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Mrs F Ashton
Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Ashton

Ofsted monitoring of schools with a notice to improve

Thank you for the help which you, your staff, students and governors gave when I inspected your college on 28 November 2007, for the time you gave to our phone discussions and for the information you provided before and during my visit.

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 college was asked to improve:

- standards and students' achievement in Years 10 and 11
- performance in science
- the consistency of teaching so that students' learning improves
- communication with parents.

Having considered all the evidence I am of the opinion that at this time the college is making satisfactory progress in addressing the issues for improvement and in raising students' achievement.

In 2007 the college's provisional results at GCSE improved in all measures. In particular the proportion achieving five or more higher grade passes increased substantially, though did not meet the target set. However, in relation to their broadly average standards when they entered Year 7, students by the end of Year 11 made inadequate achievement, although this was better than in 2006. Too many students did not reach their targets. This was due partly to support previously being focused upon those students in danger of not achieving a grade C, especially in English and mathematics. However, this targeted support was reflected in the much-increased proportion of students gaining five or more higher grade GCSEs, including English and mathematics.

The college sees raising achievement as a key priority. Actions taken have included improving the monitoring and reporting of students' progress. Academic mentoring has improved, helping students to focus on raising their standards. The college has also improved its systems for identifying those students underachieving and for finding appropriate strategies for improvement. Governors, through their improvement group, have established closer links with faculty leaders to support improvement and challenge underachievement.

In recent years, changes in science staff, often due to promotions to other schools, have meant this specialist subject has not developed sufficiently. Science is still not pivotal in driving up standards and is not yet recognised as a leading subject in the college. In 2007 achievement in science at Key Stage 3 dipped and standards did not improve at Key Stage 4. The specialist subject targets have not been met in science in recent years, though in 2007 the targets in mathematics and information and communication technology (ICT) were exceeded. The college's data indicates that targets should be met in 2008.

The college has made a fresh start with the science specialism. It has created a more visible science identity through improved displays and a wide range of enrichment activities. It has also started working closely with two other science colleges to share their good practice. An improved science and ICT curriculum is now in place at Key Stage 4. Instead of having three separate teachers for chemistry, physics and biology, students are now taught all their science by one teacher. This is intended to increase teachers' accountability for students' progress. However, not all students are happy with this arrangement. This is especially so when they see weaknesses in the teaching they receive in comparison to that of their peers. A minority perceive their science lessons to be dominated by too much talk by the teacher and excessive copying from textbooks. Leaders are aware that investigative work in science remains an area for improvement.

Mechanisms for identifying and tackling weaker teaching and helping teachers to improve are in place. However, only recently have middle leaders begun to be involved in monitoring the quality of teaching and learning in their subject area. The college realises this is a crucial area to develop in order for learning to improve. Staff have opportunities to visit other lessons in order to share good practice and identify inconsistencies. However, there is still some way to go to reduce the differences students experience across their lessons. Inconsistencies are seen in the type of marking and feedback students receive about their work, and in how students' learning needs are met. Teachers are provided with data showing the students' current standards and potential capabilities. This is not used effectively in some teachers' planning, which generally lacks sufficient detail. As a result, the level of challenge some students receive is not always well matched to their needs.

The college has worked hard to improve communication with parents and carers. It has recently redesigned and relaunched the college website to keep parents better informed of developments, such as how it is progressing since the last inspection. The college makes much use of electronic communications, such as email and text messaging, to alert parents to information concerning their child, for example when a student is absent or when homework is missed. Students are acutely aware of the

impact of this instant communication. Reporting to parents on how well their child is doing has also improved and now takes place three times a year. A communication group initiated by governors has further enhanced links with parents. However, the college is aware that a few parents still feel they do not get a quick enough response when trying to contact teachers. Leaders are now looking to improve upon this.

Tameside local authority has contributed well to the progress made since the last inspection by providing a good level of support. For example, there has been bespoke support to improve the consistency of teaching and learning in an effort to raise students' achievement.

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

Yours sincerely

Mark Wilson
Additional Inspector