

18 November 2008

Mr A Goulty  
Headteacher  
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Dear Mr Goulty

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 17 November 2008, for the time you gave to our phone discussions and for the information which you provided before and during my visit. I would also like to thank the students for being so welcoming and speaking with me so openly.

Since the time of the inspection in February 2008, the school has experienced major changes in both leadership and the physical environment. At that time, the school was led by an interim executive headteacher and a consultant headteacher, both from a neighbouring school. The current headteacher took up his post in June 2008. Since then, five assistant headteachers have either been newly appointed or had temporary appointments made permanent. The school moved into a new building in September 2008.

This letter will be posted on the Ofsted website

As a result of the inspection on 25 and 26 February 2008, the school was asked to:

- raise standards and improve students' achievement
- improve the quality of teaching so that students learn effectively
- improve attendance, especially at Key Stage 4
- ensure the sixth form is effective so that students reach their full potential.

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 students' achievement.

Standards are going up across the age range. The best improvement has been at Key Stage 4. All aspects of the GCSE results in 2008 were better than those in 2007. In particular, the proportion of students gaining five or more grades A\* to C rose to 48%, the school's best ever performance. Similarly, almost twice as many students gained five or more grades A\* to C including English and mathematics, a qualification which is particularly important for their future career prospects. At Key Stage 3, standards also improved significantly in English, mathematics and science, across most of the ability range. The one exception is at the higher levels in English, where test results did not reflect the improvement seen elsewhere. The better test and examination results in 2008 indicate that students are making better progress as they move through the school and that their achievement is improving. This evidence is confirmed by the school's monitoring records which show, for example, the current Year 11 on track for even better GCSE results than the previous cohort.

Students in Year 11 describe very clearly the good improvements in teaching and learning that they have experienced this year and lesson observations made during the monitoring visit entirely support their views. Staffing vacancies have been filled so that there is now a full complement of suitably qualified teachers. Behaviour has improved significantly so that lessons are rarely disrupted. Teachers structure their lessons appropriately and generally provide activities that attract students' interest and engage them in their learning. They make effective use of the improved resources in the new building, notably interactive whiteboards. Nevertheless, there remain some weaknesses in teaching and learning, particularly a rather slow pace and shortage of challenge in some lessons, together with some students' weak attitudes to learning, especially among boys in Key Stage 4. Students know their target levels and grades but this information is not used to full effect in encouraging students to greater achievement.

The school has introduced many measures to improve attendance, several of them going beyond strategies that are commonly used in schools. For example, the school has different approaches to dealing with different levels of poor attendance, maintains contact with families of poor attenders during the holidays and has partnership arrangements with a nearby school for excluded students to attend the partner school. As a result, there have been significant improvements in attendance both across the whole school and particularly in Key Stage 4.

As in all the other areas for improvement, the school has made very detailed plans to improve the sixth form. However, implementation of these strategies has been hindered by the need to change the management structure for the sixth form. The new leadership arrangements will not be fully in place until January 2009. In addition, it was not possible to change the curriculum for the current Year 13 to run all courses on the school site for these students. The school is fully aware of the benefits of running all sixth form courses on-site because of difficulties in monitoring both students' progress and the quality of their experiences when they are educated off-site for some of the time. Nevertheless, when students have already embarked on particular courses, with the intention of continuing in Year 13, it is appropriate for them to complete those courses with the same teachers. Hence, the impact of

improvements for the sixth form has not been as good as that for the main school. Nevertheless, Year 13 students speak enthusiastically of the more effective support they now receive and the better working atmosphere that now exists in the sixth form. In addition, Year 12 benefit from an improved, entirely 'in house' curriculum that meets their needs. External analysis of sixth form examination results indicates improvement in achievement in the sixth form and lesson observations suggest that students now learn more effectively.

Since the previous inspection the contribution of specialist arts college status to school improvement has been enhanced significantly. Drama and dance remain the highest achieving subjects in the school. Music is less successful but the recent introduction of a new BTEC course is providing students with a better range of opportunities to achieve in that subject. Some teaching in the specialist subjects is outstanding and the particular skills of these teachers are now being well used to offer new strategies and techniques for teachers in other subjects. However, the main area of improvement lies in the increased work in partner primary schools which is providing valuable extra experience in the arts for pupils before they arrive in Year 7. Further work with the community is planned but is not yet fully in place.

The local authority produced a good, detailed plan of action to guide the school's progress. It has since given valuable support, notably in helping improve the quality of teaching and learning, providing extra personnel to help the school in its efforts to improve attendance and in giving very practical help when the school experienced difficulties with staffing in mathematics in the summer term.

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

Yours sincerely

Christine Harrison  
Additional Inspector