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Mr Stephen Liddle
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Liddle

Ofsted monitoring of schools with a Notice to Improve

Thank you for the help which you and your staff gave when I inspected your college on 23 January 2008, for the time you gave to our phone discussions and for the information which you provided before and during my visit. Please also give my thanks to the chair of governors and the students.

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 college was asked to:

- Improve the achievement of all students in order to raise standards
- Increase the proportion of good teaching and eliminate any that is inadequate
- Improve the attendance of all learners, particularly in Years 10 and 11.

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.

At Key Stage 4, the college's GCSE results in 2007 improved in all measures when compared to 2006. - notably in the number of students achieving five or more A* to C grades, including English and mathematics and the percentage gaining at least one GCSE pass grade. Results in English literature continue to exceed national average figures. At Key Stage 3, however, national test results in 2007 were disappointing. The percentage of students attaining both expected and higher levels in English, mathematics and science declined. Standards remain low in both key stages.

However, evidence seen during the monitoring visit, including lesson visits and tracking information, indicates that the college is now making satisfactory progress in tackling underperformance in Key Stage 3. Internal assessments are more secure and are regularly reviewed by senior and middle leaders. The college is fully aware that progress between Years 7 and 9, in particular, requires rapid improvement and it is working hard to address this key issue.

Senior leaders are fully focused on improving teaching and learning. A current rigorous programme of lesson monitoring indicates that the quality of lessons is rising, with the majority good or better. The local authority has worked with senior and middle leaders and also individual teachers to develop and enhance classroom practice. Staff training has a strong focus on developing and sharing good practice and the teacher effectiveness enhancement programme (TEEP) has been successfully implemented in the college.

Senior leaders have a secure understanding of what constitutes good practice. The college's internal system, together with external reports, indicates that strategies to reduce the number of inadequate lessons are succeeding. There are effective procedures for identifying unsatisfactory teaching and individual support plans help to improve practice. The college knows that there is not yet enough good or better teaching and is actively working to raise the quality of teaching in those lessons which are satisfactory.

During the monitoring visit, the majority of lessons seen were good with no inadequate teaching observed. In the best lessons, skilled questioning and high teacher expectations ensured a vitality about learning which engaged all students. Students made less progress in those lessons that lacked challenge and where students remained passive learners.

Generally, assessment information is used well to plan lessons and there is good consolidation of learning at the end of the lesson. Students are set and are aware of their targets in most subjects. They report that they generally enjoy lessons, particularly when they are fully involved in the learning process.

The college is using an array of strategies, including rewards and targets, to improve levels of attendance. This work is being led by a member of the senior leadership team, supported by key personnel. There are indications of some success, particularly for those students with a record of persistent absence.

Overall, there has been a reduction in the authorised absence figures in all year groups, with the exception of Year 10, and attendance in Year 7 at the end of the autumn term was above the overall national average figure. Through focused provision and support, namely the 'house', significant improvements are also evident for the majority of students with a track record of poor attendance, particularly in Years 10 and 11. Nevertheless, the college's attendance figure remains well below the national average, and in Years 9, 10 and 11, attendance has not improved when compared to a similar point last year. The college recognises that this continues to undermine its ability to raise standards. Progress in addressing this area for improvement is unsatisfactory.

The local authority has given appropriate levels of support, advice and challenge to the college. Milestones and challenging targets for progress are now in place, and help from consultants is responsive to particular needs within the college. Robust evaluation reports provided by the school improvement partner are helping the college to keep its progress under review and move forward on the basis of clear recommendations for further action. Good relationships exist between the college and the local authority and the college values its support.

The headteacher and the senior leadership team have a determined and committed approach to raising standards. They recognise the need to continue to drive improvement at pace to eradicate underachievement swiftly, particularly in Key Stage 3. Revised staffing structures and the work of the school improvement group, which involves a range of personnel, are key elements in the college's strategy to build capacity and improve outcomes for students. Middle leaders are increasingly held to account for improvement in all three areas for development, within their subjects.

Strategic planning is well co-ordinated, with a strong focus on identified priorities. There are challenging targets for students' performance, the quality of teaching and attendance. Sufficient evidence was seen during the visit to suggest that the college is moving in the right direction to secure further progress in all areas for improvement.

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

Yours sincerely

Angela M Headon
Her Majesty's Inspector