

3 December 2019

Dear Parent/Carer

Gordonstoun School, Moray

HM Inspectors recently visited Gordonstoun School. The visit was part of our quality improvement and professional engagement visits with independent schools which complement the general programme of inspections. The approach allows us to maintain our knowledge of schools in the independent sector throughout Scotland, and provides assurance to parents on the school's capacity for evaluating its own work and making improvements which have a direct impact on the quality of experiences for its children and young people. Our visit was based on the school's self-evaluation and priorities identified for school improvement. During our visit inspectors talked to staff and children and young people, and worked together with the Principal and senior staff about the planned developments to ensure outcomes for children and young people continue to improve.

How well does the school ensure outcomes for children/young people continue to improve?

The Board of Governors has demonstrated innovative thinking in determining the leadership and strategic direction of the school. Governors provide a well-judged balance of support and challenge to the school. They are keen to learn from staff at all levels and from parents, children and young people, in order to improve their understanding of the work of the school. This enables them to make decisions in the best interest of every child and young person.

The approach to the leadership of change and improvement in teaching, learning and the curriculum at Gordonstoun School is outstanding. The dynamic leadership team, comprising the Principal, the Headmaster and the Bursar, provides stability and clear direction for the school. They have set out an ambitious strategic plan with clear measures of success to improve outcomes for children and young people. Embedded throughout the plan is their vision for Gordonstoun School as a world leader in 'character education'. Creating this vision involved rigorous academic research and a wide range of stakeholder engagement, for example on the impact of the unique Gordonstoun curriculum. Of note, high numbers of former pupils provided very helpful views on the long-term impact of their time at Gordonstoun School. Staff participate in working parties and high-quality professional learning activities. Staff also participate in and lead national initiatives, such as the sector-leading Dialogue Society, where young people explore ways to share differing opinions through listening with empathy. As an extension of this innovative approach, the recent 'Learning to Listen' event, hosted by Gordonstoun School, involved young people from independent and local authority secondary schools across Scotland and the United Kingdom. Learners across the school take on meaningful leadership roles through a range of in class and out-of-class opportunities. For example, the senior school 'Colour Bearers' (prefects) discuss wide ranging themes of interest and school policy, such as inclusion, sustainability, diversity and equality issues.

The positive, caring, family ethos of Gordonstoun School promotes a sense of trust, respect and kindness for all. There is particularly strong communication between academic, pastoral, boarding house and medical staff. This results in all children and young people being known very well as individuals by a variety of adults. Their needs are being met consistently well across the school and boarding houses. Senior leaders and all staff place the wellbeing of all children and young

people at the centre of the life and work of the school and boarding houses. The comprehensive systems, policies and procedures to keep the school community safe are monitored rigorously by pastoral leaders and are a model of best practice; and result in sector-leading pastoral care which nurtures and supports each individual. This includes the school's development over many years of an innovative electronic system to track and monitor any health and wellbeing or learning needs children and young people may have.

Across the school, rigorous approaches to self-evaluation ensure that key improvement priorities are actioned by staff and closely monitored by leaders. Self-evaluation processes include regular surveys, pupil participation groups, staff reviews, departmental reviews and a strong focus on professional reflection and learning. By carrying out a regular programme of classroom visits and tracking and monitoring data, such as examination results and ongoing assessments, school leaders gather clear evidence of the impact of improvements. Recent improvement priorities have included learning and teaching and in the comprehensive curriculum review. The school's own analysis of stakeholders' views is thorough and informs next steps throughout the change process. The school plans to strengthen parental partnerships further, including for those living overseas, through developing a family engagement strategy.

