



Inspection report

Somervale School

**Better
education
and care**

Unique Reference Number 109307
LEA Bath and North East Somerset

Inspection number 274813
Inspection dates 9 and 10 May 2005
Reporting inspector Mr R Blatchford HMI

This inspection was carried out under section 3 of the School Inspections Act 1996 and was deemed a section 10 inspection under the same Act.

Type of School	Comprehensive	School address	Redfield Road
School category	Community		Midsomer Norton
Age range of pupils	11 to 18 years		Radstock
			BA3 2HG
Gender of pupils	Mixed	Telephone number	01761 414276
Number on roll	853	Fax number	01761 410613
Appropriate authority	The governing body	Chair of governors	Mr M Venning
Date of previous inspection	December 2003	Headteacher	Mr M Gorman

Age group	Published	Reference no.
11 to 18 years	14 June 2005	274813

Introduction

When Somervale School was inspected in December 2003, it was judged to require special measures because it was failing to give its pupils an acceptable standard of education. Her Majesty's Inspectors of schools (HMI) subsequently visited the school on three occasions to monitor its progress, and reinspected the school in May 2005.

Description of the school

Somervale School is a mixed comprehensive school for pupils aged 11 to 18 years. The school serves the town of Midsomer Norton and surrounding villages. The area is socially and economically mixed; six per cent of the pupils are eligible for free school meals. The school has identified 12 per cent of the pupils as having special educational needs; this is broadly in line with the national figure. Three per cent of the pupils have a Statement of Special Educational Need. Just below one per cent of the pupils have first languages other than English. Although the attainment of pupils on entry to the school varies from one year group to another, it is broadly average overall.

The school has 853 pupils on roll, smaller than average, with slightly more girls than boys. Fifteen pupils joined the school after the usual time in Year 7.

The school has been a media arts college since September 2000 and achieved Investors in People recognition in 2002.

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Overall effectiveness of the school

In accordance with section 14 of the School Inspections Act 1996, I am of the opinion that the school no longer requires special measures, since it is now providing an acceptable standard of education for its pupils.

Somervale School provides a sound education for its pupils, with an increasing number of good features. Most of the pupils achieve satisfactorily, although standards of attainment in GCSE examinations have been below those expected for the pupils' ages. There is a legacy of underachievement, which the staff are working diligently to eradicate. The pupils are well cared for; they behave satisfactorily and relationships are positive, although the code of conduct is not consistently followed by some pupils. The pupils' attendance is satisfactory, as is their punctuality to school and to lessons. The quality of teaching and learning is satisfactory overall, with a number of notable strengths. The curriculum meets statutory requirements and opportunities for extracurricular activities are good.

The leadership provided by the headteacher is very good, and day-to-day management is meticulous and effective. Middle management is good overall. All staff have worked hard to improve the quality of education for the pupils. The school no longer experiences the difficulties with recruiting teachers which it once did. Governance is good: the governors are strongly committed to the school and are increasingly rigorous in holding it to account.

Effectiveness of the school's sixth form

The school has an effective sixth form. The school's analysis of the value it adds to the education of post-16 students indicates an improvement, following a period of decline.

Standards of achievement vary in the sixth form. Year 13 students are making good progress, although the school recognises that too few students are likely to attain the higher grades at Advanced Level. In Year 12, despite high performance by some students, the school's data indicates that the students are not making good enough progress to achieve in line with their prior attainment. Attendance is generally sound and only a small number of students have dropped out of the courses they started. This is an improvement on last year.

The support and guidance the school provides on the options available post-16 are reported by students to meet their needs and aspirations. Students are clear about the grades they are predicted to achieve in external examinations, and are well supported throughout their courses. In lessons, teaching was consistently satisfactory or better. Teachers had expert subject knowledge and the best lessons were challenging and students made very good progress. Working relationships between staff and students were always productive.

The management of the sixth form is sound and academic progress is well monitored, although there are some inconsistencies across subjects. Managers are aware of this and are working hard to improve matters where there are weaknesses.

