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20 November 2009

Mr T Johnson  
Headteacher  
Castle High School and Visual Arts College  
St James Road  
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Dear Mr Johnson

Ofsted monitoring of Grade 3 schools

Thank you for the help which you and your staff gave when we inspected your school on Thursday 19 November 2009 and for the information which you provided before and during our visit. Would you also pass on our thanks to all of the pupils who helped to make our time with you so enjoyable and interesting.

As a result of the inspection on 24 and 25 September 2008, the school was asked to:

- put in place rigorous analysis and interpretation of performance data to improve target-setting, increase the challenge provided and raise standards and achievement
- develop effective leadership and management skills at all levels focused on the improvement of teaching and learning.

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.

Although results in 2009 Key Stage 4 national assessments showed no significant increase compared with outcomes in 2008, the school's current data and evidence collected during the monitoring visit show that the school is on track to meet its ambitious 2010 targets at Key Stage 4. At Key Stage 3, progress is evident in data from the school's monitoring of pupils' progress. The data is increasingly robust and now enables individual pupils to be tracked and identified for appropriate interventions. These interventions, combined with a clear understanding of next steps for improvements, have contributed to improving standards. Pupils are now able to take a wider range of qualifications than before, to suit their abilities and interests.

The school's leaders judge the quality of teaching to be satisfactory and improving. The evidence collected during the visit supports this. The leadership team has a realistic view of the quality of teaching in the school and is aware of where there are strengths and areas for improvement. It is working effectively to increase the number of effective lessons. In the better lessons, teachers consistently share learning objectives with pupils and show a good awareness of the different abilities of the pupils in the class so that their needs are increasingly well met. In the less effective lessons, learning is too passive as pupils are not provided with a sufficient range of activities to keep them motivated. Additionally, in these lessons, the differentiation of work to suit all needs is not well thought out, so not all pupils make as much progress as they could. Planning is inconsistent between subjects. In some areas, learning objectives and outcomes are not clearly enough defined to enable teachers to evaluate effectively the learning taking place in their lessons.

Although in its early days, there are increasingly robust systems being put in place for monitoring the quality of provision and outcomes within each department. These systems have been supported by training provided for heads of department to give them the skills to monitor the work of their subject areas. So far, self-evaluation of the English and science departments has taken place and other subjects are scheduled to undergo this process. The school is using the outcomes from this process to identify strengths and areas for improvement. This is helping to join together the evaluation of the work of departments and their action plans to whole school improvement. This has enabled increasingly challenging targets to be set throughout the school. The identification of the school's strengths has also encouraged the sharing of good practice between staff.

The new systems for setting targets and monitoring progress across the school already demonstrate a significant impact on the number of pupils reaching their target grades. Changes to the curriculum at both key stages have contributed to the raising of standards, allowing pupils to study a wider range of subjects and qualifications. These changes have been driven by the individual needs of the pupils and by the needs of cohorts. Pupils have been overwhelmingly positive and supportive of these changes and see them as enhancing their curriculum opportunities.

The school is taking action to tackle the persistently low attendance of a number of pupils. Although there have recently been specific circumstances, such as a week of swine 'flu, which have contributed to low attendance overall, the school has targeted persistently low attenders for intervention. This has started to have an impact on raising the levels of attendance. According to pupils, increased attendance is also the result of more engagement during lessons due to improved teaching and curriculum opportunities.

The school's visual arts specialism has continued to perform very well and the school has met or exceeded its ambitious targets in this area. Good evidence has been

collated to show that the specialism is now supporting other areas, such as literacy, numeracy and personal, social, health and citizenship education (PSHCE).

The increasing awareness of the school's performance by senior and middle leaders, the well-targeted interventions for pupils alongside increasing evidence of rising standards at both key stages, show that the school is demonstrating a better capacity to improve than at the time of the last inspection. Effective support has also been provided through the Black Country Challenge and the local authority, by the provision of advanced skills teachers and consultants, to support middle managers and to build capacity at all levels of the school's management.

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

David Muir  
Her Majesty's Inspector