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16 February 2011

Mrs A Smithers
The Astley Cooper School
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Dear Mrs Smithers

Ofsted monitoring of Grade 3 schools: monitoring inspection of The Astley Cooper School

Thank you for the help which you and your staff gave when my colleague and I inspected your school on 15 February 2011, for the time you gave to our phone discussions and for the information which you provided before and during the inspection. I should particularly like to thank the Chair of the Governing Body and the vice-chair for finding the time to take part in discussions, the other staff who were involved and the students who gave up part of their lunchtime to give us their views about improvements at the school.

Since the last inspection a number of changes have been made in the governing body. A new chair was appointed in December 2009 and there is a new clerk. Additional governors joined following the inspection and also in September 2010. A new head of sixth form joined the senior leadership team in September 2010, following the retirement of the previous post-holder. In the summer term 2010, the school achieved re-designation of its specialist status as a visual and performing arts college.

As a result of the inspection on 16 September 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 satisfactory progress in making improvements and satisfactory progress in demonstrating a better capacity for sustained improvement.

The school's data on students' attainment shows a significantly greater proportion on track to achieve higher GCSE grades (A* to C) in 2011 than was the case at this time last year. In 2010, standards at the end of Year 11 remained similar to those in 2009 in most areas, although the percentage of students achieving five or more higher

September 2010



grades rose to above the national average, maintaining the improvement noted in 2009. The school is on track to meet its challenging targets for results in 2011 in Year 11 and the sixth form. There is clear identification of the school's most able students, but progress in achieving the highest GCSE grades (A* and A) has been less marked.

One reason for the improved standards is a stronger focus on tracking the progress of individual students, providing support and intervention where they are needed. The school makes very good use of its assessment data in this way. Students noted a stronger focus on high achievement in assemblies this year. A second reason is a greater focus on learning objectives in lessons and the improved use of assessment criteria to support students in evaluating their own work and that of their peers. During the inspection, inspectors saw good examples of this in use in physical education and English. There are many other good elements of teaching, with challenging activities and good use of questioning, for example in a music lesson, to draw out extended responses from students and take learning forward. These are still not consistently in place in all classrooms and sometimes expectations are not high enough, the pace is slow and students are not sufficiently engaged. Consequently, students make satisfactory progress overall. Students' behaviour is generally good around the school but occasional off-task behaviour in some lessons slows progress for all in the class. Students reported that behaviour systems had become a lot tighter this year and that this supported learning.

The current school year has seen a faster pace of development than happened in the year following the last inspection. It took some time to appoint the new Chair of the Governing Body and for him and the new governors to settle into a new pattern of working. Administration of the governing body has improved. The governing body now has a clear programme for its work during the year, with its committees fulfilling their role well in providing recommendations to the full governing body following detailed development work. Governors have growing confidence in their ability to challenge the school over its outcomes and to ask for the information they need to gain a better understanding of the issues facing the school.

The senior leadership team has taken a much more sharply focused role in the monitoring of teaching and learning. Senior leaders use a clear set of criteria for observation, and a recently improved observation record which is designed to ensure that notes focus more on students' learning than they have done previously. Joint observations undertaken during the inspection showed that senior leaders have a consistent and accurate view of the quality of teaching, with considerable insights into the key features that make learning good or indicate that improvement is needed. A programme of professional development focuses clearly on learning. The school's very extensive data on students' progress is not yet analysed in a way that would support its programme of monitoring and evaluation. Members of the senior team have also had a much greater role this year in department reviews, enabling them to provide greater challenge and support to heads of department.

One of the greatest successes has been an improvement in attendance to almost the national average in this school year. Recognising that previous strategies were not having sufficient impact, the headteacher took a much greater leadership role in this area. New ways of working, supported by the greater involvement of a range of other staff, have sustained this improvement since September and progress in this area has been good. Students are fully aware of the link between good GCSE grades and good attendance.

The school's specialist area of visual and performing arts has had a satisfactory impact on the school's improvement. Take-up of courses in this area in Years 10 and 11 is high and standards in the arts subjects are among the best in the school. Successes in BTEC courses have done much to motivate students and raise standards. The school has met its specialist targets.

The local authority has not had a particularly strong influence on the school's development since the last inspection. It was supportive in finding new governors who could provide relevant expertise and the work of the school improvement partner in supporting the school's re-designation as an arts college was effective. The involvement of the school in an education improvement partnership was not as helpful as was expected, however, as the match of partner school was not ideal and resources available through the partnership were limited.

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

Frank Knowles
Additional Inspector

Annex

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

- Maintain the trend of improvement secured in the 2009 results by:
 - focusing teaching on learning outcomes
 - ensuring the higher-achieving students secure the highest grades at both GCSE and in the sixth form.

- Improve the monitoring and evaluation of teaching by further developing the role of the senior staff team to ensure consistency of judgement.

- Strengthen the work of the governing body's contribution to the monitoring and evaluation of the work of the school.

- Continue to improve the rate of attendance by targeting vulnerable students early and by planning a relevant range of learning opportunities.