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Mr N Stonehouse
Headteacher
The Phoenix School
Manor Road
Dawley
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Dear Mr Stonehouse

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

Thank you for the help which you and your staff gave when I inspected your school on 18 October 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 Chair of the Governing Body, staff and students.

Since the last inspection, the school has gained specialist status for sports and science and has been recognised for Leading Practice in Gifted and Talented Education, achieved IT Mark Award and been nominated for Keele University's School of the Year. Ten new staff have been appointed, including new subject leaders for ICT and performing arts, four newly qualified teachers and two staff on the graduate teacher programme. The pastoral system has also changed to be more closely aligned to supporting students' academic progress. From this September, Year 7 students are taught for the majority of their lessons in a separate learning block.

As a result of the inspection on 19 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.

Attainment at the end of Key Stage 4 remains lower than the national average but shows a three-year improving trend. The numbers of students gaining five A* to C grades at GCSE including English and mathematics has risen to 43%. Students' attainment in English is slightly behind that in mathematics. There are differences in performance between girls and boys, and some students who have special



educational needs and/or disabilities. The school uses its data very effectively to ensure that variations in achievement are quickly identified, so that carefully tailored interventions are provided to support individual students. Students spoke very positively about the support they receive and the time staff give to help them. The needs of higher attaining students are well met through the challenging work that is set for them and the extra GCSE courses which students asked the school to provide to extend the range of subjects they can study. The school has been working hard to improve the attendance of students. Behaviour around the school and during lessons is good.

In the majority of lessons seen, students' progress was good. All staff plan their lessons effectively to meet the range of learners' needs. The quality of questioning by staff has improved. Students commented that they were no longer able to sit back in lessons and avoid answering questions. Opportunities for students to ask their own questions and follow their own line of investigation are not well established, however. Increasingly, students are actively engaged in their learning. For example, in a drama lesson, students were skilfully enabled to understand the characters in *Hamlet* through acting out events which mirrored those in the play. Likewise, in a sociology class, students took on the roles of a discussion panel to better understand the complex issues surrounding their topic. The school is aware that the quality of marking and guidance students are given on how to improve are still inconsistent. It is beginning to use the good practice it has identified to improve these across the school.

Under the outstanding leadership of the headteacher, ably supported by the senior and middle leaders, the school has appropriately continued to maintain a sharp focus on improving teaching and learning. The school's development plan is succinct, with timely milestones to measure the impact of actions which are closely aligned to the few key priorities. It is effectively shared both with the governing body and middle leaders so that all staff understand what the school's priorities for improvement are. Systems ensure that all staff are accountable for students' progress. Senior and middle leaders confidently monitor and use data to improve teaching and learning. The school has a cycle of departmental reviews. This ensures all staff understand strengths and weaknesses and have agreed the areas for development. Staff are reflective about their own practice and are encouraged to set their own targets for development. They are working to share their good practice with, and learn from, others. Newly qualified teachers and those on the graduate teacher programme receive good support through this system. Good use is made of external programmes to encourage staff to develop middle management roles and to progress to qualifications such as masters degrees. This drive to build capacity has advanced improvements in teaching and learning and self-evaluation. The approach has transformed learning in the classroom and has enabled senior leaders, middle managers and the governing body to have an accurate picture of the school's strengths and weaknesses. This has greatly improved the school's capacity for sustained improvement.

The development of the school's specialism has helped to broaden the curriculum and to more strongly link subjects together to reinforce the development of students' core skills. There has been an appropriate emphasis on planning to meet students' interests and support them in taking more responsibility for their learning.

The school manages effectively the good quality support it receives from the local authority to ensure this has maximum impact on improving outcomes for all students through the improvements in teaching and learning.

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

Michelle Parker
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

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

- Improve the quality and consistency of teaching by ensuring all is at least satisfactory and 75% good or better by devising a questioning strategy in lessons to ensure that:
 - all students understand the work they are given and their learning is regularly checked and consolidated
 - students of all abilities are appropriately engaged and challenged
 - all students answer or ask at least one question every in lesson.

- Ensure that the school improvement plan is succinct, has termly milestones to measure the impact of all its actions, and is sharply focused on the few key priorities that will raise standards.