In recent years, teachers have strengthened further their understanding of effective learning and teaching approaches through the school's dedicated approach to professional learning. All staff are aware of the importance of creating a supportive climate for learning, in classes and across the life of the school. They benefit from a wide range of approaches to share good practice and learn from each other and children and young people. For example, at a recent training event led by young people, staff explored ways to improve the learning and teaching methods for children and young people for whom English is an additional language. As a result of the school's continuous focus on improving pedagogy, there are many examples of very high quality teaching. Across the junior and senior schools, almost all children and young people are engaged and motivated to learn. Relationships are positive, with learners of all ages working very well individually and in small groups. They are motivated, eager to learn and very proud of their school. Children and young people with barriers to learning benefit from very well planned targeted support. In class lessons, the learning needs of most children and young people are taken into account during planned learning. Most teachers give relevant feedback and use praise well to support learning. Overall, the pace of lessons is appropriately brisk. In highly effective lessons, teachers and learners use digital technologies well. Senior leaders have identified the further development of digital technology to support learning as an area for improvement. Most teachers use questioning effectively and encourage learners to engage fully in their learning.

In the junior school, the latest attainment data for June 2019 shows that almost all children make good progress in literacy and numeracy, with a few exceeding national expectations. Teachers make well-judged use of a range of assessment information to inform highly personalised learning programmes for children and young people. In the senior school, staff have a relentless drive to ensure that each young person achieves their full potential. Performance in national qualifications is an important strength of the school, with young people achieving very well at both GCSE and A level in 2018-2019. From data provided by the school, almost all young people leaving school in 2018-2019 moved successfully into employment, higher education or training. Across the junior and senior schools, leaders are aware of the need to continue to raise attainment further. Promoted staff plan to put in place a more rigorous whole-school tracking system. This will help to enable staff to ensure that all children and young people are appropriately challenged in their learning, as they move through the school.

The extensive range of opportunities for personal achievements in the senior school, as part of the Gordonstoun broader curriculum, is outstanding. The Gordonstoun Diploma records young people's achievements for commitment and approach in four areas: academic learning; outdoor learning; arts, culture and sport; and citizenship and service. Taken together, this reflects very well the ethos of the 'character education' of Gordonstoun School. In the senior phase, all young people are provided with worthwhile, real-life leadership opportunities through the 'services'. They gain qualifications in coaching and refereeing, first aid and lifeguarding. The community of Moray benefits from young people participating in and leading the local fire service, coastguard and mountain rescue teams, as well as conservation and community projects. All young people participate in sail training and seamanship at Gordonstoun School. Many young people also participate in drama, dance and musical productions. Most senior young people take part in an international service project. They work in teams, under challenging conditions, with local communities in countries such as Thailand, Kenya and Romania. Exchange visits to countries such as South Africa and Peru provide young people with a forum to share a commitment to personal development and responsibility with young people from across the world. All children and young people speak positively and enthusiastically about the extensive range of opportunities available to them at the school, particularly the wide-ranging out-of-class learning experiences. The school guides them "towards being leaders" and staff plan learning that develops learners' confidence, resilience and positive attitudes to all school life. From the junior school onwards, all children and young people participate in expeditions such as canoeing through the Great Glen and at Cape Wrath. They develop important skills for learning, life and work through projects including debating, photography and mountain biking. Staff should continue to develop this work to offer regular leadership roles for children in the junior school and lower secondary stages.

There is clear evidence of the positive impact of self-evaluation, which is demonstrated through the school's many successes and achievements. This includes positive examples in attainment over time and the successful placing of learners in high-quality destinations at the end of their time at the school. Young people express very well how they evaluate their work and what they need to do to improve. The impact from this is demonstrated well in the quality of their practical and written work. Embedded within the school's departmental improvement plans is the whole school approach to improving learning and teaching. Successful implementation of these plans will continue to improve outcomes for children and young people. A next step is for senior leaders to continue to make the most of the all-through school community in order to make the most of the strengths and talents of the staff team. Staffs' participation and leadership on whole-school working groups will provide opportunities for both the junior and senior school teams to share good practice and learn from each other.

What happens next?

We are confident the school has the necessary arrangements and procedures in place to ensure continued improvement in the quality of education provided. The school and Board of Governors will inform parents about the school's progress as part of its arrangements for reporting to parents on the progress of the school. During the visit, we identified aspects of innovative practice. We shall work with the school and Board of Governors to record the innovative practice and share it more widely.

Elizabeth C Montgomery
HM Inspector