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30 June 2009

Mr A Robbie
The Headteacher
Millgate School
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Dear Mr Robbie

Ofsted monitoring of Grade 3 schools

Thank you for the help which you and your staff gave when I inspected your school on 22 June 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 pupils and parents who took the time to come and talk to me.

There have been changes in the leadership and management of the school since the previous inspection. Your appointment as substantive headteacher of Millgate School commenced in April 2009. The acting headteacher at the time of the previous inspection now shares the role of acting deputy headteacher with another senior leader. The head of care was permanently appointed to post in May 2009. A new subject leader for mathematics joined the school in January 2009.

As a result of the inspection on 15 and 16 April 2008, the school was asked to:

- clarify the range of needs the school admits, to ensure all pupils' needs can be met effectively
- improve pupils' attendance and reduce the number of fixed-term exclusions to enable all pupils to achieve as well as they should.
- extend the range of vocational courses and qualifications to increase the enjoyment and achievement of pupils.

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.

The pupils' behavioural, social and emotional difficulties mean that pupils are working well below national expectations. Pupils' academic achievement is satisfactory overall, although it is stronger in practical subjects such as design and technology, information and communication technology (ICT), outdoor education and music. Pupils gain a great deal of enjoyment from these subjects because they



see them as relevant to their interests and contributing to possible future employment. Pupils' achievement in mathematics is improving through good teaching and an emphasis on practical investigation and problem solving. Pupils told the inspector how much they enjoy mathematics lessons now. Although all pupils leave the school with at least one qualification or accreditation appropriate to their ability, senior leaders are aware that improving the range of vocational courses on offer will increase pupils' options for the future. At the same time, they are also committed to raising the aspirations of more able pupils and ensuring that all pupils make at least satisfactory progress in developing basic literacy skills. Plans are already in hand to ensure that English lessons have greater priority in the timetable and staff expertise in assessing pupils' progress is improved. The subject leader is also aware of the need to monitor how well pupils' literacy is developed across the curriculum. At the present time, pupils' low level literacy skills are limiting their future economic well-being.

There has been only limited progress on the second area for improvement. Too many pupils are absent from school each day and the overall attendance record for the school remains exceptionally low. While there are systematic procedures to investigate absence, including involvement of the education welfare service, strategies to promote attendance are not yet having enough impact particularly amongst the older pupils in Years 10 and 11. Nevertheless, some boys do attend well, particularly those in residential places and boys new to the school in Years 7 to 9. The headteacher is firmly focused on the reintegration back into the classroom of those pupils who are receiving home or individual tuition and, although it is early days in this respect, there are some individual success stories. The school is acutely aware that it must demonstrate significant improvement in pupils' attendance if this aspect is not to be found inadequate at the next inspection.

Exclusion levels continue to be high although the school has secure evidence to show that they are starting to reduce this term. The new policy of requiring pupils to make up time in school after they have absconded or damaged school property, rather than 'rewarding' the misdemeanour with time off with an exclusion, is going some way to improving the situation. It demonstrates to pupils that senior leaders have high expectations that they should be in school, remain there, and behave well so that they can learn. There are sound plans in place to reorganise timetabling to prevent 'flashpoints' during the day and to ensure pupils get appropriate relaxation breaks between periods of learning.

Senior leaders have a clear vision to develop the curriculum so that it engages pupils as well as possible, leading to well attended lessons by pupils at both key stages, rather than the sparse classroom population currently seen. A good start has been made in extending links with other providers, such as the Braunstone Skills Centre, GAZ Autos and the Contact Centre, to improve opportunities for pupils' learning in courses which are relevant to their aptitudes and interests. Accreditation opportunities are increasing, for example for food hygiene and drumming. The introduction of entry level qualifications and adult literacy and numeracy courses is helping to boost pupils' confidence to aim higher in Year 11. Plans to develop new

courses in finance and food technology are also in hand, although some accommodation modifications are required for the latter subject.

There is good morale as a result of stabilisation of the leadership and management. Staff are highly committed to improving the school to maximise the life chances of the boys in its care. In lessons, teachers and staff are firmly focused on pupils' learning, supporting their individual needs and difficulties and having positive and caring relationships so that the pupils present behave appropriately and try their best. Planning continues to be variable in format and quality. Teachers know what they want pupils of different abilities to learn but do not communicate this well to the pupils at the start of lessons. Senior leaders correctly identify that academic guidance is an area for improvement, most notably in ensuring that teachers give pupils good quality feedback through regular and consistent marking of their work. The boys who spoke to the inspector during the visit were very positive about the school. They feel safe, well cared for, and appreciate greatly the individual time and support given to them by staff. These views were mirrored by the parents who spoke to the inspector.

The local authority has supported the school effectively through a time of considerable uncertainty, not least in the support for those who undertook protracted acting positions of leadership during a sensitive time for the school. Local authority officers and an experienced School Improvement Partner have given effective assistance to the acting headteacher and governing body through the recruitment and selection process, culminating in the crucial appointment of a substantive headteacher. The headteacher has been quick to build positive relationships and an open dialogue with other special schools and the local authority in the quest to ensure that pupils are correctly placed according to their needs. The impact of this is already being seen in the appropriate placement and better attendance of pupils recently new to the school. Although the school has strong aspirations for the future, self-evaluation processes, including focused and regular monitoring of teaching and learning, require strengthening so that the school knows exactly how effective its provision and actions are in improving pupils' achievement.

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

Helen Barter
Additional Inspector