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Mr J Whitcombe  
Headteacher  
The Westlands School  
Westlands Avenue  
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Kent  
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Dear Mr Whitcombe

Ofsted survey inspection programme – Creative Learning

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff and students, during my visit on 20-21 October 2008 to look at creative learning.

As outlined in our initial letter, the visit had a particular focus on the ways in which you develop creative learning and the impact this is having on achievement and standards and on students' personal development.

The visit provided valuable information which will contribute to our national evaluation and reporting. Published reports are likely to list the names of the contributing institutions but individual institutions will not be identified in the main text. All feedback letters will be published on the Ofsted website at the end of each half-term.

The evidence used to inform the judgements made included interviews with staff and learners, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of students' work and observation of parts of ten lessons and other activities.

The overall effectiveness of your school's development of creative learning was judged to be outstanding.

Achievement and standards and personal development

Attainment on entry to the school is broadly average, though there are relatively few high attaining students. The number of students with special needs is above average. Most groups of students make progress that is much better than average from the time when they enter the school in Year 7 to the end of Year 11. The school is committed to supporting the very best achievement, and the use of creative learning makes an excellent contribution both to students' learning and to their personal development. In particular, students gain greatly in self-confidence because they know that their opinions will be valued by teachers and students alike. They are not afraid to make

hypotheses and they develop the skills they need to become effective learners. Especially good enjoyment and involvement were seen in a sixth form English lesson to prepare a recorded guide to the school, a Year 8 lesson on the solar system, and a construction group in Year 11. In all these lessons, students created a unique piece of work in which they could take a real pride. Your staff has a good understanding of the role played by creative learning in raising attainment, but explicit reference to it as part of your own monitoring is still an area for development.

### Quality of teaching and learning in relation to the survey

Teaching and learning are good overall and the use of assessment to monitor students' progress and promote effective learning is also good. In the best lessons, judged to be outstanding, students undertook tasks which required them to be creative, such as designing a rice salad in Year 7 or a poster of the solar system in Year 8. Collaborative work meant that students were constantly required to promote their ideas, respond to criticism, and evaluate their own work and that of others. These techniques have proved to be especially successful in work with students who find conventional academic schooling hard to relate to, and an outstanding lesson in construction was seen with a group of Year 11 students who clearly appreciated the direct relevance of the course to their future employment prospects.

Use of creative techniques, often involving use of personal computers to promote independent learning, is also important with the most able students. However, the school is clear that it is important to match teaching closely to each student's needs and that sometimes more traditional teaching methods lead to the best achievement, especially for the highest attainers. However, the culture of promoting creativity, cross-curricular activities, and the personal skills of collaborative work, evaluation and refinement is a very strong one which pervades the work of the school and helps students to achieve as well as possible.

### Quality of the curriculum

The quality of the curriculum overall is outstanding. The school has considered very carefully how the curriculum can be adapted to meet the needs of all students. A carefully thought-out course at the end of the summer term, conducted in conjunction with local primary schools, makes excellent use of the resources available as a result of the school's specialist status and ensures that new entrants to the school make a secure start. Vocational courses are integral to the work of the school and are taken by all students to complement more traditional, general courses. The beneficial effects of imaginative teaching and creative learning were seen across many areas of the school, but the school's tracking data show that it is with potentially disaffected and lower ability students in Years 10 and 11 that the use of creative learning has had the most dramatic effect and made a significant difference to overall achievement.

The school demonstrates a strong belief that every child matters and combines cross-curricular work, extra curricular activities vocational courses

and vertical tutoring to produce a vibrant curriculum designed to match all students' needs.

### Leadership and management

Your leadership of the school is outstanding. Your conviction that creative learning is key to the school's excellent contextual value added scores is fully borne out by observations over the two days. You and your team of senior leaders and staff manage the work of the school with an outstanding sense of purpose and drive that stems from an understanding that when students are being creative they are learning well. You have inspired your staff by your approach, so that they eagerly accept the challenge of introducing creative learning into as many lessons as possible. The challenges you set inspire them to further training, to share their skills freely and to contribute willingly to the further development of the school.

### Equality and diversity

This is a highly inclusive school, through its curriculum, through its support structure, and through day to day teaching. All courses are available to any students, and though there are some single sex groups, this stems from students exercising freedom of choice. For example, the construction group is currently all boys, but this has not always been the case, and there is no bar to girls choosing this course.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- incorporating the evaluation of creative learning into monitoring procedures
- incorporating opportunities for creative learning into the work of all students wherever possible.

I hope these observations are useful as you continue to develop creative styles of learning in your school.

As explained in our previous letter, a copy of this letter will be sent to your local authority and will be published on the Ofsted website. It will also be available to the team for your next institutional inspection.

Yours sincerely

David Lewis  
Additional Inspector