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Mr Middlemass  
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Dear Mr Middlemass

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 November 27, 2008, for the time you gave to our phone discussion and for the information which you provided before and during my visit.

This letter will be posted on the Ofsted website.

As a result of the inspection on 30 April -1 May 2008, the school was asked to:

- ensure consistency in lesson planning to provide more opportunities for active engagement in lessons in order to accelerate rates of progress across the school with a specific focus on English, and cross-curricular literacy
- improve the management of pupil behaviour to ensure that learning is not disrupted
- further refine the use of assessment information, supported by training, to ensure progress is effectively tracked to support timely intervention
- focus leadership at all levels on raising standards and achievement, and improving the quality of teaching and learning.

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 students' achievement.

The issues identified at the previous inspection have been tackled vigorously. Standards and achievement are improving as indicated in the provisional results of 2008. Key improvements have been made at Key Stage 4, particularly in English and mathematics with 50% of students gaining a GCSE grade C or above in these subjects, a figure just above the national figure. Achievement in English improved significantly with 67% gaining a GCSE grade C or above. However, the school is

aware that there is still some fragility evident in mathematics where the improvement in 2008 was not as dramatic as in English and the progress of current Year 11 students indicates they are some way below their targets in mathematics for 2009.

The school has made good progress in improving the planning of lessons in order to provide more opportunities for the active engagement of pupils. There is an emphasis on joint planning, with closer attention to what students are expected to learn in lessons. This has improved the quality of teaching and learning overall and especially in English lessons. Further, the school has usefully developed the use of peer coaches through pairing teachers within departments, which is proving effective in supporting improvement. This has the potential to become a model of good practice if developed further to include cross-curricular pairings. The pace of lessons is generally good and when students are actively engaged in interesting and varied activities, their concentration and focus on learning is significantly improved. In these lessons, no disruption of learning is evident. The school leadership team have an accurate view of the quality of teaching and learning across the school. Their evidence in this respect is supported by a variety of lesson observations conducted during the monitoring visit.

Students' behaviour was good during the visit. The school has worked effectively on a variety of appropriate strategies to reduce the instances of disruption referred to in the last inspection report. A new behaviour for learning policy has been agreed in consultation with staff, students and parents and has now been implemented. Senior leaders routinely conduct behaviour checks in lessons throughout the school in order to reinforce good behaviour and follow up any disruptions. Students have responded positively; the school's monitoring records indicate that withdrawals from lessons for misbehaviour have reduced significantly. The focus on improving teaching and learning has resulted in better engagement of students in learning activities and this is promoting greater enjoyment of learning. Therefore, good progress has been made in tackling this issue.

Satisfactory progress has been made in refining the use of assessment information in order to raise achievement. Performance data is being regularly collected and analysed and middle leaders are becoming more skilled at using this to identify where interventions are necessary. The training provided for staff has been useful in raising awareness and prompting discussion about good practice in this respect. However, the use of data remains variable and is therefore inconsistent. Middle leaders are gaining confidence in using the information to identify where interventions might be made, but these tend to be additional activities outside of the classroom and has not yet informed teachers' everyday practices in teaching. Consequently, teachers tend to be reactive to the data rather than using the information available to plan their approaches to learning.

The school has made satisfactory progress in developing the role of middle leaders to have a stronger focus on standards and achievement and teaching and learning. Increasingly, curriculum leaders are held to account and many are embracing their

roles in driving improvement with increased confidence. However, inconsistencies remain in practice and the effectiveness and impact of this has yet to be realised in terms of consistent policy and practice in some curriculum areas. Several middle leaders might benefit from the coaching model used to improve teaching and learning. Senior leaders hold regular meetings with curriculum leaders in order to focus on standards and progress issues. Similarly, middle leaders are meeting with individual department staff to discuss performance issues, although it is too early to judge the impact and effectiveness of these at this stage.

The local authority (LA) is providing good support and challenge for the school's improvement drive through a LA Support Team (LAST), which is chaired by a senior school improvement adviser. Increasingly, this support is being tailored to the school's individual requirements, in particular to meet their preference for teachers to be supported in their classrooms to minimise any possible disruption to learning. The LA has also brokered the early involvement of the head teacher designate who is due to take up the post from January 2009.

At present, the specialist status of the school is contributing strongly to the expansion of the range of courses within the specialist areas and improving attainment in these areas. However, there has not been significant impact of specialist status in driving improvements in the core subjects to date.

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

Yours sincerely

Judith Matharu  
Her Majesty's Inspector