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Mr Andy Abernethy
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Abernethy

Ofsted monitoring of Grade 3 schools

Thank you for the help which you and your staff gave when my colleague and I inspected your school on 25 February 2010, for the time you gave to our planning meeting and for the information which you provided during the visit.

Since the last inspection the acting headteacher has retired and the headteacher has returned to the school following a period of secondment to other local schools. There are two new heads of department.

As a result of the inspection on 17–18 April 2008, the school was asked to:

- ensure sustained improvement in achievement and standards across the school and particularly in the core subjects
- improve the analysis and use of assessment data and ensure its consistent application across the school to raise achievement and standards in all subjects
- stabilise leadership and management at all levels to ensure accountability and secure improvement.

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

Attainment is rising slowly. The proportion of students gaining five or more A* to C grades at GCSE has increased since the last inspection. The specialist subjects of

business and information and communication technology had above average A* to C pass rates in 2009. Very good results were also obtained in design and technology. Contextual progress measures show that students are making better progress in English, mathematics and overall than at the time of the inspection. Within this overall positive picture there remain differences between subjects and some inconsistencies year on year, most notably in mathematics where outcomes were not as good in 2009 as in 2008, and this led to fewer students achieving five or more A* to C grades including English and mathematics. Current assessment data, including the results of GCSE English and mathematics examinations taken early, show that for the current Year 11 a higher proportion of students is expected to achieve five or more GCSE A* to C grades including English and mathematics.

In the lessons observed in the core subjects, good or better progress was observed in over half the lessons with instances of outstanding progress. There is an effective system for checking the standards of students' work in books and for sharing that with them. Students know their targets and their current levels. They understand the criteria and the means of improvement. Teacher assessment is recorded in an effective way for analysis by senior staff and others. This allows appropriate intervention to be put into place in both Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4. In particular there are effective systems for identifying what remains to be improved for Year 11 students. The introduction of the 'Study Plus' programme to boost achievement has been well received by students. Although too early for a full evaluation there are encouraging signs of its impact on outcomes. The use made of the available data in planning lessons is variable. In English very good use is made of information about individual students. In science, lesson planning is often not as thorough and does not take individual needs into account. The science curriculum at Key Stage 4 has been improved to offer a better choice of courses.

Leadership and management have been stabilised. The headteacher has provided a clear focus on raising standards following his return to the school in September 2008. He is ably supported by four assistant headteachers and other senior staff. Most of the middle management team are well established in their posts, which is an improvement on the position at the time of the inspection. A number of staffing issues have been resolved. Heads of department are now held accountable for outcomes and supported by senior leaders. A change in culture has been achieved, partly through direct involvement of middle managers in setting out clear expectations of their roles and responsibilities. A formalised quality assurance schedule, with senior management monitoring, provides a valuable framework for heads of subject who are now more closely involved with assessing the quality of provision in their departments. They have received training in lesson observation to support them in this. There are good examples of middle managers using coaching strategies to help teachers develop their skills, which in turn has fostered a collaborative team ethos.

A number of issues about e-safety which were raised in an inspection in June 2009 have been addressed. The majority of staff, including support staff, have had training in e-safety and further training is planned. The e-safety curriculum was revised in the summer and since September 2009 has been age related. Students spoke positively about the training they had received and showed a sound awareness of key issues. Older students clearly understood some of the possible implications of internet activities for their future employment. This was particularly so for those taking business courses.

Self-evaluation is thorough and is carried out both at whole school and departmental level. Judgements are based on detailed analysis and are realistic. The improvements in outcomes, more refined systems for tracking progress and planning interventions, and the increasing strength of the management team as a whole clearly demonstrate a better capacity to improve than at the time of the inspection.

Local authority reviews have supported the school in planning for improvement. The work of local authority consultants has provided valuable help on specific issues, including science and mathematics.

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

Ruth James
Her Majesty's Inspector