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25 May 2010

Mr G Atkins  
Associate Principal  
Northwood School  
Potter Street  
Northwood  
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Dear Mr Atkins

Ofsted monitoring of Grade 3 schools

Thank you for the help which you and your staff gave when I inspected your school on 19 May 2010, 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 staff, governors and students who gave their time to the discussions.

Since the last inspection, the school's leadership and management arrangements have changed very significantly. In July 2009, the school federated with a local comprehensive school under the leadership of an executive headteacher. The schools are governed by a single governing body. The Associate Principal of Northwood School has been in post since September 2009. The decline in the number of pupils entering the school in Year 7 continued in 2009 and student numbers in Year 11 are currently over twice the size seen in other years.

As a result of the inspection on 19–20 May 2008, the school was asked to:

- work with the local authority to urgently revise the recovery plan to ensure that the school can continue to provide an acceptable standard of education based on realistic projections for student numbers
- raise standards in English and mathematics at Key Stage 4
- improve the quality of teaching so that all students are enabled to make good progress
- ensure that all boys behave and achieve well
- ensure that there is effective oversight of the Special Resource Provision.



Having considered all the evidence I am of the opinion that at this time the school has made satisfactory progress in making improvements and good progress in demonstrating a better capacity for sustained improvement.

While progress against the areas for improvement has been satisfactory, it has accelerated rapidly since the advent of the federation in July 2009, with the result that the quality of education the school provides is now quickly improving.

School leaders recognise that achievement has been inadequate in 2008 and 2009, with high proportions of students failing to meet their targets. For example, the proportions of students attaining five or more GCSEs at grades A\* to C, including English and mathematics was consistently low. The achievement of students who have special educational needs and/or disabilities was inadequate. However, a very intensive intervention programme, informed by vastly improved systems for monitoring students' progress, is having a clear and marked impact in supporting current Year 11 students in their preparations for public examinations. Indeed, work seen in lessons and in books, together with modular examination results which have already been secured, support the school's view that achievement is now satisfactory overall and satisfactory for most boys. As a result, attainment at the end of Key Stage 4 is now broadly average in English and mathematics.

Improved leadership and management arrangements have ensured that achievement in specialist subjects has improved after a very significant dip in 2009, and current Year 11, 12 and 13 students are achieving well. Specialist status has helped strengthen provision and opportunities for vocational learning. Although the specialism makes a commendable contribution to developing the business and enterprise skills of large numbers of children from local primary schools, the wider impact of the specialism on other subjects within the school has been limited up until now, in part because of previously declining performance in specialist subjects.

In the last year, strong leadership has enabled the school to take robust action to improve behaviour. Students consistently reported that behaviour has improved very significantly since the formation of the federation. Indeed, inspectors saw no unsatisfactory behaviour during the visit and good behaviour in lessons. As school leaders established raised expectations, the proportions of students subject to fixed-term exclusions rose considerably, but the numbers of exclusions are now rapidly reducing. School monitoring, confirmed by inspection evidence, confirms that most groups of learners, including boys, now behave well.

The school has taken decisive action to reduce the incidents of inadequate teaching. Changes to staffing have been accompanied by comprehensive provision for teachers' professional development, provided through expertise within the federation, local authority advisors and external consultants. School leaders have a very secure understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of teaching and learning and have strengthened monitoring systems to ensure greater consistency in the quality and accuracy of lesson evaluations. Improved systems to ensure teachers are held to account for students' results are beginning to have a positive impact in

raising achievement. Students in Year 11 are highly appreciative of the outstanding teaching they have received as a result of the federation, notably in mathematics. A key improvement to the quality of teaching and learning has been the effective and consistent use of learning objectives during the lesson which enable students to understand what they are trying to learn. As one student commented, 'Every lesson is now more structured, so we know what we're going to do and how different activities are linked'. Less secure is teachers' use of assessment to ensure that they and their students can clearly evaluate how much progress students have made in each lesson. This is because teachers' planning does not clearly articulate how the impact of each learning activity will be measured. Teachers are not consistently effective in devising strategies that enable them to assess the learning of the whole group before moving onto the next task. While there is some differentiation in place, the tendency of some teachers to talk too much means that all students have to learn at the same pace, regardless of their differing abilities.

Effective oversight of the Special Resource Provision is now in place. Recent improvements to systems for monitoring and evaluation ensure that the very small numbers of students who use this provision continue to achieve above expectations. While improvements to provision across the school ensure that most students with special educational needs and/or disabilities now make satisfactory progress, the school recognises the need to further improve the quality of support provided. For example, the quality of students' individual education plans is poor. Targets lack clarity and fail to set out clear strategies by which students' progress in personal development and achievement can be secured. There is currently insufficient dialogue and sharing of expertise between the special educational needs department and subject teachers, with the result that provision is not fully refined to meet individual needs.

Leaders and managers have worked effectively to address the very significant budget deficit which the school had accumulated at the time of the last inspection. In the past year, more rigorous scrutiny of the school's finances through strengthened leadership and management arrangements exposed a deficit much greater than realised, despite the school taking decisive action to reduce costs. However, further economies have been implemented to dramatic effect and the school is on track to eliminate the deficit completely by 2012. Staffing levels now appropriately reflect the decline in the numbers of students entering the school.

The school values the good support it has received from the local authority through, for example, the work of a range of subject consultants, the school improvement partner and support in securing more robust systems for financial management.

While progress in addressing the key issues for improvement has been satisfactory overall, the rapid improvements seen in the last year, provide strong evidence that the school has made good progress in demonstrating a better capacity for sustained improvement, particularly given the previous inspection judgement that it was inadequate. The marked improvements to the school are reflected in the improved

projections with regard to the number of students who are set to join the school in Year 7 next September.

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

Daniel Burton  
Her Majesty's Inspector