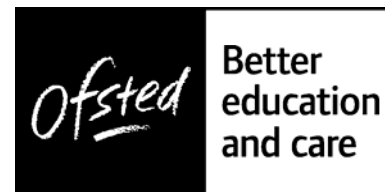


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Mr I Brown
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Brown

Implementation of The Duston School's Action Plan

Following the visit of Mr C J Redman HMI, Mr S Harford HMI and Mrs C Kirby HMI to your school on 26 and 27 May 2005, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector to confirm the inspection findings which are recorded in the attached note.

The visit was the fifth monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures. The focus of the inspection was to assess: the pupils' standards of attainment and their progress; the quality of education provided; the leadership and management of the school; the pupils' attitudes and behaviour; and the progress that has been made in implementing the action plan.

The school has made limited progress since the last monitoring inspection and limited progress overall since being subject to special measures.

I am copying this letter and the note of the inspection findings to the Secretary of State, the chair of governors and the Corporate Director Education Services for Northamptonshire. This letter will be posted on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Andrew Reid
Head of Institutional Inspections and Frameworks Division

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE DUSTON SCHOOL'S ACTION PLAN

Findings of the fifth monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures

During the visit, 31 parts of lessons and five registration sessions were inspected. Meetings were held with the headteacher, the chair of governors, nominated staff, two groups of pupils from Years 8 and 10, and a representative from the LEA. Informal discussions were held with other members of staff and 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, the headteacher designate, and two representatives from the LEA.

Standards in lessons varied widely, but were below the levels expected in about half of the lessons. Where the teaching was good or better, standards were sound but too rarely good.

The quality of teaching and learning has improved modestly since the last monitoring visit. Teaching was satisfactory or better in 25 lessons, including eight in which it was good and four in which it was very good; however, too much variability remained both within and between faculties. Very good teaching occurred in humanities, art and physical education, but the teaching was unsatisfactory in six lessons in English, mathematics, science and modern foreign languages. Learning was not as effective as the teaching; it was satisfactory or better in 21 lessons including nine where it was good and an art lesson where it was very good.

In the best lessons, learning objectives were shared effectively with the pupils. Good use of assessment enabled teachers to plan activities which were accurately matched to the pupils' previous attainment; this helped ensure they made good progress. Collaborative work in pairs or small groups, for example in humanities, art and physical education, encouraged the pupils to take responsibility for their learning and share their ideas with others.

Twelve lessons were satisfactory overall, but were nevertheless weak in some aspects. For example, some lacked pace and a firm sense of purpose; where this occurred, the pupils, while remaining generally compliant, did not show much enthusiasm for their work and, as a result, their progress was unsatisfactory. Mundane activities did not capture the attention of some pupils or retain the interest of others; consequently learning was restricted. The pupils' listening and their use of time were variable with too many drifting into chatter which did not disrupt the whole class but did slow learning.

In the unsatisfactory lessons, planning did not match the wide range of abilities in the class. The teachers often talked for too long and the learning activities were uninspiring and did not encourage the pupils to be active in their learning. Pace

and challenge were insufficient to engage and sustain the attention of the pupils. Occasionally, higher attaining pupils finished work and were not provided with extension activities. Too much time was spent in some lessons managing the pupils' unsatisfactory behaviour.

The quality of display varies widely; some is good but it remains unsatisfactory overall. Most teachers have attempted to make their classrooms attractive learning environments, but little of the display is sufficiently well organised to stimulate further learning. The dowdy state of the furnishings and fabric of the school detracts from the effectiveness of display. The wide extent of graffiti on desks, chairs, exercise books and walls demonstrates a lack of care shown by the school community.

The pupils' homework diaries show far too many occasions when work has not been set. The homework set in lessons was broadly satisfactory, but rarely asked the pupils to engage in work that was likely to stimulate further interest in the subject.

The pupils' behaviour and their attitudes to learning were satisfactory or better in 25 lessons and good or better in 16; they were very good in two lessons, in science and French. Where teaching was good or better, most of the pupils co-operated well with their teachers and other adults, and took part in activities willingly; their behaviour was at least sound. In these lessons, the pupils demonstrated reasonable levels of independence, were generally attentive and showed clear understanding of established classroom routines. Where the teaching was very good, a number of pupils asked pertinent questions that sought to clarify their understanding and contributed well to the atmosphere of learning. By contrast, where the teaching was weak, the pupils' attitudes and behaviour were unsatisfactory. Many of the pupils had a casual approach to their work; they listened poorly to the teachers and each other, and were too dependent upon the close supervision of adults. Too many pupils were indifferent to their learning and took little responsibility for it.

Behaviour between lessons had improved. The majority of pupils moved around the school sensibly, with suitable care for one another; most were polite to the teachers and visitors. Many pupils used the school field appropriately to socialise and play games at lunchtime. However, a significant minority of the pupils moved to lessons and registration sessions reluctantly, only making progress when challenged by the teachers. A minority of pupils engaged in raucous and boisterous behaviour and in some instances an air of tension prevailed. The number of fixed-term exclusions has risen sharply compared with the two previous years.

The pupils' rate of attendance for the academic year so far is 87.8 per cent; this is well below the national median and continues to be unsatisfactory.

