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Dear Mr Woods

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 Tuesday 27 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 below 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 observed in lessons was good.

- The range and the quality of the work seen in most Year 7 books confirm the judgements on standards and progress.
- There are a few students who struggle to organise and present their work well. Writing is not set out logically and the use of diagrams, charts or graphs to illustrate key points is underdeveloped.

- Year 7 students say they enjoy the challenge of their work and that their knowledge and understanding are increasing.
- Although their basic skills were below average on entry to the school, Year 7 students are making brisk progress in developing their ability to use literacy, numeracy and information and communication technology (ICT) skills in their learning.
- Year 7 students' personal, social, moral and cultural development is good. Their spiritual development and their sense of well-being are outstanding.
- The behaviour seen in lessons was good and Year 7 students say they learn well because they feel safe and free from any form of intimidation or bullying.
- Attendance rates are average when compared to national levels. Compared to schools in similar circumstances they are good. Exclusions are low and on a downward trend.

Quality of teaching and learning

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

- The development of personal, learning and thinking skills is prominent in teachers' lesson planning. In the lessons seen, Year 7 students were given extensive opportunities to work as a team, to participate actively, to be creative in their approach to solving problems and to reflect on how well they were learning.
- Students can explain their favourite learning techniques. They say they learn best through group activities where they can share ideas and help each other. Role play is enjoyed because it gives them an understanding of the social and emotional aspects of learning. Visiting speakers bring new experiences and different perspectives on life. Extensive use is made of ICT in lessons and many spoke about the impact of using the inter-active whiteboard on their motivation to learn.
- Some students have difficulty working independently and taking responsibility for their own learning. This is a development point revealed by the school's audit of students' needs.
- Working relationships are good. The pace of learning in the lessons seen was brisk, good humour was evident and students left the classroom smiling.
- Teachers monitor and assess students' progress accurately and most marking helps students to raise the standard of their work. In some of the books seen, however, no written guidance was given on how to improve.
- Students who are vulnerable or who have learning difficulties and/or disabilities are well integrated into lessons and make good progress. This is because their needs are identified early and timely and appropriate arrangements are made to support them. Teaching assistants play a key role in this.

Quality of the curriculum

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

- The school has made good progress in adapting schemes of work to incorporate the revised National Curriculum. Greater prominence is now given to students' personal, learning and thinking skills.
- Audits of students' needs and of the provision the school makes have been undertaken. Curriculum changes have been made and are on-going. Project days are planned for Year 7 to make the links between subjects clear to students. Good practice exists to inform such developments, for example in the links between technology, science and geography.
- The school has worked closely with its feeder primary schools to give students continuity in their learning when they transfer. Its specialist status in technology has provided the resources and expertise to do this well.
- Appropriate curriculum provision for the transition group and booster class has enabled lower attaining students to make rapid progress.
- The school's personal, social, health and citizenship education programme provides well for students' personal development. It covers the non-statutory elements of the revised National Curriculum, including economic well-being and financial capability.
- There are extensive extra-curricular clubs, activities and sporting and cultural opportunities which are well attended. They do much to extend students' understanding of the work done in class and promote their well-being.
- The additional time released in some areas of the new National Curriculum is being used to extend creative learning activities and encourage more independent working.

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 well and led effectively by senior leaders. Existing provision has been mapped against an audit of students' needs and changes made to make the curriculum fit for purpose.
- This has resulted in good curriculum planning which gives prominence to the way students learn and the basic skills they need in all subjects. These developments have been informed by the planning experience the school has gained as a specialist college.
- Subject leaders have played a key role in planning and in ensuring that all staff were well prepared for the start in September. They have had sufficient time to assimilate the new requirements and adapt schemes of work.
- The specialist status has played a significant part in raising standards and creating a forward looking, positive ethos for learning in the school. It has also enabled the school to provide appropriate and timely training for staff.
- The school's self-assessment is good and appropriate plans are in place to give students a more coherent educational experience by making the links between subjects clearer.

- The school recognises that monitoring of the implementation of agreed policies needs to be tighter to ensure consistency of practice across all subjects.

Inclusion

The impact of the curriculum on inclusion is good.

- The school's Christian beliefs and values centre on giving every student every opportunity to succeed.
- The curriculum and the programme of activities outside lessons are accessible to all students.
- There are vulnerable students who join the school with emotional and social difficulties and students who have learning difficulties and/or disabilities. The school works effectively to meet these needs and as a result such students make good progress academically and in their personal development.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- the consistent application of agreed teaching and learning policies
- the presentation of students' written work and their use of illustrations to emphasise key points.

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