The sixth form students make an important contribution to the life of the school; they are effective mentors to Year 10 pupils and organise successful events, which have raised significant sums of money for charity.

Improvement since the last inspection

At the time of the last inspection in December 2003, the school was required to address key issues concerned with achievement, teaching and learning, behaviour and attitudes, and leadership and management. Reasonable progress has been made in raising the pupils' achievement, and good progress has been made with the other issues.

Capacity to improve

Over the past 18 months, the school has clearly demonstrated the capacity to tackle a range of long-standing weaknesses and other issues as they have emerged. The quality of its self-evaluation is very good; the school has therefore been in a strong position to address weaknesses robustly and plan for the future with optimism and determined vision. The school has managed its deficit budget carefully, and has rigorous procedures to monitor expenditure. Secure foundations have been established to bring about sustainable improvements at all levels within the school. There is a strong sense of all the staff pulling together to provide the quality of education that the pupils deserve.

What the school should do to improve further

The key priorities for the school's development plan are to:

- raise standards overall, with particular regard to the needs of higher attaining pupils;
- continue to improve the quality of teaching, so that none is unsatisfactory and more of it is good or very good;
- ensure that the pupils' attitudes and behaviour continue to improve.

Achievement and standards

The school's 2004 national test results at Key Stage 3 showed an improvement from 2003 in English, mathematics and science, bringing the results in line with the expected standards. The results for GCSE in 2004, showed a rise from 2003 in the proportions of the pupils gaining five or more A* to G grades; however, only a third of the pupils were awarded five or more A* to C grades, which indicated continuing underachievement among some pupils. The school's analysis of the results of recent practice tests and examinations is thorough, and it anticipates significant improvements in the GCSE results in 2005. During the inspection, almost all pupils made at least satisfactory progress in lessons, with many pupils

achieving well. The higher attaining pupils in both Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4 are being given appropriate activities in order to extend their abilities and skills, although provision for these pupils is not consistent.

Standards in English, mathematics and science are broadly in line with those seen nationally in Key Stage 3, and are rising steadily in Key Stage 4 towards nationally expected levels.

In the sixth form in 2004, the percentage of students achieving AS level passes at A–E grades was 81 per cent; at A level, 98 per cent of students gained passes at A–E. These results marked a rising trend from the previous year, and the school records that all students who wanted places in higher education secured them.

Personal development

Behaviour in classes and around the school is usually at least satisfactory and is often good or very good. Most pupils have positive attitudes towards their learning, and this marks a decisive improvement from when the school was inspected in December 2003. The school has developed sound systems and procedures to improve the pupils' attitudes and behaviour; these give a greater focus on ensuring that the quality of learning for the majority is not jeopardised by a few pupils who cause minor disruption. In most classes, the pupils respond to exhortations to focus on their work; however, good routines have not been adopted by all the pupils.

The school's behaviour policy is applied consistently by staff and most pupils are aware of boundaries; this has resulted in higher expectations and more positive attitudes to learning, with fewer pupils adopting a casual or indifferent approach to their work. Many pupils benefit from arrangements for mentoring and peer support, and the careful matching of the pupils who are involved ensures positive outcomes. The representatives of the school's council are thoughtful and articulate; they show a great pride in their school and are keen to identify ways in which it can be improved. Their contributions are carefully considered and have been acted upon where possible; the school is committed to listening to the views of its pupils. Many other pupils value the various posts of responsibility they hold.

Attendance is closely monitored and averages 92 per cent for 2004-2005, in line with the national average for secondary schools. The school has been active in promoting good attendance and in targeting particular pupils for rewards. There have been five pupils excluded permanently and 122 fixed-term exclusions since the beginning of the academic year; the latter figure remains high.

