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Dear Mr Cooper

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 12 January 2009 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

Students enter the school with standards that are below average. Their achievement is good.

- Recent changes to the Key Stage 3 curriculum contribute to the students' good progress, alongside other established factors. It is too early to see this translating into higher overall standards, but progress rates are better than in previous years.
- The progress of students entering with moderate or severe reading difficulties have risen more steeply than usual this year.

- The targeted support from a Special Educational Needs programme and a Basic Skills programme has, this year, been further personalised which has had a positive impact on achievement.
- The greater freedom offered by the curriculum has allowed staff to adjust the learning of individual students to their preferred speed or areas of interest and recovery of reading skills has been very marked.
- The year group as a whole has improved well in terms of personal development, shown by higher attendance levels, fewer exclusions and surveys indicating very high levels of student satisfaction.
- Lessons and interviews confirm that students very much enjoy the way they are taught. Many show a good awareness of how they learn and recognise that active participation helps them make progress.
- Students take considerably more responsibility for their own learning than is usual. They extend this to wanting to help others make good progress.
- Staff find the year group particularly well motivated and very positive about new features of the curriculum.

Quality of teaching and learning

The quality of teaching and learning in Year 7 is good. Excellent practice is also present.

- Teaching is lively, well prepared and, at times, pleasantly unpredictable. Students are not always sure what might happen next, but expect something exciting which will involve them.
- Staff have made impressive progress in ensuring heavy participation by students in all lessons. This partly reflects careful differentiation so that all have access, support and challenge. It also stems from lesson structures built around rapid-fire question and answer sessions. Good use is made of information and communication technology (ICT) to provide stimulus material. Teachers make sure that students know their views and ideas matter; they create a learning atmosphere in which it is good to explore, try out responses and sometimes be wrong.
- Teachers and teaching assistants provide especially well for students with learning difficulties or a deficit in literacy skills. Intervention strategies are applied early on in the year and reading recovery rates are very rapid.
- Students' personal, learning and thinking skills (PLTS) are given prominence by staff. Their lessons systematically build up students' confidence, freedom to seek advice and help, ability to work independently, be creative and display their eagerness to learn.
- Self and peer assessment is used very regularly and owes some of its prominence to the recent Key Stage 3 initiatives.

Quality of the curriculum

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

- Amongst recent successful changes to the curriculum is the enrichment programme which occupies Thursday afternoons and offers a carousel of options. Students speak eagerly about this programme, especially the fact that they can suggest options to supplement those supplied by staff and the attractive overall range of choices. The programme will be extended into Year 8 next year.
- Most subject leaders have yet to systematically work PLTS and Functional Skills (FS) across their full programmes of study. However, they have selected particular skills, such as independent learning and effective participation, and quickly established them as standard features in all their lessons.
- Some topics successfully link subjects, such as geography units taught in French, and students respond very positively to the new ways they have to learn in such lessons.

Leadership and management of the new Key Stage 3 curriculum

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

- Senior leaders have whole-heartedly welcomed the new curriculum and fostered a very positive response from middle managers. It has already had a good impact on students' personal development and on aspects of attainment.
- Planning by the Local Authority and school has been effective; it started in good time, built on existing good practice and has been implemented securely. Subject leaders have been allowed freedom to interpret initiatives creatively and this has kept their motivation strong.
- Plans indicate clearly how unfinished implementation will proceed. The track record shows the school to be good at completing initiatives it starts. Its monitoring has been very effective in ensuring benefits are maximised and problems dealt with as they emerge.
- The school specialisms of languages and vocational education have been used well in promoting better provision at KS3. Extensive language teaching is helping students understand how they learn; it also leads the way in developing cross curricular topics. Expertise in vocational work in Key Stage 4 provides the school with imaginative staff and systems for introducing changes in Year 7; it also offers better continuity between key stages than in many schools.

Inclusion

The impact of the curriculum on inclusion is good.

- The school has strong existing expertise in serving students with learning or physical disabilities well. It has used the new Key Stage 3 initiatives to develop these further through even better personalisation of the curriculum in lessons. Teaching assistants have been encouraged and trained to take the lead in this process.
- Access to the curriculum has been improved by placing emphasis on topics and approaches for which students show a preference. Their

interest has also risen because of the enrichment programme they rate so highly. As a result, Year 7 lower attaining students and those with learning difficulties are making particularly rapidly progress this year.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- completing the process of embedding all the new skills into the programmes of study for each subject
- expanding the place of cross-subject topics in the curriculum, building on successful early projects.

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