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Mr P Coates
The Headteacher
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Dear Mr Coates

Ofsted monitoring of schools with a Notice to Improve

Thank you for the help which you, your staff and students gave when I inspected your school on 31 October 2007, for the time you gave to our phone discussions, and for the information which you provided before and during my visit. The staff I met were helpful, professional in outlook, and committed to resolving the issues of concern. The students I met were articulate and positive about recent changes. The results of national tests in 2007 showed exceptional improvements in English standards at Key Stage 3, and in overall standards at Key Stage 4. In particular, a rise in the proportion of students gaining 5 A* to C GCSE grades from 47% in 2006 to 57% in 2007 is a testament to an effective and rapid response to concerns raised in March.

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 14 and 15 March 2007, the school was asked to:

- raise achievement, particularly at Key Stage 4, by ensuring that teaching is consistently effective and makes good use of assessment information
- strengthen the provision for science
- monitor the implementation of policies more rigorously and ensure that all levels of management are more accountable for improving the pupils' progress
- broaden access to vocational programmes in the sixth form.

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 students' achievement.

New leadership in English during the 2006 to 2007 year helped the sharp improvements in standards. The improvement of overall standards in 2007 came

from the swift remedial action taken by the school. This was catalysed by the immediate and very effective secondment of an experienced deputy headteacher from a school that had successfully emerged from special measures in 2003 and recently was judged as outstanding. Most subjects performed better than in 2006. Local authority (LA) consultant staff have worked effectively with teachers in addressing key issues in science, and in developing assessment policy. The fruits of this were evident as I scrutinised students' work. In all the samples I found consistent marking practice that was informative and helpful to learners. Lesson planning seen was consistently satisfactory, with some good examples of diagnostic analysis by teachers leading to adapting plans. There is scope for more explicit differentiation in planning to meet the varied needs of students of different ability, or to better accommodate what they can already do. Some advice to students given in the marking had not been followed up.

Staff changes at senior level, characterised by a willingness to learn and improve practices as exemplified by the headteacher, have seen improvements to the teaching provision in science, and the leadership of mathematics. These changes came too late to spot the problem with GCSE mathematics in 2007, which resulted in disappointingly low standards and a consequently low performance in terms of students gaining 5 A* to C grades that included English and mathematics. However, the reasons (poor coursework standards) have been exhaustively identified. The resultant changes for this year suggest that any recurrence of the problem would now be noticed in time to fix it. Science staffing changes that occurred at the start of this term were too late to impact upon 2007 results, which were as low as in previous years but not unexpected. Current teaching quality in science is judged by the school and LA to be at least satisfactory with many good features. My own brief sampling confirmed this evaluation. All of the teaching I saw during the visit was of good quality.

There are good records of monitoring of teaching quality, and a good range of strategies is in use to visit lessons, including formal observations, work scrutiny and unannounced checks. The LA is closely and effectively involved in moderating these judgements. The evidence I saw was consistent with the school's present evaluation that teaching is now at least satisfactory with many good lessons. There has not yet been time to see the impact of better and more consistent teaching in public examination results, but there is the evidence of consistent marking and planning.

The Year 10 students I met all knew their target grades and, most importantly, knew what they needed to do to get them, subject by subject. They said this was much better than in the past, and felt confident that the school was working to help them 'get a good education'. The school does now have a simple and well understood student progress tracker system that is clearly identifying students' current performance, and whether intervention is necessary. Middle managers also have prior attainment information embedded into their departmental planning. The final phase of LA support for middle managers in the spring of 2008 is planned to improve monitoring and evaluation practice. New homework diaries for students are being consistently checked by tutors, although not always being fully completed by students. This is much better than in previous years, where little monitoring of homework was occurring.

The quality of departmental reviews of 2007 results is good, with identification of the performance of different groups of learners, and a clear assessment of what went well, and what did not. The school has made big changes to its timetable organisation and moved departments around between its two sites. As a result, all students now spend sessions in just one site and this has cut problems of punctuality at a stroke. More vocational options have been offered for the sixth form from 2007, although not all were taken up.

The impact of LA intervention in the school has been very good. The swift early action in seconding an effective deputy headteacher and continuing collaborative support have been key factors in the good progress being made.

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

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Brian Cartwright".

Brian Cartwright
Her Majesty's Inspector