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Mr E Wilkes  
Headteacher  
Highfields School  
Upper Lumsdale  
Matlock  
DE4 5NA

Dear Mr Wilkes

### **Notice to improve: monitoring inspection of Highfields School**

Thank you for the help which you and your staff gave when I inspected your school on 10 May 2012 and for the information which you provided during the inspection. Please pass on my thanks to the students, Chair of the Governing Body, and colleagues from the school as well as from the local authority who contributed.

There have been no significant changes to the context in which the school is working since the previous inspection.

As a result of the inspection on 21 September 2011, 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 is making good progress in addressing the issues for improvement and in raising the students' achievement.

Following an accurate analysis of school's developmental needs, targeted actions have been carefully planned to ensure that all improvements in provision lead to better achievement and better teaching. As a consequence, achievement across the school is improving. The results of assessments already taken for the 2012 examinations, the early-entry examination results, and the school's tracking data all demonstrate that a higher proportion of students will be awarded five or more good GCSE passes including English and mathematics this summer, than in 2011. This means that the school is improving markedly and is breaking away from the static trend of performance over the last three years. Existing strengths in mathematics are being built on, and outcomes in English show improvement from the average levels seen at the previous inspection. There is still more work to be done in reducing overall subject variation, due largely to inconsistencies in teaching. The progress made by students with disabilities and those with special educational needs

is improving because of better provision for them in lessons and in the special needs department. Improved attendance, particularly in Year 11, from levels that were previously low to levels that are now average or better, also contributes significantly to the improved attainment and progress of students in that year group.

The information held by the school on achievement this year enables it to analyse and support students' progress more accurately. Target setting is increasingly precise and linked to GCSE or National Curriculum levels. This enables senior leaders to track progress more closely and identify more securely which students make satisfactory or better progress over time. It also enables teachers to use this information to plan more accurately for students' individual needs in lessons and to help them to catch up when they are falling behind. Furthermore, the sharing of targets and current working levels as 'flight paths' enables students to see and value the progress that they are now making.

The proportion of teaching that is good or better is improving gradually and securely across most departments. The range of teaching strategies used is broadening, and more staff are beginning to use new techniques confidently and effectively. A new teaching and learning policy provides useful guidance and expectations on the use of assessment during lessons, the use of learning objectives, the planning of activities to support active learning and the constructive use of marking and feedback. As a result, students now have a clear sense of their personal targets in all subjects and they have a clear idea of how to make progress in their lessons; students are more interested in their lessons and engage in the tasks set; many staff now use better questioning techniques and obtain feedback from plenaries in order to inform them of the next steps in learning. The good teaching in the school does this well, and more of the teaching that is still satisfactory is beginning to reflect aspects of this good practice. More of the marking is giving clear feedback to students about how to improve their work but this is still an area for improvement. Students talk readily of these changes and staff refer to their classrooms now being places of 'active learning'.

The planned curriculum is growing in its effectiveness in meeting students' needs and aspirations. At Key Stage 3, early entry in information and communication technology qualifications boosts students' confidence. Learning pathways at Key Stage 4 are carefully planned to offer appropriate qualifications as well as an improved balance of academic and vocational courses. The new vocational courses in particular provide more hands-on learning activities and stimulating work for those who choose them. A more personalised curriculum is in place for support to those whose circumstances may make them vulnerable and this is enhancing their personal development. These changes are all designed to contribute to raising attainment levels across the school in the coming years. It is therefore too early to determine the full impact of these strategies.

The specialism has led to the provision of a wide range of performing opportunities, both curricular and extra-curricular. All students follow music, drama and dance

across Key Stage 3. There is a healthy uptake for the performing arts at Key Stage 4, which is continued in the sixth form. A wide range of showcase opportunities, give students the opportunity to perform in front of audiences from the local community.

Senior and middle leaders have taken a strong lead on improving teaching. They assess its quality accurately and have a good sense of what needs doing to improve it. The central co-ordinating group for teaching, known as the 'Inspire to Learn Group', and wider staff development opportunities have the capacity to continue developments such as these across all classrooms and to make the necessary improvements in the consistency of practice across all departments.

The support and challenge provided by the local authority are much appreciated by the school. Its action plan, already deemed 'fit for purpose', is being used well as a working document against which both the school and the local authority can measure progress at termly progress review group meetings. Senior staff and heads of department have also benefitted from the coaching they received in monitoring teaching and learning and in developing further the quality of teaching.

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

Trevor Riddiough  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**

## **Annex**

### **The areas for improvement identified during the inspection which took place in September 2011**

- Raise students' achievement in all subjects and particularly in English and mathematics, including for those students currently in Year 11 by:
  - ensuring that all teachers accurately use assessment data to set challenging targets
  - ensuring that students' targets underpin the teaching and learning in lessons
  - ensuring that all teachers set clear learning objectives for all groups of students and that these are reflected in lesson planning
  - ensuring teaching effectively engages students and provides more hands-on learning activities
  - ensuring all forms of feedback, including marking, clearly indicate to students what they are doing well and what they need to do to improve.
  
- Broaden the curriculum so that it meets the needs of all students by:
  - engaging students in stimulating and imaginative work
  - ensuring it provides opportunities for students to develop their interests, gain qualifications and enhance their personal development.