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23 October 2009

Ms C Bradford
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Dear Ms Bradford

Ofsted monitoring of Grade 3 schools

Thank you for the help which you and your staff gave when I inspected your school on 15 October 2009, for the time you gave to our phone discussions and for the information which you provided before and during our visit. Thanks also to the students, staff and local authority officers who gave up their time to meet us.

As a result of the inspection on 1 and 2 October 2008, the school was asked to

- raise students' achievement and standards, particularly in English and mathematics
- ensure teaching and learning are challenging and well paced for all students, and work set is matched closely to their different needs
- ensure that the frequency and quality of the marking of students' work and guidance to students are consistently good so all students know what they need to do to improve.

Having considered all the evidence, I am of the opinion that at this time the school has made

satisfactory progress in making improvements

and

satisfactory progress in demonstrating a better capacity for sustained improvement.



The headteacher and her senior leaders have set out a clear direction for improving the school's performance. Staff, students and local authority officers are clear that the past year has seen improvement and speak of the positive impact of actions taken, particularly on aspects of learning and teaching. Due to a legacy of underachievement in some curriculum areas, these actions have yet to make a consistent impact on achievement and standards, particularly in mathematics and science.

Standards as measured by GCSE results in 2008 were significantly below the national average. The number of students achieving five A*-C grades was low at 37% and, when English and mathematics are included in the calculation, this fell to 25%. Progress by the cohort as a whole was lower than in most schools. Actions taken by the school have seen improved tracking and intervention work, the development of a strong literacy strategy and a significant improvement in the quality of teaching and learning in classrooms. The impact of these actions on the results for the cohort completing their GCSEs in 2009 can be seen in an 11% rise in the number of students attaining five A*-C grades and a 12% rise in English results. However, mathematics failed to achieve its target for improvement with intervention strategies for underachieving students proving less successful than in English. Science suffered from significant staffing difficulties and, consequently, the results students achieved were below those expected. Overall, this resulted in a small rise in the number of students attaining five A*-C GCSE grades including English and mathematics. This was below expectations and failed to meet the school's target.

The school has an accurate view of the quality of teaching and learning. Correctly, the school has focused on eradicating unsatisfactory teaching. Staff report that they particularly enjoy the monthly paired lesson observations they undertake and that these are improving their practice and consistency across the school. Much of the teaching in the school is now good or better. Lessons are now often marked by high expectations and the necessary pace to ensure good progress. Students respond well to engaging teaching. For example, in an English lesson observed during the visit, they were positively bursting to contribute their views about characters' relationships in 'Of Mice and Men'. The whole-school literacy focus is also paying dividends with improved speaking and listening evident in many lessons. Planning for the needs of the full range of abilities is embedding across the school, with good examples seen in some observed lessons, but this is not yet universally the case.

The school's specialist arts departments are being well used to drive improvement and raise standards. Their contribution includes examination results well above national averages and highly capable teachers helping to spread best practice across the school through coaching others. Exemplary practice in the use of assessment, including peer- and self-assessment, can be seen in the school, especially in the specialist departments. Here, students develop a very powerful evaluative vocabulary and work sensibly in appraising each other's work.

The school's focus on assessment through scrutiny of students' work has ensured that marking is regular. Some inconsistencies still exist in its efficacy with students



unaware of the meaning of the targets set in science, for example. There is a strong correlation in the school between the success of departmental assessment and students' outcomes. Where assessment practice is weakest, students still tend to underachieve. The school's focus on raising attainment at Key Stage 4 has also resulted in some inconsistency in the quality of academic guidance across the year groups, with students reporting it to be stronger the older they get.

The headteacher has appreciated the support she has received in bringing about improvement. The local authority has worked well to support the National Challenge process and have helped to mitigate the recent hiatus caused by the resignation of the national challenge adviser by providing effective ongoing support. Consultant support has been available as required and refocused when less effective, for example in mathematics.

The school leadership undertakes accurate self-evaluation and is well aware of its strengths and areas for further development. It knows, for example, that low aspiration, misbehaviour and frequent absence remain factors that negatively affect the achievement of some students. The improvements made in each of these areas have not led to complacency and the school has successfully bid for 'inspiring communities' money to help raise aspirations of education for its students and their parents. The school leadership is also aware that it must meet its targets for the number of students attaining five A*-C GCSE grades including English and mathematics this year. To this end, it has established early entry for mathematics GCSE and redesigned subsequent intervention. While this approach has the potential for success, the school is also considering a whole-school numeracy approach to emulate the impact that whole-school literacy has had on English results over time.

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

Peter Gale

Her Majesty's Inspector