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Mrs Sarah Graham  
Headteacher  
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Dear Mrs Graham

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 14 October, for the time you gave to our phone discussions and for the information which you provided before and during my visit. Please pass on my thanks to the staff, governors, local authority (LA) advisers and the students with whom I spoke. The information they provided was most valuable.

Since the inspection in February, there have been considerable changes to staff, some with key management responsibilities, with most starting in September. A new deputy headteacher joined in September and two new assistant headteachers, one since April. A new leader of science joined in June and two science assistant curriculum leaders in April. Similarly in mathematics, there is a new leader, two new assistant curriculum leaders and a new mathematics teacher. There is new leadership of the provision for students' special educational needs. There is also new leadership in humanities, information and communication technology (ICT) and history. There were five other new teaching posts in September, three within the English department.

This letter will be posted on the Ofsted website.

As a result of the inspection on 6 February 2008, the school was asked to improve students' achievement where it is inadequate, especially in mathematics and science; ensure the consistency of effective teaching across the school; use assessment more effectively to inform teaching and raise expectations; and improve the effectiveness of middle leadership.

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 students' achievement.

The school has worked successfully to establish more rigorous systems for monitoring and developing teaching quality with support from the LA. Partnerships with schools that have particular expertise are helping to improve skills where teaching is weakest. There have also been several new appointments in a number of critical departments, such as English, mathematics and science, which are contributing significantly to improving teaching quality. The school's evaluation of teaching is now more accurate. The extent of inadequate teaching has been substantially reduced and the proportion of good or better teaching has improved so that over half is now good. More work is planned to improve the quality of teachers' marking of students' work and students' involvement in improving their work. Students say that improvement is particularly noticeable in science and to a lesser extent in English and mathematics. They welcome having much more continuity in science teaching. An 'effective practice' group of teachers has now been established and is being trained to coach weaker staff so that best practice within the school helps to raise overall teaching quality further.

The 2008 GCSE results give a mixed picture, but the improvements in teaching quality are beginning to have a positive impact on students' progress. The proportion of students attaining five or more GCSEs at grade A\*-C, including English and mathematics, was similar to that of 2007 at just below average. However, this year 11 group was lower attaining on entry to Year 7 than last year. Science results improved considerably in 2008, although mathematics did not, and considerable variations in standards across subjects remain. The 2009 school targets are considerably higher, reflecting the impact the school is working to achieve through improved teaching and better use of assessment. Current GCSE external coursework assessments for Year 11 show that standards are indeed rising, including in both science and mathematics. Key Stage 3 provisional test results, taken shortly after the last inspection, are still too low. However, recent standardised assessments of the current Year 9 in mathematics show that the great majority are now making at least expected progress in the subject, with many progressing well. Other core subjects are now closely monitored and supported to help ensure that they too reach the higher target levels expected for 2009.

The school's media arts specialist status is a strong and influential feature of its work. Students report that they much enjoy their learning in media and arts subjects. Specialist targets at GCSE or equivalent were met in both the last two years.

Much work has been done to provide detailed guidance and a clearer framework for middle leaders to help them evaluate effectiveness in their subjects rigorously. For example, half-termly student reviews of progress, regular evaluation of teaching and marking quality, and other monitoring activities are now in operation to establish consistency. Equally importantly, senior line managers hold very regular discussions with middle leaders on their findings to hold them to account and to provide additional guidance where necessary. These potentially robust management systems are recent and very much work-in-progress but they have been well-received by both new and experienced curriculum leaders. Complementing this development, a

much more effective central assessment database and target setting system is also in place from September, introducing half-termly student progress reviews by subject leaders and by directors of learning (formerly pastoral leaders). This focus on more rigorous and consistent monitoring of provision and outcomes for students reflects an important change to the culture among leaders at all levels. The school and LA both recognise that these initiatives must now gather pace in order to embed them in the school's work and drive up standards. The LA's statement of action fulfils the requirements and it has recently been revised and re-focused more strongly in these areas. Satisfactory support from the school improvement partner (SIP), consultants and school partners is helping to improve the rigour with which teaching quality is monitored and supported and middle leaders carry out their work.

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

Yours sincerely

Ray Jardine

Additional Inspector