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Ms Kim Bolton
The Headteacher
Downs Park School
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Dear Ms Bolton

Ofsted monitoring of Grade 3 schools: monitoring inspection of Downs Park School

Thank you for the help which you and your staff gave when I inspected your school on 30 November, for the time you gave to our phone discussions and for the information which you provided before and during the inspection. Please pass on my thanks to the pupils, chair of governors, and colleagues from the school as well as the local authority, who contributed.

The leadership of the school has undergone some changes over the past eighteen months. Following a year with an acting headteacher, the school now has a long-term acting head of school and shares an executive headteacher with another special school in the authority. As part of planned changes within the local authority, pupil numbers have decreased since the last inspection and there are now 68 pupils on roll.

As a result of the inspection on 28 April 2009, the school was asked to address the most important areas for improvement which are set out in the annex to this letter.

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

The information held by the school on achievement this year shows an encouraging improvement from 2009. Target setting is increasingly precise and linked closely to National Curriculum levels. This has enabled senior leaders to track progress more accurately and identify more securely which pupils are making good or outstanding progress. The focus on reducing the proportion of pupils who were underachieving has had good impact. Targets are scrutinised and monitored by senior leaders and

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increasingly good use is made of moderation to ensure that staff are more involved in the target setting process.

Much work has been done to support teachers in improving their practice. Opportunities to work with colleagues have enabled staff to re-evaluate the impact of their teaching and to make well-focused improvements if necessary. Teachers show an increasing confidence in using assessment information to extend their pupils' learning on an individual basis. This increased confidence is reflected in the positive responses and engagement of the pupils. Very good relationships and increased levels of challenge mean that pupils themselves are willing to take risks and attempt work that they may previously have found too difficult or daunting. They are increasingly aware of the levels at which they are working and what they can do to improve, although some find this difficult to remember without clear visual reminders. Differences in progress between subjects are being reduced and the school's evidence shows that this is impacting positively on both English and mathematics. Lesson planning is, as yet, variable, but school leaders are aware that this may be an area for future development as greater consistency in teaching is achieved across the school.

The school's work on revising the curriculum has already been effective in creating greater opportunities for pupils to learn through practical experience. Younger pupils have responded well to a more topic-based approach and they show that they are more able to apply key skills in real-life or role-play situations. For example, pupils in Key Stage 1 enjoyed measuring ingredients and making buns; those in Key Stage 3 confidently recited their times tables while experiencing an 'air-raid' as part of their project on the Second World War. Older students are now accessing a range of accredited and work-related courses at local colleges, and with other providers such as the RSPCA. These opportunities have increased their aspirations and encouraged them to look forward to life beyond school. One boy wrote, 'I have enjoyed working with others and meeting new people. I have learnt lots of skills at Motorvation that will be useful later in life.' Another spoke with great enthusiasm about his role as a sports leader and a forthcoming trip to the Gambia to work with other young people. The school is rightly seeking to extend further the ways in which older students can gain accreditation for their work.

All concerned have done well to make such improvements following a period of absence and some uncertainty with regard to the substantive leadership of the school. The appointment of an executive headteacher from September 2010 has helped to accelerate the progress already made during the previous academic year. The need to accommodate a reduction in staff numbers has also been responded to positively. The governing body has been well supported by the local authority. Governors have shown good resolve and their determination to minimise disruption has benefited the pupils well.

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

Yours sincerely

Anne Duffy
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection which took place in April 2009.

- Improve teaching and learning, especially in English and mathematics, ensuring work is more challenging and that assessment information is used to the full to improve progress.
- Develop activities in the curriculum which are more practical and related to real life.
- Work with the local authority to implement robust plans to minimise the impact of any staff absences.