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Mr M Frank
Headteacher
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Donald Road
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Dear Mr Frank

Inspection Visit to Bedminster Down School

Thank you for your hospitality during my visit to your school with Ms B Cusdin HMI and Ms J Arnold HMI on 26 and 27 April 2005. This letter is to confirm the findings, which are recorded below.

This return inspection visit was arranged as a follow-up to the visit on 4 and 5 May 2004 which took place in connection with the Schools facing Challenging Circumstances initiative. The main focus of the visit was to assess the progress made in raising the pupils' attainment and addressing the areas of concern identified during the previous visit.

During the visit 30 lessons or parts of lessons, four registration sessions and two assemblies were inspected. Meetings were held with the headteacher, the chair of governors, nominated staff and a representative from the LEA. Informal discussions were held with other members of staff and with pupils and samples of work were examined. A range of documents was scrutinised. Using this evidence, HMI made the following observations to the headteacher, the chair of the governing body and a representative from the LEA.

The context of the school has changed little since the previous inspection. The roll has fallen slightly to 971. Most of the pupils represent a white British heritage and only 27 have a first language that is not English. The percentage of the pupils who are eligible for free school meals is 14.3 per cent, which is close to the national average. Similarly, the proportion of the pupils identified as having special educational needs, 19.5 per cent, is typical of schools nationally; the proportion

with a Statement of Special Educational Need has fallen to 1.2 per cent and is about half of the proportion nationally. Staff recruitment and retention is typical for secondary schools. The school is part of the South Bristol Leadership Incentive Grant (LIG) cluster. The seven schools in the cluster serve an area characterised by low family aspirations and large areas of deprivation. A new school is being built on the existing site and will be fully operational by March 2006.

The proportion of the Year 11 pupils achieving at least five GCSE grades A* to C has increased from 24 per cent in 2002 and 27 per cent in 2003 to 32 per cent in 2004, one of the best results ever achieved by the school. Nevertheless, the results were well below national averages. The progress made by the pupils since Key Stage 2 was well below the rate typical of schools nationally, although it was quite good compared with similar schools. Middle ability girls progressed relatively slowly, but higher ability boys and girls made sound progress.

In the 2004 Key Stage 3 national tests half of the pupils achieved the nationally expected standards in English and science, but in both subjects the school's targets were missed. The mathematics results were significantly improved with almost two thirds achieving the expected Level 5.

Standards in lessons were mostly below the levels reached in schools nationally. Standards of literacy and numeracy were below average and adversely affected the pupils' progress in several lessons.

The school has tackled systematically the weaknesses in teaching highlighted at the previous monitoring visit. A purposeful schedule of lesson observations has generated an intensive programme of support for individual teachers where concerns were identified.

The quality of teaching was satisfactory or better in 25 lessons; it was good or very good in 14. In four lessons in science, mathematics and special educational needs, the teaching was very good; it set out to achieve worthwhile objectives which were integrated well into the activities and the dialogue in the classroom. Ideas were presented in ways that helped the pupils to rise to the challenge provided by the work; for example, the teachers referred to clues in everyday events or they used technological resources to model situations visually and dynamically.

The school has achieved a more consistent classroom experience for the pupils, and the number of well taught lessons has increased to almost half of those observed. Nonetheless, the senior team recognises that there is still some weaker practice; the teaching in five lessons was unsatisfactory. A main weakness was a failure to make the key learning points clear and, in addition, too little attention was given to finding out whether the pupils had understood them.

The quality of marking has continued to be a major focus for the senior and middle managers. There are sensible expectations for marking which rightly reflect national guidance. Productive marking was seen in humanities and there were other instances of useful feedback to pupils. However, there were exercise books in a number of lessons where constructive comments were rare. In too many books, even in the higher sets, classwork or homework was incomplete.

The senior team has shown that it has the capacity to identify weaknesses in teaching and has deployed a range of support to improve the overall quality. The groundwork is well underway to widen the scope of development into a refined agenda to improve the quality of learning in each classroom. The senior team and middle managers are introducing useful strategies (for example peer coaching) to share good practice amongst the staff with the intention of increasing the amount of good teaching, as well as celebrating and strengthening practice which is usually good.

The specialist provision for special educational needs continues to be good. The teaching in the individual pupil support unit was good. The teaching and resources were matched well to the specific learning needs of the pupils, who were keen to learn; as a result, they made good progress in relation to their abilities. In humanities lessons, there was appropriate use of writing frames to support the learning of pupils with special educational needs. However, in too many lessons, there was insufficient action taken to adapt the provision to support the pupils with learning difficulties to achieve their targets.