The provision for the pupils' moral, social and cultural development is satisfactory and there are some good features in how the school has supported the pupils to develop a greater awareness of their social and moral responsibilities. The pupils are given an understanding of cultural diversity when they are involved in whole-school ventures, such as the arts week, where they have access to a range of events spanning different cultures. There is a wide range of extracurricular opportunities, with visits home and abroad, which enhance the pupils' experiences. The pupils have the opportunity to join a number of clubs and after

school activities, although the range is limited, with most being connected to sport. The provision for the pupils' spiritual development is considerably underdeveloped and opportunities are missed in assembly, registrations periods and in lessons. In assembly, the Year 11 pupils behaved very well and showed positive attitudes; however, an act of corporate worship did not take place so statutory requirements were not fulfilled.

The ethos of the school is at least satisfactory and is often good; the staff and pupils enjoy a camaraderie, mutual respect and a strong sense of purpose. The school has some way to go in helping the pupils to develop healthy eating habits.

Quality of provision

The quality of teaching has improved and is satisfactory overall. It was good or better in more than half of the lessons, and at least satisfactory in all but one. Teaching was especially effective where expectations and challenge were high, irrespective of the prior attainment of the pupils. Other positive features of good lessons included: detailed planning and thorough knowledge of the pupils' prior attainment and their preferred learning styles; the clarity of the teacher's explanations; inventive resources; skilful question and answer techniques; a classroom ethos of intellectual challenge; and regular checking by the teacher that the pupils understood complex new ideas.

The quality of learning is satisfactory overall. It was good or better in half the lessons, and at least satisfactory in all but one. Effective learning and good progress occurred when the pupils clearly understood the purpose of the lesson and were given confidence in their own abilities. They were able to develop the learning objectives for the lesson as it unfolded. The pupils were not afraid to make mistakes in oral answers and they enjoyed working for the teacher and with their peers. Where tasks and assignments were well conceived by the teachers, the pupils were able to both consolidate and extend their skills, knowledge and understanding. Sixth form pupils demonstrated very good independent research skills and collaborative working. The pupils in all year groups have made positive improvements in the regular use of their planners, with the setting of suitable homework a more consistent feature in the school.

The use of assessment to monitor the pupils' progress and set performance targets is good. A suitable range of external tests and regular evaluations by the teachers builds a picture of the attainment and progress of every pupil. Marking in most subjects is regular and in many cases includes good feedback to the pupils. Targets to challenge the pupils and their teachers are established using commercial schemes and local knowledge; the pupils know these. The targets are updated regularly and available to all teachers on their laptops. Very good analysis of the requirements for improvement makes targets specific, especially for the lower attaining pupils. Reports to parents have been improved with a facility to merge targets and attainment into a description of an individual pupil's performance.

The school has a wide range of data and has started to refine its use, bringing clear messages to teachers and pupils about what needs to be done to raise standards further. A sharp focus in the core subjects on what is necessary to turn GCSE Grade D passes into

Grade Cs or better has brought a justifiable measure of confidence to the teachers and their pupils that overall attainment at Key Stage 4 is set to rise.

The provision for pupils who have special educational needs is good. The support is well managed and the co-ordinator and behaviour support manager work effectively together. There is a clear vision for the future. The progress made by the pupils is carefully tracked and several new initiatives have been developed to improve the provision; their impact is carefully monitored. The special educational needs department makes effective use of data and the team of skilled learning support assistants has a clear role in supporting pupils and in monitoring their progress. Subject teachers' lesson plans contain information on how the pupils who have special educational needs will be assisted during class lessons and, where there are learning support staff, this works well. In other lessons, it is less apparent how the full range of needs, including those of the higher attaining pupils, is being met. Nevertheless, the school has taken a number of lively initiatives for pupils with high ability, or potential, in academic, creative and physical subjects.

The curriculum offered to the pupils is sound. In Key Stage 3 it is broad and balanced. Pupils are taught in ability-setted groups in some subjects and in mixed-ability groups in others; this arrangement is left to the discretion of the subject leader concerned and is monitored by senior managers. The core curriculum in Key Stage 4 ensures that all pupils study English, mathematics, physical education, religious education and information and communication technology (ICT). Subject options provide pupils with the opportunity to choose one of a combination of courses including GCSE, applied GCSEs and National Vocational Qualifications. Pupils who choose applied subjects undertake part of their study at the local college of further education. All pupils have to study what is broadly described as an arts subject, although not all study a modern foreign language, despite a strong recommendation from the school. The school has thoughtful plans to develop the curriculum in both key stages to increase its relevance to the pupils.

