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Dear Mr Forster

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 19 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

Standards on entry to the present Year 7 were average. At this early stage of the implementation of the new Key Stage 3 curriculum, it is not possible to make a firm judgement on its impact on achievement but the progress of the students seen in lessons was good.

- The quality of the work seen in students' books confirmed the judgements on standards and progress.
- Students say they are making good progress because they enjoy their work and like their teachers. Attendance rates are above average.
- Students' literacy and numeracy skills are at the level expected for their age but their information and communication technology (ICT) skills are more highly developed.

- Standards of presentation in students' books are good and testify to the interest and pride they take in their work.
- Students' personal development is good. They work hard, get on well with each other and are confident and articulate young people.
- Vulnerable students are well integrated into the life of the school and become confident and self-reliant learners.
- The behaviour seen in lessons was excellent. Students say they learn well because they feel safe and free from any form of bullying or intimidation.
- The responsibilities the older students take on as mentors and sports leaders contribute significantly to their good personal development.

Quality of teaching and learning

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

- Lesson planning is good because work is suitably challenging and varied teaching approaches are used to motivate students.
- Teachers' assessments of students' progress are accurate and their marking and the feedback they give to students in lessons are good.
- The pace of learning in lessons is brisk and effective use is made of homework to consolidate and extend the work done in class.
- Students spoke enthusiastically about their use of ICT for learning, the stimulating work done on the interactive whiteboard in lessons and their frequent access to the school's visual learning environment website. The use of ICT for teaching and learning is excellent and contributes significantly to the good progress Year 7 students are making after just one term in the school.
- The range of questioning techniques used in the lessons seen was limited. Opportunities were missed to pose open-ended 'What if?' and 'Why?' questions to generate reflection and discussion on the work done.
- Students' attitudes to learning are good but at times a small number of the students seen failed to listen carefully to what the teacher was saying.

Quality of the curriculum

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

- The school has done good work in reviewing curriculum provision against the qualifications, skills and personal attributes it deems essential for students' future success.
- As a result, the development of students' personal, learning, thinking and functional skills, including the social and emotional aspects of learning, is now evident in schemes of work and lesson plans and was seen in the four Year 7 lessons observed.
- The school's specialist status for mathematics, ICT and science has improved curriculum provision, resulting in a rise in standards in those subjects. The status has also enabled the school to build closer links with its feeder schools to ensure continuity of learning across the key stages.

- Good use has been made of the additional curriculum flexibility to provide more opportunities for students to work independently, particularly through research projects. It has also enabled staff to work together in planning for a whole school creative event to be held in the summer term.
- Planning to give students greater coherence in their learning is at an early stage. The school's development priority is to break down curriculum rigidity and make subject links more flexible.
- A second priority in its development planning is to create a manageable monitoring and assessment system for evaluating the impact of students' personal, learning, thinking and functional skills on their progress and achievement.
- There are extensive and well-attended extra-curricular activities to enrich and extend learning.
- The school's personal, social, health and citizenship education programme provides well for students' personal development. It covers most of the non-statutory elements of the revised National Curriculum but the school has yet to incorporate economic well-being and financial capability into the scheme of work.

Leadership and management of the new Key Stage 3 curriculum

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

- The introduction of the new Key Stage 3 curriculum has been managed and led effectively by senior leaders. They are well informed about the developments and have ensured that staff have had sufficient time to assimilate the new requirements, review provision and adapt schemes of work.
- The result is that staff were well prepared for the start in September. There is already evidence of greater prominence being given in their lessons to the teaching of learning skills.
- Subject leaders have been fully involved in planning for and implementing the changes. They are enthusiastic about the new opportunities for greater collaborative working, as seen in the detailed plans in place for the summer creative event.
- The school has been successful in involving parents in their children's education, many having sat in on lessons or attended curriculum briefing sessions. As a result, they have a good understanding of how well their children are doing and what they can do to help them in their work.
- The school's self-assessment is good and appropriate plans are in place to address the two development priorities recorded above. As a result the school is well placed to improve further.

Inclusion

The impact of the curriculum on inclusion is outstanding.

- The curriculum is accessible to all students and inclusion is central to the school's development planning.

- There are vulnerable students who join the school with emotional and social difficulties. The work the school does in meeting these needs is outstanding and as a result they make good academic progress and excellent progress in their personal development.
- This has received recognition by Cheshire's Inclusion Service. It highlights the quality of the school's learning support programmes for the development of social and life skills, the extended work placements and the alternative curriculum provision.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- defining the criteria against which curriculum changes will be evaluated
- extending students' understanding of the links between subjects.

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

Brian Dower
Additional Inspector