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Ms Alison Shaw
Principal
Seaton Burn College, A Specialist Business and Enterprise School
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Dear Ms Shaw

Ofsted monitoring of schools with a notice to improve

Thank you for the help which you and your staff gave when I inspected your college on 6 May 2010 and for the information which you provided during my visit. Please also pass on my thanks to the students, staff and governors who I met and spoke with during my visit.

Since the last inspection there have been some significant changes. The number on roll has fallen from 700 at the time of the last inspection to 651 at present. After a prolonged period of instability, the college has finally appointed a new subject leader for mathematics who will start in September 2010. The subject leader for English, who took up post only a few days before the last inspection, has had a positive impact on the provision for the subject.

As a result of the inspection on 16 and 17 September 2009, the college was asked to

- Raise standards in all subjects and particularly those which are underperforming.
- Accelerate the progress made by all groups of students.
- Improve the quality of teaching and learning, paying particular attention to the way in which teachers use assessment information when planning lessons so that the needs of all students are met and they make progress commensurate with their capabilities and starting points

Having considered all the evidence I am of the opinion that at this time the college is making satisfactory progress in addressing the issues for improvement and in raising the students' achievement.



The now validated 2009 GCSE results indicate that the number of students gaining an A*-C grade in GCSE examinations increased on previous years. Students continue to do well in geography but poorly in mathematics. Assessment systems have been improved so that leaders at all levels are working with more detailed analyses of students' likely outcomes. This data and the results from early entries for GCSE English, mathematics and physical education examinations indicate that the results for 2010 should rise further. Consequently, leaders feel more confident that standards of attainment will be in line with declared targets for the first time in many years and students' achievement will be better. Inspection evidence confirms that standards are beginning to rise, particularly in English. Underperforming subjects have been targeted for extra support. This has been reasonably successful in mathematics as seen through the improved results last November. However, leaders know there is still a long way to go.

A range of new initiatives to accelerate students' progress is resulting in more students making better progress in lessons. The curriculum has been modified and is better matched to students' needs. For example, new BTEC courses are operating and the health and social care course, which was the worst performing subject in the college, will be discontinued from September 2010. Intervention strategies, targeting those students most likely to underperform, are having a positive impact. A greater focus on clarifying what students are to learn each lesson is helping students to understand what they are supposed to be doing. Academic targets are clearer so that more students know how well they are doing and what they need to do to improve. Students say this has helped them to gain a better understanding of their learning. They agree that the quality of learning in English lessons has greatly improved but are less happy with the quality of science lessons. Despite these improvements, the legacy of underachievement that has prevailed for many years has not yet been halted. Several students, particularly middle-ability girls continue to underachieve. Leaders are focused on improving the quality of teaching and learning and there are clear signs that things are slowly beginning to improve.

The quality of lesson planning has improved so it gives a greater focus on matching work to the needs of all students. In the best lessons, the planning is based on accurate previous assessment of the progress made by students and builds on this to ensure all achieve as well as they can. This is not the case in all lessons because there remains too much inadequate teaching to ensure that students make enough progress. In weaker lessons, students spend too much time sitting passively listening to teachers talk. They do not have enough involvement in their own learning and do not get enough opportunities to undertake different types of activities. In these lessons, the teachers end up working harder than the students. Consequently, students often lose focus and persistent low level disruption ensues. In the better lessons, such as a highly successful English lesson seen, learning objectives and outcomes were clear and used effectively to enable students to evaluate their own progress; activities were suitably varied and a brisk pace was maintained. All this resulted in high levels of enjoyment, engagement and progress.



Performance against targets in the college's specialist subjects remains uneven. Whilst information and communication technology is relatively strong, the performance of the business subjects has been poor. Leaders recognise that the business and enterprise specialism is not promoting improvement across the college effectively.

The local authority's initial statement of action required amendment. The changes have been made and it is now fit for purpose. Effective targeted support has been successful. A consultant headteacher has provided regular guidance with interpreting and using data and a mathematics specialist consultant has worked with the mathematics department. The senior secondary adviser from the local authority is providing much needed challenge and support for the college in the role of School Improvement Partner. The latest local authority review indicates that some aspects of the college's work are improving but not quickly enough. This view was confirmed by this monitoring visit. Governors and senior staff are aware of the need for more rigour and urgency to ensure all teaching is improving as quickly as it needs to.

I hope that you have found the visit helpful in promoting improvement in your college. This letter will be posted on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Anthony Briggs
Lead Inspector