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Mrs Wendy Tomes
The Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Tomes

Ofsted monitoring of Grade 3 schools

Thank you for the help which you and your staff gave when I inspected your school on 2 December 2008, 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 students and governors who also spent time in conversation 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 4–5 October 2007, the school was asked to take steps to address the health and safety concerns related to the preparation and storage of chemicals and the physical deterioration of the science laboratories; and to ensure that improvements achieved during the year prior to the inspection had a positive effect on standards and achievement.

Since the school's last inspection, there have been a number of significant changes to the school's provision. The science laboratories have been extensively refurbished to address the health and safety concerns noted in the last inspection report. A new drama studio has been installed to improve provision for performing arts. The curriculum has been reviewed extensively to offer students a broad range of choices of academic and vocational pathways, and to strengthen provision for music, drama and performance across all years. Students appreciate being able to eat in the new canteen, rather than, as previously, in the hall. Non-teaching heads of year have been appointed to help students gain access to pastoral support more quickly. Following the school's removal from an Ofsted category of concern at the last inspection, the governing body assumed full responsibility for governance of the school from the Interim Executive Board.

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 the students' achievement.

Standards have risen so that overall GCSE and equivalent vocational results were above average for the first time in 2008. Results rose in the majority of subjects, with a number making substantial improvements to turn around performance from well below average in 2007 to average or better in 2008. While this has led to a smoothing out of wide variations in subject performance, some significant differences remain. Standards in science at GCSE, for example, continued to rise strongly in 2008, with results well above average. The school's strength in science is based on a lively, practical, investigative approach to the subject which students find engaging; it encourages them to think independently and reflect carefully on cause and effect. Students are confident in discussing their approaches with adults or their peers, and work well in groups when carrying out practical tasks. Students effectively assess their own work and that of their peers as a means of identifying how to improve. In addition, students' progress in science is rigorously monitored to ensure that they are getting the results of which they are capable.

In the core subjects of English and mathematics, standards remained below average at GCSE in 2008. Students underachieved in these examinations, given that they joined the school with average attainment. Results rose in mathematics but fell in English, so that overall, while the proportion of students gaining five GCSEs at grades A* to C inclusive of English and mathematics rose, it remained slightly below the government's minimum target. However, students' attainment and progress in mathematics and English are strengthening throughout the school as a result of improvements in the quality of teaching and learning, and of swift interventions to give more support to students falling behind. Unvalidated test results for Year 9 students indicate broadly average standards and satisfactory progress. Students themselves acknowledge improvements in the quality of learning in mathematics, brought about by high expectations of teachers, active and varied methods in the classroom, and very careful monitoring of students' progress. In English, while there is some strong practice to be found in engaging students in their learning, lessons on occasions are directed too much by the teacher. In these cases there are insufficient opportunities for students to think or articulate ideas for themselves, so that students with sound literacy skills are not always confident in applying these to tasks they are set.

Health and safety concerns raised in the previous inspection report, particularly around accommodation for science, have been addressed through refurbishment.

Much has been done to promote more effective relationships within the school's own community and within its own locality. More direct engagement with parents has helped the school to raise attendance to above the national average and to make a huge reduction in exclusions. Within the local community, burgeoning partnerships with local schools, colleges and other organisations have helped the school to

diversify and enrich its curriculum. The school's work with the police and youth service to promote the involvement of young people in local projects has been very well received. As yet, though, the school's links with the wider national and international communities are relatively underdeveloped.

The school continues to make effective use of external support to guide its progress, including regular discussions on performance and key developments with its School Improvement Partner. A recent local authority review of the quality of provision, requested by the Interim Executive Board before handing powers to the governing body, proved useful in confirming the school's own findings on the quality of education, and also in offering detailed further advice on the storage of chemicals. The governing body itself continues to maintain a close and well-informed scrutiny of the work of the school.

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

Yours sincerely

Ian Hodgkinson

Additional Inspector