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Mr Matthew Shanks
The Headteacher
Coombeshead College
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Dear Mr Shanks

Notice to improve: monitoring inspection of Coombeshead College

Thank you for the help which you and your staff gave when I inspected your school on 4 November 2010 and for the information which you provided during the inspection. Please pass on my thanks to the students, staff, school improvement partner and the chair of the governing body who gave their time to talk to me.

Since the last inspection the school has appointed a new headteacher, who took up post in April 2010. Two new assistant headteachers have been appointed and there has been a complete redistribution of roles and responsibilities at senior level. Two new advanced skills teachers have been appointed in behaviour and learning and in art. There have also been new subject leaders appointments in English and in physical education. The pastoral system has been reorganised under the leadership of a Director of Key Stage 3 and a Director of Key Stage 4 supported by six new key stage team leaders from Year 7 to Year 11. The school is currently restructuring its support staff system.

As a result of the inspection on 2 March 2010, 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 is making satisfactory progress in addressing the issues for improvement and in raising the pupils' achievement.

There is a clear commitment across the school to raising the achievement of students and this is seen in the work of senior leaders, governors and staff. The work of the governors' action plan monitoring committee, established after the inspection, has been effective in evaluating progress against the recommendations from the report and holding senior leaders to account. The unvalidated results of the GCSE examinations for Year 11 pupils in 2010 show a rise in attainment across a

number of key indicators. As a result, the school met its challenging targets for the proportion of students attaining five grade A* to C grades and five A* to C grades including English and mathematics. There was a significant improvement in attainment and progress of students in English and science regardless of ability. The college's analysis of its most recent data, including results from early entries, shows that current Year 10 and Year 11 students appear to be maintaining this level of improvement. Attainment in mathematics fell slightly on the previous year and fewer students made expected levels of progress in mathematics than in English and science. Consequently, a searching analysis of performance and an incisive subject review have enabled the college to develop a clear set of interventions. These include changes to the curriculum, re-setting to better target support for groups and a specific targeted intervention programme for individual students. Early indications are that progress in mathematics is accelerating, but the college acknowledges that this continues to be a key focus of improvement work.

Under the clear direction of the new headteacher, the college has worked hard to eradicate inadequate teaching and improve satisfactory teaching to higher levels. The system of training and lesson observations has succeeded in bringing discussions on teaching and impact on learning to the fore. All college staff have been fully engaged in a robust professional dialogue to develop a common set of principles for effective practice in teaching, learning, lesson support and tutoring. This information has been used well to sharpen and strengthen the quality of monitoring and evaluation at all levels. A good benchmark has thus been established. The college recognises that changes to practice are not fully embedded across the school and the senior leaders need to assure themselves that they have evidence of teachers consistently performing at a higher level.

The quality of teaching is still variable, but inspection evidence, examination performance and internal monitoring show an improving profile overall. Teaching is not consistently good in all curriculum areas because there is not always sufficient focus on students' learning outcomes. Although teachers now have access to good assessment and achievement data for all students, not all staff use this information effectively to inform teaching strategies and tailor learning opportunities to meet the full range of learners needs. In some classes, over-long teacher explanations and/or questioning, and dialogue that rarely 'delves deep' in order to check understanding inhibit opportunities for students to think for themselves and to develop and explain their ideas. Marking and assessment also vary in quality. An outstanding drama lesson was characterised by the highly skilled way in which the teacher and students used precise subject-specific assessment and dialogue to articulate the key features required to improve their performance pieces. However, such good practice is not consistently in place across the curriculum. Although it is improving, students confirmed that too often, verbal and written guidance does not make explicit the next steps that they need to take to improve their work or give them the opportunity to respond.

Planning for a more cohesive Key Stage 4 curriculum is well under way. The college has worked well within the constraints of a common consortium timetable to begin the process of restructuring the college day so that blocks of time are being used more effectively to maximise learning. A number of the one-year GCSE option courses for Year 10 students, which were having an adverse affect on the aspiration and achievement of some students, have been removed. The college recognises the need to ensure that these options result in more students gaining the highest grades. All one-year GCSE options have been removed for Year 9 students from next year thanks to the development of four new and distinct curriculum pathways. Achievement in science has been enhanced significantly with the introduction of BTEC science to support the college's traditional offer. The amount of time spent in double lessons has been greatly reduced at Key Stage 3 and appropriate plans are in place to reduce this further next year. College monitoring and evaluation indicate that these changes are already having a positive impact on the behaviour, engagement and motivation of students across the school. This is supported by inspection evidence.

The college has specialist status in media arts and take-up rates and achievement in the specialist subjects of media studies, drama and art have remained strong. Film and animation are being used well to support student engagement and develop the quality of teaching and assessment across the curriculum, especially in English literature, science and physical education. The college offers a full programme of support for initial teacher training and has recently been re-designated as a training school.

The college is receiving good support from the local authority. The statement of action meets requirements and has enabled good development of teaching and learning, particularly through more incisive monitoring and evaluation. The support plan has been well targeted particularly in relation to focused intervention work. The school improvement partner and earlier support offered by the experienced assigned headteacher have helped the college to understand itself better and have contributed well to its improvement.

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

Karl Sampson
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection which took place in March 2010

- Raise attainment and improve rates of progress, especially in English, mathematics and science, by:
 - rigorously tracking all student progress and intervening appropriately so that all middle- and lower-ability students make at least three levels of progress from Year 7 to Year 11, and the higher-ability group progress by four levels
 - carefully planning intervention activities for students at risk of underachieving and routinely evaluating them to measure their effectiveness
 - reviewing the Key Stage 4 curriculum to evaluate the effectiveness of courses in terms of outcomes and cohesiveness
 - reviewing the structure of the college day to ensure that blocks of time are used in the most effective way to maximise learning.

- Increase the proportion of good teaching by ensuring that teachers consistently:
 - use assessment information to plan lessons that take account of prior attainment and the individual learning needs of students
 - use teaching methods that provide pace, variety, interest and challenge for students of all abilities to accelerate progress and build positive behaviour and attitudes
 - engage students fully in understanding how well they are progressing in their work so they take responsibility for what they have to do to improve.

- Improve monitoring and evaluation at all levels so that:
 - strategies are implemented to enhance teaching skills and share good practice
 - the governing body can use information on students' outcomes and progress to hold leaders to account in a regular and systematic way.