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Mrs P Campbell  
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Dear Mrs Campbell

Ofsted monitoring of Grade 3 schools

Thank you for the help which you and your staff gave when I inspected your school on Wednesday 20 February 2008, for the time you gave to our phone discussions and for the information which you provided before and during my visit. Please also pass on my thanks to the senior leaders, department heads and groups of students who gave of their time to meet with me. Their enthusiasm and commitment to the school is commendable. 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 7 and 8 February 2007 the school was asked to address five areas for improvement: to raise standards and achievement across both key stages; ensure that the good aspects of teaching and learning are embedded across the school; to improve the two-way communication with parents/carers; to improve rates of attendance; and to provide more opportunities which develop work-based skills and students' understanding of economic well-being.

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 senior leadership team (SLT) has been restructured and strengthened with the appointment of two deputy headteachers and three assistant headteachers. Under the headteacher's incisive leadership they are energetically driving improvements forward. They have a good overview of strengths and weaknesses in provision and are taking robust action to tackle areas requiring improvement. Where there has been targeted action there is demonstrable impact, for example, in raising standards at GCSE and, more recently, in improving rates of attendance. Analysis in the school's self-evaluation is accurate although some of the judgements are overly positive given current outcomes in tests and examinations. Very thorough quality assurance procedures are in place to monitor teaching and track students' progress.

Performance management is supported by an excellent professional development programme which has been shaped from the school's 'visioning day' involving all staff. The role of middle managers, including department heads and Learning Managers' has been developed further: they are effectively engaged in monitoring provision and assessing students' academic and personal achievements. They are highly supportive of the headteacher and speak passionately of the way in which the school has been transformed in the last two years.

Students are also extremely positive about the changes that have taken place. They cite increased opportunities to contribute to the running of the school and more enjoyable lessons as key factors. They have welcomed the introduction of the 'Vertical Tutoring System' and mixed year tutor groups and report that relationships across the whole school have improved as a result. Behaviour is generally good: students report that bullying is rare and effectively dealt with if it should occur. Their increased enjoyment is evident in their improved attendance and punctuality to lessons in the last two terms. Although attendance rates are still below the national average, the downward trend has been arrested and the number of persistent absentees has reduced compared with the same period in 2006/07. The school has made satisfactory progress in improving the rates of attendance but recognises that further improvement is necessary. Attendance has become a whole school focus and is given a high profile in tutor time and in reporting to parents. Sound procedures are in place to tackle persistent absenteeism, including 'truancy calls' to parents and targeted support from learning mentors.

The school has made satisfactory progress in improving standards and achievement. Standards at Key Stage 4 are much improved and students make satisfactory progress by the time they leave school. The percentage of students gaining five or more A\* to C grades at GCSE has increased from 34% in 2005 to 51% in 2007. 41% of students achieved five or more A\* to C grades including English and mathematics in 2007. This is a significant improvement on previous years and brings the school's performance closer to the national average. However, students' progress at Key Stage 3 has been too slow: standards attained in tests are below the national average and have not improved since the last inspection. This is due to instability in teaching caused by a large amount of long-term illness and a legacy of underachievement. Staffing has now been stabilised and the school is taking action to tackle the underperformance at Key Stage 3 and support students in Year 10. Targeted support is well planned based on comprehensive tracking of students' progress. Projections for 2008 indicate further improvement across both key stages.

Good progress in embedding the good aspects of teaching and learning across the whole school has been made. A small number of lessons were sampled during the inspection and these confirmed the school's own evaluation of strengths and areas for development. In the most effective lessons self- and peer-assessment is used to very good effect. Students know where they are in terms of their own performance, what they are aiming for and what they need to do to improve their work. Key appointments in the science and mathematics departments have improved the effectiveness of monitoring and are having a positive impact on the overall quality of teaching and learning. The learning and teaching action group is providing dynamic leadership to develop varied and motivational teaching approaches. The school has

developed a strong culture of sharing effective practice, providing mutual support and challenge and celebrating successful and innovative practice.

The school has taken a number of actions to improve communication with parents and carers. Although it was not possible to ascertain parents' views during this visit, students referred to the effective channels of communication that have opened up through development of the school website and text messaging services. The website gives access from home to classroom materials, policies and calendars. Parents also have open access to a named member of staff, the 'Family Manager', ensuring a prompt response to any concerns. The school has organised further parents' evenings through which information about their child's progress and curriculum developments are shared: termly written reports provide good quality information about achievement, attendance and behaviour. The school is currently working toward a Leading Parent Partnership Award. The detailed audit and action plan provides the basis for further development in this area.

Good progress has been made in providing opportunities for students to develop work-based skills and extend their understanding of economic well-being. The school has built on embedded practice to extend students' understanding of consumerism and budgeting and develop their communication, leadership and critical thinking skills. The school has good links with local colleges, employers and work-based learning providers. Access to vocational options, young apprenticeship courses and extended work placements has increased and further vocational pathways are being introduced in September 2008. Students value opportunities for work experience and report that careers guidance is helpful and easily accessed.

The school recognises the need to raise standards further, particularly at Key Stage 3, and to improve rates of attendance. Sound structures and procedures are in place to share and embed good teaching, assess students' progress and raise standards. The SLT has set challenging targets and staff and students are focused fully on improving the quality of provision and raising achievement. They have good capacity to bring about further improvements.

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

Yours sincerely

Jean Kendall  
Her Majesty's Inspector