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Mr Peter Beaven
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Beaven

Ofsted monitoring of schools with a notice to improve

Thank you for the help which you and your staff gave when I inspected your school on 23 March 2010 and for the information which you provided during my visit. I would be grateful if you would pass on my thanks to those who met me, including members of staff, the Chair of the Governing Body and vice chair, a representative from the local authority and the group of students from the sixth form.

There have been no significant changes to the context of the school since the last inspection.

As a result of the inspection on 11 and 12 November 2009, the school was asked to:

- ensure that statutory requirements for safeguarding are met, risk assessments for school trips are consistently applied and a reliable system put in place to record the attendance of sixth form students
- improve attendance and reduce the number of persistent absentees
- strengthen leadership and management in the sixth form
- improve the quality of teaching and learning with a particular emphasis on the use of assessment data in planning lessons, setting high expectations, developing teachers' questioning skills and using the federation's expertise to enable teachers to understand what makes an outstanding lesson.

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

Evidence from more accurate school tracking data and examinations which have been taken already indicate that attainment is rising in most subjects. Students are on track to sustain the trend of improvement. The school has rightly identified the

need to raise standards in mathematics. In 2009, the proportion of students making expected progress in mathematics was low. Attainment was also low in science. Science and mathematics are a focus of the 'Gaining Ground' programme and standards are rising in both subjects. The proportion of students making expected progress in English and mathematics has increased as a result of improving teaching and more targeted interventions such as subject specific mentoring.

The school has quickly and successfully tackled all the areas for improvement relating to safeguarding. Statutory requirements relating to the recording of vetting checks meet requirements. All staff have received appropriate child protection training. Information about this is included on the central vetting record. Arrangements are securely in place to ensure that new teachers have relevant guidance as part of their induction and key information about the school's procedures are made available to supply teachers. Relevant staff and members of the governing body have completed the nationally approved safer recruitment training. The school has started to systematically review, update and approve all its safeguarding policies. This will take some time to complete because it is being done with a view to harmonising policies across the federation. New policies, for instance on e-safety, have been drafted. The school is reviewing its arrangements for managing site security to identify and reduce any potential risks. Relevant staff have received training in carrying out and quality assuring risk assessments for school trips and this has brought greater rigour in implementing procedures.

Attendance has improved with a significant reduction in persistent absentees. Nevertheless, the attendance levels of the Year 11 year group are lower than others. Attendance in the sixth form is high and, while there is no historic data to compare this with, levels are increasing, particularly since January. As with safeguarding, the school has very successfully tackled this area with rigour and determination. An electronic registration system has been fully and smoothly implemented across the school and sixth form since January. This has resulted in a number of important outcomes, not least the improving trends. Recording of attendance, including at lessons, is much more accurate. This enables staff to monitor and follow up individual absences and identify group trends. As a consequence, a range of stepped interventions and incentives can be put in place and to good effect. Tutors are taking more responsibility for following up absences. A support panel has been established which met for the first time in March. The panel will meet bi-weekly to identify how different agencies will coordinate action for identified students with particular attendance difficulties. The new registration systems enable staff to record when sixth form students are in school or on home study. This addresses another aspect of safeguarding which required improvement.

Observations from a small sample of lessons visited with senior leaders indicate that teachers are using questions to check on students' understanding, extend their knowledge and sustain the pace of the lesson. Teachers are using data about students' progress to inform their planning. However, the quality of planning is variable and, on occasion, this is reflected in lack of clarity about what is expected in

terms of learning outcomes. Written feedback is also variable. At its best it provides clear pointers to help the students improve. Students are keen to learn. They are given a number of opportunities to work together and assess each other's progress and this helps them engage in and enjoy their learning. Staff are undertaking peer observations and sharing best practice across the federation. This is having a positive impact, for instance in the progress being made in mathematics and science. Sixth form students are positive about teaching in most subject areas and they highlighted the passion of the teachers and their availability to provide support and guidance.

The school has put into place a comprehensive action plan to improve leadership and management of the sixth form. Lines of accountability are clearly defined and structured support is in place. There is some evidence of impact of this support, for example in the management of attendance, and greater clarity about the role of tutors. Sixth formers report that they have not yet seen the full impact of the school's actions. Nevertheless, they are upbeat about the quality of provision and the progress they are making.

Progress in the specialist subjects is in line with expectations in English and above in music. Media is currently one of the best performing subjects in the sixth form. Somervale is a hub school for the Creative and Media Diploma. The pilot is proving popular and attracting new students. Somer Valley FM, the school's in-house radio station, is going from strength to strength and is having a positive impact on the local community, including some local primary schools.

The school benefits from strong leadership and governance, and highly effective federation arrangements which have become more embedded since November. Because of this internal capacity the school has been selective in its use of external support, conscious that it wants to manage it in a targeted way. It values, for example, the support provided by consultants from the school improvement and achievement team, the School Improvement Partner and the children missing education officer. The local authority's statement of action was evaluated prior to this visit and judged to meet requirements. The impact of its support is reflected in the positive outcomes since the last inspection.

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

John Kennedy
Her Majesty's Inspector