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Mr S Heslop
Principal
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Dear Mr Heslop and Mrs Tait

Ofsted monitoring of Grade 3 schools: monitoring inspection of Folkestone Academy

Thank you for the help which you and your staff gave when we inspected your academy on 3 November 2011, for the time you gave to our phone discussions and for the information which you provided before and during the inspection. Please extend my sincere thanks to the staff and students we visited in lessons, and to members of the senior and middle leadership team, teachers and students whom we interviewed.

The Folkestone Academy opened in September 2007 with a sixth form, replacing the predecessor 11–16 Channel School. A period of turbulence in the leadership of the academy between 2008 and 2009 was followed by the appointment of the substantive Principal in March 2009. In September 2009, a primary and Early Years Foundation Stage was opened with a substantive Principal. This replaced the former Park Farm Primary School. Both Principals report directly to a Board of Trustees.

As a result of the inspection on 10–11 March 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.

Students who join the secondary academy have skills and abilities that are well below those expected for their age and compared with national levels at Key Stage 2. Following the low pattern of attainment in GCSE examinations over the last four years, the secondary phase academy prioritised specific interventions for those Year 11 students who were underachieving, such as mentoring, team-building strategies and small-group support. This resulted in raised expectations and achievement and, in 2011, unlike in previous years, students made good progress in overcoming their barriers to learning. A very high proportion of students successfully gained five or more A* to C grades in the GCSE examinations. The proportion who achieved five or

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more of the A* to C grades in the GCSE examinations, including mathematics and English, rose from 14% to 43% during the period 2008-2011. The academy has remodelled the Key Stage 3 curriculum to ensure a greater focus on literacy so as to better meet the needs of its students. In the lessons observed by inspectors, students were developing good oracy, personal, learning and thinking skills as part of their development.

In the primary academy, the success of the 'Hogswort' initiative has led to less able students making good and, in some cases, outstanding progress, especially in the development of their writing skills. Additionally, over the first half of this term, over two thirds of Year 6 pupils had already accelerated their progress in reading skills, by one sub-level (a third of a level). In 2010 by the end of Key Stage 1 pupils in the Early Years Foundation Stage made satisfactory progress in relation to their low starting points. The majority of those observed in lessons by inspectors were making good progress. The academy is prioritising working with those who are underachieving, especially boys, and recognises the importance of closer working with parents and carers, through creating better opportunities for them to participate in their children's learning experiences. This is already raising the confidence of those pupils at the beginning of their schooling this term.

In the sixth form, owing to improved personalised advice and guidance, a greater number of students continue their studies from AS to A level. The proportion of students who remained on a Level 3 course increased from 79% in 2010 to 95% in 2011, with 78% of students passing A level examinations with A* to C grades; a significant increase on the previous year. Owing to raised expectations, a greater number of these progressed successfully to university.

Attainment of students on the vast majority of BTEC vocational courses is above national averages and the progress students make on Level 2 courses is good. Building upon the success of these courses, curriculum changes include Level 3 courses from September 2012. The academy recognises that there is inconsistency in students' attainment across the subjects.

Across the academy, tracking of students' progress is now more rigorous as senior leaders are working much more closely with middle managers. However, in lessons, the valuable information that teachers have on students' prior attainment and assessments is not used consistently to set aspirational targets and to plan learning tasks and activities that meet the needs of all students. Where this is not so effective, especially in the secondary academy, a minority of students lack challenge or struggle to understand basic concepts critical to underpinning knowledge or, for instance, are not developing the appropriate skills they need, such as literacy and writing skills. Other students may not be extended sufficiently in their learning. Where assessment processes successfully underpin the planning of learning, students are challenged, well supported, aspire to higher levels of attainment and enjoy their learning. This was especially evident in mathematics in the sixth form, in

Years 7 to 9 and in the primary academy. The majority of students interviewed in the academy knew their learning targets and most knew what they needed to do to improve. In the majority of lessons observed across the academy, teachers built on their good relations with students and fostered a productive learning environment. In some lessons, the pace and timing of activities were less well suited to the needs of all students and not all teachers checked what their students were learning. Despite some good examples of assessed work, teachers do not consistently ensure that students have corrected their work before moving on to the next stage of learning. In most instances, the academy's learning coaches were observed by inspectors developing students' independent learning skills.

The academy has invested considerable time and resources in behaviour management strategies and has prioritised the involvement of parents and carers in establishing a good behaviour for learning ethos across all phases. Levels of persistent absence and attendance have now improved and are broadly in line with national averages. Fixed-term exclusions have halved in the secondary academy. In most lessons, students behave well and any instances of disruptive behaviours are dealt with firmly.

Both Principals have been instrumental in changing the academy's ethos, with a cross-phase focus on raising the achievement and aspirations of all students. This has been achieved through celebrating their success and instilling an ethos of respect for learning. The Principal of the primary academy has maintained a single-minded focus on developing capacity within her team and ensuring the rigour of quality assurance processes. Monitoring the quality of teaching and learning is now more thorough across all phases. Self-evaluation processes are rigorous, and managers are aware that they need to focus more effectively on the learning and progress of all students in lessons so as to sustain greater outcomes in achievement and attainment. The academy has been well supported by the Standards Adviser. In addition, the primary academy Principal, who is also an executive headteacher of a National Support School deployed these resources effectively to improve the quality of education within the primary academy; consequently, this has resulted in greater capacity in leadership and management.

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

Meena Wood
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

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

- Improve the quality of teaching by ensuring that teachers use information about students' prior attainment and barriers to learning in order to plan and deliver lessons that meet the needs of all students in the class.
- Ensure that monitoring of teaching and learning is accurate and takes sufficient account of the outcomes achieved by different groups of students.
- Ensure that behaviour management strategies are applied fairly and consistently.