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Mr Les Jones
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Jones

Ofsted monitoring of Grade 3 schools

Thank you for the help which you and your staff gave when I inspected your school on 3 July 2008, for the time you gave to our telephone discussions and for the information which you provided before and during my visit. Please thank the many staff who spoke to me and thank particularly the students who were so welcoming and helpful during the day.

As a result of the inspection in March 2007, the school was asked to:

- ensure that all teachers mark work and use assessment information effectively so that students know exactly what they need to do to improve
- improve attendance.

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.

When students join the school their attainment overall is broadly in line with national figures. However, more than a third of students have reading ages which are below, and often well below, their actual age and some students have gaps in their knowledge and understanding of the basic skills of literacy and numeracy. This has a considerable impact on their progress. In 2007 the results of national tests at Key Stage 3 were disappointing. Given their starting points at the end of Key Stage 2, students made inadequate progress in all core subjects. The proportion of students attaining the nationally expected Level 5 was well below national averages and far fewer students attained higher levels than did so nationally. Students did better in mathematics than in English. Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities made satisfactory progress although they attained less well than their peers in other schools.

At Key Stage 4 the picture was more positive. Although students made inadequate progress overall, the proportion of students attaining both five GCSE passes at grades A* to C and five passes including functional English and mathematics rose, continuing the upward trend of the past three years. However, fewer students gained at least five passes at grades A* to C including English and mathematics than did so in 2006. Most students attained at least five A* to G grade GCSE passes and nearly all students gained at least one pass.

Systems to track the progress made by students and to identify and tackle any underachievement have been improved. Staff are given clear and effective guidance about lesson planning and organisation, marking and assessment. Rigorous quality assurance procedures ensure that all staff conform to new expectations. Where new systems are applied rigorously, for example in mathematics, they are having a very positive effect on the progress made by individual students. The school now has suitably qualified and permanent teachers of mathematics and science and at the time of the visit only two teachers were employed on a temporary basis. Lessons seen during the visit confirm that the school's evaluation of the quality of lessons is accurate: teaching is improving. However, the school does not provide additional support to help students of average ability overcome weaknesses in basic skills at an early stage and not all teachers tackle these weaknesses during lessons. For instance, the presentation and organisation of work in some books is of very poor quality. When teachers insist on high standards and take the time to identify and correct misunderstandings, students respond well.

Students know their targets in all subjects and what they must do to improve. However, they are not always given time in lessons to act on the written guidance they receive. In the best lessons students evaluate their own learning and progress and this helps them to identify any additional help which may be required. The school provided 'booster' and revision lessons in the weeks leading up to national tests and examinations and monitored the progress of individual students rigorously. As a result more students in both key stages are on track to achieve their targets. School data suggest that attainment will improve in 2008.

Students who were interviewed or spoken to in lessons offered thoughtful and perceptive comments and were clearly very proud of the school. Older students think that things are improving. They say that lessons are usually interesting because activities are varied. They feel that behaviour is improving although they say that a minority of lessons can be disrupted by students who do not want to learn. They think that there is a better choice of options than was previously the case and they appreciate opportunities to experience the world outside the school. They say that although there is some bullying this is dealt with well. Most students appear to enjoy school. However, despite this attendance remains well below average overall. Gains have been made in the attendance of students in Key Stage 3 and innovative measures to persuade students to attend revision sessions and examinations were successful. The school has a range of appropriate strategies to encourage more regular attendance, including involving parents and carers and taking legal action where necessary, but these are not yet having the desired effect.

Senior and middle leaders hold staff firmly to account. All departments undertake detailed and rigorous self-evaluation and the work of staff and the progress made by students is monitored regularly. Senior leaders have taken on new roles and responsibilities positively and effectively. The additional work involved in the planning of the new school building has been managed well. The governing body is well informed: they understand that there is still much to be done and are appropriately focused on the main areas for improvement.

The school is part of the 'making good progress pilot' and has worked well with local authority (LA) consultants. The school improvement partner is working effectively with the school and is providing both support and challenge.

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

Yours sincerely

Christine Graham
Her Majesty's Inspector