting school ventures and in developing pupils' enterprise skills and understanding of the world of work.
	• Very beneficial links with Banff and Buchan College in providing vocational options for some pupils at S3/S4.
	Highly-developed links with the local community, including pupils' participation in services to the elderly, sports, arts and cultural events and public performances.
	Parents needed clearer information about the school's priorities for improvement and the content of its PSHE programme.

5. Leading and improving the school

Staff at The Gordon Schools, supported by a number of excellent links with the community, provided a wide range of educational experiences for pupils. Teachers generally set high expectations of pupils' achievement at S3 to S6, and there were major strengths in pupils' personal and social development. Attainment was good at S3 to S6, and adequate at S1/S2. Overall standards of teaching were good. Teachers supported pupils well, but did not always challenge them enough, particularly at S1/S2. They cooperated very effectively with support for learning staff to help pupils with additional needs to meet their targets. The needs of pupils in the Curriculum Support Unit were very well met. Staff gave a high level of attention to the care and welfare of all pupils. Pupils were positive about school. Overall, they behaved very well and worked hard in class.

Leadership across the school was good. The new headteacher had already begun to identify some key areas for school improvement. Senior managers worked effectively as a team. They supported staff very well and involved them fully in decision making. The three depute headteachers each made important contributions to the work of the school. One of

them had organised the day-to-day running of the school very effectively since the retirement of the previous headteacher. The deputes worked closely with their linked departments. In a few cases, and with some success, they had supported individual colleagues to try to improve learning and teaching. Most heads of subject departments led improvements to courses effectively. Like senior managers, however, they did not play a sufficiently proactive role in improving learning and teaching across the school. Senior managers and a few heads of departments led staff working groups very effectively in important areas such as pupils' health and behaviour, enterprise and citizenship. Several unpromoted teachers made important contributions by leading delegated aspects of work in the school.

Staff evaluated and improved some aspects of the school's work effectively. However, they gave too little emphasis to improving the quality of learning and teaching. With external support, senior and middle managers carefully analysed examination results in each subject and used their findings to improve courses and assessments. Attainment information from S1/S2 courses was not used sufficiently as a measure of performance. Departments evaluated aspects of their work annually using performance indicators. These evaluations, combined with extensive consultation of parents and pupils, helped to determine development plans. Every few years, senior managers carried out reviews of departments which included observations of lessons, meetings with pupils and feedback to teachers. However, these reviews were too infrequent, lacked rigour and did not include sufficiently robust action points for improvement. Monitoring of learning and teaching by heads of departments was inconsistent and often lacked focus. Overall, school self-evaluation was weak.

As well as building on the strengths and addressing the issues raised throughout this report, the school and the education authority should address the following main points for action.

Main points for action

- Review timetabling to reduce the number of shared classes at S1 to S4, and the number of different teachers experienced by pupils at S1/S2.
- Raise expectations at S1/S2 by improving curricular links with the associated primary schools and by ensuring appropriate pace and challenge in all classes.
- Improve arrangements for monitoring and improving the quality of learning and teaching across the school.

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 and carers. Within two years of the publication of this report parents and carers will be informed about the progress made by the school.

Tom Straiton HM Inspector

19 June 2007

Appendix 1 Indicators of quality

The following quality indicators have been used in the inspection process to contribute to the evaluation of the overall effectiveness of the school in promoting learning and achievement for all pupils.

Section 3. How well does the school raise achievement for all?			
Structure of the curriculum	good		
The teaching process	good		
Meeting pupils' needs	good		
Pupils' learning experiences	good		
Personal and social development	very good		
Overall quality of attainment: S1/S2	adequate		
Overall quality of attainment: S3/S4	good		
Overall quality of attainment: S5/S6	good		

Section 4. How good is the environment for learning?			
Pastoral care	very good		
Accommodation and facilities	good		
Climate and relationships	very good		
Expectations and promoting achievement	good		
Equality and fairness	very good		
Partnership with parents, the School Board and the community	very good		

Section 5. Leading and improving the school		
Leadership across the school	good	
Self-evaluation	weak	

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

excellent outstanding, sector leading

very good major strengths

good important strengths with areas for improvement

adequate strengths just outweigh weaknesses

weak important weaknesses unsatisfactory major weaknesses

Appendix 2 Summary of questionnaire responses

The following provides a summary of questionnaire responses. Key issues from the questionnaires have been considered in the inspection and comments are included as appropriate throughout the report.

