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Dr R Blencowe
The Headteacher
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Dear Dr Blencowe

Ofsted monitoring of schools with a Notice to Improve

Thank you for the help which you and your staff gave when I inspected your school on 7 May 2008, for the time you gave to our phone discussions, and for the information which you provided before and during my visit. I am also grateful to Patricia Rowlands, chair of governors, to the group of students who spoke to me, and to Alan Cooper, the representative from the local authority (LA).

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 3 and 4 October 2007, the school was asked to:

- raise standards and improve achievement in the core subjects at Key Stage 4 by setting students targets that are more ambitious
- ensure there is more teaching which is good or better, by making sure all lessons have sufficient challenge and interest and that students understand what they need to do to improve their work
- develop the role of the middle managers so they are more effective in raising standards and rigorous in their monitoring and evaluation.

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

Since the inspection in October 2007, the school has taken effective action in ensuring that achievement improves and standards continue to rise. The actions taken have been effectively focused and appropriate and well led by the headteacher. The school's monitoring and evaluation of teaching and learning has much improved. A rigorous programme of lesson observations has ensured that the leadership team and particularly the headteacher have a clear and accurate understanding of the strengths and areas for development in the school. There has been an unrelenting effort to improve standards. Standards improved in 2007 with 19% of students gaining 5 GCSE A* to C grades including English and mathematics.

Current Year 11 standards are showing further improvements as seen in a significant increase in the GCSE modular exam and coursework grades. For example English literature, physical education, history and expressive arts did particularly well. At Key Stage 3, internal assessment data indicates that the school is working well towards achieving its current targets in some areas and surpassing in others.

The quality of teaching has improved. Lessons are routinely observed and staff are given clear feedback on how and what they could do to improve their practice. The school, along with the LA, judges teaching to be at least good. Inspection evidence supports this judgment, although the school acknowledges that there is still some work to be undertaken where teaching is satisfactory. Teachers work hard, prepare their lessons well, and, as a matter of routine, share learning objectives with students. In most lessons the pace and questioning by teachers is brisk. Teachers set high expectations and the students respond well to these. Students' attitudes and behaviour are generally good. However, some students report that this is not always consistent across all year groups and subjects. Students spoke positively about how the school has improved. For example, they said that lessons are now much more interesting and challenging. Students know which levels they are working at and what they need to do to improve. This is a result of much hard work in improving assessment and target setting systems which are now good. However, marking in books remains inconsistent. Staff have a good range of information about the students' prior attainment and they use this information well to set students challenging work. The good systems in place to track the progress of students ensures any underachievement is quickly identified. As a result, appropriate action is taken including the work with individual students through, for example, booster classes, work with mentors and revision weekends in Wales.

The headteacher has an unwavering commitment to improving standards and provision for all students. Her hard work and energy has revitalised the school. She along with her senior leadership team work well together and they have a shared vision for school improvement. Middle leaders are being empowered to take greater responsibility and some, for example in mathematics and science, are having an important impact in improving provision. They too work hard and share the same commitment and vision. There is a growing culture of consistency and accountability across the school because senior leaders regularly check the work of middle leaders.

The local authority's action plan was judged to be satisfactory. The LA set up a Core Group immediately after the inspection in October to oversee each of the areas for improvement. This group has well worked with the school through, for example, monitoring and evaluating teaching and learning. Overall, the effectiveness of the LA support is satisfactory.

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

Yours sincerely

Rashida Sharif
Her Majesty's Inspector