

17 December 2007

Mr A Worthington  
Acting Headteacher  
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Dear Mr Worthington

Ofsted monitoring of schools with a Notice to Improve

Thank you for the help which you and your staff gave when Jane Austin HMI and I inspected your school on 13 December 2007, for the time you gave to our phone discussions and for the information you provided before and during my visit. Please pass on my thanks to all the staff involved in the visit, with particular thanks to the two groups of pupils I met throughout the morning.

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 May 2007 the school was asked to:

- raise standards and ensure that pupils achieve well
- improve the quality of teaching and learning
- take robust and effective action to improve the standard of behaviour.

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.

Since September 2007 a deputy headteacher has taken the role of acting headteacher until a permanent appointment is made for the beginning of the next academic year. His open and consultative leadership style has quickly gained the full support and confidence of staff, parents and pupils alike. There is increasing ownership and accountability at all levels of the school and a strong commitment to drive improvement and raise standards.

Good support is being provided by the local authority to move the school forward, through actions to raise standards, improve pupils' achievement and secure the school's financial position over the next three years. Evaluation reports provided by school improvement partners are helping the school to keep its progress under

review and move forward on the basis of clear, well considered recommendations for further action.

The school's results in the 2007 national tests and examinations at Key Stages 3 and 4 indicate that overall pupils did not make sufficient progress, given their starting points. The progress made by pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities improved; they are broadly achieving in line with expectations. At Key Stage 3, results in English and mathematics were below average, while those in science were well below average. The school did not meet its targets. At Key Stage 4 the upward trend in the proportion of pupils attaining five or more A\* to C grades at GCSE was maintained: results increased to 55%, further closing the gap on the national average of 60%. However, the trend for those gaining these grades including English and mathematics is more erratic. In 2007 results fell to 32%, well below the national average of 46%. In the sixth form AS level results improved, with the pass rate increasing from 59% in 2006 to 75%, although the pass rate at A level fell from 92% to 88%. The 2007 value added data indicate that many sixth-form pupils are not achieving in line with expectations.

Strategies applied since the inspection in May 2007 to improve standards did not make an impact on outcomes for that academic year; however, the school is now instigating a range of initiatives to improve achievement and standards for 2008. Since the inspection the school has developed a more accurate view of its performance: this is reflected in its self-evaluation form (SEF). There is greater ownership of and involvement in the school's self-evaluation process. The SEF is reviewed regularly and has been recently updated to reflect a more evaluative approach, with judgments firmly rooted in evidence. It does not, however, make the school's judgement of pupils' achievement clear.

Key to the school's work to accelerate pupils' progress is the tracking system that records their attainment at intervals and measures this against their individual aspirational targets. A higher profile has been given to ensuring that pupils know their predicted grades and what they need to do achieve them. There is more focused intervention for pupils at risk of not achieving their targets. Intervention lessons are held earlier in the term and a recently formed intervention group is systematically identifying where pupils' work is not of the expected quality or is incomplete, enabling support to be arranged more swiftly.

Pupils in Years 10 and Year 11 greatly value the more challenging approach to their individual academic targets and feel this is working well in raising their own expectations. The use of assessment data is improving at Key Stage 3, although the school recognises further work is required to ensure all Year 7 to 9 pupils are clear about their targets and how they can reach their potential.

The school has a range of short- and long-term strategies planned to address the previous underachievement at Key Stage 3 and 4. There are early indications that these are beginning to make an impact, particularly in the clearer understanding by pupils of their progress and through improved intervention initiatives. It is too early, however, to determine the full impact of strategies to improve pupils' overall achievement and standards.

The school's internal report, along with external reports, indicates that teaching and learning are now satisfactory and strategies to reduce the numbers of inadequate lessons have been successful. A number of actions have been taken to strengthen quality assurance. For example: all observers have been retrained in the autumn term to ensure more consistent grading of lessons; routine departmental scrutiny of teaching, assessment and pupils' work is now formally fed back to teachers, with clear indications of how to improve; and lesson planning has been refined, for instance teachers consider activities from the moment pupils arrive to lessons and routinely review the session to ensure that continuity in learning is sustained through to future lessons. Pupils report improvements in the quality of teaching, particularly in regard to teachers' classroom management. The school recognises, however, that there is not enough good or better teaching and learning and is now in the process of tackling the high proportion of satisfactory lessons. To improve the teaching environment, some alterations are currently under way, for example a new sixth-form study and social area is being relocated into the main building to support learning better and to provide a more suitable working space.

Concerns about standards and the quality of some lessons in science were identified by the school and through the local authority's monitoring. New leadership in the science department since September 2007 has resulted in: increased rigour in the monitoring of pupils' progress; improvements in the quality of science coursework; and some improvements in the quality of teaching through mentoring and support for individual teachers. It is too soon, however, to judge the full impact on pupils' achievement and standards.

Arrangements for sharing good practice are increasing through more formal staff forums and linking across departments although these are still at an early stage and have yet to make a significant impact. Opportunities to use some of the school's best teaching practice are missed. The school still has a high number of newly qualified teachers and supply teachers. Many parents who returned questionnaires aired their concerns about the stability of staffing. The school has made a number of new key permanent appointments which are due to begin in January 2008.

Both internal and external reviews show that behaviour in lessons and around the school has improved and is now satisfactory. Staff, pupils and parents ascribe this change to the introduction of a system that rewards pupils for coming prepared for learning, following the rules, working hard, treating others with respect and supporting a school event. Based on recognised good practice, this incremental system ensures that pupils receive regular, instant recognition while working towards significant rewards such as an end-of-term bowling trip. The system is very popular with pupils who were involved in its development. There is a strong emphasis on pupils developing self-discipline: posters displayed around the school and details in the pupil planner remind pupils to consider the consequences of their choices.

Pupils are well aware of the sanctions that apply when they make the wrong choices, although they say that there is some inconsistency in the way these are applied. Sanctions are recorded and the school analyses the pattern of incidents. Support,

where appropriate provided by external agencies, is put in place to match pupils' needs. A marked reduction in the number of exclusions this term, when compared with a similar period in the last academic year, indicates that this is effective in the main. Helpfully, local authority consultants are focusing their support in areas where most incidents occur. Despite an improving picture, of the 8% of parents who returned questionnaires a significant proportion remain concerned about the impact of unacceptable behaviour on learning.

Systems to tackle bullying continue to be effective. There has been a marked decrease in the incidences of bullying. The school is thorough in recording these so that patterns can be identified and issues dealt with. Pupils run the anti-bullying action group, which has decided that a sustained high profile will remind pupils that bullying is not acceptable. To this end, there is a focus each month on a different aspect of the issue. Pupils appreciate the confidential 'buddy box' through which they can report incidents.

The school is clear about what it needs to do to improve and is working to embed its systems and iron out any inconsistencies. It is successfully building the foundations for further improvement, aided by a more proactive and less reactive approach to issues.

Yours sincerely

Deborah Vaughan-Jenkins  
Her Majesty's Inspector