What parents thought the school did well	What parents think the school could do better
Parents who responded to the questionnaire were positive about almost all aspects of the school. In particular, they felt that: • their children enjoyed school; • the school had a good reputation in the local area; • staff made them feel welcome; • parents' evenings and reports on their children's progress were helpful and informative; and • the school was well led.	A minority of parents felt they lacked information about the school's priorities for improving pupils' education.
What pupils thought the school did well	What pupils think the school could do better
Pupils were positive about most aspects of the school. In particular, they felt that: • they enjoyed school and got on well with other pupils;	A minority did not think that all pupils were treated fairly or that the behaviour of pupils was good.
 teachers expected them to work to the best of their ability; 	
teachers checked their homework;	
• they felt safe and secure in school; and	
the school helped them to keep safe and healthy.	

What staff thought the school did well bette	at staff think the school could do er
Staff were positive about almost all aspects of the school. In particular, they felt that:	A minority of non-teaching staff felt they lacked involvement in school decision making.

Appendix 3 Attainment in Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) National Qualifications

Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) levels:

- 7: Advanced Higher at A-C/CSYS at A-C
- 6: Higher at A-C
- 5: Intermediate 2 at A-C; Standard Grade at 1-2
- 4: Intermediate 1 at A-C; Standard Grade at 3-4
- 3: Access 3 Cluster; Standard Grade at 5-6

Percentage of relevant S4 roll attaining by end of S4

English and Mathematics @ Level 3	Gordon Schools,The Comparator schools ⁴ National	2004 91 95 91	2005 96 95 90	2006 96 95 91
5+ @ Level 3 or Better	Gordon Schools,The	90	96	94
	Comparator schools	93	94	93
	National	91	90	91
5+ @ Level 4 or Better	Gordon Schools,The	82	87	84
	Comparator schools	83	80	81
	National	77	76	77
5+ @ Level 5 or Better	Gordon Schools,The	35	40	42
	Comparator schools	37	36	40
	National	35	34	35

Percentage of relevant S4 roll attaining by end of S5

		2004	2005	2006
5+ @ Level 4 or better	Gordon Schools,The	91	83	87
	Comparator schools ⁴	84	84	83
	National	78	78	78
5+ @ Level 5 or better	Gordon Schools,The	53	50	50
	Comparator schools	52	50	49
	National	45	45	45
1+ @ Level 6 or better	Gordon Schools,The	43	42	40
	Comparator schools	43	42	44
	National	39	39	38
3+ @ Level 6 or better	Gordon Schools,The	25	25	23
	Comparator schools	25	25	23
	National	23	23	22
5+ @ Level 6 or better	Gordon Schools,The	10	13	11
	Comparator schools	10	10	9
	National	9	10	10

Percentage of relevant S4 roll attaining by end of S6

		2004	2005	2006
5+ @ Level 5 or better	Gordon Schools,The	55	56	52
	Comparator schools ⁴	50	54	51
	National	47	47	48
1+ @ Level 6 or better	Gordon Schools,The	49	46	45
	Comparator schools	48	50	47
	National	44	43	43
3+ @ Level 6 or better	Gordon Schools,The	38	34	31
	Comparator schools	34	32	33
	National	31	30	30
5+ @ Level 6 or better	Gordon Schools,The	27	23	23
	Comparator schools	20	22	20
	National	20	19	20
1+ @ Level 7 or better	Gordon Schools,The	15	15	15
	Comparator schools	13	15	14
	National	12	12	13

 $^{^4}$ Comparator schools are the 20 schools statistically closest to the school being inspected in terms of the key characteristics of the school population.

How can you contact us?

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