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Dr John Frain
Headteacher
South Shields Community School
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Dear Dr Frain

Ofsted monitoring of Grade 3 schools

Thank you for the help which you and your staff gave when Mr Dower and I inspected your school on 19 November 2009 and for the information which you provided before and during our visit. I would also like to offer my thanks to the students who spoke to us during the inspection.

South Shields Community School opened in April 2007 following the amalgamation of two local schools, Brinkburn and King George V. Staff and students moved to the restructured Brinkburn site in September 2007. Since the last inspection the number of students attending the school has fallen by around 25%. This is because fewer students joined the school at the start of Year 7 in September 2008 and 2009, largely as a result of changes in the local population.

As a result of the inspection on 18–19 June 2008, the school was asked to raise students' achievement in English and mathematics, improve attendance, increase the proportion of good and better teaching and enhance communication with parents so as to improve their perceptions of the amalgamated school.

Having considered all the evidence I am of the opinion that at this time the school has made:

satisfactory progress in making improvements

and

satisfactory progress in demonstrating a better capacity for sustained improvement.

The headteacher has worked tirelessly to steer the school through the post-amalgamation period and has tackled some extremely challenging circumstances with calm resolve and tenacity. He has generally been well supported in this task by the senior leadership team. There have been some good gains in relation to the curriculum and around the schools' specialisms in business and enterprise for example. Nevertheless, the school's leaders and managers acknowledge that some aspects of the school's work, most notably in the quality of teaching and learning in science, are yet to recover fully from the merger.

Although higher ability students did not achieve as well as expected overall, attainment at Key Stage 4 improved in 2009 when compared to the previous year. Provisional examination results indicate that the proportion of students gaining five GCSEs grades A to C rose by 43% compared to results in 2008. At 97%, the school attained the highest-ever proportion of students gaining five GCSEs grades A to C in South Tyneside. Provisional examination results show that the proportion of students achieving five GCSEs grades A to C including English and mathematics rose by 6% to 37%.

The school has made satisfactory progress overall in raising attainment in English and mathematics. In 2009 the school made good progress in raising attainment in English at Key Stage 4. Whilst boys' attainment in mathematics was satisfactory at this level, that of girls was inadequate. Progress in raising attainment in both English and mathematics at Key Stage 3 in 2009 was satisfactory. The school has carefully analysed the reasons behind pockets of underperformance and looks set to raise attainment in English and mathematics further by the end of the current academic year.

Despite a small improvement in overall attendance and in the number of students with persistence absence, attendance in 2008/09 was inadequate; the attendance for girls in Year 9 and in Key Stage 4 being particularly low. Changes to the way attendance is managed and coordinated have resulted in more robust measures to monitor and tackle absence. There are early signs that these are proving to be effective. For example, the one-to-one tuition and other activities implemented as part of the 'making good progress' pilot have demonstrably improved the attendance and progress of some students who had previously become disengaged from their learning. Setting aside a significant number of absences as a result of confirmed cases of swine flu, school and local authority data indicates that attendance so far this term – including that of girls - would be broadly in line with national expectations.

School leaders are addressing challenging staffing issues head-on; most have been resolved but tackling them has held back the rate at which the proportion of good or better teaching has risen so far. There is evidence of some improvements in

elements of teaching in some areas of the school, resulting in the proportion of teaching that is good or better rising by 11% to around 47%, with notable improvements in specific subjects such as business studies and information and communication technology (ICT). This is beginning to raise standards in some subjects including English and mathematics. Nonetheless, too high a proportion of lessons remain no better than satisfactory. Teaching and learning is currently too variable between subjects and some small pockets of inadequate teaching remain. School leaders routinely observe lessons and provide detailed feedback to teachers, and student surveys provide invaluable insights into how students prefer to learn. However, this information does not always result in sharply focused improvement actions which are then monitored and reviewed. Consequently even though some solid foundations for learning have been put in place, not all teachers build upon these strategies sufficiently well or interest and engage students fully in their learning in order to promote consistently good learning and progress.

Inspection evidence, including scrutiny of recent questionnaires and meetings with students, confirms that parents' perceptions of the school have improved significantly. This is a direct result of the effective actions the school has taken to engage with them and keep them informed. As one parent explained in a recent survey, 'the school has been very approachable and has definitely improved in the last 12 months'.

The school's specialist status in business and enterprise is having a positive impact on its work. The new business centre which opened in March 2009 provides a good learning environment for students, and acts as a hub for work in the local community which is helping to improve perceptions of the school. Termly enterprise events with primary schools share staff expertise and, as inspectors witnessed first hand, create a real buzz of common purpose and endeavour and help prepare younger children well for their transition to secondary school. Standards and achievement in business and ICT courses are rising and are currently good. Curriculum developments are broadening choices for students both within school and in partnership with other providers. Good practice is increasingly being shared across the school, and specialist targets are being met or exceeded.

The school looks outside its boundary to secure support that will promote improvement. For example, working with external partners to monitor the quality of provision and broaden the curriculum. School leaders have expended an enormous amount of effort and energy on researching and diagnosing where the school's strengths and weaknesses lie. This results in some strong analysis and reviews that give a clear picture of why things are as they are and progress to date. However, this information is less effectively translated into operational plans and targets that staff throughout the school can readily understand act upon and be measured against. Overall, the school's planning and many of the procedures currently in use are too complex and lack sufficient precision to consistently secure improvement.

I hope that you have found the visit helpful in promoting improvement in your school. This letter will be posted on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Wendy Ripley
Her Majesty's Inspector