In nine out of ten lessons, the pupils' attitudes and behaviour were satisfactory or better and in six out of ten they were good. These are similar proportions to the previous monitoring inspection. In the better lessons, good relationships underpinned the teaching; the pupils were keen to participate, showed interest and worked productively. In the weaker lessons, the teaching failed to capture the pupils' interest and enthusiasm; many pupils engaged in low level disruptive behaviour which caused a distraction to others. A consistent approach to the management of the pupils' behaviour, including sanctions and rewards, has resulted in some improvement since the previous visit. However, the behaviour of several Year 11 pupils in lessons was unsatisfactory; their lack of interest and low motivation impeded their learning and that of others. Around the school, the majority of pupils showed respect, were courteous and helpful. They coped well with the limitation on space imposed by the current construction work.

The school's many strategies to promote good behaviour initially resulted in a significant reduction in the number of days missed by pupils through exclusions. However, the school is aware that the number remains too high, currently 577 days

as a result of 195 fixed term exclusions since September 2004. In addition, there have been three permanent exclusions this year, the same as in the previous year. As the systems of support for pupils at risk of exclusion are becoming more established, their effectiveness in preventing further exclusions for pupils with behavioural difficulties is improving.

The school has worked hard to improve attendance and has met with some success. The school's records indicate that 670 pupils now have an average attendance of above 90 per cent, an increase of five per cent over the last two years. However, the current attendance rate of 89 per cent overall is still unsatisfactory. On the first day of the inspection attendance was only 87.4 per cent; Year 11 attendance was 80.7 per cent which is very low, especially for the crucial period just before their GCSE examinations. Despite determined and rigorous efforts, the number of pupils who have attendance of below 60 per cent has remained largely unchanged for the last four years. Poor attendance remains a major challenge to the school in its efforts to raise standards.

Pupils arrived late to lessons on several occasions, resulting in a loss of teaching time. The school is aware of the need to improve pupils' punctuality to maximise their learning opportunities.

The plans to enrich the curriculum from September 2005 are good. Three relevant pathways have been identified in Key Stage 4 offering the pupils a traditional academic course, one with a mix of traditional and vocational courses, or a mix of core subjects, vocational courses and work experience. Close co-operation within the South Bristol LIG consortium has enabled these pathways to be established, one of which will be achieved in coordination with the further education college. The current unsatisfactory provision in Key Stage 4 for information and communication technology (ICT) is to be suitably addressed through an imaginative circus of subjects in which there will be accredited short courses in ICT, religious education, key skills, citizenship and personal, health and social education. The current Key Stage 3 curriculum does not provide a satisfactory course in Year 9 for ICT; the school is examining ways of addressing this recognised weakness so that statutory requirements in this subject can be provided.

The system of assessment is good. National and other assessments are used to set end-of-key stage examination targets. The pupils are given written guidance in each subject to identify what they need to do to reach the next stage of progress towards their target. Good use was made of National Curriculum level descriptors in English to help pupils evaluate their own work and that of their peers. Twice yearly assessments are made of the standards the pupils achieve in all subjects; these are used to track the pupils' progress. Suitable intervention is made in core subjects to address slow progress; heads of year and other staff are fully involved

with mentoring pupils who require it. Good support has been arranged to continue the Year 11 pupils' study up to the GCSE examinations including a programme of revision lessons tailored specifically for each pupil. A financial incentive, £30 per pupil, has been used to encourage all Year 11 pupils to undertake an internet based revision course.

The quality of leadership and management has improved; there is a sharper focus on teaching and learning. Action to address the weaknesses identified on the previous monitoring inspection has been appropriate. The headteacher has a clear vision for the quality of education he expects the school to achieve. Senior and middle managers are working hard to achieve this shared vision, but the impact has varied widely. Nevertheless, the school has the capacity to continue to improve. The vision for the school is reflected in the design of the new PFI funded school building which offers greater opportunities to implement the teaching and learning styles that are being encouraged.

The governors give good support to the school. They have undertaken training to improve their skills and are holding the school to account for its actions more effectively. There are two outstanding issues for the governors to address; the non-compliance with statutory requirements for a daily act of worship and the full compliance with statutory requirements for information and communication technology.

Financial management continues to be good, but there is a continuing deficit of about £94,000. Additional funding streams are being investigated and the school hopes to resolve the deficit quickly.

The LEA has worked assiduously to help the school address its weaknesses and to monitor progress. It has planned its work well. Support for the school has included the provision of consultancy across the curriculum, training to improve middle management and governance, and regular reviews of the school's progress. The impact of this work has varied, but has been sound overall.

It is important that the school continues to improve: standards; the quality of teaching and learning; attendance; and to reduce the incidence of exclusion.

The school has made satisfactory progress in addressing the weaknesses identified on the two previous monitoring inspections.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the chair of governors and the Director of Education for the City of Bristol. This letter will also be posted on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

C J Redman
HM Inspector of Schools