

26 January 2009

Mrs J Walker  
Headteacher  
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Dear Mrs Walker

### 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 23 January 2009, 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 students, staff, the chair of governors and the representatives from the local authority for their helpful contributions.

There have been no major changes to the school's context since the previous inspection. However, the senior leadership of the school has been extended to include associate assistant headteachers whose responsibilities include leading on the areas for improvement identified in the inspection.

As a result of the inspection on 13 and 14 May 2008, the school was asked to:

- raise standards and achievement, especially in Key Stage 4
- improve the quality of teaching so that it is consistently good or better
- ensure the monitoring of teaching and learning is more consistent and effective
- improve the monitoring of the school's progress towards its targets to ensure standards and achievement can be evaluated with accuracy.

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 students' achievement.

The school achieved its best ever results at Key Stage 3 in 2008 and exceeded its targets at the expected Level 5 in English and science, missing its mathematics target by one percentage point. These results represented a significant increase on the standards achieved in the previous year; for example, the proportion of students achieving Level 5 in English rose from 79% to 92%, and the proportion gaining the higher Level 6 rose from 38% to 46%. The proportion of students who achieved a Level 5 in both English and mathematics rose to 88%. The school also achieved significant improvements in examination results at the end of Key Stage 4, with the

proportion of students who gained five or more good GCSE grades (A\* to C) being the best achieved by the school. At 67%, this represented a significant increase from 54% in 2007 and exceeded the percentage of students who achieved this measure in 2006. The proportion of students achieving five or more good GCSE grades including English and mathematics also rose from a dip to 48% in 2007 to 54% in 2008. The proportion of students gaining five or more GCSE passes at grades A\* to G remains above the national average and no student left school without at least one qualification. The standards achieved by students in the sixth form remained broadly similar to those achieved in the previous year, broadly in line with national averages.

However, this encouraging picture is not the full story. The school met its specialist school target in dance, but results in the other specialist subjects were disappointing, with music and drama below target, the latter for the first time. Although most examination outcomes at Key Stage 4 are in line with national averages, this does not yet represent sufficient achievement given the students' starting points. The school has made progress in tackling the legacy of underachievement and is setting increasingly challenging targets but, as it recognises, has some way to go before it reaches the standards achieved in similar schools. Nevertheless, the evidence provided by the school of the outcomes of early GCSE entries in English and modular results in mathematics indicate that the school is on an improving path. These results also include a higher proportion of students gaining the highest A\*/A grades than gained in the 2008 examinations.

The school now has a more robust approach to raising standards and improving students' achievement. This approach encompasses a range of strategies, some of which have built on what was in place at the time of the previous inspection and some of which are new. A key factor in the improvement is the focus and drive of the headteacher and senior staff. The school's senior leaders have recognised the need to focus on key priorities; the restructuring of the senior leadership team to include clearly identified leadership on the areas for improvement reflects this focus.

Senior leaders now have better data by which to monitor progress towards the school's targets because a significantly improved system to track students' progress has been established. Students and teachers all noted the benefits arising from this system. From the students' perspective, they have a much clearer picture of their progress in relation to the targets they have been set, and note that teachers have a sharper focus on 'getting the grades'. Teachers recognise the benefits of better tracking in their own subjects, and also the access to information about students' progress in other curriculum areas. The tracking system incorporates information about students' attitudes as well as their progress; these attitudes relate principally to learning rather than behaviour. As a result, staff with oversight of year groups and key stages have a clear overview of students' progress and attitudes and can therefore identify more readily those students who need to be targeted for additional support and challenge. The school is using a wide range of intervention strategies to promote achievement; these include reorganising teaching sets, mentoring individual students and involving parents and carers more closely. A significant feature is the

tailoring of intervention more carefully to meet the needs of individual students because the school has better data. The school can demonstrate the impact of this intervention in the results already obtained by students.

The availability of improved data has contributed to sharper accountability throughout the school, which is recognised by staff and students. The roles and responsibilities of middle leaders, including subject leaders, are clearer. Although some inconsistencies remain, the school has taken sound steps to improve the effectiveness of middle leaders in raising standards, improving teaching and learning, and monitoring the quality of teaching and learning. Partnership work with the local authority has been particularly helpful in developing staff expertise, including developing subject leaders' skills in lesson observations. Records of the most recent observations demonstrate these improved skills, and include a sharper focus on the factors which promote learning. Accountability extends to the work of the whole school. The regular 'impact team' meetings of senior staff, governors and representatives from the local authority to review progress on the school's action plan have maintained the impetus for improvement, as well as strengthening the partnership between the school and the local authority. These meetings also demonstrate improvements in the governing body's role in holding the school to account.

The local authority's work has been valued by the school, not least in its contribution to improving the quality of teaching and learning. The samples of lessons observed during the inspection included a variety of learning experiences for students, such as freeze-framing scenes from 'A Midsummer Night's Dream' in English and repeating different rhythms to answer the register in music. Although the sample of lessons observed on this inspection was small, there were no examples of the dull activities described in the report from the previous inspection. Students were actively engaged, well behaved and they collaborated well with their peers. They responded well to the opportunities to take responsibility and use initiative. Teachers spoke very positively about the opportunities they have had for professional development through a variety of approaches, including coaching, work with other schools and the increasing amount of work with colleagues from other departments in school. Staff noted the higher expectations placed on them, but recognised the benefits for students and for their own professional development. The school has successfully created a climate for improvement which resonates with students and staff and where all can identify the benefits: students noted that lessons have changed for the better. Nevertheless, the school and the local authority both recognise that this is 'work in progress'. There is a clear commitment to improvement, greater transparency on what is needed and the support provided to reach goals for students and teachers. This includes a focus on improvement in the performance of specialist subjects.

The impact of the school's specialism on the school's performance is varied. As has been noted, the examination outcomes were mixed in 2008, and disappointing overall. However, the school's actions illustrate that these shortcomings have been tackled robustly. Evidence from the inspection shows how students and teachers

have begun to benefit through, for example, a better understanding of examination assessment criteria. There is, as yet, limited evidence of the impact of the specialist subjects on overall standards at Key Stage 4 but additional curriculum courses at Key Stage 4 and in the sixth form are broadening the opportunities for students to achieve in the specialist subjects.

As has been acknowledged above, the partnership work of the local authority has been valued by the school in promoting improvement since the school was given a Notice to Improve. No amendments were required to the local authority's action plan to support the school, but there is scope for the local authority to refine the milestones it uses to monitor its actions, and clarify the basis on which it evaluates the impact of its work with the school.

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

Yours sincerely

Heather Richardson  
Her Majesty's Inspector