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Dame Maureen Brennan  
The Headteacher  
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Dear Dame Brennan

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 29 November 2007, for the time you gave to our phone discussions, and for the information which you provided before and during my visit. I would also like to thank the pupils I met, the chair of the interim executive board, and the representative from the local authority for their time and contributions.

This letter will be posted on the Ofsted website. Please inform the Regional Inspection Service Provider of any factual inaccuracies within 24 hours of the receipt of this letter.

As a result of the inspection on 20 and 21 February 2007, the school was asked to: provide stability in, and improve the effectiveness of, the school leadership; ensure that governors have the capacity to hold the school to account; ensure that the curriculum in the school and in the sixth form meets the needs and interests of all learners; and, improve the communication with, and involvement of, parents and students.

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

Since the last inspection, there have been significant changes to the school's staffing. Twenty two teachers left the school and twenty one have been appointed, including the new headteacher and three other senior leaders.

There is much greater stability and quality in the leadership of the school. The new headteacher, a permanent appointment with a successful track record, took up her post two months after the inspection. She has acted quickly to strengthen the senior team by appointing permanent members, again with good track records. There is now reasonably frequent monitoring of teaching and learning. Advice is provided

where it is needed and a robust approach is taken with any that does not improve. The problem of teacher absence is declining because of the approach taken to its management. Pupils' behaviour has improved and is now good. Regular weekly training, as well as regular support from senior leaders, has been provided for subject leaders. The school's monitoring of their work suggests this support is effective. The quality of leadership of subject leaders is improving.

An interim executive board (IEB) has replaced the governing body. The IEB has a clear understanding of the school's strengths and weaknesses and is working hard to improve matters. There is a detailed improvement plan to set out what needs to be done. The plan's effectiveness is reduced because there are too few quantitative targets with interim 'milestones' towards their completion. The IEB is rightly concerned that this impairs its ability to monitor the effectiveness of the plan. As a result, changes are being made. Members of the IEB are getting to know the school through attendance at some training events, but have not yet taken part in any direct observations of the school's other work.

Improvements in the school's leadership and management are beginning to show some impact on pupils' achievement and standards, although these showed a decline in the last school year. In the GCSE examinations, standards fell to below national averages and pupils' achievement was inadequate. In the end of Year 9 national tests, standards in mathematics remained in line with national results, as did science. The English results, which showed a decline, are subject to appeal. In the sixth form there was a decline in the students' progress when compared with 2006. Nevertheless, Year 10 pupils, who were entered for their GCSE science examination a year early, attained a higher proportion of A\* to C grades than was attained by the Year 11 group. In addition, data for pupils currently in Years 9 and 11 shows that the decline has been halted. Progress is beginning to turn.

A contributory factor in pupils' weaker attainment at Key Stage 4 in 2007 is the fact that the curriculum did not offer suitable courses for the range of pupils' interests and aspirations. In the relatively short time available there have been some improvements made. A 'Makin Trax' music technology course has been instituted for some Year 10 pupils who are at risk of low achievement. This has had the effect of improving both their attendance and behaviour. There are now opportunities to take qualifications at more than one level in construction and health and social care. In addition, pupils sit their English and mathematics GCSE examinations in November of Year 11 to raise the level of challenge. Preparations for the introduction of a wider range of vocational courses for the 14 to 19 age group are being implemented, including, for example, the accreditation of the school for appropriate courses. Pupils still do not receive their statutory entitlement to information and communication technology (ICT) at Key Stage 4. The number of clubs for pupils to join has increased.

Communications between the school and parents and pupils have much improved. Meetings have been held with parents, including meetings with the IEB. These have attracted high attendance and have been well received. The pupils' study planners also give means for parents and the school to communicate with each other and

there is clear evidence that they are used well for this purpose. The school follows up issues raised by parents, such as the amount of homework set.

The college's language specialism is showing signs of increased effectiveness, with stronger teaching, but it is not yet meeting its targets.

The local authority acted promptly in establishing an IEB. It is aware that there are insufficient milestones and quantitative data in its own plans, but has not yet modified them.

I hope that you have found the visit helpful in promoting improvement in your school.

Yours sincerely

Alan Alder  
Her Majesty's Inspector