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Ms C Mullane
Headteacher
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Dear Ms Mullane

Ofsted 2010–11 survey inspection programme: assessing students' progress (APP)

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff and students, during my visit on 14 October 2010 to evaluate the impact of the APP initiative.

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 institutions will not be identified in the main text without their consent.

The evidence used to inform the judgements included: scrutiny of documentation; observations of teaching and learning in English and mathematics; and discussions with senior leaders, other staff, students and a representative from the local authority.

The overall use of assessment to support learning is good.

Impact on students' achievement and attainment

- The clear direction given by senior leaders to school improvement has enabled APP to make a useful contribution to raising attainment. Improvements in the quality of teaching are influenced by the principles of APP and promote students' achievement well.
- The gap in students' overall achievement compared with the national average has narrowed, markedly so, since 2008. The school's work to accelerate progress in English and mathematics since the previous inspection is having a significant impact on achievement.

Impact on the quality of students' learning and progress

- The principles and materials of APP influence lesson plans and learning activities to support the progress of different groups of students. The

national success criteria are used to give students a clear understanding of the standard of work needed to meet the different levels.

- The school's success in developing students' skills for independent learning has enabled teachers and students to get the best from the principles of APP.
- In discussion, most students understood the purpose of targets and success criteria. They confidently explained the different sorts of feedback that teachers provide to help them improve. All students spoke positively about the emphasis on structured group work and welcomed the opportunities presented to take some responsibility for their learning.

Impact on the quality of teaching and the use of assessment to support learning

- APP has contributed to improvements in the quality of teaching, particularly in English and mathematics. However, effective leadership that has refined the skills of teachers already secure in their subject knowledge is the driving force for change and improvement.
- Consistent features of teaching across mathematics and English are: effective use of information about individuals' progress to plan lessons; activities which allow some choice for students at different points in their learning; and skilled use of questioning and other strategies to check that students understand the work and are making good gains throughout the lesson.
- Teachers consider that APP has encouraged and informed a productive debate about the use of assessment and strategies to support learning.
- A strongly collaborative culture has developed within subject teams. This is demonstrated in the consistency of practice within and between English and mathematics. Just occasionally, teachers spend too much time talking about the success criteria for different attainment levels, rather than getting on with the work that will enable students to achieve these.

Impact on the curriculum

- The notion, promoted by APP, of assessing students when they are ready has influenced curriculum development in English and mathematics. Early examination entry for those who are ready is becoming a feature of provision. A broader range of options in English and mathematics has extended choice to better meet individual needs. For example, a GCSE in additional mathematics offers students greater challenge in applying their knowledge and skills.

Areas for development, which we discussed, include:

- increasing the effectiveness of the evaluation of assessment practice by making clearer the distinction between how well teachers use data about students' progress to plan lessons and how well they use strategies during lessons to check students' learning.

I hope that these observations are useful as you continue to develop APP in support of school improvement.

As I explained previously, a copy of this letter will be published on the Ofsted website. It may be used to inform decisions about any future inspection. Except in the case of academies, a copy of this letter is also being sent to your local authority.

Yours sincerely

Cathryn Kirby
Her Majesty's Inspector