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Dear Mr Tyrer

Schools Where the Pupils' Behaviour has been Identified as a Concern by Inspection: Monitoring Inspection of Ash Green School

Introduction

Following my visit with Andrew Harrett HMI to your school on 3 and 4 May 2005, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector to confirm the inspection findings.

The visit was a first monitoring inspection as part of the programme of visits to schools where the pupils' behaviour has been identified as a concern by inspection.

This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the acting headteacher, the executive headteacher, senior managers, the heads of English, mathematics, science, information and communication technology, members of the school council and representatives from the LEA.

Context

Ash Green School is smaller than most secondary schools. The proportion of the pupils known to be eligible for free school meals is in line with the national figure. The roll includes an above average proportion of pupils who have special educational needs, while the percentage for whom English is an additional language is below the national figure. At the beginning of the present term, the school entered into a loose federation with the nearby Nicholas Chamberlayne Technology College; its headteacher is designated as executive headteacher for Ash Green and a deputy headteacher from Nicholas Chamberlayne is its acting headteacher. A third senior leader from the college also has an interim

management role at Ash Green. The school has found recent difficulty in recruiting and retaining sufficient numbers of appropriately qualified teachers but the staffing situation is now more stable.

Achievement and standards

In terms of the pupils' average points scores, attainment in GCSE examinations was well below the national average in 2004. It was also well below that of schools nationally in which pupils had similar levels of prior attainment at Key Stage 3 and very low in comparison with that of schools nationally in similar socio-economic contexts. However, in the proportions of pupils achieving at least one overall pass grade and five or more overall pass grades, the school's performance was above that of schools in which pupils had similar attainment at Key Stage 3. The percentage of pupils gaining five or more A*-C GCSE grades fell from 26 per cent in 2003 to 18 per cent in 2004 and the trend in the school's results over the last five years has been below the national trend.

In the statutory Key Stage 3 tests in 2004, attainment was well below the national averages in each subject. In English, 46 per cent of the pupils achieved the expected Level 5, while the corresponding figures in mathematics and science were 51 and 45 per cent respectively.

Since the last inspection in 2003, the school has improved the quality of its assessment data for pupils in each year and has made it more accessible to staff. The information is used to set targets and to monitor the progress of classes, individuals and groups of pupils who are at risk of underachieving but it has not yet had a significant impact across the school on standards and progress in lessons. However, pupils have been identified in Years 9 and 11 who would benefit from extra help in their preparation for examinations. The school has provided a programme of support for them, scheduled in the school holidays, at weekends and after school and including a residential weekend for identified pupils in Year 11. A series of targeted lessons for some Year 11 pupils will also run during the examination period.

The pupils' progress was satisfactory or better in 16 of the 23 lessons. It was unsatisfactory in four lessons and poor in three. In the lessons in which progress was satisfactory or better, the pupils were motivated by the brisk pace of the learning activities and the clear connection between them and the precise learning objectives. The poor literacy skills and low self esteem of many of the pupils significantly hindered their progress. Standards of speaking and listening were well below average. Many pupils had difficulty in explaining themselves clearly in class and their weak listening skills also made it difficult for them to build on the comments of others. Consequently, whole class discussions and group work

tended to founder. There are insufficient structured opportunities for the pupils to improve their attainment in speaking and listening. Study skills are weak across the school. Pupils are generally too reliant on adult help and supervision and they are not given enough opportunities to develop independent learning strategies. As a result, many of them do not develop essential skills, such as deduction and inference, and they have little idea of how to plan and organise their own learning.

Personal development and well-being

In lessons, the pupils' personal development was at least satisfactory in 16 of 23 lessons; it was very good in two lessons, good in four and poor in three. The staff report that the pupils' attitudes and behaviour have improved since the beginning of the present term and the school's incident log, the responses to a pupils' questionnaire and written feedback from recent visitors to the school provide evidence that this is the case. Nevertheless, many pupils have failed to develop good learning habits over time and arrive at lessons without commitment to study or apparent awareness of what might reasonably be expected of their behaviour in a classroom. This was as evident among Year 11 pupils for whom GCSE examinations are imminent as it was among the younger pupils.

During this inspection, very few pupils showed aggression or made themselves deliberately offensive to staff, visitors or each other; the great majority responded at least satisfactorily to effective teaching. However, in the lessons in which the teachers' approach to behaviour management was insufficiently robust, they talked freely among themselves and over the teachers' voices, listened to personal audio equipment and ignored requests for silence; their progress was unsatisfactory or poor in consequence. Many older pupils spoke readily and positively to visitors about their future plans for further education and careers but they did not always recognise the importance to their aspirations of achievement in GCSE examinations and the concomitant need for hard work. Overall, the school now has clear policies and expectations about the management of behaviour but the staff have yet to implement these policies consistently and vigorously in order to overcome the legacy of past and unacceptable habits on the part of the pupils.

The pupils' movement around the site was rarely ill-natured but it was often boisterous and inconsiderate. In the dining area they were generally friendly if noisy but the quantity of litter left on the floor after lunch was excessive and created unnecessary work for the catering staff.

