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Mr Paul Allen  
Headteacher  
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Acklington Road  
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Dear Mr Allen

Ofsted monitoring of schools with a notice to improve

Thank you for the help you and your staff gave when I inspected your school on 04 November 2009, and for the information you provided during my visit. Particular thanks to the students, chair of governors and to the local authority representative who spoke with me.

Since the inspection in February 2009, new appointments have been made to the English and science departments, and an assistant headteacher with specific responsibility for raising standards in English has also been appointed. A leader from another school has been seconded, as an assistant headteacher, to the school and an acting head of English has been appointed to cover for the long-term absence of the incumbent head of English. The science department has suffered and still does to an extent, a high degree of staff turbulence.

As a result of the inspection on 04–05 February 2009, the school was asked to:

- raise standards in English and science at Key Stage 4
- develop a more rigorous and consistent whole-school approach to monitoring marking and written feedback to students so they know how well they are doing and what to do to improve
- develop more robust evaluation and monitoring of provision to ensure that all students achieve in line with their capabilities
- develop further the monitoring and evaluation role of the head of sixth form to include all aspects of provision in Years 12 and 13, especially teaching and learning.

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 and in raising students' achievement.

The provisional GCSE results for 2009 show an overall improvement from the previous year. The proportion of students achieving five or more A\* to C grades was 64%, an increase of 4% from 2008. This also demonstrates an improvement in the progress made by these students. The proportion of students gaining five or more A\* to C grades including English and mathematics also increased by 4% in 2009. Targets for both these measures were exceeded. The school has improved the rigour of its target setting and staff are becoming much more aware of the importance of targets in raising standards. The school increased strongly the percentage of students achieving grades A\* to C in GCSE English from 44.9% in 2008 to 54.7% in 2009. Targets, however, were not met in English in 2008 or in 2009, though in 2009 the shortfall was reduced. The strong progress made in improving English is reflected clearly by students' increased enjoyment of their lessons. Those interviewed spoke appreciatively of the more interesting lessons now planned for them in which they often experience much more interactive learning. There is an increased confidence in the teachers of English, propagated by the much-increased capacity, albeit temporary, leadership of English. This confidence has started to rub off onto the students who see clearly the efforts being made in other subjects to help develop their literacy skills.

However, set against these promising improvements in English, the rise in standards in Year 11 GCSE science in 2009 was less encouraging. In the separate GCSE science subjects the proportion of A\* to C grades improved; however, the overall proportion of students attaining two or more A\* to C grades did not. Consequently, the school has intensified its efforts to improve standards in science, particularly in chemistry. It is also working hard to address the turbulence in staffing; for example a new member of staff was appointed in September 2009. However, physics teaching remains inconsistent, with lessons sometimes delivered by temporary teachers. The recent introduction of the BTEC science course in Years 10 and 11 is starting to engage students more in learning science.

Improvements have been made in the quality of marking and feedback students get on their work. Much of this results from improved quality assurance procedures and the impact of the teaching and learning group. In some subjects such as art, technology and more recently English, students understand clearly how well they are doing and what they have to do to improve; hence the improved standards in English. An improved marking policy has been developed along with support to help teachers provide better feedback to students. However, there is an acknowledged need to share and embed more of this improved practice across the school. Stickers are now used in the vast majority of students' books to highlight their targets. However, their use is inconsistent. In some books there are no action points or they are not specific enough to help the student improve. Nevertheless, evidence from the school's recent tracking of students' performance indicates that the actions taken are starting to have a positive impact.

As a result of the strengthened senior leadership, the hearts and minds of staff and students are being won over; staff now much more clearly realise the work needed to continue the journey of improvement. The senior leadership team has implemented a more robust system of monitoring and evaluation. Governance is clearly supportive of the school and its improvement. The strong 'Post-Ofsted Steering Group', along with the very experienced chair of governors, holds the school rigorously to account each month as to the findings from this monitoring and drive school improvement forward. Consequently, the senior leadership team is now much more focused upon what needs to be done to raise standards. This is leading to more appropriate actions being taken to help students achieve their potential. However, not all middle leaders ensure that teachers make best use of assessment information to help individual students learn.

As with the leadership and management of the main school, there is now an increased rigour in the sixth form leader's evaluation and monitoring of the provision for sixth form students. Regular monitoring of lessons means the sixth form leader has a much clearer understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of what is provided to students. As a result, more focused support is given to teachers. The impact of this is already being seen in increased opportunities for independent learning. However, inconsistent approaches in teaching and learning across the different sixth form subjects still exist. The sixth form leader is clear what needs to be done to ensure a consistent better quality in all lessons. The leader along with other senior leaders in the main school is developing more confidence and experience in working with subject leaders when concerns arise. However, this is an ongoing process, especially for those senior leaders dealing with subject areas outside of their expertise.

The school has specialist engineering status. In the technology specialist areas, such as resistant materials and graphics, targets are exceeded and standards are consistently above the national average. In the specialist subject of mathematics students have, for example, across 2006 to 2008 made significantly more progress than that normally expected. However, in 2009 in the specialist subject of science, in terms of students attaining two or more higher GCSE grades, standards remained significantly lower than the national average. Good practice in specialist subjects is shared effectively across other subject areas. The very enthusiastic leader of the specialist status is, for example, providing support to teachers in developing the quality of their lesson planning.

The local authority action plan is fit for purpose. It details clearly the support for the school and it is used effectively to hold the school to account for the progress it is making. The local authority also provides effective support to the school's leadership. For example, it has brokered additional senior leadership capacity. This has been pivotal in the school's development not only in driving the improvements seen in English but in the improvement of teaching and learning across the whole school.

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

Mark Wilson  
Additional Inspector

