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Mr Ian Smith
Headteacher
Millom School; A DCSF Technology and Arts College
Salthouse Road
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Cumbria
LA18 5AB

Dear Mr Smith

Special measures: monitoring inspection of Millom School; A DCSF
Technology and Arts College

Following my visit John Paddick, AI, to your school on 21 – 22 January 2009, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector to confirm the inspection findings.

The visit was the third monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures in November 2007. The monitoring inspection report is attached and the main judgements are set out below.

Progress since being subject to special measures – satisfactory
Progress since previous monitoring inspection – satisfactory

Newly qualified teachers may be appointed only with the agreement of the lead inspector, in advance.

I am copying this letter and the monitoring inspection report to the Secretary of State, the chair of governors and the Director of Children's Services for Cumbria LA.

Yours sincerely

Pat Kime
Her Majesty's Inspector

Special measures: monitoring of Millom School; A DCSF Technology and Arts College

Report from the third monitoring inspection on 21-22 January 2009

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the headteacher, groups of staff, including those with leadership responsibilities and recent appointees, groups of pupils, a representative of the governing body and representatives of the local authority (LA).

Context

At the start of the current school term a new special educational needs coordinator (SENCO) and a part-time English teacher joined the school's staff.

Achievement and standards

Since the previous monitoring visit in September 2008, data comparing students' performance at GCSE with that seen nationally and in similar schools has been published. This confirms the view of achievement and standards reported in September.

The students who took GCSE examinations in 2008 had not make sufficient progress during their time at the school. The headline figures of five good passes and five good passes including both English and mathematics were significantly below the national average. Underachievement was most prevalent for average and less able students, including those with learning difficulties or special educational needs; for the more able the proportion obtaining five good passes was what would be expected from their attainment at age 11. Nonetheless, in English and mathematics, this year group made considerably better progress in Key Stage 4 than they had done earlier in the school.

Teachers keep a close eye on the standards of students' work and assess their performance regularly against the levels of the National Curriculum and GCSE grades. The senior team and LA staff have supported teachers to improve the accuracy of their assessments. On the basis of these assessments by teachers, the school expects a significant improvement in GCSE results this year. Changes to the curriculum in Key Stage 4 have the potential for a positive impact on standards. Nearly all students are now undertaking courses that lead to accredited qualifications and staff believe the introduction of some modular courses has enhanced students' motivation, for instance in science.

At Key Stage 3, the school's tracking shows that students in Year 7 and Year 8 are reaching the standards that would be expected for them and scrutiny of the work in

a sample of pupils' books supports this. In Year 9, the school's data shows that standards are higher in science than in English.

Exam results indicate that sixth form students make at least satisfactory progress.

Progress since the last visit on the areas for improvement:

- Raise standards and achievement, especially in English and science – satisfactory

Personal development and well-being

During the inspection, pupils usually behaved well in lessons and conducted themselves in an orderly fashion around the school, for instance when moving from one classroom to another. In the most effective lessons students showed a high level of commitment to achievement. Inspectors saw no evidence of deliberate disruption to lessons or poor behaviour. In some lessons, however, the extent of learning continues to be reduced by a degree of restlessness, inattention and time wasting on the part of some pupils when, for example, the classroom routines are not established quickly or the pace of the lesson is laboured.

Quality of provision

The school has continued to monitor the quality of teaching and its records of lesson observations show an increasing proportion of good teaching. Students say lessons are pacier and more often involve them in active ways of learning, and that teachers focus more on students' progress towards their targets. The lessons observed by inspectors broadly confirmed the school's evaluations of teaching and none were inadequate. The impact of continuing professional development and of personalised packages of support for some teachers is evident but some of the satisfactory teaching remains fragile. In English some of the teaching in Key Stage 3 is not strong enough to enable students to overcome the legacy of earlier underachievement. Where the teaching was at its most effective, teachers' enthusiasm and lively style captured and held students' attention and interest. In these lessons students of all abilities worked with a good degree of independence and a commitment to learning.

