

15 April 2008

Mr J Joyce
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Dear Mr Joyce

Ofsted monitoring of Grade 3 schools

Thank you for the help you and your staff gave when Gill Jones and I inspected your school on 14 April 2008, for the time you gave to our telephone discussions and for the information you provided before and during our visit.

The school has seen a change in its population of students in recent years. The proportion of students receiving free school meals has increased and is now higher than the average. The proportion of students identified as having learning difficulties and/or disabilities has also risen, particularly in Key Stage 3. There has been a fall in the number of students on roll and this mirrors the picture in the local feeder primary schools. Governors are in the process of appointing a deputy headteacher to enhance the capacity of the school's leadership and management. There is significant building work taking place on site due to the refurbishment of the community leisure centre and this is expected to take a year to complete.

This letter will be posted on the Ofsted website.

As a result of the inspection on 22 and 23 February 2007, the school was asked to:

- regularly evaluate how effective the school is in its work, so that there is a clear view of what needs to improve and precisely how this is to be done
- raise expectations of and challenge to students, particularly those of average ability, by more consistently good teaching and smarter use of tracking data
- make achievement more consistent so that standards rise, especially in science at Key Stage 3 and mathematics at Key Stage 4.

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

The school's 2007 national test results at both Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4 were very disappointing and continued the decline seen in recent years. A significant

proportion of students of average ability on entry to the school failed to reach the standards expected of them. The average point score and the proportion achieving the expected Level 5 at the end of Year 9 were just below national average in English, but well below national averages in mathematics and science. The proportion of students achieving at least five GCSE passes at grades A* to C was well below the national average. Too few students achieved the higher grades of which they were capable.

Senior managers acted quickly to identify the causes of these poor results and agreed that they urgently needed to raise standards and improve the quality of teaching and learning. The local authority has provided intensive support and guidance at all levels, working to a brief determined by the school's priorities. Teacher assessment was recognised as a weakness and student attainment and target setting data was found to be unreliable. The school has taken appropriate steps to rectify these weaknesses. There is closer monitoring of students' progress and individual targets are reviewed to ensure that they are sufficiently challenging. In mathematics good practice is emerging with students being set targets for Years 8 and 10 as well as Years 9 and 11. As a result, the students are aware of their levels of attainment, the progress they are making and what they are aiming for. The school identified those students in the current Year 11 who are at risk of underachieving and is providing good individual mentoring as well as additional coaching and revision sessions. Some students have successfully passed their GCSE English Language early in Year 11 and those who did not achieve the expected grades have the opportunity to re-sit the examination in the summer. This additional guidance and support is valued by the students and their parents. It has successfully raised students' expectations. Some students in other year groups lack confidence in their abilities and are not sure what they need to do to improve. Senior managers are aware of this and intend to extend this model of support to students in other year groups, particularly Year 9, later this year.

The school now has more reliable data on which to base its predictions for students' achievement and standards in the future. Data for 2008 indicate an expected improvement in results at both key stages, including those in science at Key Stage 3 and mathematics at Key Stage 4. Senior managers say they are 'cautiously optimistic' and are confident that they have halted the decline in mathematics.

Some changes have been made to the curriculum to make it more relevant to students' needs. For example, a modular syllabus has been introduced in mathematics and revisions have been made to courses in information and communication technology (ICT). Staff training has focused on improving the quality of teaching in subject areas. Local authority consultants have worked closely with subject leaders and teachers to raise awareness of good practice. A cycle of twice yearly lesson observations has been established and senior managers will shortly be undertaking training for this. However, there is no whole-school approach to how this monitoring will be carried out and no shared agreement on what criteria will be used to judge the quality of teaching and learning. As a result, the school does not yet have an accurate view of what proportion of its teaching is good or better. Senior managers have observed some improvements in day-to-day practice in classrooms and are aware that inconsistencies remain and need to be tackled. Heads of

departments are not yet involved in formally monitoring the quality of teaching in their subjects.

The teaching observed during this visit was satisfactory overall with some good practice evident in both key stages. In the better lessons teachers established high expectations of the students' behaviour, quality of work, personal aspirations, participation in lessons and respect for the environment. The students responded well to these expectations, were aware of what was expected of them and were motivated to achieve their best. Teachers demonstrated good subject knowledge. As a result of teachers' good questioning, the students gave more considered responses and this helped to deepen their understanding of the subject. No unsatisfactory teaching was observed during the visit. In the weaker lessons, some students were unwilling to listen or take part in activities and their constant chatter and interruptions caused disruption to other students' learning. Teachers' skills and confidence in managing this was variable. There were inconsistencies across the school in teachers' expectations of behaviour in lessons.

Since the last inspection the school has established a behaviour support unit. The local authority behaviour and attendance consultant has worked with the school on this and has provided some staff training on how to manage challenging behaviour. It is too early to measure the impact of this development but senior managers report that it is enabling the school to provide more focused support for individual students.

Through targeted intervention, the school has successfully improved punctuality to school and attendance is close to the national average.

Copley High School is a specialist mathematics and computer college. Senior managers have some good ideas about how they want to extend and share the school's expertise. However, they are very aware that their priority is to raise standards in these subjects first and this has been the focus since the inspection.

The school's current improvement plan covers the academic year 2007 to 2008. Plans for improvement beyond that date have not yet been formalised. A 'learning cycle' has been introduced that sets out the steps and the approximate timescales the school will take towards improvement. For example, the third phase in summer 2008 will include a closer focus on scrutiny of students' work as well as the second round of lesson observations. Senior managers are aware that while this is proving to be an effective short-term measure to address the school's urgent priorities, its place within a longer-term whole-school improvement plan has yet to be determined.

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

Yours sincerely

Caroline Broomhead
Her Majesty's Inspector