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Mr C Eves
The Headteacher
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Dear Mr Eves

Ofsted monitoring of schools with a notice to improve

Thank you for the help which you and your staff gave when I inspected your school on 7 July 2009, for the time you gave to our phone discussions, and for the information which you provided before and during my visit. Please pass on my thanks to the students, staff and the chair of governors who gave their time to talk to me.

Since the last inspection, the management team has been restructured and now consists of the principal and three assistant principals.

As a result of the inspection on 8 and 9 December 2008, the school was asked to:

- tackle the legacy of boys' underachievement and the inadequate progress of some groups of students through the strategic analysis of data to plan targeted interventions
- ensure behaviour is of a consistently high standard around the school and in all lessons
- ensure teaching consistently uses assessment information on students' performance to secure learning which matches the differing needs of students
- establish a stable senior leadership team which effectively and strategically uses information on the performance of the school to secure improved outcomes for learners' achievement and personal development.

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 pupils' achievement.

Standards across the school remain satisfactory. Students are now making satisfactory progress, except in science at Key Stage 3 where only a small minority are making the expected progress. Current data show that boys and students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are making better progress and there is no



significant difference between the performance of these groups and that of girls. The improvement is the result of more accurate record keeping and analysis of data which are then used to plan effective intervention strategies for students on the C/D borderline. This has had a positive impact particularly in English and mathematics. A new whole school system for tracking students' progress is planned to be in place for September. This has been welcomed by middle managers who recognise the need to have a consistent procedure with regular assessment points, which coordinates data from all departments.

In classrooms, the use of assessment information to provide work that is well matched to students' needs is still very inconsistent. Too many teachers are still not planning sufficiently thoroughly to take account of prior learning or to meet the specific needs of individual students. There is good practice in the school. In lessons where the work is both challenging and well matched to need, students of all abilities are fully engaged and absorbed in the activities provided so they make at least satisfactory, and sometimes good, progress. In some lessons seen there were no lesson plans available, and very few referred to strategies that would effectively meet the specific needs of individual students or groups. Many teachers are not taking sufficient responsibility for the quality of learning and progress of individuals in their classes, including those with learning difficulties and disabilities. Strong support is provided by a team of knowledgeable learning support assistants. They feel frustrated that the data they provide about students' needs and the strategies suggested to support students' learning and behaviour are not regularly consulted or applied by teachers. This limits the progress these students make because classroom teachers do not consistently follow through or add to the support given outside lessons. Teachers do not appear to have the skills to support those students who have literacy difficulties, particularly at Key Stage 4.

In lessons, behaviour is very closely linked to the quality of teaching and students' enjoyment of their learning. The new teaching and learning group for teachers has already had some impact in developing teaching skills in departments. Where lessons are well planned and stimulating, with the teacher enthusiastic and regularly offering more praise than criticism, students behave well. It is clear from the quality of work in exercise books that students take little pride in what they are doing when teachers do not show through regular marking that they value the effort students have made. Those teachers who give constructive help on how to improve, both orally and with written comments, are appreciated very much by students, but this is very inconsistent across the school. A new system to manage classroom behaviour which is easier for teachers to understand and implement has been introduced very recently. Initial surveys show that this is beginning to have a positive impact and during the inspection students reported an improvement in behaviour since its introduction. However, they also say that teachers are operating the system inconsistently and report patchy and unfair use of the current reward system. During lunchtimes behaviour is well managed by a well trained team of lunchtime supervisors, but the problem of a few students being in out-of-bounds areas continues. Exclusions and use of the exclusion room have reduced since the last inspection but, overall, behaviour remains satisfactory.

Instability in staffing within the senior leadership of the school has hampered progress but these problems are now resolved. Comprehensive reorganisation has led to the appointment of a new leadership team and some current and new staff have been appointed to key roles for the next academic year. However, the impact of this reorganisation on strategic planning is not yet evident and training has not yet been provided to support the assistant principals in their new roles. The inter-relationships between the new responsibilities are not yet clear to staff, students or some governors. Effective work by some middle managers, particularly those in English and mathematics, has contributed very much to the recent improvement in achievement. Middle managers are enthusiastic for change and very keen to share their expertise. They welcome the opportunity to be involved in the development of policies for both behaviour and teaching and learning, and to take on a greater role in monitoring and evaluation within their departments. The chair of governors challenges the school leadership effectively. She is rightly anxious that the pace of improvement should accelerate now that the new leadership team is in place, with a strong focus on raising the quality of teaching and learning and the progress made by all students in lessons.

The school is a specialist language college that offers Japanese both at Key Stage 3 and as a GCSE and A level subject, in addition to French, German, Italian and Spanish. Attainment in languages at GCSE in 2008 was satisfactory. Recent curriculum changes have allowed more coherent provision. The uptake of languages at GCSE is 80% which is in line with DCSF guidelines.

The local authority has made extensive offers of help to the school leadership, but the degree to which these have been taken up is limited. As result, available funding has not been fully used. The school drew up its own action plan, but the way it is presented and organised makes it difficult to follow and it does not use the interim milestones or success criteria suggested by the local authority in its statement of action. The support of local authority advisers for individual departments has been good and has had a positive impact on raising the quality of teaching and learning, and in extending knowledge of current curriculum developments. The School Improvement Partner has made regular visits and provided useful support to the school.

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

Mary Massey
Her Majesty's Inspector