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Mrs Anne Hill
Principal
Northampton Academy
Wellingborough Road
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Dear Mrs Hill

Ofsted monitoring of Grade 3 schools with an additional focus on behaviour: monitoring inspection of Northampton Academy

Thank you for the help which you and your staff gave when I inspected your academy on 12 October 2011 together with Steven Goldsmith, additional inspector, for the time you gave to organising our programme and for the information which you provided during the inspection. Please also thank the students that we met.

Since the previous inspection in May 2010, there have been significant changes in the leadership of the academy. In September 2011 a new principal took up post, and since then arrangements have been made to further strengthen the leadership team through restructuring roles and responsibilities.

As a result of the inspection on 10 May 2010, the academy 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 academy has made satisfactory progress in making improvements and good progress in demonstrating a better capacity for sustained improvement. In addition, the effectiveness of the academy in improving students' behaviour is good.

Students enter the academy with attainment that is well below average. The 2010 GCSE results remained below average, but the provisional 2011 results were the best in the academy's history. Attainment rose sharply with 73% of students gaining five or more good grades at GCSE, while the proportion gaining five or more good grades including English and mathematics rose by 12% to 47%. While standards are still below national averages, progress in English and Mathematics has risen sharply. Progress in English is now in line with national expectations, and whilst below in Mathematics, the gap has narrowed significantly. Achievement in the sixth form has



also risen sharply. Attainment has risen from well below average levels in 2007 to above average levels in 2011, and progress is currently above expectation in most qualifications. Students in the current Years 11 and 13 are on target for similar or better results in 2012 and our observations confirmed the academy's data; improvements have resulted from some recent developments in teaching and learning and targeted support for individual students identified as underachieving.

During the monitoring inspection we observed 22 part lessons, and just over a third were good or better. The academy has taken a number of measures to improve teaching and learning, but they have not yet had a full impact. They include improving teachers' understanding of data and their use to inform planning, coaching targeted teachers to satisfactory or better levels of performance, and disseminating good practice. Teachers have also improved their understanding of the components of good teaching, and a useful handbook has been produced to help teachers to ensure good progress. Not all teachers internalise and act on this guidance.

In the best lessons, students are suitably challenged and engaged in their work. Clear information is provided about what they need to do to improve through feedback during the lesson as well as marking. There are good opportunities for students to work independently, for example in preparing their own presentations or teaching peer group members the skills they have learned. However, these practices are not yet universal. In satisfactory lessons, progress is limited because the planned activities are either not interesting enough or dealt with superficially; oral feedback informs students regularly about how to improve, but marking does not provide the same specific advice and guidance.

Students and teachers were unequivocal in saying that behaviour has changed significantly over the past year. It is clear that policies and approaches are now being applied fairly, consistently and effectively. One student commented, 'We know where we stand now.' The number of exclusions has been reduced, as has the number of referrals by teachers. The good behaviour observed during the visit in lessons, around corridors and outside during break and at lunch time contributed to a calm, well-ordered and very friendly working environment.

Concerted action is reducing the number of persistent absentees, but overall attendance remains at broadly average levels. Parental support has been harnessed through productive family liaison using a dedicated worker, and through setting up attendance contracts with parents and carers.

Provision for students who have special educational needs and/or disabilities has improved. The coordinator has clear knowledge and understanding of all their needs, and teachers work productively with their teaching assistants to ensure that these needs can be met. However, the class teachers rely too much on teaching assistants to take responsibility for this, and they are sometimes unclear about how to respond.

There has been much activity to promote communication across the academy, but the impact has been limited. Leaders respond to ideas from individual students and the outcomes of surveys. However, the responses are not used in such a way as to make conclusions that guide appropriate responses and actions. Steps have been taken to improve contact with parents and carers, but expectations regarding response times are not made explicit. There have been some examples of effective practice being shared across the academy, but they follow no explicit strategic intentions.

The academy's specialist departments are being used effectively to raise standards, particularly through the establishment of applied courses in sports and business with their associated high pass rates.

The recently appointed Principal has developed a clearly articulated vision for the academy, and there is a renewed sense of urgency to drive improvement through strong lines of accountability. Key areas of its work are showing improving trends, including teaching and learning, behaviour, assessment and attendance. The academy is now working steadily towards securing these improvements at good levels, and in so doing is striving to meet its ambitious targets.

The academy has received some useful support from its School Improvement Partner, who until recently worked with senior leaders to validate their evaluations, and from the academy sponsor, who has supported extensive leadership training and development.

I hope that you have found the inspection helpful in promoting improvement in your academy. This letter will be posted on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Trevor Riddiough
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

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

- Further improve the quality and consistency of teaching by:
 - ensuring that work is carefully matched to the needs and ability of all students
 - developing students' confidence and skills to learn independently and take initiative in their work
 - providing clear guidance to all students through teachers' marking, comments and oral feedback on how they might improve their work.

- Raise outcomes for students by:
 - ensuring that all teachers use the academy's systems effectively to manage and improve behaviour
 - developing the skills of all teachers to respond effectively to the range of students with special educational needs and/or disabilities
 - working with parents to improve further students' engagement, punctuality and attendance.

- Develop communication across the academy by:
 - ensuring that students' views and ideas are fully taken into account
 - providing a prompt and flexible response to parents' queries and concerns
 - ensuring that effective practice is widely shared among all staff to improve outcomes for students.