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Mr Keith Grainger
Principal
Garth Hill College
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Dear Mr Grainger

Ofsted monitoring of Grade 3 schools

Thank you for the help which you and your staff gave when I inspected your college on 21 May 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 my thanks to the staff and students who spoke with me, and to the governor who gave up time to meet with me.

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 10 and 11 May 2007, the college was asked to:

- raise standards in English, mathematics and design and technology, especially at GCSE
- improve the consistency of teaching and investigate ways of recruiting more permanent teachers
- develop the curriculum in the sixth form to offer students a wider range of choices and opportunities
- improve the attitudes of students in Years 10 and 11 by consistently providing relevant opportunities for them to take responsibility.

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

The GCSE examinations results in 2007 improved on those in 2006 and continue the upward trend. Overall results were in line with national averages and were the college's best ever with 59% of students gaining five or more GCSE grades A*-C and virtually all students leaving Year 11 with at least one qualification. These results mask, however, the relative weaknesses in English and design technology results for both boys and girls, and in mathematics for boys. Nevertheless, the percentage of

students gaining five or more GCSE grades A*-C, including English and mathematics went up from 28% in 2005, to 33% in 2006, and to 38% in 2007.

In the end of Year 9 national tests, the 2007 results were average in mathematics, above average in science but below average in English. Results in mathematics and science show a rising trend. In English, they have declined in recent years.

The 2007 examination results in the sixth form went up slightly for A-levels where standards are broadly average. They dropped for AS-levels showing below average standards; these results were a disappointment for the college. Students' progress was broadly satisfactory for A-levels but not generally as good for the AS subjects except in mathematics, and art and design where it was excellent.

Attainment on entry has been broadly average but is rising and is now a little above average in Years 7 to 9. Students' progress from Year 7 to Year 11 improved overall in 2007 and was generally satisfactory but some weaknesses in progress remain in English, mathematics and design technology.

The college has improved significantly the quality of provision in English and is working to improve, where necessary, provision in mathematics and design technology. College records show that the positive impact of improvements in English are likely to be visible in raised 2008 test and examination results. GCSE results in mathematics are also expected to rise in 2008. For design technology, results are expected to be similar to those in 2007. The college is also expecting improved results in the sixth form.

The previous inspection report stated that 'difficulty in recruiting and retaining specialist staff led to a lack of continuity and inconsistent teaching'. These difficulties have been largely eradicated although some inconsistencies in teaching remain. Staff and students speak with relief that the number of lessons that need a covering or supply teacher has gone down considerably. Senior leaders have a very good understanding of the strengths and relative weaknesses in teaching. The good systems of keeping a check on the quality of lessons are being reviewed to give an increased focus on students' learning rather than, as previously, focusing mainly on teachers' actions. The college rightly judges that the overall quality of teaching is satisfactory and there are signs that it is improving. Much good teaching and learning exist with examples of outstanding work. Lessons are well planned and conducted briskly, in the main, with students concentrating and working well. The college's strategies for good classroom management and maintaining discipline, with the support of students, are generally applied consistently and unobtrusively. A calm, purposeful atmosphere prevails. The extent to which teachers routinely question students to probe their understanding, or to develop their thinking or ideas, varies, as does the extent to which all teachers promote the development of students' literacy skills in their subjects. A teacher's entirely appropriate urging to 'write in full sentences' seen in a science book, for example, was not followed up overtly and incomplete sentences continued to appear in subsequent work. In a design technology lesson seen, students wrote reflectively about the success or otherwise of their projects; this good strategy encouraged students to compose their thoughts

coherently but also revealed variations in students' skills to do this fully and with technical accuracy.

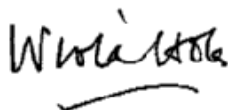
Much good work has been done in recent months to boost the college's capacity to compile and analyse attainment data and use it to encourage students to make the best possible progress. The data are being used well centrally by senior staff to identify and support students at risk of underachieving. Some subject teachers also use this information well but more work needs to be done to develop all teachers' skills in this respect. Sixth form students, in particular, appreciate the way subject teachers and tutors keep a regular check on their progress and provide guidance about how they can improve.

The college has responded trenchantly to the criticisms in the previous report in relation to 'timetable clashes and limited opportunities for enrichment' in the sixth form. It has addressed them successfully and has also improved aspects of support for students' personal development. Students now have increased opportunities to play a part in the life of the college and local community. The range of courses has been extended, with further extensions planned for September 2008. Students feel that the choice of subjects available is good, and enhanced by the college's well organised links with other local providers. The number of students in the sixth form is increasing year by year.

Sixth form students, as well as students in other years, are encouraged to express their views and contribute ideas. In particular, they are much involved, through year and college councils and in other ways, in making decisions about the new college building that is about to be constructed for occupation in 2010. Students are routinely involved in the smooth running of college life and take these responsibilities seriously. The attitudes of students in Years 10 and 11 are now positive as a whole, and those of younger students are more so. Students of all ages give examples of activities that they enjoy although the lists are not extensive. They cite sports and college productions as key features. The comment in the previous report about behaviour that is 'challenging and disruptive, mainly in lessons taken by temporary staff' no longer applies to the same extent. Some students do, however, mention instances of poor behaviour, adding that the college deals with this swiftly. The rate of exclusions from the college has gone down. Students are aware of the college's increased emphasis on speeding up their rates of progress. They appreciate the work of teachers and support staff in giving up time to offer booster classes, catch-up sessions, various clubs and other activities that help to raise the quality of their work and add enjoyment to college life.

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

Yours sincerely



Wiola Hola
Her Majesty's Inspector