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Mrs Carol Ketley  
The Headteacher  
Northwood School  
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Dear Mrs Ketley

Ofsted monitoring of schools with a notice to improve

Thank you for the help which you and your staff gave when I inspected your school on 8 November 2007, for the time you gave to our phone discussions and for the information which you provided before and during my visit. Please pass on my thanks to members of the senior leadership team, the chair of governors and others who spoke with me during the day.

This letter will be posted on the Ofsted website. Please inform the Regional Inspection Service Provider of any factual inaccuracies within 24 hours of the receipt of this letter.

As a result of the inspection in March 2007, the school was asked to make improvements in three key areas. These were to: improve achievement in English, mathematics and science, especially in Years 7 to 9; improve attendance; and improve teaching and learning so that a greater proportion of lessons is good or better.

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 pupils' achievement.

The school has taken robust action to strengthen procedures for assessing attainment and tracking the progress of individual pupils and year groups. The setting of targets and predictions of future performance are more secure, because they are based more firmly on an accurate assessment of pupils' current performance. Accountability for performance has been devolved to middle managers, and the Year Learning Coordinators are developing an in-depth knowledge of the progress of every pupil and the factors that affect their learning. This means that interventions to speed up progress are better focused and more rigorously monitored. The detail of the information collected is impressive and exemplifies the close attention that the school is paying to improving the progress of each pupil.

Since the school was last inspected, the results of national tests and examinations taken in the summer term have become available. There were good improvements in English at Key Stage 3. The proportion of pupils reaching the level expected for their age was almost double that of the previous year, reversing the decline. Results in mathematics and science were also significantly higher than in 2006. The results were close to the national averages. The local authority's calculations show that the value added by the school was broadly average, confirming an upward trend over the past three years. GCSE results also improved, but were below the national average. Performance in some subjects was very good, in particular in art and design, theatre studies and business studies. However, the proportion of pupils gaining 5 good passes including English and mathematics fell far short of the school's target. The school is rightly focussing on bringing about rapid improvements in the core subjects of English, mathematics and science.

The school is not yet in a position to show that better use of the assessment information in lessons is leading to accelerated progress but, as noted above, the systems and structures are securely in place to make this happen. Teachers increasingly draw pupils' attention to National Curriculum levels or GCSE grades in lessons, to help them judge the level they are working at and to show them what they need to do to improve. Improved progress depends a good deal on better teaching and much work is being done in this regard. The recently appointed head of science pointed out that, in the past, too much attention was paid to what the pupils were going to do in lessons, rather than what they would learn. This is beginning to change and teachers' plans show that they give thought to what pupils should know by the end of a lesson. However, their skill in disentangling learning from activities is variable.

Much effort has gone into helping teachers who had been observed teaching inadequate lessons to improve their performance, to good effect. Some teachers have been helped to tackle areas of weakness so that their teaching is now satisfactory, others have left the school. The school judges that the proportion of good or better teaching is growing and the emphasis is shifting towards making satisfactory teaching good; as the staff development coordinator rightly said, 'satisfactory teaching is not enough'. There is a rigorous programme of monitoring, underpinned by support and training.

The school's strenuous efforts to improve attendance have met with a good degree of success. A full-time attendance liaison officer works with the assistant headteacher and they have set about strengthening the school's procedures with great determination. There are numerous rewards for good attendance and the school has not shied away from taking strong action against families of persistent poor attenders. The links between attendance, attainment and progress are regularly pointed out to parents. Better teaching means that fewer pupils choose to miss particular lessons during the day. Attendance figures for the summer term and for the first half of this term were significantly higher than corresponding periods last year.

The school has recently appointed an assistant head to lead on the school's specialisms of business and enterprise. He has a clear vision of how to build on the

obvious strengths and to take work forward in order to increase pupils' success both academically and in their personal development.

One of the main reasons that the school is moving securely forward is that the senior leadership team is now well established and is taking a strong lead in driving improvements. The senior leaders are setting a clear direction and are firmly committed to ensuring that the pupils do as well as they should in their time at Northwood. They are making sure that accountability for the pupils' progress is shared by everyone at whatever level in the school.

Another reason for the improvements is that the support provided by the local authority has been focused on areas where it is most needed. The school particularly values the work that has taken place in English, and it is here that a significant impact has been seen.

I hope that you have found the visit helpful in promoting improvement in your school.

Yours sincerely

Linda McGill  
Her Majesty's Inspector