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Mrs J Herriman  
The Headteacher  
The Duston School  
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Dear Mrs Herriman

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 29 November 2007, for the time you gave to the day's programme, and for the information which you provided before and during my visit. The programme included observations of the school's work, including four part lessons, scrutiny of documents, and meetings with nominated staff, a group of students, the chair of the Interim Executive Board (IEB), the School Improvement Partner (SIP) and a representative from the local authority (LA).

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 on 21 and 22 March 2007, the school was asked to:

- raise the proportion and consistency of good teaching to ensure that all students are able to reach their potential
- refine the way the students' progress is tracked in order to identify accurately where underachievement persists and take suitable action
- improve governance so that there is a balance of support and challenge to the school.

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 students' achievement.

The new school buildings were completed for the start of this academic year and, although work continues on the outdoor facilities, they have transformed the learning environment. The accommodation has enabled the school to further embed its strategies for improving students' attitudes and behaviour. There is, consequently, a calm and orderly climate in lessons and around the building. Staff follow agreed routines and encourage students to take responsibility for their learning. The move

into the new school was very well managed, but has absorbed considerable staff time and energy. Nonetheless, the school has continued to work hard to address the areas for improvement and also plan developments across a wider front in order to strengthen provision and the outcomes for students. Attendance, although still below the national figure, is continuing to improve.

The school has made good progress in developing systems for assessing and monitoring students' progress, based on a rigorous tracking system. All subjects use a detailed points score to assess and record students' performance at the end of each term. The data is used by curriculum and pastoral leaders to quickly identify subjects, groups or individuals whose progress has dipped. Information is shared effectively with students and with parents. The students themselves understand the fine gradings and are motivated by the regular feedback that it provides on their performance and progress. At present, it is too early to evaluate fully the impact of the new system, but it is already adding rigour to the school's self-evaluation and the way that it uses targets to raise achievement.

The school has continued to work hard to strengthen the quality of teaching and has made satisfactory progress on this key issue. Common routines for planning and behaviour management ensure that learning is well directed and purposeful. All staff contribute to the tracking system and have access to the assessment data. In the most effective lessons, teachers use this information effectively to plan work with suitable levels of challenge for different abilities within the group and to guide the students in their work. However, there remains some inconsistency in the way that the information is used to plan lessons, to set short term targets and to guide improvement through marking. Teachers all opt into regular professional development sessions that are tailored to meet different needs, and each has an individualised programme of development, based on personalised 'coaching plans'. The school recognises that a small proportion of teaching remains unsatisfactory and targets support for individual staff. The school's systematic programme of monitoring indicates that teaching has improved since last year.

The school has made very good progress on improving governance. The IEB, that replaced the governing body in April 2007, has provided a significantly higher level of challenge and support and has skilfully established a good working relationship as the school's critical friend. This improved partnership working has given the headteacher and senior leaders confidence in their own strategic leadership and has also provided an additional pool of expertise on which the school can draw. Good guidance has been provided across a range of issues, including student tracking and the curriculum. The IEB has prioritised its work sensibly and set out a clear way of working through a series of task groups. Suitable plans are in place for the establishment of a shadow governing body from Easter 2008 so that effective governance can be established in due course.


Results in the most recent national tests and examinations in 2007 indicate that standards are rising overall. However, the GCSE results indicated that too many Year 11 students underachieved. The school is aware that standards are not as high as

they should be and recognises the need to secure a higher proportion of good and outstanding teaching in order to accelerate the students' progress.

The Duston School had been in an Ofsted category for over six years and, during that time, the LA has invested considerable resources in its support. The school welcomes the advice and guidance that has had a measurable impact on the quality of teaching and student achievement, but is critical of the speed and effectiveness of some support. The implementation of the IEB and the additional support from the school SIP have been particularly positive developments. Nonetheless, relationships between the school and LA reflect an unhelpful mistrust. Since the last inspection LA support has been satisfactory.

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

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "P. Brooker".

Paul Brooker  
Her Majesty's Inspector