Accommodation is satisfactory overall. However, the provision for physical education indoors is poor and hinders the quality of teaching and learning. The school has made good use of its classrooms and common areas, and the quality of display is imaginative. Resources are fit for purpose, particularly in relation to the pupils' and teachers' use of ICT. The newly refurbished library, with its integrated computer area, provides a welcoming environment for the pupils, although its potential has yet to be fully realised. There is considerable scope for improving the overall fabric of the school buildings.

Links with parents, local primary schools and the community are strong, and have been enhanced through the school's specialist designation as a media arts college. The school's close involvement in the staging of local community plays has been beneficial in raising the profile of the performing arts.

Leadership and management

Significant improvements have been made to the quality of leadership and management at all levels within the school during the last year.

The headteacher has shown very good leadership in moving the school forward. He provides thoughtful, inclusive and enabling leadership of a high quality. With colleagues, he has established very good management structures and systems which enjoy the full confidence of staff and the pupils; his analysis of the school's strengths and weaknesses and the progress it has made is sharply focused and accurate. The headteacher has led improvements across many critical aspects of the school's provision, adroitly judging the pace of change. He has thoughtfully managed reductions in staffing whilst drawing colleagues together to effect sustainable developments.

The leadership team is cohesive, focused and effective, with suitably complementary skills. They have been instrumental in creating a culture within which well-planned lesson observations and thoughtful feedback on strengths and weaknesses are valued by staff. The team has properly encouraged teachers to develop the richness of their own individual styles within a framework which safeguards the key priorities of effective lesson-planning and teaching. The programme of training for teachers and support staff has a high priority and is suitably focused on the priorities set out in the school's development plan. Newly qualified teachers and staff new to the school are given a well-designed induction programme.

The heads of department and heads of year provide good leadership overall, making sound judgements in challenging and supporting their team members. The reports written by departments each term reflect an increasing capacity for open and trenchant self-evaluation. The sampling and scrutiny of the pupils' work by subject leaders is more regular but has not become a strong feature of practice across the curriculum.

The governing body is effective and shares with the leadership team a clear vision for the future development of the school. The chair of governors rightly identifies a renewed community confidence in the school, the increasing impact on pupils of the media arts specialist status, and the importance of the productive partnership with the neighbouring secondary school. The budget continues to be in deficit, but the school and local education authority (LEA) have agreed a sensible plan for reducing it over the coming years.

The LEA has committed good support to the school over the past 12 months and is confident in the school's capacity to continue improving the standards and quality of teaching and learning.

Appendix – Information about the inspection

Somervale School was inspected in December 2003. The inspection was carried out under section 3 of the School Inspections Act 1996, which gives Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools the authority to cause any school to be inspected. The inspection was also deemed a section 10 inspection under the same Act. The inspection was critical of many aspects of the work of the school and, in accordance with that Act, the school was made subject to special measures because it was failing to give its pupils an acceptable standard of education.

The school was visited by HMI in May and September 2004, and in January 2005 to assess the progress it was making to implement its action plan and address the key issues in the inspection report of December 2003.

In May 2005, two HMI and an Additional Inspector returned to inspect the school for two days.

Thirty three lessons, eight registration sessions and an assembly were inspected. The pupils' conduct was observed around the school and on the playground at break and lunchtimes, and samples of their work were inspected. Discussions were held with the headteacher, nominated staff, groups of pupils, the chair of governors, a representative from the LEA, and informally with other staff. A wide range of the school's documentation was scrutinised. Account was taken of the evidence from previous monitoring inspections.

The inspection assessed the quality of education provided and the progress the school has made, in particular in relation to the main findings and key issues in the inspection report of December 2003 and the action plan prepared by the governing body to address those key issues.

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