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Mr G Edwards
Acting Headteacher
Marriotts School
Telford Avenue
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Dear Mr Edwards

Notice to improve: monitoring inspection of Marriotts School

Thank you for the help which you, your staff and students gave when I inspected your school on 9 October 2012 and for the information which you provided during the inspection.

There have been significant staff changes since the last inspection, most importantly in leadership. Following the headteacher's resignation, an interim leadership team has been put in place from April 2012, comprising an executive headteacher and an acting headteacher and, since September, two senior leaders seconded from within the local authority. Since the inspection, the local authority has withdrawn delegation of the school's budget and there have been wholesale changes to governance: most governors resigned, a new Chair and Vice Chair formally took up post in May, and a raft of new appointments have recently been made, including new parent and community governors. A significant number of teaching staff left at the end of the school year.

The planned move into the new building did not take place, as scheduled, in September. This is now due to take place in January 2013.

As a result of the inspection on 8 February 2012, 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 satisfactory progress in addressing the issues for improvement and in raising the pupils' achievement.

Although the most recent A-level examination results showed some improvement in 2012, the school failed to meet its targets at Key Stage 4. Unvalidated GCSE results show no significant increase in standards when compared with outcomes in 2011 and, although a few subjects performed well, there was significant underachievement across many curriculum areas. The proportion of students making expected levels of progress increased in mathematics but slumped in English, leaving both subjects well below national figures. Despite this gloomy picture, however, there is evidence that progress is accelerating in response to better teaching and a more systematic approach to assessment, target-setting and tracking. The school's more rigorous and effective use of data means that staff know the potential of their students and are more alert to underperformance. Senior and middle leaders monitor student progress and target specific support or intervention where individuals are falling behind. Although the school recognises that much work needs to be done to strengthen provision, there is emerging a shared understanding of what constitutes good progress and achievement. Importantly, the progress of particular groups, such as students who have special educational needs or are supported by the pupil premium, is closely monitored so that any gaps in performance can be narrowed. Lesson observations support the school's view that progress is accelerating but that underachievement is still widespread.

The quality of teaching has been strengthened by the introduction of more consistent approaches to planning and use of assessment. Students acknowledge that lessons are more sharply focused, with learning objectives and outcomes that are routinely shared at the start of each session. Teachers are expected to use assessment data and contextual information to make seating arrangements and set challenging outcomes for different groups. In addition, students know their target grades and their current working levels, and this has helped to raise their own expectations. The most effective teachers use this information well in their lesson planning and set tasks that immediately engage every student, for example by using mini-whiteboards or sorting cards as a starter activity. The best teaching is skilfully directed, with brisk and high-quality exposition, and builds in opportunities for students to assess and review their own progress. Students like this active involvement. They collaborate sensibly on group tasks and readily support one another. Observations undertaken jointly on the inspection confirm that some teaching is good or outstanding, notably in physical education and dance, but that much requires improvement. The school recognises that improvements in teaching are not ubiquitous and that weaknesses persist. Students make slow or uneven progress when planning is unambitious and when learning activities encourage passivity rather than active engagement. Occasionally, even when planned outcomes are suitably ambitious, too little is demanded of the students themselves.

There have been notable improvements in marking and in the use of assessment, with some exemplary practice in some lessons. There is now an expectation that students will revisit their marked work and make specific corrections so that they 'close the gap' in their learning. This, however, is inconsistent. Marking has little impact when teachers' comments are cursory, unhelpful or illegible.

Agreed systems for behaviour management are clear and understood. Students say that behaviour has improved. Although there is inconsistency in the way that teachers implement the 'consequences', there has been a reduction in recorded incidents of unacceptable behaviour. Improvements in teaching have strengthened students' attitudes to learning, although occasionally students are not managed well enough and the recalcitrance of individual students is not effectively challenged.

Systematic and robust procedures for monitoring teaching and managing performance have been rapidly implemented. This more-rigorous self-scrutiny has highlighted weaknesses in teaching and shortcomings in leadership and management. These have required fundamental changes in the day-to-day running of the school, in addition to more tightly focused development planning. Clarifying the responsibilities of senior and middle leaders and establishing clear lines of accountability have been central to this metamorphosis. Middle leaders are beginning to understand their strategic role in implementing and guiding improvement, and the importance of reliable data, but self-evaluation at this level is not robust.

The school's leadership, including governance, has been transformed since the last inspection. The leadership team has acted decisively in making necessary changes and steering improvements. The acting headteacher's drive, energy and affability inspire commitment from staff and students. Higher expectations about students' conduct, for example, have had an immediate impact on their punctuality, appearance and behaviour in lessons. The vertical tutor system has been replaced with year groups, so that tutor time can be more constructively used. Longer-term strategies to raise achievement, for example by reviewing early-entry options, will take time to produce results, but necessary changes have already been set in motion. Although not universally popular with staff and students, these changes have raised expectations about what students can achieve and engender confidence in the school's improvement.

Governance has been overhauled. New systems and structures have been developed so that roles are delegated, first-hand information can be gathered more comprehensively and the governing body is able to both support and hold the school to account. The governing body is kept well informed by senior leaders and by the action group which is responsible for steering the school's recovery.

The local authority statement of action is fit for purpose and sets out a clear programme of suitable support. It is well structured and soundly based on rigorous success criteria and key milestones for improvement. Although there have been unforeseen delays, for example in providing planned support for English, the support and guidance provided by the local authority has been of high quality. The personnel brought in to strengthen leadership and management have made much needed changes to the school's systems so that improvements are sustainable.

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

Paul Brooker
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection which took place in February 2012

- Raise attainment and improve students' progress urgently, especially that of boys, in English and mathematics by:
 - rapidly developing their literacy and numeracy skills as soon as they enter the school
 - supporting and developing literacy and numeracy skills in all subjects, including through the marking of students' work.

- Improve the quality of teaching so that at least 80% is good or better by ensuring that all teachers:
 - match work closely to students' differing abilities
 - use questions effectively to check students' understanding and develop their thinking
 - make clear exactly how students can improve their work by challenging them to demonstrate that they understand teachers' comments.

- Improve students' behaviour and attitudes to learning by:
 - ensuring that teaching engages students' interest and motivates them
 - making the expectations of students' behaviour simple and clear
 - ensuring that all teachers use the agreed procedures for managing behaviour consistently.

- Improve leadership and management by ensuring that action plans are tightly focused and implemented promptly and consistently across the school.