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Mrs Vicky Beer and Mr Tarun Kapur
Headteachers
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Dear Mrs Beer and Mr Kapur

Ofsted survey inspection programme – Curriculum Innovation

Thank you for your assistance and hospitality, and that of your staff, during my visit on 23-24 May 2007. At the end of the visit I fed back my conclusions and this letter confirms those findings.

The visit provided valuable information which will contribute to our national evaluation and reporting. Published reports are likely to list the names of the contributing institutions, but individual institutions will not be identified in the main text. All feedback letters are published on the Ofsted website at the end of each half-term.

The evidence used to inform the judgements made included: interviews with staff and students; scrutiny of relevant documentation; analysis of students' work and visits to some lessons; seeing the school at work.

Context and background

Ashton-on-Mersey School has a strong tradition of curriculum innovation. Over the years, the school has developed a very broad and flexible Key Stage 4 curriculum, with an extensive range of vocational and applied courses. It also does much innovative work as a sports college. The school is currently in the process of changing its approach to the Key Stage 3 curriculum. In 2006, students took the national tests in mathematics in Year 8 rather than in Year 9. This was extended to English in 2007 and, from 2008, students will complete the national tests in all subjects at the end of Year 8. Students also have a number of opportunities to take GCSE and other examinations during Key Stage 3 or in Year 10. For example, a significant proportion of students take a GCSE in a modern foreign language at the end of Year 9. Additionally, the school has formed a 'transition group' in Year 7 for a small number of students likely to find the move to secondary school difficult. These students

are taught together, with a curriculum and approach to teaching and learning that combines aspects of primary and secondary provision.

The school is currently part of a federation with another local school. The previous headteacher of Ashton-on-Mersey is now the Executive Headteacher of both schools.

Achievement and standards and personal development

Students enter the school with standards that are in line with the national average. They make considerable progress during their time in school and leave having attained standards that are above the national average. This progress is rather uneven across the key stages, with students generally making greater progress at Key Stage 4. The changes made to the Key Stage 4 curriculum have already had a significant impact on students' achievement. As the changes to the Key Stage 3 curriculum are more recent, it is too early to assess their impact.

The school's highly innovative curriculum makes a strong contribution to students' personal development. As it meets their needs so well, all students are able to enjoy learning and to achieve well. Behaviour around the school and in lessons is excellent and students are very positive about school. Students appreciate the opportunities that the school provides for them to learn in a variety of ways, with a wide range of vocational courses and options. In some cases, these opportunities begin before Key Stage 4. For example, a group of students has responded very positively to the opportunity to begin studying Construction in Year 9.

Students understand the rationale behind the school's approach to the curriculum and the recent changes that have been made at Key Stage 3. While they recognise the extra challenge that taking national tests in Year 8 brings, they are very positive about it and understand the advantages. Students also value the opportunity to gain qualifications in Years 9 and 10; many feel that this reduces the pressure on them at the end of Year 11. The 'transition group' curriculum in Year 7 helps the more vulnerable students make a more successful move into secondary education. This is having a positive impact on their behaviour and attitudes to school.

Teaching and learning and the curriculum

The school's innovative approach to the curriculum over the past few years has produced a curriculum structure that meets students' needs very well. The diverse range of options at Key Stage 4 ensures that every student is able to select a curriculum pattern that meets their needs. The school's approach to the curriculum at Key Stage 3 provides a significant amount of time for the study of other subjects in Year 9. The school has planned very well for this and the time is being used to enable students to accumulate a range of other qualifications. The flexibility of the Key Stage 4 curriculum

inevitably places some constraints on the timetable at Key Stage 3. The school is aware of this and manages the problems well to minimise their impact on students.

The teaching and learning observed during the inspection was all at least good. Lessons are typically very well planned and organised, with excellent student behaviour and attitudes to learning. Part of the rationale for moving the national Key Stage 3 tests to Year 8 was to increase the pace and challenge for students in Year 7 and 8 lessons. There is evidence that this approach is already having a positive impact. Year 7 and 8 lessons observed during the inspection were very purposeful, with a clear focus on the requirements of the national tests. Lessons observed in vocational subjects were also well taught.

Leadership and management of the curriculum

There is a strong, clear overarching vision for the development of the curriculum. Any changes are well thought out and planned, and are based on the school's thorough understanding of the needs and aspirations of its students. There is very clear monitoring of the gains produced by particular changes to the Key Stage 4 curriculum.

You have successfully developed an environment that encourages staff to take well considered risks to develop provision further. As a result, staff across the school have a very positive and open approach to curriculum innovation and change. The school is currently undergoing an immense amount of curriculum development. However, it has strong, effective structures in place to support the development of staff and leaders at all levels in the school. This ensures that they have the ability to manage this level of innovation successfully.

Inclusion

The school's innovative curriculum structure makes a strong contribution to inclusion. The diversity of the curriculum helps ensure that all students are able to follow a programme that suits their individual needs and interests.

Overall

Strengths:

- There is a clear rationale for the school's approach to curriculum innovation.
- Curriculum innovation is well planned and is responsive to the needs of students.
- A very wide range of courses and subjects is available.
- Students understand the reasons for the school's curriculum structure and the advantages that it brings.

- Students are able to build up a range of qualifications as they move through the school.
- There is a strong willingness and capacity amongst staff to innovate further.

Issues for consideration:

- There is a need to monitor the impact of recent curriculum changes on student achievement at Key Stage 3.

I do hope you find these comments useful. I look forward to being updated about current developments as you continue with your curriculum innovation.

Yours sincerely

Christopher Russell
Her Majesty's Inspector of Schools