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Dear Mr Walls

Ofsted survey inspection programme – Planning for change: the impact of the new Key Stage 3 curriculum

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 07 November 2008 to look at work in planning for and implementing the new Key Stage 3 curriculum with particular reference to Year 7.

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 students, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of students' work and observation of four lessons.

The overall effectiveness of the planning for and implementation of the new Key Stage 3 curriculum was judged to be good.

Achievement and standards

Achievement in Year 7 is good. Students enter the school with below average standards and make rapid progress in lessons.

- This is partly because of good quality teaching and a stimulating curriculum, but owes much also to the highly positive ethos pervading the school. Consequently students are extremely well behaved and keen to learn in lessons.
- Recent changes to provision reflect the school's own initiatives as well as new Key Stage 3 requirements. Their impact on standards cannot be judged reliably at this stage because it is too early. In addition, the

school is aware that it has still to systematically map and monitor students' functional skills and personal, learning and thinking skills.

- However, some actions recently taken by the school have already had an excellent impact on students' personal development. It has recently introduced special events such as an annual "Take Over Day" and six "Flexible Learning Days" to promote greater engagement of students, stronger team work, self awareness and understanding of financial matters. These have had an instant and lasting effect on students' confidence, self esteem and team work skills as well as giving them a real insight into the world of work. Relationships between students and staff have strengthened further from an already good starting point.
- Twice-weekly 'Personalised Learning Curriculum' (PLC) sessions have strengthened personal, health and social education provision, along with Extended PLC events every two weeks.

Quality of teaching and learning

The quality of teaching and learning in Year 7 is good.

- Relationships in lessons are particularly positive.
- The school has succeeded in establishing an extremely constructive attitude to learning amongst students.
- Teachers value students highly and events such as "Take-Over Day" (in which many students act as class teachers, preparing and helping lead lessons) reinforce this superbly.
- Strategies such as paired work, group work, self assessment and peer assessment are used increasingly well. There is still scope for greater consistency in helping students understand their levels of achievement and ensuring challenging work is set for able students.

Quality of the curriculum

The quality of the new curriculum in Year 7 is good.

- The outstanding features for Year 7 (and other year groups) are the special days and sessions such as "Take Over Day" the "Flexible Learning Days" and the PLC. These are having an exceptionally good impact on students', awareness of others, self awareness, imaginative thinking and their enjoyment of school.
- Collectively these strategies promote a highly developed sense of economic reality and awareness of financial matters even amongst the school's youngest students. The school has received national recognition for its work in this area.
- In addition it has begun to offer very good jointly planned projects: for instance, information and communication technology and geography's collaboration on assessment; art and English working together on a Beowulf project; and religious education and geography's field work on environmental responsibility.
- Visual art, the school's specialism, makes an excellent contribution to the curriculum, being at the fore-front of work on self-evaluation, peer evaluation and inter-subject projects.

- These developments stem primarily from the school's independent review of its work and subsequent action plan. The role of new Key Stage 3 requirements fits well with these priorities and enhances many of them.
- Other new emphases in the new Key Stage 3 curriculum are less clearly established in day to day lessons. Planning for Year 7 and Year 8 has progressed no more than is common nationally. Schemes of work do not routinely establish the good differentiation, team work, inter-subject collaboration and focus on skills work that exist in parts of the Year 7 curriculum.

Leadership and management of the new Key Stage 3 curriculum.

The leadership and management of the new Key Stage 3 curriculum are good.

- For the school as a whole there is evidence that leadership and management have an outstanding impact on standards and achievement. The Year 7 curriculum has been less of a focus until recently.
- It is too early to note an impact on standards but recent changes to provision have given an impressive boost to students' already excellent personal development. These initiatives arise in part from the new Key Stage 3 requirements but also reflect the school's pre-existing priorities.
- The curriculum is well led and training for new requirements has been done well by the school. It reports less input from external sources to the training programme than is common.
- Middle leaders are aware of the significance of functional skills and personal, learning and thinking skills. Their existing schemes of work offer students good support in these areas but the curriculum revision process has yet to ensure comprehensive coverage and mechanisms for monitoring these skills.
- The school manages transition from primary schools into Year 7 well and students speak very highly of how welcoming they have found secondary school. Several talked of the "extra freedom" it gave them, both to explore as a campus and in the variety of stimulating subjects and teaching approaches it offers.

Inclusion

The impact of the curriculum on inclusion is good.

- The school is exceptionally welcoming to students of all backgrounds, abilities and needs. It succeeds in its goal of helping them feel settled and highly valued.
- Its provision backs this up well in most respects, especially via the well tailored help for the high proportion of students with learning difficulties.
- Provision for a smaller number of able students is good in places but less consistent.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- completing the updating of schemes of work to establish as normal, rather than special, the good differentiation, team work, inter-subject collaboration and focus on skills work that exist in parts of the Year 7 curriculum
- set up mechanisms for monitoring students' acquisition of the functional and personal skills required by the new Key Stage 3 curriculum.

I hope these observations are useful as you continue to develop the curriculum in the school.

As I explained in my 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

Bob Drew
Additional Inspector