It is too early to identify clear trends in the rate of fixed term exclusions since the changes to the senior team and the inception of the new behaviour policies. However, fixed term exclusions for the month of April 2005 show a reduction on the corresponding month in 2004. The number of pupils excluded in the present academic year to date is 104, while that for the full school year 2003-4 was 180.

The most recent attendance figure for the present academic year to date is 90 per cent. There is, however, significant variation between attendance in different year

groups. Attendance is markedly better in Key Stage 3 and it is lowest in the present Year 11 at 84.9 per cent; in Key Stage 4, only two tutor groups, both in Year 10, have attendance over 90 per cent. If the present rate of attendance is sustained until the end of the present term, it will represent an improvement on the corresponding figure for 2003-4 of 89.6 per cent. The school reports an improvement in the pupils' punctuality to school. On the second day of this inspection, several pupils were still entering the school after the registration bell but there are now suitable measures in place to deal with lateness. The high profile presence of senior staff around the site during registration discourages late arrival and the pupils themselves reported that the situation has greatly improved this term.

Progress on the area for improvement identified by the inspection in October 2003:

- Ensure that teachers consistently expect good behaviour and effort from pupils;

Progress has accelerated recently but over the period since the last inspection in October 2003, it has been inadequate; there remains too much inconsistency in the teachers' expectations of the pupils' behaviour and effort.

Quality of provision

In 17 of the 23 lessons, the teaching was at least satisfactory; it was good in seven and very good in two. The teaching was poor in a further two. The best teaching was seen in modern foreign languages, art, music, history, design and technology, physical education and business studies. Teaching which was less than satisfactory was seen in each of the core subjects and in design and technology. At best, the lessons were well planned, with sharp learning objectives which were understood by the pupils. Sessions began promptly and moved briskly forward, with clear short-term deadlines for the completion of tasks. Questioning was well used to assess the pupils' understanding at appropriate stages and the plenary time at the end of the lesson was used to review and fix key learning points, as well as to look forward to the next stages of the work in hand. The pupils were expected to sustain their concentration, to listen attentively and to contribute to discussion. The teachers of these lessons made good use of praise and encouragement where they were warranted but responded firmly and promptly to misbehaviour, however low key. Where the teaching was good, the pupils' progress was at least satisfactory; in the best lessons, assessment was used well to plan challenging work, well matched to the pupils' needs and attainment.

In less successful lessons, too little was required of the pupils in terms of their attitudes, behaviour and progress. This was evident in the marking of books, which was often cursory and tolerant of inadequate standards of presentation and effort. It was also mirrored in poorly mounted display of pupils' work, from which it was evident that expectations of achievement were too low and, in some cases, time had been wasted in the colouring of drawings, in subjects in which no worthwhile learning outcomes could be gained from this low level activity. In some

lessons, teachers were unable to establish quiet when they spoke to the whole class; repeated requests for quiet were ignored and there was either no attempt to move to the next level of sanctions or threats were made which were either not fulfilled or were too mild a response to the level of disruption to the learning. Latecomers were not always challenged robustly nor required to explain themselves. Some members of staff did not offer good models for the pupils in the explanations they provided and in their use of spoken and written language.

The Key Stage 4 curriculum is broad and offers the pupils appropriate programmes, including vocational subjects, taught by the school staff and by other local providers. Pupils are given appropriate information and guidance to ensure that their needs and aptitudes are met by the choices they make. Since the last inspection, the school has ensured that all pupils in Year 10 receive a satisfactory experience of information and communication technology.

Leadership and management

The new leadership team is very experienced and has established a clear vision for the development of the school. The executive headteacher and acting headteacher have been in post for only three weeks but they have succeeded in communicating their vision to the staff and pupils and in engaging the commitment of most of the teachers to the school improvement process. The school's self-evaluation indicates that the senior managers recognise the strengths and weaknesses in the existing provision and have a realistic programme for its development. With the experience and expertise of the present leadership team, the school is well placed to bring about the improvements needed in the quality of the teaching, the pupils' progress and their personal development. Middle managers, however, are not as consistently realistic in their evaluation of the school's progress and there is some tendency to assume that the recent rise in the morale of the staff will in itself bring about the necessary changes.

External support

The LEA has provided good support for the school, brokering the partnership with Nicholas Chamberlayne Technology College and providing valuable advice and guidance across a range of curricular and management aspects of its work. The monitoring of the school's progress by officers has been realistic and suitably robust. The school has had support from the LEA's education social workers, including the use of fast track procedures for parents of persistent non-attenders.

Main Judgements

This visit has raised serious concerns about the standard of education provided by the school and I am recommending a return visit.

Priorities for further improvement

- ensure that the staff implement consistently the school's procedures to promote good behaviour, punctuality and attitudes to learning;
- improve the quality of the teaching and the pupils' progress;
- continue to develop management at all levels so that the provision is evaluated with equal rigour by all those with management responsibility.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the chair of governors, the executive headteacher and the County Education Officer for Warwickshire LEA.

Yours sincerely

Caroline Bolton
HM Inspector of Schools