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Mr A Davis
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Davis

Schools Where the Pupils' Behaviour has been identified as a Concern by Inspection: Monitoring Inspection of Whitcliffe Mount School

Introduction

Following my visit with Andrew Bennett HMI to your school on 27 and 28 June, 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 headteacher, other nominated members of staff, a group of pupils and a representative from the LEA.

Context

Whitcliffe Mount School is a larger than average mixed secondary school for pupils aged between 13 and 18 years. It was awarded specialist school status in business and enterprise in September 2004. The school serves an area that has broadly average socio-economic indicators and the proportion of pupils who are eligible for free school meals is broadly average at 11.3 per cent. Following a period of turbulence, the lack of specialist teachers in the mathematics and English departments has been addressed. The school is currently undergoing a building programme to improve provision for post-16 pupils.

Achievement and standards

In recent years, the school's trend in the Key Stage 3 national tests has been broadly in line with the national rate of improvement; school results have been below the national trend in the average total GCSE/GNVQ points score per pupil. The school has acted upon particular concerns such as fluctuating results year-on-year in the Key Stage 3 English tests and a comparatively low proportion of candidates achieving five or more higher grade passes in the GCSE/GNVQ examinations compared with other indicators. Senior managers are confident of improved headline data in the 2005 GCSE/GNVQ examinations and of improving value-added measures, particularly between Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4.

Personal development and well-being

Behaviour in lessons was satisfactory and in general reflected the quality of the teaching. The school's behaviour code outlines clear expectations and associated sanctions, which are understood by most pupils. However this policy is not consistently applied by all teachers. Where teaching was good and expectations were high, the pupils behaved well and their attitudes to learning were good. However, in too many lessons, the pupils had limited opportunity to participate actively in their learning and they became passive, showing little enthusiasm for their work. In a minority of lessons, agreed procedures for behaviour management were not followed and pupils become distracted or poorly behaved.

Behaviour around the school was satisfactory and pupils were attentive during assemblies. During the break time pupils were orderly and queued sensibly in the dining area; they responded appropriately to a high staff presence on the corridors although not all moved between lessons with sufficient urgency. The pupils interviewed reported that they were well supported and guided by staff; appropriate attention is paid to issues such as bullying. Reports on the pupils' progress have been improved and enhanced opportunities to discuss them with parents have been welcomed. Guidance provided for the pupils concerning progression into post-16 courses is thorough; post-16 participation rates are continuing to increase.

Attendance has risen to 91.6 per cent as a result of regular analysis of data and targeted action, supported by external agencies. Increased links with parents and pastoral support programmes have been beneficial in raising the awareness of the importance of good attendance. Punctuality to school is improving and is satisfactory overall, although during the visit, too many pupils arrived late to lessons and teachers challenged this inconsistently.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the inspection in March 2004:

- to take further steps to improve the behaviour of a significant minority of the pupils – satisfactory progress.

Quality of provision

The quality of teaching was satisfactory in 17 lessons, good in six and very good in one. It was unsatisfactory in four lessons. In the most effective lessons, the teachers challenged all pupils and engaged their interest through a well planned range of varied activities that appropriately targeted different levels of attainment within classes. Probing questions allowed teachers to assess the pupils' progress through the course of the lesson; when the pupils answered questions, they were encouraged to think about their responses and to develop them with appropriate detail and description. In these lessons, the pupils were eager to extend their understanding, asking and answering questions eagerly; they willingly took responsibility for their own learning when given the opportunity to do so in group work or independent tasks.

A number of lessons, however, while broadly satisfactory overall, often lacked sufficient structure or focus to engage the pupils' interest and advance their learning at more than an adequate pace. Starter activities were sometimes dull or over-long and lacked obvious connection to the main part of the lesson. Teachers frequently talked too much, so that the pupils had too little to do for themselves and lost interest, especially when the content of the lesson did not take sufficient account of the range of attainment within the class. Opportunities to develop dialogue with pupils were often missed. This approach slowed the pace of lessons, so that the end-of-lesson plenary was often rushed and gave few opportunities for pupils to participate, or did not take place because the teacher had run out of time.

In some unsatisfactory lessons, the work was so undemanding that, although pupils were compliant and well-behaved, too little learning took place. In others, the teachers did not manage the pupils' behaviour adequately from the outset; school procedures were not followed and as a consequence, adults' energies were channelled into controlling and containing the pupils rather than developing their learning.

The curriculum has been modified in Key Stage 4 to include vocational examination courses and some off-site provision brokered by the LEA for a small number of pupils whose needs cannot be met adequately by typical classroom courses. Further developments mean that current Year 9 pupils have been offered the choice of two distinct pathways in Key Stage 4. The structure of the timetable is to change in September from a 30 period week to a 50 period fortnightly cycle, with lessons of 60 minutes rather than 50 as at present. This change has the potential to increase efficiency, with fewer movements during the day and less impact on teaching time through pupils' late arrivals to lessons. The opportunity is also being taken to increase the time allocation to English and mathematics in Key Stage 3, so that the pupils' widely varying levels of literacy and numeracy when they enter the school can be addressed with appropriate consistency and rigour.

Leadership and management

The headteacher provides good leadership and he is well supported by senior leaders and other members of the school community. The self evaluation portrays a realistic picture of the school and senior managers work hard to keep it up to date. The senior management team is committed to school improvement and their capacity to improve is evidenced by the appropriate prioritisation of actions in the school development plan. Systems for monitoring progress are well established and managers have recognised the need for additional time to evaluate the impact of actions. The headteacher has acted decisively to address concerns relating to the leadership and management of some subject areas and the quality of teaching.

Middle managers are more aware of their role in raising standards through analysing data from individual teaching groups. The pastoral staff are significantly involved in raising attainment for example, through target setting and arranging mentoring programmes where appropriate.

The school has continued to develop a systematic and rigorous approach to behaviour management and inclusion, supported by multi-agency links and informed by data. The pupils who are vulnerable or at risk of exclusion are targeted for additional support; the access centre provides a suitable environment for pupils with specific needs. Modifications to the curriculum have increased the range of opportunities for these pupils; for example, ASDAN and alternative provision. Links with feeder schools have been strengthened to ensure a smooth transition for those pupils who are a cause for concern. As a result the number of behaviour referrals has dropped and exclusions have fallen to 55 for the last year.

The school behaviour group, which includes representatives from all subject areas, has analysed the strengths and weaknesses of current systems for rewards and sanctions. It has also consulted the school council and Year 8 pupils from feeder schools regarding the review of the home-school agreement, which will be linked to the new rewards system prepared for launch in September. In addition, the pupils' planner has been revised to focus on positive attitudes and achievement.

External support

The school has worked closely with the LEA to develop improved curriculum links with feeder middle schools. Subject and behaviour consultants and officers have assisted school managers with internal reviews and monitoring and have interviewed pupils to evaluate their perceptions of the school. The LEA reports that the school functions well and has the capacity to improve further and that pupil behaviour is not a major issue. Intervention strategies are seen to be raising attainment in Key Stage 3.

Main Judgements

The school has made satisfactory progress.

Priorities for further improvement

- ensure continued support for those teachers who continue to experience difficulties in managing the behaviour of a small number of challenging pupils
- raise the proportion of teaching that is good or better
- promote more positive attitudes to learning among the pupils, especially the high attaining pupils.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the chair of governors and the Director of Lifelong Learning for Kirklees.

Yours sincerely

Sara Morrissey
HM Inspector of Schools