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10 October 2008

Mr Kevin Beaton  
Heateacher  
Sydney Smith School  
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Dear Mr Beaton

### **Ofsted monitoring of schools with a notice to improve**

Thank you for the help which you and your staff gave when I inspected your school on 9 October 2008, for the time you gave to our phone discussions and for the information which you provided before and during my visit. Please also pass on my thanks to the students.

This letter will be posted on the Ofsted website. Please inform the Regional Inspection Service Provider of any factual inaccuracies within 24 hours of the receipt of this letter.

As a result of the inspection in January 2008, the school was asked to:

- Raise standards and improve students' progress in English, mathematics and science.
- Improve students' personal development, particularly their attitudes to learning, attendance, punctuality and willingness to take on responsibilities as part of the school community.
- Increase the proportion of good and outstanding teaching through continued sharing of best practice and raising students' levels of independent 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.

In 2007, GCSE examination results in all key performance measures, with the exception of the number of students attaining at least five A\* to C grades, improved. The picture at Key Stage 3 was less positive, with attainment at expected levels in all core subjects and also higher levels in English and mathematics declining. In 2008, provisional national test results at Key Stage 3 indicate improvements in mathematics and science at both expected and higher levels, with English results

similar to those attained in 2007. Unvalidated GCSE results show an increase in the proportion of students achieving five or more A\* to G grades. However, the percentage of students attaining at least five A\* to C grades including English and mathematics has declined to below 30% and the school is to be assigned a National Challenge adviser.

Systems to track the progress students are making are robust and attainment information is collected and carefully reviewed at regular intervals throughout the academic year. The school's most recent assessments indicate that, if students perform as expected, challenging targets set for 2009 are attainable. The number of students in Year 9 on track to reach expected levels in English, mathematics and science is presently closer to the national average. In Year 11, the school's data indicates that students are on course to improve their results in all key performance measures and also increase the proportion achieving A\* to C grades in GCSE English and mathematics.

The school is fully aware of the need to re-examine its intervention work to ensure a sharper focus on targeted groups in both key stages and this work has already started. Continuing efforts to improve attendance and increase the proportion of good or better teaching will also need to be maintained if significant improvements in achievement and standards are to be secured.

The school has worked hard, using a range of approaches including the Teacher Effectiveness Enhancement Programme (TEEP), personal coaching and assessment for learning strategies, to improve the quality of classroom practice and engage and interest students in their own learning. More than half of the lessons observed during this inspection were good or better, with no inadequate teaching seen. In most classes observed, relationships are good. Teachers know their students well and give them effective support and encouragement. Students' attitudes to learning are generally positive, with new technology, including the use of interactive whiteboards, having a beneficial effect on learning. The school is determined to meet the needs of all students, and this is reflected in the quality of lesson planning and delivery. A focus on improving the progress made by lower ability students, in particular, is having some impact. Generally, progress in lessons is greatest when tasks are closely linked to students' learning needs and targeted questioning challenges pupils to explain their thinking and ideas. Evidence indicates that the marking of workbooks is regular, with some examples of good guidance to help students improve.

The school has a rigorous programme of lesson observations, involving leaders at all levels. Teachers receive regular feedback about their work and there is a comprehensive and well-targeted programme of professional development. This includes the use of skilled teachers and coaches, together with opportunities to develop and discuss teaching and learning within the 'school improvement' and 'learning communities' groups. Frequent monitoring of teachers' work helps to ensure that there is a consistent approach in all subjects and lessons.

Attendance in 2007/08 remained well below the national average. The school, however, was successful in improving attendance in Years 7 and 9 and reducing the levels of authorised absence across the school. However, figures for unauthorised absence and the overall percentage of students with a track record of persistent absence increased. School records show that severe flooding in the school in June 2007 had an adverse impact on attendance in a number of year groups. The school re-opened fully in May 2008. Despite this, the school has continued to develop and use an extensive variety of strategies, involving both students and families, to improve attendance figures. Targeted students in both year and subject groups are closely monitored and more recently, key workers have been introduced to improve the attendance of those with persistent levels of absence. The profile and importance of attendance is high, and the school is fully aware that present attendance levels continue to hamper the school's continuing drive to raise standards. Strenuous efforts have also been made to address some students' poor punctuality at the start of the day and in lessons. Over time, this shows an improving picture.

The behaviour of students in lessons and around the school is generally good. The school has a behaviour and reward system, which is supported and monitored electronically with good behaviour regularly rewarded. Students are keen to talk about aspects of school life and the school has created a number of opportunities for them to exercise responsibility. These include serving on the school council, acting as peer mentors and involvement in the student leadership programme. Through the citizenship curriculum, students are also able to raise funds for charity. The introduction of the social and emotional aspects of learning (SEAL) and 'extended guidance' work is also helping students to develop the necessary skills to better engage with learning and with the school community.

The headteacher, supported by the leaders at all levels, is aware of what needs to be done to improve standards across the school. Expectations of what is required and is possible are appropriate and based on a sound evaluation of the school's present position. The school has suitable systems in place to evaluate the impact of its actions. The role of middle leaders continues to develop well, with a growing involvement in monitoring and evaluation. Teaching staff are continuing to embrace change and particularly appreciate the opportunities to discuss and share existing good practice.

Evaluation reports provided by the school improvement partner and local authority have helped to keep the school's progress under review, with focused recommendations for further action. The local authority's revised action plan clearly outlines intended provision for all areas requiring improvement and there are suitable arrangements for monitoring the school's progress. To date, however, the impact of these actions on raising standards across the school has not been fully realised.

I hope that you have found the visit helpful in promoting improvement in your school.

Yours sincerely

Angela M Headon  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**