The key elements that distinguished the most successful lessons from those that were simply satisfactory were:

- the match of the tasks set for students to the planned learning outcomes
- the extent to which the work was tailored to meet the full range of the students' attainment
- the management of students' behaviour and, consequently students' application to their work, their commitment to achievement, and pace of learning.

Recent whole-school training for staff on the social and emotional aspects of learning included a focus on consistent strategies for managing students' behaviour. However, it is too early to judge the impact on teachers' skills in this area.

Teachers' use of assessment has improved. Students are clearer about what they are expected to achieve and their progress towards their individual targets. Much marking is well focused on giving students pointers for improvement and there are examples of very effective marking. The arrangements for assessing students' progress in science have improved so staff have a better picture of students' progress across aspects of the subject. The accuracy of teachers' assessments has improved but is not fully secure across all subjects.

The new head of the English department, with support from an assistant headteacher, has produced a more coherent and progressive programme of work for Key Stage 3. As a result, the teachers know what they are expected to teach and students in different teaching groups in the same year study the same topics. This was seen during the inspection when students in different 'sets' in Year 9 were all working on Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. Likewise, the newly appointed SENCO has been supported in drawing up plans to tackle the underachievement of students with special educational needs.

Progress since the last visit on the areas for improvement:

- Increase the pace and challenge in lessons and ensure that poor behaviour does not disrupt the learning – satisfactory

Leadership and management

There has been considerable improvement in the school's use of data and a further step up in the contribution of middle managers. These improvements have the potential for positive impact on the quality of teaching and learning and on students' achievement.

A well planned programme of professional development, linked well to the school's priorities and supported by LA staff, has been a key factor. The 'away day' for heads of departments has proved particularly significant. They report a better understanding of their responsibilities, particularly in ensuring that the teachers they manage are held accountable for students' achievement; an increased sense of common purpose; and greater consistency of expectations of staff and students across departments. A number of heads of departments who met with the inspectors showed good knowledge of students' achievement and standards and the teaching in their subjects and they know what issues remain to be tackled. Staff at all levels report improved morale and confidence and say they feel supported by the senior team.

The developing culture of accountability is supported by rigorous analysis of performance data. This is now used to set challenging targets for students, to keep

track of progress towards them, and to trigger a range of intervention strategies to tackle underachievement. The directors of learning for each Key Stage have developed their skills. They are supported well by senior staff and they work in partnership with heads of departments. Training in the interpretation of data has improved teachers' understanding.

One of the assistant headteachers has taken on leadership of the school's specialisms and a sound plan has been produced to support further development. Specialist status has a positive impact on standards as some of the better performing departments are those of specialist subjects.

Governors are knowledgeable about the school's work and they remain closely involved in its efforts to improve.

Progress since the last visit on the areas for improvement:

- Ensure the rigorous and consistent implementation of new policies and systems to raise achievement – good
- Improve the rigour and effectiveness with which leaders and managers at all levels monitor the school's work – good

External support

The LA has continued to provide effective support. Its consultants have worked closely with staff and the school's leaders. For example, they have supported work on accurate assessment of students' work against the levels of the National Curriculum; moderated teachers' assessments; and observed lessons. The LA's school specific monitoring group keeps the school's progress under review, challenges the senior team constructively and points the school to useful examples of success, from which it might learn, in other schools

The school improvement partner has been replaced by a National Challenge advisor, from the LA, who has visited the school and reported on what needs to be done to tackle the weaknesses identified in November 2007 and the priorities set at the last monitoring inspection.

Priorities for further improvement

- Improve pupils' achievement in English, particularly in Key Stage 3.
- Further improve the quality of teaching by moving more of that which is currently satisfactory to good.
- Monitor and consolidate the recently introduced systems to ensure staff are held to account for students' progress.