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Friday 2 May 2008

Mr J Tippett
Executive Headteacher
The Thomas, Lord Audley School
Monkwick Avenue
Colchester
Essex
CO2 8NJ

Dear Mr Tippett,

Ofsted monitoring of schools with a Notice to Improve

Thank you for the help which you, your staff and your students gave when I inspected your school on Thursday 1 May 2008, for the time you gave to our phone discussions and for the information which you provided before and during my visit. I would be particularly grateful if you could pass on my thanks to your deputy headteachers, heads of subject and the local authority advisor for their time and help during the day.

This letter will be posted on the Ofsted website.

As a result of the inspection on 19-20 September 2007, the school was asked to:

- Improve the quality of teaching by ensuring that the school's strategy for improvement is applied with rigour and pace, so that teaching quality and pupils' progress become good.
- Develop the roles of those with pastoral and subject responsibilities to ensure they play a full and effective part in raising pupils' attainment.
- Ensure that the progress of pupils is monitored regularly, accurately and formally so that any underachievement can be identified and acted upon speedily.
- Improve pupils' behaviour and attitudes to work so that they become good.

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 standards achieved by students.

Since the last inspection, there have been no major changes to the teaching staff. However, in November 2007, the local authority opened a consultation on a proposal to close the Thomas, Lord Audley and Alderman Blaxill Schools and replace them with an academy. One of the reasons given was the large number of surplus secondary school places in south Colchester. The consultation period closed in January, but no decision had been announced at the time of my visit. Understandably, the proposal has been the cause of some uncertainty but nevertheless staff have remained supportive and willing to embrace change – and this is undoubtedly helping the school to move on. There is also no doubt that your leadership has played a central role in building confidence amongst students, staff and parents.

The school now has comprehensive tracking data systems, and these suggest that students are on course to achieve the 2008 test and exam targets for both Key Stages 3 and 4. Whilst the school recognises that these figures remain below expectations, given the abilities of students when they joined the school, they nevertheless represent improvement on the 2007 results. Intervention strategies now in place include individual interviews for all Year 9 and Year 11 students.

Attendance continues to improve. This reflects students' increased contentedness with their education, and the school is on course to meet the attendance target set by the local authority. Behaviour seen during the inspection was satisfactory; however, whilst the number of fixed term exclusions is lower than last year, it is still well above the national average and the school has not met its target for reducing exclusions. The strong and uncompromising approach to inappropriate attitudes is appreciated by staff and many students, but there is more to be done before behaviour can be considered good.

Pastoral and subject leaders have been further empowered to monitor and coach colleagues, through lesson observations and sharing of good practice. Four middle managers accompanied me on visits to lessons taught by their team members. These observations supported the school's view that the great majority of teaching is now at least satisfactory and that students now experience less variability in the quality of lessons. Some strong, active learning was seen where teachers gave good opportunities for students to develop independent learning skills. However, there are still occasions when students are unable to contribute to class discussions because the lesson is dominated by teacher talk. There are also still too many instances of students calling out in class; again, this prevents other, quieter students from answering or participating fully. There are some good examples of the effective use of data by teachers to track and target students' achievement, including the regular verbal and written use of level descriptors to guide and motivate students as seen, for example, in a history lesson. However, the quality of marking and other assessment strategies remains inconsistent and in a few cases poor. Our joint observations and subsequent discussions suggested that whilst managers correctly identify the key characteristics of teaching and provide particularly positive encouragement, they do not yet offer precise enough feedback or specific, challenging targets to help teachers further improve students' learning in lessons.

The school continues to receive good support from local authority consultants, complemented by continued good support from Stanway School.

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

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Mark Phillips", with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Mark Phillips
Her Majesty's Inspector