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Mrs G Ward
Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Ward

Ofsted monitoring of Grade 3 schools: monitoring inspection of Stepgates Community School

Thank you for the help which you and your staff gave when I inspected your school on 17 February 2011, for the time you gave to our phone discussions and for the information which you provided before and during the inspection. Please also pass on my thanks to the pupils and your chair of governors for the help they provided.

Since the last inspection the leadership team has been restructured and a new deputy headteacher was appointed in September 2010. All of these appointments have been made internally.

As a result of the inspection on 4-5 February 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 has made satisfactory progress in making improvements, and good progress in demonstrating a better capacity for sustained improvement.

Following the last inspection, the attainment of pupils at the end of Year 6 fell significantly and was exceptionally low in 2010. Nearly half of pupils in the year group had special educational needs and a number joined or left the school during the junior years. Pupils who had been at Stepgates since Year 2 made satisfactory progress, often from very low starting points. Pupils in the current Year 6 are attaining at much higher levels and progress is beginning to accelerate throughout the school as teaching improves. Pupils really enjoy their learning. They behave well in lessons and respond well to teachers' questions. They are particularly enthusiastic



when activities are interesting and practical. For example, pupils in Year 2 enjoyed identifying quarter hours on a large clock and then testing their skills excitedly in a game of 'What's the time, Mr Wolf?' Most pupils attend regularly but a small number are often absent which means that overall levels of attendance remain too low.

The quality of teaching has improved since the last inspection and is leading to consistently better progress. In mathematics, it is clear that pupils are being given more opportunities to apply their skills to solve problems. For example, in a Year 6 lesson, pupils enjoyed solving 'The Carriage Conundrum' when they were asked to move an increasing number of 'princes' and 'princesses' around a royal carriage within set parameters. The activity was skilfully organised to provide challenge for all groups of learners. The more able group devised their own algebraic formula to solve the problem. Teachers are more confident in assessing pupils' progress and using the information to set work to match the ability of different groups of pupils. This level of challenge is still not consistent, however, for more able pupils in all subjects. Sometimes, introductions for the whole class are too long when more-able pupils are ready to move forward in their learning. At other times, independent activities are not demanding enough or do not give them enough scope to pursue their own ideas. The school had identified that the pupils' understanding of counting and number bonds was often weak when they entered the juniors. As a result, a one-to-one support programme, 'Numbers Count' has been introduced in Year 2. This has helped to accelerate the progress of the pupils involved markedly and there are plans to involve more pupils in Year 2 and to extend it to Year 3. This is helping to give pupils a firmer grasp of key skills, which will support their mathematical learning better as they move into the juniors.

In science, investigative skills are far more to the fore. In a Year 5 lesson, for example, pupils were asked to classify a collection of musical instruments, using their own criteria. A few were a little disconcerted by the lack of structure at first but then came up with some interesting and innovative ideas. The teacher used her excellent subject knowledge of science and music to clarify their thinking and deepen their understanding. This approach to science is now much more widespread throughout the school.

The capacity of the school to continue to improve has been considerably strengthened as leadership has become more widely distributed. Leaders are knowledgeable and committed and focused on raising achievement. They have galvanised the support of staff. There are robust systems to track the progress of every child which are being used with increasing rigour by leaders and teachers to identify potential underachievement at an early stage and to ensure that pupils do not 'slip through the net'. Initiatives such as the 'Numbers Count' programme are monitored carefully to measure their impact. A strong coaching culture has been established which is enabling staff to share good practice alongside a rigorous monitoring regime which is beginning to accelerate progress by improving teaching and learning. The local authority has provided a good level of support and challenge to the school through the school improvement partner and consultants in literacy



and numeracy. This work, in particular, has assisted leaders to develop teaching and learning effectively. Nevertheless, the school is demonstrating considerable internal capacity to address the issues of raising levels of attainment and accelerating pupils' progress still further.

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

Graham Lee
Additional Inspector

Annex

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

- Accelerate progress and raise attainment in mathematics and science by:
 - ensuring a consistent focus on the teaching of key skills, particularly in science and mathematics topics
 - giving pupils more experience of problem solving in which to apply their numerical and scientific skills.

- Raise the quality of teaching so that it is consistently good or better by:
 - ensuring that teachers make more effective use of information on pupils' prior attainment to plan lessons to challenge all groups, especially the more able
 - sharing examples of best practice across all staff.

- Increase the impact of school monitoring and evaluation by ensuring that middle leaders evaluate initiatives more rigorously and act to remedy weaknesses.