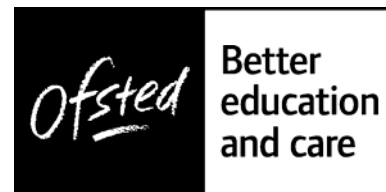


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28 June 2005

Ms M Austin  
Headteacher  
Ashcroft High School  
Crawley Green Road  
Luton  
LU2 9AG

Dear Ms Austin

### **Implementation of Ashcroft High School's Action Plan**

Following the visit of Mr S Harford HMI, Mr A Gray HMI, Mr S Robertson HMI and Mrs S Nolan, Additional Inspector to your school on 15 and 16 June 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 good progress since the last monitoring inspection and reasonable 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 – Lifelong Learning for Luton. This letter will be posted on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Andrew Reid  
Head of School Improvement

## **IMPLEMENTATION OF ASHCROFT HIGH SCHOOL'S ACTION PLAN**

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

During the visit 48 lessons or parts of lessons, seven registration sessions and one assembly were inspected. Meetings were held with the headteacher, other senior and middle managers, the vice chair of governors 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 vice chair of governors and a representative from the LEA.

Standards in lessons vary widely, but remain below average overall. However, the school is confident that the overall results in the national tests and examinations will be better this year. The latest predictions for the pupils' performance in the GCSE examinations are that between 40 and 44 per cent of the pupils should achieve five or more grades A\* to C, and that around 90 per cent should achieve five or more A\* to G grades. In the national tests at the end of Key Stage 3, the school expects nearly three quarters of the pupils to achieve at least the expected Level 5 in each of the core subjects of English, mathematics and science. The accuracy of these predictions will be a clear indicator of the success or otherwise of the school's assessment procedures. If realised, these figures would represent significant improvement in the school's performance.

The quality of teaching has improved significantly since the last monitoring inspection. It was satisfactory or better in 43 lessons, including 16 that were good and five which were very good. Very good teaching was seen in science, drama, mathematics, music and English but a number of other lessons contained highly effective elements, such as the use of assessment in a geography lesson.

The school has focused on improving four main elements of teaching over the last term: a common beginning to lessons; the quality of starter activities; planning lessons with a focus on learning; and the quality of concluding plenary sessions. While the teaching reflected the school's emphases, the success of implementing them was variable. Generally, lessons started in an orderly way; most of the pupils organised their equipment well and prepared themselves for learning appropriately. However, in a few lessons, the tardiness of some pupils disrupted the prompt start. All lessons included starter activities, some of which were successful in reviewing prior work and laying the foundations for the lesson, but a number were used primarily to settle the pupils and had insufficient relevance to the intended learning. Most lessons contained concluding plenary sessions; some, for instance in a Year 10 science lesson on volcanoes, involved all the pupils, accurately checked their understanding and identified those who needed further support. Many plenary sessions, however, were unsuccessful because time was managed inefficiently and there was too little assessment of the pupils' progress to inform future planning.

The teachers' planning was satisfactory overall, but too rarely good. Lessons were generally well structured, but many of the plans did not focus clearly on learning; as a result, some pupils lacked a clear idea of the purpose of the lesson or how they could judge their own achievements. Many lessons included active approaches to learning, but in some cases these were not well managed; the resulting progress did not warrant the time spent.

The school's emphasis on developing literacy and oracy in all subjects has had partial success. Many pupils spoke confidently in lessons and were able to ask interesting questions about the work. There were some good opportunities for group discussion, but few occasions when the pupils could practice formal speaking through, for example, planned presentations. The development of the pupils' literacy across the curriculum is less secure; a number of teachers paid too little attention to the pupils' basic writing skills or how to promote good handwriting.

The quality of the pupils' learning, including the progress they made, was satisfactory or better in 43 lessons; it was good in 15 and very good in five. The pupils made good progress when teachers were clear about the lesson's purpose and used probing questions to deepen understanding. Additionally, learning was effective when supported by useful structures for writing, clearly linked to the lesson's objectives. In some lessons, the pupils were given criteria to assess the quality of their own work and that of their peers; they responded well and their progress was very good. Conversely, learning was unsatisfactory where there was a weak match of the activities to the pupils' needs and the link between the tasks and the learning objectives was unclear. In the small number of lessons where the pupils' attitudes were unsatisfactory, they made insufficient progress.

The pupils' attitudes and behaviour have improved markedly since the last monitoring inspection. They were satisfactory or better in 44 lessons, including 32 in which they were at least good. In nine lessons, the pupils' attitudes and behaviour were very good and in two they were excellent. Most of the pupils followed the rules and routines of the lessons willingly and engaged quickly with their learning. The pupils co-operated well with staff and collaborated productively with each other. There is an improving work ethic across the school. A small number of the pupils participated reluctantly and there were some instances of low-level disruptive or challenging behaviour; however, weak attitudes and unsatisfactory behaviour are now uncommon in lessons. Around the school, behaviour was generally good. Most of the pupils were helpful and courteous; there were only a few examples of boorish and over-boisterous behaviour.

The number of fixed-term exclusions this year is much higher than last, but has declined each term; in the autumn there were 178, but in the spring term this reduced to 88. There have been six permanent exclusions this academic year, none since the last monitoring visit; this is similar to last year.

