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Dear Mr Taylor

Ofsted survey programme visit - National Strategies survey 2008-09

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 23 January 2009 to look at the impact of the National Strategies on raising standards and narrowing the attainment gap.

As outlined in my initial letter, the visit focused on the work of the National Strategies in improving outcomes for children and young people. The visit focused particularly on the school's view of the impact of the National Strategies and how this is evaluated.

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 schools 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 outcomes of the visit included three interviews with the Headteacher and members of the Senior Leadership Team, including a lunchtime briefing with representatives of those departments that had received National Strategy support. I also observed three lessons, including two joint observations and scrutinised relevant documentation. The visit did not consider in detail the work of the sixth form.

Staff at Kirkby College hold consistent views regarding the effectiveness of support from the National Strategies. There was an agreement that the quality and impact of this support had been good overall. However this was linked to a widely shared recognition that both the timing and school level leadership of that support was critical to the success. Strategies that have been adopted include the implementation of a clear three-part lesson structure throughout the college with shared lesson and learning objectives. Behaviour management strategies and a closer monitoring of absence rates and patterns, led initially by national strategy advice, have helped improve both overall behaviour and attendance.

The provision of additional consultant support was welcomed and the quality was felt to be generally high. In addition to this staff felt that the quality of additional resources for individual lessons was good. However, by far the most welcome source of support was felt to be the use of enhanced assessment techniques which are being increasingly effectively implemented throughout the college. Senior leaders felt that this had resulted in a closer identification of student need and more precise monitoring of individual student progress. Some good examples of this were evident in one of the lessons observed where students were very clear about what they had to do to achieve a certain grade in their forthcoming examinations and what the marking criteria would be for each grade. However, it was also acknowledged that this had become increasingly effective once the college had taken a strategic lead in how it was to be implemented rather than it being seen as an external requirement driven by consultants. This was also identified as a key lever in improving the quality of teaching and learning, not least in contributing to a richer programme of professional development that has been developed both within the college and through the various partnerships and networks with which staff are engaged. The college hosts a meeting at least twice a year with all external consultants to plan a programme of engagement and expectations. This college-led initiative has served to put a framework on national strategy advice and support.

Although the effectiveness of national strategy support would be characterised as good overall by the senior staff it was also apparent that it was seen to be most effective when in the initial stages of implementation. In particular, help with straightforward systems and structures to improve attendance and behaviour had been successful and assistance in conducting an audit of basic provision was useful in allowing the college to set basic expected standards. However, as the college improved in the period following 2006 however the impact of these initiatives became less driven by external advisory colleagues and more by the college itself.

During the lessons observed, behaviour was good with students on task and engaged with the lesson content. In one science lesson, students worked independently and showed a readiness to accept responsibility for their own learning. Relationships between students and staff were constructive and respectful. There was a willingness to learn that was evident throughout. This was captured by some students in Year 11 who recognised that they were now 'learning much more quickly' due to good quality teaching. The college sees this shift in culture as a significant improvement and recognises the impact of the national strategies behaviour consultants and additional materials on this. Staff acknowledge that, although good, there is some room for further improvement in general behaviour and continue to take action to support those students who misbehave.

One particularly successful impact of national strategies has been in relation to Information and communication technology (ICT). Frequent assessment and a sharp eye on developing literacy skills through ICT has considerably improved the quality of provision and outcomes in the subject and literacy

skills generally. This focus is also having benefits in subjects that were already strong performers such as mathematics.

Over the period 2005 to 2008 the pattern of achievement and standards has been variable with some students underachieving across key stages and core subjects. The college currently receives additional funding support following it being identified as a National Challenge provider in spring 2008. This initiative supported the implementation of a strong intervention programme in the lead up to the 2008 national tests and examinations. As a consequence the proportion of students managing this has risen from 21% in 2007 to 31% in 2008. The college is confident that improvement will continue into 2009 and is targeting 38%. The gains made in 2008 mean that the college has already achieved the national floor target for this age range and anticipate further improvement with the help of National Challenge funding.

The college is aware that there are several hurdles that remain to be cleared. The performance of the boys is generally lower than that of the girls, especially in English, and some subject departments remain below national averages, both in terms of student progress and attainment. It serves as a useful raising attainment plan. There is an awareness that the impact of national strategy support, although welcome as part of an early recovery period, will be lessening over time and that a clear exit strategy is emerging. There is also however an appropriate and growing sense of self confidence and optimism as a result of the improvements made over the last two years.

I hope you find this feedback useful.

Ofsted gathers information on the immediate and longer-term impact of survey inspections, both on the institutions themselves, and with a view to improving its own processes. To this end, I should be grateful if you would complete the attached questionnaire and return it within the next ten days. We have also just sent a copy of the questionnaire by email. Please return your completed questionnaire to either the email or postal address on the form, not to me. We may also contact some schools by telephone after several months in order for us to gain a picture of longer-term impact. Thank you in advance for your assistance.

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

Ceri Morgan
Her Majesty's Inspector