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Mr P Salter
Headteacher
The Brakenhale School
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Dear Mr Salter

Ofsted monitoring of Grade 3 schools

Thank you for the help which you and your staff gave when I inspected your school on 9 June 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, there have been significant changes to the school's leadership and management arrangements, resulting in a much larger senior leadership team than before. Since September 2009, a new deputy headteacher and two new assistant headteachers have been appointed to complement the work of other senior leaders. In contrast to previous years, the school now has a full complement of permanent teaching staff. The number of students on roll has continued to rise and the number of mid-term admissions has greatly reduced. The school has a full roll for Year 7 for September 2010. The school now receives support through the Department for Education's National Challenge programme.

As a result of the inspection on 25–26 February 2009, the school was asked to:

- make sure that lessons provide the necessary enjoyment and challenge for middle- and lower-attainers, particularly boys
- provide a more relevant curriculum that matches the needs of the wide range of students that the school caters for
- improve the evaluation of progress data and use this more effectively to provide appropriate match of work.



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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.

The achievement of Year 11 students in 2009 was inadequate overall and extremely poor for boys in particular. As a result, the proportion of students attaining five GCSEs at grades A* to C including English and mathematics was well below the national average, having previously been low in 2008. Only 13% of boys achieved this target. While girls performed better than boys, their achievement was also inadequate. However, a very significant raft of intervention strategies, supported by the local authority, external consultants and the National Challenge programme, has helped drive up achievement for the current Year 11 students. School data, based in part on qualifications already secured, indicate that achievement has improved and is now satisfactory. Strategies to drive up the achievement of the current cohort of Year 11 students are also having a clear impact on raising boys' achievement and ensuring that those of average and below average ability are making satisfactory progress. Although those students who have special educational needs and/or disabilities make similar progress to their peers, the analysis of their performance is not yet carried out regularly enough. School leaders recognise that this is an area in need of immediate remedy to ensure that improvements in achievement remain secure.

Behaviour has improved and the school's robust stance in tackling the most serious incidents of poor behaviour has proved effective. Much improved systems to support students who exhibit the most challenging behaviour have helped to ensure that the proportion of students subject to fixed-term exclusions has reduced rapidly. Inspectors saw good behaviour in lessons and no incidents of unsatisfactory behaviour were observed. However, some students in the lower and middle sets reported that some of their lessons are still disrupted by poor behaviour. Some older students also reported that, while they feel safe in school, they do not think the school deals effectively enough with some incidents of bullying, particularly name-calling. Work to improve attendance has had a marked impact, particularly in reducing the proportion of students who are persistent absentees. As a result, the school is now meeting its statutory attendance targets.

Teaching is now benefiting from much more stable staffing, with almost all lessons taught by permanent staff. This is in sharp contrast to the situation in previous years. Lessons seen during the monitoring visit were conducted in a calm and orderly atmosphere and students made satisfactory progress. However, not enough lessons are sufficiently effective in securing good or better progress. This is because, while teachers' subject knowledge is good, their use of assessment to promote learning is weak. For example, teachers do not yet routinely and effectively use assessment information well enough to ensure that work fully meets the needs of all groups of learners. Lesson planning does not yet articulate with sufficient sharpness how the differing needs of students, including those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities, will be met. In some lessons this hinders the impact of the



work of support staff. Teachers are not yet consistent in communicating clear and robust success criteria by which they and their students can evaluate how well the students have done in each lesson. These weaknesses are sometimes exacerbated by marking of variable quality. Although teachers increasingly identify how students can improve their work, targets lack sharpness and are too generalised. Some students in the lower sets reported that some lessons are still characterised by the use of worksheets and activities that are not challenging or enjoyable.

Leaders and managers have begun to forge links with another local school to help improve the quality of teaching and learning. However, this is at an early stage of development. The school recognises that students' progress is likely to remain fragile and overly dependent on intervention strategies to remedy past underachievement until teaching is of consistently good quality.

The school has been much more successful in improving curriculum provision to better meet the needs of a wider range of students. An increased range of BTEC qualifications, vocational courses and an expanded Young Apprentice Programme have played a significant role in driving up quickly the achievement of current Year 11 students. The impact of this improved provision is also being seen in other year groups. The opportunity for students to enter mathematics early has enabled some Year 11 students to secure their GCSE qualification already. This has enabled them to have additional time to prepare for their English GCSE examinations. The range of options available at Key Stage 4 also includes the 14–19 Diploma in Business Administration and Finance Diploma to be delivered from September 2010.

The capacity of leaders and managers to promote sustained improvement is better than at the time of the previous inspection. Since September 2009, a fully staffed and expanded senior leadership team has benefited from good-quality support from the local authority, independent education consultants and the school's National Challenge adviser. While some of this support is temporary, it has proved instrumental in helping the school to establish much improved monitoring and evaluation systems and in increasing the skills of managers at all levels to sustain improvement for the longer term. Much improved systems to evaluate progress data now ensure that underachievement can be addressed more quickly and effectively than before. Very good local authority support since September 2009 has been particularly beneficial in tackling weaknesses in provision in Key Stage 4 English and mathematics. However, this support was not in place quickly enough to address underachievement last year, despite the dip in performance at Key Stage 4 already evident in 2008. The school's Raising Achievement Plan articulates a clear and appropriate set of required actions to raise achievement and address key weaknesses. Understandably, the evaluation of data has been sharply focused on driving up the achievement of current Year 11 students, given last year's poor examination results at Key Stage 4. School leaders know that similar attention now needs to be given to all year groups to ensure that improved achievement is sustained and accelerated in the years ahead.



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

