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30 September 2011

Mrs D Morton
Headteacher
Alnwick the Dukes Middle School
Hope House Lane
Alnwick
Northumberland
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Dear Mrs Morton,

Ofsted monitoring of Grade 3 schools: monitoring inspection of Alnwick the Dukes Middle School

Thank you for the help which you and your staff gave when I inspected your school on 29 September 2011, for the time you gave to our phone discussions and for the information which you provided before and during the inspection. Please pass on my thanks to the staff and students who spoke to me, the Chair, and the other representatives of the governing body, including the executive headteacher who attended meetings at very short notice.

Since the last inspection, five teachers have left the school and five recruited; three from the beginning of the autumn term 2011. An executive headteacher has been appointed to provide strategic oversight across the federation of four schools. The federation's governance arrangements have also changed, including the development of a standards and scrutiny committee to ensure a robust focus on the attainment and progress of students.

As a result of the inspection on 26 and 27 May 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 good progress in making improvements and good progress in demonstrating a better capacity for sustained improvement.

Standards are rising. Since the last inspection there has been a 5% point improvement in the proportion of students achieving Level 4 and above in English and a 10% point improvement in mathematics by the end of Year 6. The gap between the national average and school results is narrowing effectively in English and has virtually disappeared in mathematics. Although 2011 Key Stage 2 test results in writing were disappointing, lesson observations, teacher assessments and scrutiny of students work shows students' writing skills are developing well. This is because of the additional focus on extended writing, extra literacy lessons, teachers' better use of assessment and information to inform students' next steps and the improved quality of teaching across the school.

January 2011



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

The proportion of good teaching is increasing and satisfactory teaching has been reduced significantly. This is as a result of an effective array of strategies, including rigorous monitoring of teaching, professional development opportunities, coaching, and sharing good practice from within school and from across the federation. Good relationships between teachers and students typified all lessons observed. Lessons are purposeful and students apply themselves enthusiastically to their learning. Teachers' expectations of what students can do are higher. This is evident in the clearer and more consistent planning that teachers' use, which usually identifies levels of attainment the students are working at and the interesting activities planned to help students move on quickly. However, school leaders are aware that there remain a few residual inconsistencies in teachers' planning and delivery, to fully challenge all students, and are taking action to eradicate this.

Students have heightened expectations too, because they all have challenging targets that are reviewed regularly and because teachers' marking and feedback helps them understand how well they are doing and what they need to do next. Students report that there are more opportunities to take responsibility for their learning, take part in practical, investigative-based tasks and work in groups or pairs. They also indicate that lessons are more 'fun'. This is helping develop students' independence and resilience as learners. The whole-school focus on developing students' thinking and critical evaluation skills has had a positive impact on students' confidence in lessons to ask questions, seek clarification and secure additional guidance whenever necessary. Students say that music, one of the school's specialist subjects, remains a strength and they talk proudly of the work of the school choir. Impact of the mathematics specialism is evident in the higher standards since the inspection. Students' behaviour and attitudes are also strengths and add to the calm and purposeful atmosphere that pervades this extensive school site.

Senior leaders use regular tracking information about students' achievements more successfully to identify those who are at risk of falling behind. This is to make sure teachers can take action quickly, to tackle issues in lessons, or through additional interventions. For example, the school's assessments of students on entry into Year 5 are highlighting some deficits in literacy skills and as a result additional literacy lessons are being provided. School data shows that gaps between boys' and girls' performance in English, and that of the small proportion that are entitled to free school meals, are beginning to narrow across year groups.

Leadership has been strengthened through a more rigorous approach to monitoring and evaluating the work of the school and the development of an extended leadership team who are more fully involved in these aspects of the school work. The extended team report they, and staff, are more accountable for the achievement and progress of their students and value their enhanced roles and accountability. They also say they appreciate the greater opportunities to work with, or share experiences and good practice with colleagues in school and across the federation. Consequently morale is high and a learning culture is being embedded for both staff and students. The quality of school development planning has also improved. Priorities are succinct and clear and all staff have been involved in their

development. Underpinning action plans provide more measurable success criteria against which the identified areas for improvement can be measured.

The school has demonstrated better capacity for improvement through the actions identified above. The impact can be seen in the higher standards in 2011 and students' generally good progress in lessons, including progress of groups of students identified as previously underachieving. Leaders know there is still more to do and are successfully tackling the things that need to be better. Partnership working within the federation is good and a developing strength, as leaders and staff work together to improve outcomes for students. The federation is supporting the improvement in teaching and providing a professional dialogue with the school's leaders that includes a good balance of challenge, advice and support.

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

Margaret Farrow
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

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

- Raise attainment and levels of achievement in English and mathematics through
 - developing students' extended writing skills
 - raising students' and staff expectations on what can be achieved
 - increasing opportunities for all students to undertake investigative work in lessons by embedding the use of personal learning and thinking skills and mathematics to solve real-life problems.

- Improve the quality of teaching and learning so that it is consistently good or better by:
 - ensuring that all lessons are vibrant, interesting and engage students in their learning
 - modelling examples of the school's best practice in teaching
 - increasing the capacity of senior staff to monitor, observe and make judgements on lessons.

- Improve the systems for whole-school planning and self-review by:
 - ensuring targets for development are explicit and measurable
 - embedding evaluation into all new initiatives
 - rigorously monitoring the impact of all aspects of the school's work.