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Mr B Cooper
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Cooper

Implementation of Nether Stowe High School's Action Plan

Following the visit of Sue Morris-King HMI, Andrew Harrett HMI, and Jane Austin HMI to your school on 11 and 12 May 2005, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector to confirm the inspection findings which are recorded in the attached note.

The visit was the third monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures. The focus of the inspection was to assess: the pupils' standards of attainment and their progress; the quality of education provided; the leadership and management of the school; the pupils' attitudes and behaviour; and the progress that has been made in implementing the action plan.

The school has made good progress since the last monitoring inspection and good progress overall since being subject to special measures.

I am copying this letter and the note of the inspection findings to the Secretary of State, the chair of governors and the Director of Education for Staffordshire. This letter will be posted on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Andrew Reid
Head of Institutional Inspections and Frameworks Division

IMPLEMENTATION OF NETHER STOWE HIGH SCHOOL'S ACTION PLAN

Findings of the third monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures

During the visit 35 lessons or parts of lessons and six registration sessions were inspected. Meetings were held with the headteacher, the chair of governors, the LEA's district inspector, and several members of the senior leadership team. Informal discussions were held with other members of staff and with pupils, and samples of work were examined. A range of documents was scrutinised. Using this evidence, HMI made the following observations to the headteacher, a deputy headteacher, the chair of the governing body, and a representative from the LEA.

The proportion of good or better teaching has significantly increased since the previous monitoring inspection. The quality of teaching was satisfactory or better in 32 of the 35 lessons seen; it was good or better in 20 lessons. The quality of the pupils' learning was closely related to the quality of teaching. Consistently good teaching and learning were seen in geography, modern foreign languages and design technology. The most effective teaching made skilful use of questioning to deepen and extend the pupils' responses, broadening their knowledge and consistently testing their understanding. Learning objectives were clearly stated and were matched by a suitable range of activities which motivated and absorbed the pupils. The pupils worked well in pairs and groups, collaborating effectively. When they were given the opportunity to take responsibility for their own learning, or to share their knowledge and skills with other pupils, they responded well and made rapid progress. Assessment was built into the lessons and the pupils were encouraged to judge their own learning. Peer and self assessment were used to good effect. The pupils had a sound understanding of their present level of achievement and what they should do to improve.

In the less successful lessons, the teachers tended to dominate proceedings so that the pupils became passive observers of the teaching rather than active participants in their learning. A common shortcoming was that plenaries were rushed or omitted; consequently, the pupils did not have the opportunity to reflect on their learning. In some lessons, differentiation was inadequate, which prevented the least able from learning at a satisfactory rate and hindered the progress of the more able.

The senior leadership's monitoring of the quality of teaching and learning has provided a detailed and accurate analysis of the strengths and areas for development in subjects across the school. This has had a significant impact on the quality of provision. The school is now well placed to focus observations on particular parts of lessons and to refine further the support which is offered to individual teachers. However, the introduction of a new lesson-planning format has been inconsistent. Many of the teachers are not using the revised format and this is hindering the rate of improvement; where timings were used and the planning focused on learning rather than activities, the quality of teaching and learning was noticeably better. There has also been limited progress in establishing

common expectations for the marking of pupils' work, which remains patchy and inconsistent within and across subjects.

There has been a substantial improvement in the pupils' attitudes to learning and their behaviour since the previous monitoring inspection. The pupils' attitudes and behaviour were satisfactory or better in 33 out of 35 lessons, including 23 in which they were good or better. There was a marked difference in the attitudes of many of the pupils to their learning. Many of the pupils were more motivated; they were very keen to work and to progress. They were glad to discuss their achievements with visitors and showed a good level of awareness of what they had done well and what they needed to do to improve. Almost all of the pupils treated the staff and each other with respect. In a very few cases the pupils tried to distract each other or the teacher from the lesson by attention-seeking. The positive but assertive manner of many of the teachers effectively promoted good behaviour.

The pupils' behaviour around the school has improved. They generally showed a good level of awareness of each other and of adults as they moved around the often-cramped corridors. The staff were vigilant and encouraged the pupils to move quickly to their lessons.

Attendance for the autumn and spring terms 2004-5 was 93.4 per cent. This figure is well above the national average for secondary schools. Unauthorised absence for this period was 0.42 per cent, which is below the national average.

There were 65 fixed-term exclusions in the spring term 2005. This is a similar figure to the autumn term 2004. Over half of the pupils who were excluded in the spring term were in Year 11; some of these pupils have been excluded more than once. No Year 7 pupil was excluded; very few of the pupils in Year 8 to 10 were excluded more than once in the spring term. The school expects to be able to reduce the rate of fixed-term exclusions in the autumn term 2005.

The headteacher is providing the school with good leadership. His drive, commitment and energy have enthused and reinvigorated the senior staff. He has build a cohesive and focused senior team, who understand their pivotal roles in the school's continued improvement and are working effectively to fulfil them. He has high expectations of the senior team, and has implemented an improved system of accountability. This has had a clear impact the quality of the provision. The headteacher has given careful thought to building capacity within the school and has taken a series of appropriate actions to do so. Sensibly, he has begun an improvement planning process which involves the staff, the governors and the pupils in preparation for the next academic year. He remains clearly focused on the need to develop further the leadership roles of the middle managers. The programme of monitoring and evaluation is rigorous.

