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Mr R Cathcart
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Cathcart

Ofsted monitoring of Grade 3 schools

Thank you for the help which you and your staff gave when I inspected your school on 23 March 2010, for the time you gave to our telephone discussion and for the information which you provided during my visit. Please pass on my thanks to staff and students who gave their time to the discussions.

Since the last inspection, a new headteacher has been appointed. There have also been other significant changes to the school's leadership and management arrangements, including the appointment of a deputy headteacher and two assistant headteachers. The chair of governors has been in post since September 2008. The position of Special Educational Needs coordinator (SENCO) is currently vacant.

As a result of the inspection on 26–27 March 2008, the school was asked to:

- ensure teachers use data on students' progress more effectively to plan learning activities which challenge all students to achieve highly
- develop the methods used by teachers to manage the behaviour of students in order to promote a more consistently positive attitude to learning
- ensure that data on students' progress are used more effectively by the school's leaders to set challenging targets and strengthen monitoring and evaluation so that weaknesses can be addressed with greater urgency
- improve the attendance and punctuality of sixth form students.

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.

Students make satisfactory progress during their time in the school, resulting in standards of attainment which are broadly average. However, school leaders recognise that in 2009, while some of the school's most able students exceeded their



GCSE target grades, a small minority of less able students and students with special educational needs and/or disabilities made inadequate progress. The school has acted quickly to address these incidents of underachievement, making sensible adjustments to the curriculum and addressing inadequate leadership and management arrangements with regard to provision for students with special educational needs and/or disabilities. As a result of these actions, all groups of students are now making at least satisfactory progress.

Behaviour is satisfactory. While school leaders and managers have rightly strengthened systems to manage incidents of poor behaviour in class, teachers are still not all consistent in their application of school policies. Students reported that behaviour varies from lesson to lesson. The school takes a strong line on physical assault, drug-related incidents and racist abuse and, as a result, all students who met inspectors said that they feel safe in school. Students from a wide range of ethnic backgrounds get on well together.

Attendance has improved and is now above average. The proportion of students who are persistent absentees has halved and is now below average. Attendance and punctuality in the sixth form have also significantly improved since the last inspection, although sixth form attendance still remains lower than for the rest of the school.

The school has invested significant time and resources to improve the quality of teaching and learning. Teachers now have access to good assessment and achievement data for all students. However, not all staff use this information to devise lessons to meet the needs of the full ability range. While inspectors saw mostly satisfactory lessons and some good teaching, a small number of inadequate lessons were also seen. In the less effective lessons, teachers do not monitor the learning of the whole group with sufficient regularity to ensure that all are making good progress. In these lessons, students do not have a clear understanding of how to make good progress because success criteria are not defined with sufficient clarity. Although some examples of helpful marking were seen in books, not enough marking is sharply focused on helping students to make progress against their individual targets.

Students are now benefiting from a curriculum which is more closely matched to their needs than before. Less able students are able to choose from a wider range of accredited qualifications, including a range of BTEC qualifications. This improved curriculum choice is having a clear impact on the satisfactory progress that students currently in Years 10 and 11 are making.

Systems to provide appropriate care, guidance and support remain a good feature of the school's work and have been strengthened since the last inspection. The school's electronic registration system has had a clear impact on raising students' attendance. The school uses a wide range of interventions to support vulnerable

students. While the school does not currently have a permanent special educational needs coordinator, interim arrangements are proving to be successful in providing effective support for students with special educational needs and/or disabilities. Older students are highly appreciative of the out-of-hours support they receive to improve their chances of gaining good qualifications. This includes coursework support sessions and additional revision classes in the holidays. There is also a homework club. However, school leaders and managers recognise that homework is currently having insufficient impact on student achievement.

After a period of significant turbulence, leadership and management arrangements have been strengthened. The senior leadership team has been restructured, with roles and responsibilities more clearly defined than before. Leaders and managers can point to significant successes since the last inspection. The school's substantial budget deficit has been eliminated through very effective financial management. Management information systems have improved so that leaders and managers are able to monitor the school's work much more effectively. As a result, staff now have a clear understanding of how well different groups of learners are performing and are able to intervene quickly to address incidents of underachievement. The aspirational school improvement plan is rightly focused on raising students' achievement. While long-term and interim targets are set, not all targets are crafted in a way that enables governors to hold school leaders fully to account.

The school has used its status as a specialist language college to ensure that all boys have the opportunity to study two modern foreign languages. As a result, the proportions studying modern foreign languages are much higher than seen nationally. Students speak positively about the opportunity to develop their language skills in French, German and, in some cases, Mandarin Chinese. However, the school did not meet its ambitious specialist language college achievement targets in 2009.

The school has benefited from good support from the local authority, particularly in the period when the school was without a substantive headteacher. School leaders judge that the impact of other aspects of support from the local authority is not yet measured with sufficient rigour.

The school's progress in key areas for improvement, together with improved leadership and management arrangements, provide good evidence that the school has a better capacity to improve than at the time of the last inspection.

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

Daniel Burton
Her Majesty's Inspector