

Suite 22 West
Lancs
Investment Centre
Maple View
Skelmersdale
WN8 9TG

T 08456 40 40 40
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.ofsted.gov.uk

Direct T 01695 566934
Direct F 01695 729320

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Mr Eamonn Murphy
Astley Sports College and Community High School
Yew Tree Lane
Dukinfield
Cheshire
SK16 5BL

Dear Mr Murphy

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 5 November 2009 and for the information which you provided during my visit. Please thank those students who gave up lunchtime to share their views with me.

There have been significant changes since the last inspection. The new headteacher was appointed from Easter 2009 and two new deputy headteachers were appointed from September 2009. The senior leadership team has been trimmed in size. The heads of department for mathematics and English relinquished their responsibility at the end of the summer term. Acting heads of department in these two subjects are in place and permanent appointments have been made from January 2010. Three teachers are on long-term sick leave. A deputy headteacher has taken over leadership of the sports college specialism.

As a result of the inspection on 4-5 February 2009, the school was asked to:

- tackle underachievement and raise standards in mathematics and English
- raise overall achievement for students in the middle ability range
- improve the quality of teaching to eradicate inadequate teaching and increase the proportion of good and outstanding teaching
- ensure greater consistency in marking so that in all subjects students know how to improve their work
- share the good practice in leadership, teaching and behaviour management to ensure that students adopt good attitudes to learning and make consistently good progress in all subjects.

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 students' achievement.

GCSE results in 2009 were the best for some years in terms of the progress students had made. This year group entered the school with below average standards, in contrast to the typically average attainment on entry of students. The proportion gaining 5A*-C grades rose significantly, showing that students of average ability made better progress than had been the case previously. However, achievement in English and mathematics remained below that in other subjects. Senior leaders realised that too many staff were uncertain about students' standards and potential, especially in English and mathematics. This led to some teachers accepting work of too low a standard and assessing it inaccurately. Re-marking of coursework and module re-sits with extensive support to teachers, from both internal and external sources, means that most teachers now have a secure understanding of achievements and standards. Senior managers collect and share with departments data showing what progress students and teaching groups are making. Underachievement is identified and extra classes, revision sessions and mentoring, and some staffing changes, are enabling it to be tackled. Current predictions, based on sound evidence, indicate that further improvement is likely in GCSE results in 2010. However, they also show that too many students still underachieve in mathematics.

Senior managers have a very accurate view of the quality of teaching and learning. Inadequate teaching has been reduced. Where it still exists the issues are known and appropriate support or action is taken. The expectations on staff have been made clear and most are rising to the challenge of overcoming the legacy of underachievement in the school. Classrooms visited were generally calm and purposeful. Most students enjoy their work as shown by the significant increase in attendance, and the reduction in both exclusions and incidents of classroom misbehaviour. However, whilst acknowledging that teaching is getting better, students feel that a small minority of lessons can be disrupted by unacceptable behaviour. A tour of the school showed some instances where teachers allowed a chatty, over-casual atmosphere to develop because a minority of students, mainly boys, were not corrected or expected to work hard enough. A positive feature of lessons is more consistent planning. Students are clearer about what they should be doing and why. Marking remains a weakness. A recently agreed policy is not consistently put into practice. Good marking is evident in geography, information and communication technology (ICT), and in some science and English books. In books elsewhere, there is too little correction and advice, the latter often being vague comment about effort or neatness rather than exact guidance on how to improve skills.

The lull following the last inspection has been followed by a period of crisp evaluation and clear commitment to improving school performance. The new headteacher has set out what needs to be done and is enthusiastic and demanding

about improving the school. Most middle leaders relish the new role expected of them in terms of closer monitoring of their departments and greater accountability for what is going on. More staff are involved in a rigorous but supportive cycle of lesson observations and in monitoring the quality of work in students' books. New staff appointments, including a lead teacher in both mathematics and English, and a restructured senior team are giving a clear steer to school improvement. Judicious use has been made of expertise from within and beyond the local authority.

The school recognises that the specialism has not had enough influence on raising standards across the school and driving improvement by stimulating better teaching, learning, and students' attitudes. A thorough audit and stronger oversight of the specialism are clarifying what needs to be done. Strategies to bring about improvement are in place. Whilst targets have been met, exam results in physical education have been mediocre. Those in ICT are consistently amongst the best in the school. Both departments have stimulated valuable debate in the school about the potential of vocational courses and assessment processes within them. Physical education has taken a lead role in how to integrate literacy skills into lessons. The specialism also contributes positively to students' confidence and community awareness, for instance, through their working with pupils from primary schools and the co-located special school.

The local authority's statement of action met requirements, but was initially more about the level of support than precisely what would be achieved and by when. The good relationship between senior leaders, the School Improvement Officer and the Greater Manchester Challenge adviser has resulted in considerable support with an appropriate focus. On a practical level, too, budget flexibility has allowed key appointments to go ahead. Governors are being trained and supported. They are beginning to realize the crucial responsibilities they have as regards overseeing school improvement, reviewing safeguarding procedures and monitoring the budget.

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

Jon Lövgreen
Additional Inspector