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Dear Mr Purcell and Mrs D'Arcy

Ofsted 2010–11 survey inspection programme: leadership of more than one school

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff and students, during my visit on 9 February 2011 to look at the leadership of the federation. Please pass on my thanks to the staff, governors and local authority representatives who gave up their time and made a valuable contribution to the visit.

The visit provided important information which will contribute to our national evaluation and reporting. Published reports are likely to list the names of the contributing institutions but individual schools will not be identified in the main text without their consent.

The evidence used to inform the judgements included: interviews with staff, governors and local authority representatives; a scrutiny of relevant documentation; and the analysis of students' performance information.

The effectiveness of the federation's leadership and management in embedding ambition and driving improvement is good.

Context

The Brook Learning Partnership consists of Rivington and Blackrod High School and Ladybridge High School. The schools were federated in September 2004 as a collaborative restart. This followed the closure of The Deane School and the opening of Ladybridge. The schools are separated by a distance of seven miles. Substantive headteachers were appointed to both schools in 2007 following the retirement of the federation's executive headteacher. After several months of careful deliberation, governors will decide whether to continue with the federation at a meeting in March 2011.

Outcomes

- Standards in both schools have been rising consistently since 2007 with the large majority of students making satisfactory or good progress given their starting points. Students' targets are suitably challenging and expectations of their capabilities are high.
- Attendance continues to improve in both schools as the rate of persistent absence declines. Students' good behaviour was acknowledged in the most recent inspections of both schools. Fixed-term exclusions are low and there have been no recent permanent exclusions in either school.

Provision

- The initial support provided to Ladybridge following federation in 2004 was successful in stabilising the school and this provided a platform from which sustainable capacity could be built. The school's successful removal from special measures in 2006 reflects the outcomes of this work.
- Cross-federation work has been to the benefit of both schools. Over time, as the capacity of Ladybridge has developed, there has been an increasing emphasis on sharing good practice. This has ensured that the federation has become a genuine partnership of equals. Trust and confidence between staff are key features of the relationship which exists between the schools.

Leadership and management

- Together with senior staff and governors you provide clear direction for your schools and the federation. Both schools demonstrate high ambition and the expectations of staff and student performance are challenging.
- Since 2004, the federation's leadership structures have provided significant additional experiences and opportunities for those in senior and middle leadership positions. This has added greatly to their expertise and has been significant in retaining staff and raising standards.
- Governors and senior leaders are perceptive in their analysis of the federation's development. They recognise the period from 2004 to 2007 as a time of successful stabilisation at Ladybridge which involved a significant change to the school's personnel and a re-defining of its aims and values. The decision by governors in 2007 to change strategy by appointing separate headteachers to each school has proved decisive in sustaining improvement. It has enabled both schools to build successfully on early federation work while continuing to take advantage of federation-wide opportunities.
- The retention of strong collaborative practices in areas such as data analysis, and through the work of the executive business team, has ensured an efficient use of resources and provides effective support to staff and governors. In addition, the federation's strategy for site management has resulted in considerable financial savings.

- Self-evaluation processes are rigorous and routine. Senior leaders and governors demonstrate an accurate understanding of each school's performance. Carefully constructed individual improvement plans reflect school priorities well and offer a strong basis for continued development.
- The initial strategic aims of the federation, to establish a successful and self-sustaining school at Ladybridge, have been achieved. Decisions about the federation's future are to be made next month. Governors and senior staff are keen to build on the strengths and benefits of current arrangements and take these forward into broader collaborative activities in the West Bolton area.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- no areas for improvement have been identified ahead of the governing body's forthcoming decision about the future of the federation.

I hope that these observations are useful as you continue to develop the leadership of the federation.

As I explained previously, a copy of this letter will be published on the Ofsted website. It may be used to inform decisions about any future inspection. A copy of this letter is also being sent to your local authority.

Yours sincerely

Tom Grieveson
Her Majesty's Inspector