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8 February 2008

Mr John Graham
West Cumbria Learning Centre
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Graham

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 7 February 2008, for the time you gave to our phone discussions and for the information which you provided before and during my visit. I am grateful to you for arranging for me to visit for a short time on the afternoon of 4 February, in lieu of time on 7 February, in order to see Key Stage 4 pupils. Please convey my thanks to the chair of the management committee and Cumbria local authority staff for the assistance they gave

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 May 2007, the school was asked to:

- ensure there is a motivating curriculum and challenging external accreditation for pupils at Key Stage 4
- improve the pupils' personal development to ensure all have positive attitudes and behave well
- further increase the contribution of staff to the leadership of the centre.

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 pupils' achievement.

Four learning opportunities were observed with Key Stage 4 pupils, including well coached impromptu football at break. All these were at least satisfactory, two were good. Overall, a dozen learning situations were observed, all were at least satisfactory and a third were good. Key Stage 4 pupils are well motivated by weekly

outdoor activities, such as gill scrambling; they talk with enthusiasm of their exploits. A number of off-site activities with alternative providers – involving building skills, for instance – are well conceived. In the best lessons pupils in all key stages were attentive, showing pride in their work and giving it their best efforts. Weaker lessons were not demanding enough for the most able or more co-operative, and teachers hesitated to insist on brisk pace and accuracy. Occasionally, distracting behaviour limited progress. Teaching assistants know pupils well and anticipate their needs for support, encouragement and comforting; they are a great asset. Lesson plans are generally good; the best show how pupils will be engaged and motivated – for instance, by using a video of 1930s Germany or sudoku challenges.

Imaginative contexts are used to engage Year 11 pupils in their life skills audits that have ASDAN accreditation. Basic literacy and numeracy are being accredited (adult Entry Level to Level 2), and there are several lesser known accreditations for general life skills. However, for a few pupils in Year 10 or Year 9, more ambitious and more prestigious awards such as GCSE mathematics and English would be appropriate. Pursuit of the Duke of Edinburgh's Bronze Award has been allowed to lapse because the school has not been sufficiently creative in using existing opportunities to meet the award criteria. The school has not had a permanent science specialist teacher for some time, so headway in that subject is limited.

New pupils have increasingly challenging behaviour. Records of incidents show that this has continued since the last inspection. However, most pupils are happy and co-operative most of the time. Senior and established staff are perceptive in sensing the needs of disturbed pupils; their behaviour management is good. Attendance is a major problem: half the pupils attend less than half the time; a third less than a third of the time. There are some sensible attendance strategies – for instance a volatile pupil is currently on a successful 0.3 attendance programme which is being increased gradually. Procedures to chase-up non-attenders have been firm. However, the present educational welfare officer is new to the school and has not yet been able to make an impact. The school and the local authority have not been vigorous enough in experimenting with stronger rewards and more varied curricular alternatives to reduce this serious barrier to learning.

The school has a range of part-time arrangements with mainstream schools and these are very successful with younger pupils, usually leading to re-integration. Flexible arrangements mitigate attendance problems; the weakest attenders are those permanently excluded from secondary schools. All those with responsibility for the management of this school are keen to strengthen links with schools in the wider area and foster greater community reciprocity in providing for vulnerable pupils in north-west Cumbria. The school looks for headway on this with the restructuring of representation on the management committee.

Occasionally, pupils admitted have very disturbed and disruptive behaviour that calls for urgent assessment of their needs and for the arrangement of the best possible provision. Though procedures are put in hand within statutory timescales, those with responsibility for action do not always push vigorously enough in making the case and expediting timescales when common sense directs that need is desperate.

Leadership and management continue to be satisfactory. Progress has been made in clarifying job descriptions and expectations of staff. A benefit has been the improvement in lesson planning. Senior staff are very effective in encouraging the team and setting the right tone with pupils. However, there are fundamental staffing difficulties. There are several temporary teaching appointments. Some performance review issues need to be addressed with more vigour and urgency. Established staff have ample opportunity to have a say in how things are done but formal devolution of leadership is not realistic in the present circumstances. Though in many ways the school is well run, some necessary and agreed action points concerning leadership and management are not always implemented with sufficient alacrity and determination.

The local authority's statement of action, as amended after comment by Ofsted, has led to well focused and helpful advice, monitoring and intervention. The school values the continuing support it receives from the authority. The school has been encouraged by the support of the management committee.

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

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "J Bennetts". The signature is written in a cursive style with a horizontal line underlining the name.

Jim Bennetts
Additional Inspector