The senior leadership team report that there has been a positive change in the school's culture recently. However, a number of the pupils disagree with this analysis. Pupils in Year 8 told HMI that poor behaviour in lessons is still commonplace, and that this is exacerbated by the large number of temporary teachers who are insufficiently informed about the pupils' work and what they have done. They believed that the recent closure of the removal room had led to poorly behaved pupils being retained in lessons for too long. Additionally, they find the amounts of graffiti, litter and vandalism unacceptable on the Prestbury Road campus. The pupils were generally positive about the school's greater use of rewards, but the senior managers' optimism about the effectiveness of the school council is not shared widely by the pupils; while the Year 8 and Year 10 pupils knew of the council's existence, they felt ill-informed of the outcomes of its meetings.

The quality of leadership and management is unsatisfactory overall. The senior leadership team is relatively large; roles and responsibilities are well defined but accountabilities are not adequately understood. Individual senior managers have worked hard to bring about improvements in their areas of responsibility. However, until very recently, there was not a sufficiently clear vision about how improvement could or should be secured, and the co-ordination and effectiveness of the managers' work was unsatisfactory. Appropriate strategies, such as monitoring, professional training, and the development of policies and practices, have been undertaken, but without securing substantial improvement in the school's provision. The monitoring of teaching has been sound and has helped the school to evaluate its provision; for example, recent lesson observations of 37 teachers showed that half of the teaching was good but in almost three out of ten lessons it was unsatisfactory, similar to the proportions judged by HMI. Communication between senior managers and with other teachers has been ineffective, restricting the school's improvement. Some senior managers have not secured sufficient respect from their colleagues for their advice to be effectively implemented in lessons and their support to be adequately valued by all staff members. The system of line management has also varied too widely in its effectiveness in sustaining improvements.

Recent training, co-ordinated by the headteacher designate, has provided a glimpse of a new direction and strategy for improvement which has been overwhelmingly welcomed by the staff. This new approach, which has proved to be successful in other schools, will be introduced formally in September, but elements were apparent in some teaching less than a week after the training.

High staff turbulence has severely restricted progress. The ratio of the number of pupils to teachers has been low compared with similar schools. However, staff attendance has been very poor for a wide variety of reasons. For example, in the current term, daily staff absence has varied from ten per cent to 21 per cent with an average of 13 per cent. This has placed additional pressure on the staff required to cover for absent colleagues and has diverted the energies of senior managers who have undertaken a substantial proportion of covering lessons. The pupils expressed frustration about the number of supply teachers they meet and

the resulting fragmentation of their learning. The school's management of this situation has not effectively secured the continuity of the pupils' education. However, sensible decisions have been taken to rationalise the staffing for next term; this has included voluntary redundancies for ten teachers and the decision not to replace some staff who are leaving.

Governance continues to improve and is now good. The chair of governors has undertaken key tasks to evaluate the school's provision in behaviour management and homework; the resulting reports make clear and appropriate recommendations for improvement. Governors are starting to hold the school to account for its actions and to challenge the slow progress to address the key areas for improvement.

The LEA continues to provide a wide range of support and to write helpful reports on key areas of the school. Their review on attendance clearly identifies serious concerns, but the report on management does not hold all of the senior managers sufficiently accountable for aspects of the school's slow progress. The LEA's plans for future support indicate a commitment to ensuring faster progress in the future.

Action taken to address the areas for improvement

1: improve the quality of teaching; raise teachers' expectations and improve the achievement of students

The proportion of teaching that is satisfactory or better has risen since the last monitoring visit, but at 81 per cent is still too low. The school has identified the characteristics of good teaching, although these are not consistently applied. A range of consultants has provided considerable professional development and targeted support to teachers; however, this support has not had a substantial impact on the overall quality of teaching. There is too much inconsistency in the use of assessment to inform teaching and learning. The quality of marking has improved and although still variable, some teachers are using marking to help pupils understand what they need to do to improve their work.

Systems for monitoring the progress of pupils receiving literacy support in the open learning centre are unsatisfactory.

Progress is reasonable, but the quality of teaching remains significantly weaker than is usual in secondary schools.

2: provide the necessary leadership to drive whole school improvement

Despite the considerable efforts of managers to bring about improvement, leadership has not been sufficiently effective so that the school's progress remains too slow.

Progress has been limited.

3: ensure managers apply monitoring and support systems more consistently and rigorously

The monitoring of teaching has been improved and the school now has a clearer picture of its strengths and weaknesses. Some improvements in teaching have been secured, but the pace remains too slow. However, similar improvements in the pupils' attitudes to learning and their behaviour have yet to be achieved.

Progress has been limited.

4: improve students' attitudes

The school has made efforts to improve communications between the teachers and the pupils through raising the profile of the school council; two meetings have been held and some sensible suggestions for improvement to the school's facilities were made. However, as reported above, the outcomes of the meetings are not being reported back to tutor groups consistently. Appropriate steps are being taken to gauge the opinions of other groups.

The pupils' behaviour in lessons and their attitudes to learning have not improved since the last monitoring visit; limited progress has been made in this key area for improvement.

5: ensure students have their full curriculum entitlement

Not evaluated on this visit.

6: provide a daily act of collective worship

All tutor groups have a common theme for the week; however practice in its use to provide an opportunity for quiet reflection is too variable and many pupils asked struggled to recall their theme for the week. The statutory requirement for a daily act of collective worship is not met for all pupils.

Progress has been limited.