The pupils' rate of attendance continues to be too low; at 90 per cent it is higher than last year's figure, but well below the national median. There has been a

significant reduction in internal truancy; the electronic registration system is now used more consistently.

The pupils' punctuality to school in the mornings has improved. Between September 2004 and April 2005, the number of late arrivals to school reduced by about a quarter compared with the same period last year. Punctuality to lessons remains an issue; a small number of lessons were disrupted by the pupils arriving late.

The leadership and management of the school is satisfactory overall, with a number of strong features. The headteacher, deputy headteacher in charge of pupil achievement and the assistant headteachers lead the improvements in the school effectively. The system for monitoring the quality of teaching and learning continues to provide extensive and accurate information; the strengths and weaknesses identified have been used successfully to set out the next steps for improvement. There continues to be variation in the quality of subject leadership, but through regular meetings and close monitoring, the senior managers have ensured that subject leaders are more accountable for improvements in their departments' performance. In turn, the subject leaders are now more effective in ensuring that the school's aspirations for teaching and learning are met more consistently within their areas.

The LEA continues to provide good advice and guidance for the school. Through useful discussions between the headteacher and the advisers, the support is tailored to the school's needs appropriately; it has been particularly helpful in assessing the needs of teachers new to the school. The very good guidance given to the senior leaders by the school improvement adviser has helped them to focus on the remaining challenges facing the school. An increasingly effective partnership has been developed between the school and the LEA.

### **Action taken to address the key issues**

#### **Key Issue 1: to raise the quality of teaching and learning so that the students' learning and achievements are improved and standards are raised.**

The school continues to approach its agenda for improving the quality of education through a variety of strategies, including the discussion of important issues by the teaching and learning forum and in the middle leadership team meetings. Training has focused on core aspects of teaching, such as short-term planning, and appropriate coaching and peer mentoring for individuals has been provided.

There has been a continued emphasis on extended tasks as a way of promoting study skills across the curriculum, but the school's overall strategy to improve learning is less well developed than its approach to teaching. The pupils are making better progress in lessons, but this is because of the significant

improvement in the quality of teaching and their attitudes, rather than the systematic development of their learning skills.

Nevertheless, there has been a significant improvement in the quality of teaching and learning, and progress on this key issue is good.

### **Key Issue 2: to improve student attitudes, values and other personal qualities**

Comprehensive information continues to be collected on the pupils' behaviour. It is analysed in detail regularly and areas of concern and trends in behaviour are identified; appropriate actions are taken to support the staff and pupils. The pupils' self-esteem is being raised through suitable rewards and opportunities to voice their views and take responsibility in a number of areas of school life.

The school has implemented some appropriate strategies to improve the pupils' attendance and punctuality; for example, a league table system promotes a targeted approach to rewarding the best and challenging the least frequent attenders. Increased rigour in registration sessions has helped reduce internal truancy; teachers who fail to complete registers are systematically challenged. The monitoring and detention programme has been effective in improving the pupils' punctuality to school.

Progress on this key issue is good.

### **Key Issue 3: to ensure that those in leadership and management positions carry out their roles and responsibilities effectively**

As reported above, the leadership and management of the school is now satisfactory overall, with some strong elements, especially in the senior leadership team. The school has responded to the findings of the last monitoring inspection vigorously. The subject leaders now form a more effective group and are playing a fuller role in driving improvements across the school. In common with the senior leadership team, they have a strong desire to improve their practice; for example, a number of subject leaders are participating in a nationally recognised management training programme.

Progress on this key issue is good.

### **Key Issue 4: to ensure that the curriculum meets statutory requirements and that subjects have sufficient time and focus**

To complement the school's thought for the week, the tutors have responsibility for the daily act of collective worship during morning registration. The effectiveness of this initiative has not yet been monitored systematically by the school; the practice was inconsistent in the registrations visited by HMI.

In association with two local schools, the plans to broaden the vocational aspects of the curriculum at Key Stage 4 have been finalised. Along with qualifications-based courses, some of the pupils have been provided with opportunities for enterprise learning and projects linked with the local community. Usefully, the school has adjusted its work experience programme to cater for the needs of individual pupils more effectively.

The curriculum for personal, social, health and citizenship education has been developed further to involve outside agencies with expertise in sex and drugs education. Learning mentors have been trained in smoking cessation programmes and are working with groups of pupils. Suitable training in teaching citizenship has been provided and appropriate opportunities for its contribution to other subjects have been identified. Religious education now has sufficient time in the curriculum to cover the local agreed syllabus.

Progress on this key issue is reasonable.

### **Key Issue 5: partnership with parents to be improved**

The school's regular communications to parents are gradually eliciting more frequent responses. The parents' association has launched a first successful social event and further activities are planned. Generally, parents report content with the improvements in the school.

Middle managers have improved their responses to parents' concerns and queries, and are regularly challenged by senior managers to respond speedily. Changes to the reporting system and to information sessions for parents on the pupils' progress have had a positive impact on participation rates; over 60 per cent of parents attended the most recent academic review day.

Progress on this key issue is good.