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Mr John Wilson
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Wilson

Ofsted monitoring of Notice to Improve schools

Thank you for the help which you and your staff gave when I inspected your school on 28 November 2007, 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 the chair of the Interim Executive Board (IEB), the staff and students who we spoke to during the day.

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 in March 2007, the school was asked to: raise standards and achievement particularly in English and for boys in Key Stage 4; share the good classroom practice to ensure consistency between and within departments; make more effective use of resources to support students with learning difficulties and those who are underachieving; and ensure that actions in the school improvement plan translate into improved outcomes for 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 achievement.

Recent changes to the leadership of English have had a very positive impact on the culture and ethos of a demoralised department. Staff now feel well supported by the new director of studies and the reorganised senior leadership team and as a result are gaining in confidence and competence. New systems are in place to positively manage behaviour and expectations are more consistent across the department. As a result more pupils are developing positive attitudes to learning. The curriculum has

been restructured to make it more accessible and appropriate to the needs of pupils but it is too early to see the impact of this initiative.

Teachers plan together, which allows for greater consistency, but planning does not yet take sufficient account of what the assessment process is saying about the learning needs of individuals and groups. Thus, work is not well differentiated to meet these needs. Pupils' progress is tracked carefully, and National Curriculum levels and future learning targets are communicated to pupils and their parents. Nevertheless pupils are still not clear about their targets or about what specifically they need to do to achieve them. Marking and the regular provision of high quality guidance remain variable. Levels of literacy across the curriculum remain too low and have the potential to inhibit progress generally.

The changes made in recent months have not had time to raise standards, although the impact can be seen in improvements to the learning environment, to behaviour and in attitudes to learning. Boys appear to achieve and respond as well as girls.

The establishment of the 'progress and learning group' has created a strong link between classroom practice and improvements in pupils' learning, as well as providing an effective forum for sharing best practice. Teachers are now observed regularly and formally by senior staff and directors of learning and performance is graded and tracked over time to identify good performance and areas of weakness. A coaching programme has been introduced and currently involves over 30 staff. This provides a good vehicle for sharing best practice and supporting underperformance and has improved the quality of teaching. Observation of classroom practice is not yet fully systematised and approaches remain inconsistent. There is a lack of clarity about the focus of each observation and the balance of judgements is more weighted towards teaching than learning. There are not sufficient opportunities within the observation framework to provide feedback to teachers or promulgate particularly strong practice.

Students' behaviour was satisfactory at the time of the previous inspection. However, the school has correctly identified a link between the poor behaviour of a minority of students and underachievement. Expectations of behaviour are higher, and clear guidelines and consequences have been established. The closure of an exclusion unit, which did little to enhance students' academic or emotional development, and replacing it with a seclusion centre that offers personal and academic support is proving to be effective. Exclusion rates have been halved, attendance in lessons has improved and students are making better progress. However, work remains to be done, particularly in regard to supporting all staff in meeting the needs of all those students who are underachieving and those with additional needs. It is no surprise that when the teaching is good, attitudes to learning are good and students make good progress. The quality of teaching has improved over the past nine months; however, further progress is required so that all students are suitably engaged in their learning and their specific learning needs are catered for. The school's leadership is aware that the needs of students, as identified in their individual education plans, must be pursued during lessons and plans are progressing which will make this happen. The school is reviewing the deployment and role of teaching assistants in order to optimise their time and input, especially with students in need

of support. The work of the design and technology department in using teaching assistants to provide focused support to students with additional needs is proving instrumental in improving standards. However, this model is not followed throughout the school.

The headteacher and the senior leadership team, in partnership with the IEB, have shown great resolve in addressing the issues for improvement. The quality of self-evaluation is good and a well-constructed school improvement plan is proving to be an effective vehicle in taking the school forward. The clear and focused leadership of the headteacher, a supportive senior leadership team and an IEB that has challenged and supported the school in equal measure have been the reasons why actions designed to bring about improvement have been implemented so quickly. There is a renewed sense of purpose across the school and a willingness to improve the provision for students. Good appointments have been made to lead English and science and carefully considered action has been taken to address a budget deficit. Enhanced provision for students is already evident in improvements to the quality of teaching and learning, especially within the English department. It will take time for these positive moves to be translated into validated outcomes for students, as identified in good progress and higher standards, but sufficient evidence was seen during the visit to suggest that the school is travelling in the right direction.

The designation of specialist status in sport has resulted in increased provision in terms of resources and has helped raise students' achievement. The physical education department is making a significant contribution to the development of good practice by working with other departments to promote personalised and guided learning.

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

Yours sincerely

Christopher Keeler HMI
Her Majesty's Inspector