The governing body is providing the headteacher with a good level of support, coupled with appropriate challenge. The chair of the governing body is committed to his role and provides good leadership. The headteacher appreciates the challenge and support which the chair provides. A very comprehensive induction pack for governors gives new governors a wealth of useful information about their

role. Sensibly, the governing body has decided to provide new governors with a mentor for their first term in post. A continuing training programme has given the governors a valuable opportunity to redefine their roles and to become fully involved in the school's improvement planning. Importantly, committees request regular reports from senior leaders which form the basis for discussion.

The LEA continues to provide a good range of well-targeted support. They are supporting the headteacher with a range of personnel issues. The school's district inspector has a very clear understanding of the school's strengths and its needs. Importantly, he has attended several senior leadership team meetings to observe their effectiveness, and has met individually with members of the senior team. He continues to provide valuable support and advice to the headteacher. Sensibly, however, he has begun to decrease the amount of time he commits to the school as their need for intensive support decreases. The school values the support which has been provided by the Key Stage 3 consultants and the pupil support service; this has helped the school to address a range of issues. The LEA consultants provide clear records of the actions they have taken. The district inspector has a good overview of the work of these LEA staff.

Some progress has been made with improving aspects of the school's accommodation. Although the temporary classroom which has been declared unfit for use remains on site, the LEA has given the headteacher written assurance that this will be removed during the summer holiday period. Sensibly, the LEA has worked with the school to form some initial plans to extend the dining facilities, but the financing of this development remains unresolved.

Action taken to address the areas for improvement

1: provide training and support for teachers in dealing with behaviour and poor attitudes

The training and support provided by the school has had a clear impact on improving the pupils' behaviour and increasing the staff's capacity to manage behaviour well. The school has worked hard to create a positive ethos, with good effect. Year 9 pupils recently completed a well-designed survey of their perceptions of the effects of behaviour on learning. A good analysis of the results gives the staff thoughtful suggestions for improvement. Crucially, the pupils are involved in drawing up an action plan to address the issues which they have identified. The school intends to repeat this valuable process with other year groups. A group of pupils is involved in rewriting the school's anti-bullying policy.

The school uses a range of appropriate strategies to reward the pupils' good achievement and behaviour. Some departments have introduced their own additions to the system. Sensibly, the school has decided to review its rewards system to create greater coherence. The introduction of enrichment days is a positive development to which the pupils are responding well.

The tracking of individual pupils' behaviour and the co-ordination of referrals from staff has improved. Moreover, the increased focus on the use of data to track the

pupils' achievement is helping the middle and senior managers to shift the emphasis from behaviour to learning and from negative to positive intervention. Support for departments and for individual staff on this issue both from the school and from the LEA consultants is well-targeted, with a clear purpose.

Progress is good.

2: raise staff morale by ensuring all senior staff provide good role models in their work and provide better guidance and support for teachers

The senior staff are having a clear impact on improvement. They are well-focused and dedicated. The headteacher expects the senior team to be accountable; this provides a good role model to the rest of the staff. The level of guidance and support given to the teachers is good. The senior team have a well-developed view of the staff's strengths and weaknesses. Suitably robust action is taken to support or to challenge when necessary.

Progress is good.

3: ensure that policies are implemented consistently

There is a common understanding of what constitutes good teaching in the school and procedures for addressing behaviour are consistently applied. This clarity of purpose and sense of collective responsibility have been significant factors in improving the quality of provision in the school. Nevertheless, inconsistencies persist in the implementation of some policies, not all of which are fully in place. As noted above, marking is still a cause for concern and the policy for assessment, recording and reporting does not establish the school's rationale, expectations or procedures.

Progress is reasonable.

4: take greater note of trends in data and act on them more quickly to restore a satisfactory ethos for learning

The suitable system for measuring the pupils' progress, described in the previous monitoring letter, is enabling the school to track changes in attainment and progress for individual pupils, as well by year group, key stage and gender. The information is summarised for the staff in a suitable form and the pupils know their targets for each subject. Sensibly, new data handling systems are planned for the next academic year to increase the speed and sophistication with which assessment information can be processed, and improve the ease of access to it for the staff.

Considerable levels of underachievement have been identified. These result at least in part from deficits in previous learning. Across the school, approximately half of the pupils are performing below their target levels; the performance of Year 8 is of particular concern. With the exception of Key Stage 5, girls outperform boys. The school has appropriate procedures in place to respond to the trends in data. The senior team considers these, alongside a range of additional factors such as levels of attendance, in

deciding which pupils would benefit most from focused assistance to improve their progress. The support is tailored appropriately in type and intensity to the needs of the individual. For example, a number of Year 11 pupils have responded well to mentoring as they prepare for GCSE examinations. Helpfully, a single member of staff becomes the point of contact for such pupils and the situation is kept under regular review. Subject departments have begun to evaluate their provision in the light of trends in the pupils' progress towards their targets. The variations in the quality of learning across the school, particularly in respect of the match of work to the needs of pupils, indicate that the impact of this is inconsistent. A well considered programme of joint working for heads of department is providing the context for professional dialogue and support as this new approach to accountability is implemented.

The school has identified that approximately a third of the pupils are exceeding their targets. Although these higher attaining pupils receive recognition of their achievements, for example through praise postcards, there is not a coherent approach to meeting their needs. However, there are sound plans to introduce accelerated groups, initially in Year 7, in the next academic year. The pupils in these classes will complete the Key Stage 3 programmes of study in two years.

The school is developing a well structured approach to collecting, evaluating and responding to the data on the pupils' progress. However, it is too soon to judge the impact of this on attainment.

Progress is reasonable.

5: improve the teaching of business studies in the sixth form

This key issue has been addressed and is no longer inspected.

6: ensure statutory requirements are met

Progress was not evaluated during this visit.