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Mr J Sharples
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Sharples

Ofsted survey programme visit - National Strategies survey 2008-09

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 17 March 2009 to look at the impact of the National Strategies on raising standards and narrowing the attainment gap.

As outlined in my initial letter, the visit focused on the work of the National Strategies in improving outcomes for children and young people. The visit focused particularly on the school's view of the impact of the National Strategies and how this is evaluated.

The visit provided valuable information which will contribute to our national evaluation and reporting. Published reports are likely to list the names of the contributing institutions but individual schools will not be identified in the main text. All feedback letters will be published on the Ofsted website at the end of each half-term.

The evidence used to inform the outcomes of the visit included interviews with the headteacher, senior leaders, other nominated staff and a group of students. Parts of three lessons were observed and relevant documentation was scrutinised.

The school has used aspects of the National Strategies selectively as part of a wide range of initiatives to raise standards. Senior leaders are of the view that this approach has had a positive impact on raising levels of attendance and improving the quality of teaching and learning. In addition, the school has increased the rigour of systems to assess and track students' progress. This has enabled staff to use a variety of personalised strategies to raise the achievement of targeted groups of students who require additional support. Senior leaders report that these strategies have contributed to improvements in the quality of teaching and learning and personalised support for individual

students. However, they acknowledge that it is difficult to evaluate the separate contribution of individual initiatives in securing school improvement. On the visit, observations indicated that teachers follow a common format to lesson planning which builds in opportunities for teachers to tailor activities that meet the needs of different individuals or groups of students. A variety of activities provide opportunities for students to participate actively in their learning and to assess the progress that they have made towards learning objectives. Students report that they are much clearer about their targets and the next steps in their learning because teachers give them helpful guidance on criteria used to assess their work. They enjoy the wider range of activities planned by their teachers and also value the more frequent opportunities to assess and reflect upon their own learning as well as that of their peers. These strengths reflect the views of senior leaders from their own observations. On occasion, however, opportunities were missed in lessons to give students greater responsibility for their own learning or to use strategies to promote literacy development across the curriculum.

The school has a well established and coherent approach to supporting vulnerable students that reflects the caring and supportive Christian ethos that underpins its work with all students. A systematic and well coordinated approach to improving attendance and reducing the number of persistent absentees has resulted in significant improvement in attendance from 89.5 % in 2006-7 to 92.5% in 2007-8. The school has increased the rigour of its monitoring of attendance in order to maintain and build on this level during the current academic year.

The school has valued the guidance from the National Strategies and the range of consultant support it has received. Senior leaders have appreciated particularly, the support and challenge provided by the school improvement partner. This range of support has contributed to an improvement in the overall rate of progress made by Year 11 students over the last three years. However, variations persist in the progress made between different subjects and between different groups of students. For example, performance at the end of Key Stage 3 has fluctuated over three years and a trend of improvement has not been established. While standards at the end of Key Stage 4 rose overall between 2005 and 2008, the proportion of students gaining good passes in both English and mathematics has not improved at the same pace. In 2008, 32% of students gained five A* to C including English and mathematics. Consequently the school has become eligible for additional funding as part of the National Challenge to promote more rapid improvement in standards.

School leaders are clear about what actions to take to tackle key priorities and monitor the progress towards success criteria. However, they recognise that there is scope to review the strategies used to evaluate the impact of actions taken, in order to identify what works well and to refine the next steps in their planning to raise standards further.

I hope you find this feedback useful.

As I explained in my previous letter, a copy of this letter will be sent to your local authority and will be published on the Ofsted website.

It will also be available to the team for your next institutional inspection.

Yours sincerely

Sara Morrissey
Her Majesty's Inspector