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Mrs Sally Cryer  
Headteacher  
Unity College  
Townley Holmes  
Burnley  
Lancashire  
BB11 3EN

Dear Mrs Cryer

Ofsted monitoring of Notice to Improve schools

Thank you for the help which you and your staff gave when I inspected your school on 17 June 2008, for the time you gave to our phone discussions and for the information which you provided before and during my visit.

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 November 2007, the school was asked to:

- Raise achievement and standards in both key stages, with a focus on English and mathematics.
- Improve the quality of teaching so that most is good or better.
- Ensure monitoring by senior and middle leaders is more robust and that decisive action is taken to secure rapid improvements in students' performance.

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 pupils' achievement.

The school has an effective tracking system which underpins its monitoring of all aspects of school improvement. There are regular formal assessment points when individuals' progress against targets is reviewed. Much work has been done to ensure that these assessments are accurate in terms of national curriculum levels or grades, which had not always been the case in the past. The information technology based system identifies students belonging to specific groups which have underachieved in the past and this aids staff in monitoring the progress of these groups. The school now carries out faculty and subject level analyses of assessment data to inform

progress towards targets, and middle leaders are held accountable for achievement in their own areas. All staff are aware of the college targets for the end of each key stage. Progress towards these targets is reviewed throughout the college year by faculty and subject leaders.

The results of tests and examinations taken in 2008 are not yet available. The school data for this year indicate that the school is on track to achieve or exceed the main targets for Key Stage 4. A number of intervention strategies have contributed to this improvement. Support has been given to specific identified groups and appropriate action taken. These interventions are having a positive impact and the school's evaluation clearly shows the benefits in terms of students' improved performance. The school is also using adult literacy and numeracy qualifications to motivate students and raise attainment at Key Stage 4. School data also suggest progress during Key Stage 3 is accelerating.

The school continues to develop and implement a range of strategies to improve attendance. These are beginning to have some impact. Attendance remains below average but it has improved since the last inspection. There are fewer authorised absences. The number of students arriving punctually in the morning is also rising. Exclusions have reduced substantially compared with the previous academic year.

Although the school has no single overarching teaching and learning strategy, a number of valuable initiatives are helping to drive improvements in the quality of teaching and learning. Monitoring and targeted support are reducing inadequate lessons. All teachers have received training in what constitutes a good lesson and the learning and progress criteria by which lessons are judged. Training, development and the sharing of good practice are contributing to raising the number of good or better lessons. In lessons objectives are shared with students and there is a clear focus on the requirements for particular levels or grades so that students understand exactly what they need to do to improve their work and achieve or exceed their own targets. The pace of work in lessons still needs to be increased to improve rates of progress further. Feedback from a recent training event shows that teachers are becoming more aware of this issue. The use of small teaching teams as a means of sharing good practice is encouraging teachers to try new ideas to improve their own lessons. Learning focus weeks, as well as ensuring that learning skills are emphasised throughout the whole curriculum, now require teachers to reflect and evaluate their own practice. The school is aware that there is still more to do to establish consistently good teaching and learning across all areas to promote more rapid rates of progress.

One innovative strategy designed to make the best use of teaching and learning time in the latter part of the summer term, is the implementation of the timetable for the new academic year in June. Following a pilot last year this has continued, and this year was combined with the change to a six period day. Year 9 students have been able to embark on their chosen Key Stage 4 options early. Year 10 students have, in effect, begun their final year in school, and together with GCSE module exams this is focusing them on achieving their qualifications. Any potential impact of staff changes over the summer has been minimised by the early start of a number of the newly

appointed teachers, who would otherwise have commenced in September 2008. Although it is too early to evaluate the full impact of this initiative on student progress, all the signs are encouraging and the school reports that it is proving popular with staff, students and parents.

The headteacher provides firm, clear direction and has vigorously set about establishing an ethos and culture firmly focused on raising standards. Following a number of changes during its first year the school now has a relatively stable middle leadership team. Middle leaders have had training, particularly focusing on the use of assessment data and their responsibility for acting on it. They have been empowered to play a key role in important decisions such as the move to a six period day. They are now more aware of the significance of their contribution to school improvement, accepting responsibility for successful implementation of strategies in their areas. There is a strong sense of teamwork and a real commitment to moving the school forward.

Since the inspection the school has re-structured staffing in the core subjects. In English this has included the appointment of an advanced skills teacher and a whole school literacy coordinator. More recently a coordinator for numeracy across the curriculum has also been appointed.

School improvement planning is clearly focused on the priorities identified through inspection, although success criteria in plans are not always specific enough. The main plan is carefully monitored at meetings of the senior leadership team, the governing body and the strategy group. To improve accountability below senior management level there are now weekly meetings between the deputy headteacher and faculty leaders to discuss whole college improvement. There are regular line-manager meetings with agreed agenda items.

The local authority (LA) has been effective in supporting the school. In addition to the work of different advisers at senior leadership level, LA Consultants in English, mathematics, science and information and communications technology (ICT) have supported faculties in producing their improvement plans and delivering intervention strategies. Consultants have also supported developments in assessment for learning in core subjects. LA advisers have undertaken audits of core subject provision and helped the school develop its own monitoring of the quality of teaching and learning. Paired lesson observations have been carried out to ensure that judgments are secure. The behaviour and attendance consultant has worked closely with the attendance team on the improvement of attendance and punctuality.

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

Yours sincerely

Ruth James  
Her Majesty's Inspector