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Mrs Jayne Wilkinson/Mrs Jillian Burrell
Headteachers
Appletree Gardens First School
Appletree Gardens
Monkseaton
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Dear Mrs Wilkinson/Mrs Burrell

Ofsted monitoring of Grade 3 schools

Thank you for the help which you and your staff gave when I inspected your school on 19 November 2009, for the time you gave to our discussions and for the information which you provided during my visit. Please also thank the staff, pupils and local authority representative who took the time to talk to me.

Since the last inspection the substantive headteacher continues to be seconded to the local authority. The headship of the school is shared between the substantive deputy headteacher four days a week and an assistant headteacher from a local primary school one day a week. There is an acting deputy headteacher and three key stage coordinators who together form the senior leadership team.

As a result of the inspection on 20–21 October 2008, the school was asked to:

- develop the skills of the new leadership team in improving standards and levels of achievement
- improve the attainment of boys, particularly in English
- improve all teaching and learning to that of the best
- ensure pupils have more opportunities to use the interactive whiteboards to enhance their learning.

Having considered all the evidence I am of the opinion that at this time the school has made satisfactory progress in making improvements and satisfactory progress in demonstrating a better capacity for sustained improvement.

The school has been successful in raising attainment and levels of achievement. In the unvalidated 2009 end of Year 2 assessments, standards rose in mathematics and significantly so in reading and writing. Boys outperformed girls in reading for the first

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time. The school has successfully closed the gap between boys' and girls' attainment. This was as a direct result of the improved use of tracking data on pupils' attainment. Teachers use this data effectively to identify pupils who are underachieving and to put in place short, sharp interventions to accelerate their progress. Teachers also improved activities and challenge for more able pupils so that all groups of pupils made better progress. The introduction of the Assessing Pupil's Progress (APP) materials has also helped teachers assess pupils' work more accurately. They are starting to use this information to improve activities in lessons so activities better meet the needs of different groups of pupils.

The school's progress in improving the quality of teaching is satisfactory but it has made good progress in developing teachers' skills in using interactive whiteboards. These are now being used well to enhance pupils' learning and to further engage boys in lessons. The programmes chosen add to the pace of lessons and to pupils' enjoyment and pupils said they particularly enjoy these sessions, especially in mathematics. In the lessons observed during the visit, relationships and pupils' behaviour were good. Classrooms are good learning environments with many lively prompts to help pupils with their work. In all classes pupils listen attentively to their teachers and are keen to answer questions and show what they have learnt. Opportunities for pupils to use talk to develop their thinking and reflect on their learning are good in some lessons and developing in others. Pupils in Year 2 were learning how to write instructions for a monster's potion. They could recognise 'bossy verbs' and time connectives and use these in their writing. Pupils were very enthusiastically identifying horrible ingredients to put into their potion and all pupils were engrossed in the subject matter of the lesson and made good progress.

In some lessons too much time is spent sitting on the carpet listening to the teacher and the balance of teacher-directed learning and independent activities results in some pupils not having enough time to finish their independent work. Teachers plan activities for three levels of difficulty in lessons and the activities set are matched to pupils' previous learning and abilities. Teachers use teaching assistants well to support the less able pupils but activities for these pupils sometimes lack challenge, particularly in writing. This is because pupils are over reliant on printed worksheets and this limits their opportunities to write independently or at length. The school has a philosophy of 'Brave Writing' where pupils are encouraged to 'have a go' and put their thoughts on paper. In the Early Years Foundation Stage this is working very well and pupils are entering Year 1 with improved writing skills. The school is not yet fully building on this good work and opportunities are missed to develop writing further. The school is aware of this and has secure plans in place to continue to improve teaching and learning through sharing good practice and giving teachers release time to observe good practice in other schools.

The work in pupils' books is neat and well presented. Pupils take a pride in their work and want to do their best. There is a good range of writing for different purposes and good links between different subjects; which give ample opportunities to practise basic skills across the curriculum. In English books, pupils have clear

targets for improvement in the front of their books and good marking and feedback tells pupils what the next steps in their learning are. Pupils know their targets well and could talk confidently about what they needed to do to improve their writing. However, pupils do not always have time in lessons to act on these good comments to edit and improve their writing. Pupils' writing develops well as they progress through the school. In Key Stage 2, the oldest pupils' books in Year 4 show that attainment in reading and writing is improving. The majority of pupils are working securely at the level expected.

The school has made satisfactory progress in demonstrating a better capacity for sustained improvement. The new leadership team is working closely together with a focus on raising attainment for all pupils. Staff morale is high and all staff work hard and are keen to improve their practice and the attainment of pupils in their classes. The key stage coordinators are developing their management skills by leading whole-school areas for improvement; for example the development of APP and creative partnership developments. Tracking of pupils' progress has improved and subject leaders have a clear understanding of which groups of pupils are underachieving in their subject. They are instrumental in planning interventions to accelerate progress, for example with underachieving boys and pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities. This has been particularly successful in improving reading across all year groups.

The school's self-evaluation is accurate and the two acting headteachers work very well together to move the school forward. The current development plan includes the areas for development from the last inspection but actions for improvement are too broad and not sufficiently focused on outcomes for different groups of pupils. This makes it difficult for leaders and managers to accurately evaluate the impact of the school's work. Also, leaders are currently planning too many areas for improvement at the same time. The acting headteachers have developed procedures to monitor their work through curriculum walks, book scrutiny, and drop-in sessions and lesson observations. However, opportunities for subject leaders to monitor learning through lesson observations are limited. The school has identified this as an area for improvement and they are currently working with the local authority to further develop the coordinators' skills in this area.

The governing body have supported the changes to the leadership team and work closely with both acting headteachers to ensure continuity and succession planning. Some governors are actively involved in the life of school and visit regularly to see how planned actions are developing, for example, during writing week.

The local authority has offered good support to the school to stabilise staffing and to develop the management skills of the new leaders through good professional development and by providing leading practitioners to work alongside the staff to improve teaching and learning. The school's involvement as a creative partnership school has focused their attention on improving writing through a range of visiting

storytellers, illustrators and authors. This has increased pupils enthusiasm for writing in Years 1 and 2.

I hope that you have found the visit helpful in promoting improvement in your school. This letter will be posted on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Joy Frost
Her Majesty's Inspector