

13 December 2007

Patrick Ottley-O'Connor
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Dear Mr Ottley-O'Connor

Ofsted monitoring of Grade 3 schools

Thank you for the help which you and your staff gave when I inspected your school on 12 December 2007, for the time you gave to our phone discussions and for the information which you provided before and during my visit. Please also extend my thanks to the members of the school council and the sixth form students who gave up time to talk to me about the school.

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 November 2006, the school was asked to:

- conduct a review of sixth form provision so that it better meets the needs of students
- increase the proportion of good or better teaching in order to raise standards in the classroom and improve achievement
- improve the attendance, behaviour and attitudes to learning of a significant minority of students
- use data more effectively in the day-to-day work of the school, particularly to monitor and evaluate the impact of its actions to bring about improvement, and to inform planning.

Having considered all the evidence I am of the opinion that at this time the school is making satisfactory progress.

Results of the 2007 Key Stage 3 national tests were slightly above average in English, broadly average in science and below average in mathematics. The proportion of pupils reaching the higher levels was below average and low in comparison with similar schools. The school met its target in English but not in science or mathematics where performance was well below expectation. At Key Stage 4 in 2007, results improved on two measures: both the proportions of pupils leaving school with at least one GCSE or equivalent qualification and those gaining a

minimum of five GCSE level passes increased and are in line with the national picture. However, on other measures GCSE results declined slightly and remain well below average. There was a dip in results in mathematics. At Key Stage 5, results for Year 13 students were in line with those predicted on the basis of their prior attainment; the performance of Year 12 students was better than expected.

In the school's specialist areas of art and design results were very high at Key Stage 3. However, at Key Stage 4 they were below average overall, although the school met its targets. At Key Stage 5, students met or exceeded their predicted results in the specialist subjects.

There were some small improvements in pupils' achievement in 2007. While the Year 11 cohort did not make the progress expected on the basis of their starting points in Year 7, their progress increased and was satisfactory in Key Stage 4. The range of suitable interventions put in place by the school to accelerate pupils' progress had a positive impact on their learning. Pupils' achievement at Key Stage 3 was satisfactory in English but inadequate in mathematics and science. The school recognises that raising standards in mathematics and improving the performance of more able pupils are areas requiring rapid and sustained improvement.

In the past the school's systems for setting targets have lacked rigour. Pupils have not been expected to achieve as well as those in similar schools nationally. Appropriate steps have been taken to raise expectations while acknowledging the legacy of underachievement that remains for older pupils. An improved, manageable tracking system has been introduced so that pupils' progress towards their targets is monitored regularly and measures put in place to help those who are falling behind. Pupils know both their minimum target and their aspirational target in each subject: they say this helps them understand what they are capable of and motivates them to do well.

There have been clear improvements in sixth form provision. Central to these is the regular tracking of students' performance against well-founded individual targets. Changes to registration systems have released time for weekly meetings between tutors and students to review attendance and progress. Students value the support they are given in this way, as well as access to the dedicated sixth form mentor. Attendance has improved. Teaching and learning is better matched to the needs of sixth form students: increasingly, teachers are providing helpful scaffolding for the development of independent learning skills. The new headteacher has sought and listened to the views of sixth form students, something they appreciate very much. As a consequence, they are taking on leadership responsibilities across the school, for instance, as mentors and in running the school council. They have a greater sense of belonging because they are able to contribute to the school community. The sixth form is now led and managed as an integral part of the school. The head of sixth form has a clear remit and some dedicated time to fulfil responsibilities. The school has benefited from a recent review of progress in the sixth form conducted by the local authority.

The school has put a range of suitable strategies in place to improve attendance and, in liaison with the educational welfare officer, targeted particular groups with low attendance. This is proving effective with the best ever attendance for a Year 11

cohort. Attendance in Years 7 to 11 is in line with the national average this term. The school is generally calm; pupils move around the building sensibly. Behaviour in lessons is satisfactory overall, but pupils say their learning is hindered at times by low level disruption. The incidence of this is largely in areas where teaching is not well matched to pupils' learning needs. Overall, attitudes to learning have become more positive in response to more engaging teaching. However, many pupils remain the passive recipients of teaching rather than active participants in their learning. The school has established a consistent system for recording racist incidents that allows patterns to be tracked and addressed: there are few racist incidents. Pupils have an increasing say in school life through the school council. They are confident that their views are valued and taken into account when decisions are made.

The school has increased the rigour with which it evaluates the quality of teaching and learning. Its focus is on improving learning: the tracking and target-setting systems are contributing effectively to this aim by helping to identify more clearly what pupils need to learn next. A common planning format helps to ensure that lessons have clear objectives and a logical shape. Nonetheless, some lessons are dominated by teachers and opportunities to develop pupils' thinking and their speaking skills are missed. More able pupils are not always challenged sufficiently.

The school has begun to review the curriculum at Key Stage 3. A coherent approach to fostering pupils' basic skills across the curriculum is under development with literacy given top priority. Schemes of work in all subjects now highlight opportunities for pupils to practice and enhance their literacy skills. The school has agreed to pilot the national SEAL materials, aimed at enhancing pupils' social and emotional skills, to complement the 'Learning to Learn' programme followed by Year 7. This focuses on areas such as problem solving and teamwork.

Academic support and guidance have improved as a consequence of the sharper systems for target-setting and tracking pupils' progress. Heads of Year identify pupils making insufficient progress and coordinate support, such as mentoring, to assist them. Improved systems for monitoring behaviour allow staff to recognise problem times, areas and lessons and respond accordingly. Although tutors have much more information about their groups' progress and conduct, tutor periods are not used well to promote a positive approach to learning at the beginning of the day.

The new headteacher has injected energy, enthusiasm and self-belief into the school community. The pupils and sixth-form students value his high visibility, approachability and willingness to listen to their views. Clear-sighted leadership has resulted in a number of measures key to the school's improvement. The senior team has been strengthened, matching skills and roles more closely to the school's priorities. The introduction of more rigour into quality assurance systems is bringing expectations in line with national markers. The capacity of middle leaders has been recognised and harnessed rapidly so that, in the main, they know what they are accountable for and meet their responsibilities effectively. Underperformance is being tackled robustly. The tracking system is used regularly and methodically to improve the rate of progress pupils make in their learning.

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

Yours sincerely

Jane Austin
Her Majesty's Inspector