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13 May 2011

Mr A Cope
Headteacher
The Armthorpe School
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Dear Mr Cope

Ofsted monitoring of Grade 3 schools: monitoring inspection of The Armthorpe School

Thank you for your help and that of your staff when Ariane Roberts, additional inspector, and I inspected your school on 12 May 2011, for the time you gave to our phone discussions and the information you provided before and during the inspection. Please pass on our thanks to the students who spoke with us, the officer of the local authority and your School Improvement Partner who gave time to talk on the telephone.

Since the last inspection, there has been some significant change in staffing at the school. Several teachers, including some heads of department, left the school last year and the deputy headteacher was appointed to a headship elsewhere. New appointments have been made, including a new post-16 learning leader. A new deputy headteacher started in January. There has also been some reshaping of responsibilities among the senior leadership team.

Following the inspection on 23 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 inadequate progress in making improvements and inadequate progress in demonstrating a better capacity for sustained improvement.

Students' achievement in 2010 declined slightly compared with previous years in many subjects and remained broadly the same in English and mathematics, where progress rates continue to lag behind national rates for most groups of students. There has been some improvement in success rates at A level and AS level in the sixth form, although rates of progress remain below the national average. Projected results for 2011 do show some improvement with an increased proportion of students expected to gain five A* to C grades

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

at GCSE including English and mathematics. Progress of students in lessons, however, remains extremely variable.

The headteacher, well supported by both the previous and current deputy headteachers, has introduced clear procedures and guidance to raise achievement across the school. His identification of the strengths and weaknesses of the school is accurate and honest but the self-evaluation of some middle leaders is overgenerous. Training and guidance have been extensive and practice has, consequently, improved in some areas. There is, however, a substantial group of teachers and leaders who do not appear to have grasped fully the urgency for change or the value of established best practice. While whole-school systems for target setting and monitoring are now effectively established, in the main they have not been explained to or understood by students. Many students lack the skills to discuss their progress or how they can improve. While some good practice was observed, in some cases students could only vaguely recall their target grades and sometimes did not understand the written guidance for improvement that they had been given. This is due to insufficient commitment across the school to developments introduced by the headteacher. Much more needs to be done to ensure that the school's identified priorities are consistently applied across all subjects and teachers so that students can identify a shared corporate ethos and belief in raising achievement.

There is an agreed set of lesson observation criteria which helpfully identifies for all teachers the components of good learning, with progress as the key feature. In the lessons observed, however, too often differentiation was only through outcome, with all students undertaking broadly the same activities. Consistent use of techniques to assess students' progress during lessons was not seen. Students are enthusiastic about lessons where they are able to be more active and involved in their learning. They estimated that only about half of their learning was like this. Students' skills in collaborative working are underdeveloped because too much lesson time is dominated by teachers.

The headteacher has led decisive action on the sixth form curriculum and, in collaboration with the local authority and other providers, considered the needs of post-16 learners in the locality. As a result, some unpopular but appropriate decisions have been made to discontinue some A-level subjects with a history of underperformance and to increase the range of courses suited to the majority of Year 11 leavers. The new post-16 learning leader has made a positive impact and good collaborative arrangements with two other schools have enabled courses and choices to be maintained, even where numbers within the school are unviable. An effective tracking system has been introduced to monitor the progress of sixth form students. Although its value has not been effectively explained to all of them, there is evidence of better progress being made.

The school is appreciative of the extensive support it has received from the local authority and from its School Improvement Partner since the last inspection. There has also been an effective partnership with a nearby school as part of the Gaining Ground initiative.

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

Mr John Peckham
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection which took place on 23 September 2009

- Raise attainment and achievement, particularly in English and mathematics, by:
 - ensuring that agreed procedures for checking progress towards the school's key priorities are consistently applied by leaders and managers at all levels
 - increasing the effectiveness of evaluation processes by focusing more precisely on the outcomes for students.
- Improve the quality of students' learning and progress by:
 - using assessment information to match activities more precisely to students' individual needs
 - developing a range of teaching styles that increase students' active participation and independence in their learning.
- Improve the post-16 curriculum so that it meets the full range of needs of students and increases success rates in their chosen courses.