

20 April 2009

Mrs Julia Ridley  
Headteacher  
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Dear Mrs Ridley

### Ofsted monitoring of Grade 3 schools

Thank you for the help which you and your staff gave when I inspected your school on 1 April 2009, for the time you gave to our phone discussions and for the information which you provided before and during my visit. Please extend my thanks to the staff, the chair of governors, the educational consultants and the attached improvement adviser from the local authority.

There have been significant changes to the leadership of the school since the last inspection. Following the retirement of the headteacher, a new appointment was made in September 2008. The deputy headteacher has been absent from the school since January 2009 and an acting deputy is in place. Three classes are currently taught by supply staff. There have been several changes in the leadership of the governing body, with the current chair taking up post at the end of March 2009. The local authority continues to give additional support to the school, including the funding of the work of two part-time external educational consultants. At the time of the last inspection, the majority of students had moderate learning difficulties, although most new admissions presented more complex needs. This trend has continued. The majority of students now have severe learning difficulties or autism.

As a result of the inspection on 10 and 11 January 2008, the school was asked to:

- improve the work of the governing body, leaders and managers so that all aspects of the school's work are regularly monitored, evaluated and developed
- develop and implement a robust system for tracking and assessing students' attainment and progress, and use the information to inform planning for school improvement
- improve the achievement of students with severe learning difficulties by improving teaching, the curriculum and resources, and the use of assessment to underpin planning for learning.

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. Following the last inspection, there was a period when the issues were not addressed quickly enough. Insufficient attention was given to improving the provision to match the changing needs of the students better. However, over the past two terms, the pace of change has quickened. There is good evidence of significant improvements since January this year, but there is still a long way to go and this increased momentum will need to be maintained in order to make all the necessary changes. In general, most students make the progress that they should from their individual starting points, but there is too much variability in the rate at which they progress. This is directly linked to the quality of teaching and to current developments in the curriculum and in assessment.

There has been satisfactory progress in improving the work of the governing body and of leaders and managers. The governors, many of whom are new to the group, have a clear focus on gaining a sound evidence base from which to challenge the work of the school. They acknowledge the need to gain a better understanding of how assessment information is used to measure whether students' progress is good enough. There is also a need for the governing body to establish a cycle to monitor the effectiveness of policies and systems, particularly those that have been newly introduced, so that they are sufficiently rooted in the difference they make for students. The work of the resources committee has been particularly successful in improving financial control, providing appropriate attention to health and safety, and bringing about the necessary improvements to the learning environment. A single central record of the checks made on staff is now in place and meets the government requirements with regard to safeguarding students.

The headteacher knows the school, and its strengths and weaknesses, very well and actively seeks professional advice from others. The use of outside professional support works very well to achieve planned improvements. There is now a systematic and well-thought-through approach to monitoring, evaluating and developing the provision. Improvements to the curriculum, assessment and teaching are sensibly being developed in tandem and at a pace that is sustainable. Inadequacies in teaching and learning have been accurately identified and robust action taken to address weaknesses. The leadership team have quite rightly focused on providing staff with the training and professional experiences that they need to meet the changing needs of the students. Good relationships and high morale have been successfully maintained during the recent period of change and the students remain well settled and motivated to learn. Middle managers are not yet contributing fully to the improvement process but plans are in place to develop their roles further. Although the leadership team are very clear about the things that need to change, in consultation with the governing body, they now need to develop a clear picture of the aspirations that they have for the different groups of students so that they can monitor and measure the effectiveness of the provision more robustly.

The school has made satisfactory progress in developing systems to track and assess students' attainment and progress. An electronic system is now in place to track

attainment in all subjects, recording achievements in small steps. It is still too soon for the assessment information to be used consistently across the school. However, staff are beginning to use the data to analyse the strengths and weaknesses in each student's academic and personal performance. The information is used to set targets for individual students. More work needs to be done to ensure that the targets are suitably challenging, based on a clear picture of the level of progress expected for different groups of students. In addition, the targets need to be used more consistently to ensure that, within each lesson, different activities are planned for different groups of students according to their needs.

Progress towards addressing the third point for improvement is inadequate. This is because, while the achievement of students with the most severe and complex needs remains generally satisfactory, there is too much variability in the quality of teaching and learning across the school. As accurately identified by the school, some teaching is good but too much of it is inadequate. An appropriate range of high-quality training has helped to develop the staff's confidence and this has improved the quality of teaching overall, but urgent attention needs to be given to removing the remaining weaknesses. A revised curriculum has been in place since January 2009, matched to a reorganisation of classes according to three levels of ability. This is helping staff to focus on the needs of particular groups of students. But the curriculum is not sufficiently developed to help all teachers plan suitable activities to support the learning objectives. This is impeding the systematic progression of students' knowledge, skills and understanding. Suitable plans are in place to implement a completely revised timetable and curriculum in time for the next academic year.

The local authority is very aware of the school's challenges at this time and is providing an appropriate level of support. The strategic development remains clearly with the leadership team and governing body, with the local authority contributing appropriately to ensure rigorous and robust monitoring for sustained improvement.

I hope that you have found the visit helpful in promoting improvement in your school. This letter will be posted on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Heather Yaxley  
Her Majesty's Inspector