

23 May 2005

Ms J Gabler
Headteacher
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Dear Ms Gabler

Collaborative Restart: Inspection of Ladybridge High School

Following the visit of Mr E Craven HMI, Mr A Bennett HMI and Mrs M A Buckingham HMI to your school on 11 and 12 May 2005, I write to confirm the findings which are recorded below.

The visit was the first monitoring inspection since the school opened in September 2004. The focus of the visit 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 raising attainment plan.

During the visit 31 lessons or parts of lessons and three tutorial sessions were inspected. Meetings were held with the headteacher, the executive principal, other senior members of staff, the chair and vice chair of governors, representatives from the LEA and three groups of pupils representing Years 7, 9 and 11. 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 executive principal, the chair and vice chair of the governing body, and representatives from the LEA.

Under the collaborative restart arrangements, the school has established a partnership with another local high school. The schools share a governing body and an executive principal although they retain their unique identities. Around 50 per cent of the teachers from the former school, and a smaller proportion of the non-teaching staff, were appointed in September 2004. Eight teachers are newly qualified and four are unqualified. Most of the senior leadership team were newly appointed. There are programme and subject leaders in all departments except for

mathematics. There is a full complement of senior learning co-ordinators leading the year groups. The school has been successful in its bid to become a specialist sports college from September 2005. There are short-term plans to incorporate the small farm on the school campus into the programmes of study for science and longer term plans, and associated investment, to develop it as a wider resource for the school.

There are 722 pupils on roll. Around a third of the pupils are entitled to free school meals. Twenty three per cent are designated as having special educational needs, mainly for behavioural and moderate learning difficulties; 20 pupils have a Statement of Special Educational Need. About a third of the pupils are from ethnic minority backgrounds. There are 12 pupils who are refugees and asylum seekers and ten who are travellers. Seventy pupils are at the early stages of English language acquisition. The school reports its pupils mainly come from the more deprived areas of Bolton, although the number of pupils from more affluent areas is on the increase. The attainment on entry to the school is generally toward the lower end of the ability range but there are indications that this is rising.

Standards were below average in about a third of lessons. The progress of the pupils in around a quarter of lessons was good and it was unsatisfactory in only two. The improved behaviour of the pupils is rapidly removing barriers to their learning. The school expects to reach its targets for the proportions of pupils achieving Level 5 in the end-of-Key Stage 3 national tests in 2005 and for the percentage of pupils gaining five A* to C grades in the forthcoming GCSE examinations. Data has been used effectively to identify underachieving pupils and an array of suitable measures has been put in place to raise the value they place on examination success, to improve their examination techniques and to mentor them through to the examinations. The school's provisional targets for the end-of-Key Stage 3 national tests and GCSE examinations through to 2008 are appropriately more challenging year-on-year.

The Key Stage 3 curriculum is broad and balanced and meets statutory requirements. From September of this year, the Key Stage 4 curriculum will also meet statutory requirements when deficiencies in information and communication technology (ICT) and religious education are addressed. Alternative curriculum routes have already re-engaged some disaffected pupils, as shown through their improved attendance and positive feedback; the vocational element includes day-release programmes in partnership with various local colleges, businesses and other providers. Additional pathways for September have been tailored to the needs of the able and talented pupils and those who wish to mix elements of traditional academic courses with some vocational content. Year 9 pupils report that they have had a genuine and free choice of option subjects and pathways and

that they are pleased with the outcomes. There is an extensive range of extra-curricular activities which are greatly valued by the pupils.

The quality of teaching is satisfactory overall. Of the 31 lessons inspected, 29 were satisfactory or better; in ten of these, the teaching was good. In two lessons, the teaching was unsatisfactory. Much timely work has been completed on updating schemes of work and improving lesson plans; an intensive programme of targeted professional development has been systematically delivered; but the quality of teaching in the classroom does not always reflect this. HMI findings agree with the school's analysis in respect of the proportion of satisfactory teaching; however, the school's view of the proportion of teaching that is good or better is much too generous. Most of the pupils are ready and willing to learn but in lessons where the teacher adopts an over-cautious approach, progress is frequently less than it might be, especially for the higher- and lower-attaining pupils. The legacy of unsatisfactory progress at both key stages is being dealt with primarily through a whole-school focus on assessment for learning. Staff have received effective training; wide-ranging approaches to assessment underpin their increasingly thorough tracking of the pupils' progress but have yet to impact significantly on planning for individual needs in many classrooms.

In the good lessons, teachers drew on appropriate subject knowledge and adapted tasks sensitively for pupils with different learning styles and needs. They made inventive use of a variety of resources to increase the pupils' self-esteem; for example, encouraging them to use the interactive whiteboard when explaining their ideas to the rest of the class. Paired and group work in several lessons allowed the pupils to articulate and explore ideas while reinforcing their social skills within the co-operative, respectful ethos of the school. The best lessons were structured methodically; the pupils left with a clear understanding of what they had achieved, and why it was significant in the overall scheme of work. Starter activities were crisp and relevant, and end-of-lesson plenaries fully involved the pupils in evaluating their progress against the lesson objectives.

Some lessons that were judged to be satisfactory overall were nevertheless weak in some aspects. There was often too little adjustment of tasks to suit the needs of the different pupils and too much talking by teachers, especially at the start of lessons. Lesson plans seldom made clear the specific role of classroom assistants, of whom there were sometimes several in a classroom. A number of lessons therefore lacked pace and direction and the pupils, while remaining generally compliant, did not show particular enthusiasm for their work as a result. In many lessons, plenary sessions were weak; sometimes because the teachers ran out of time and sometimes because they did not involve the pupils in an authentic review of learning. The few examples of unsatisfactory teaching occurred when planning

lacked focus and direction and the pupils had little sense of where their work was taking them, or why.

The quality of learning was at least satisfactory, and the pupils made adequate progress, in 29 lessons; including eight where it was good. Where the teaching was good, the pupils usually made good progress. They participated enthusiastically in practical work and responded sensibly when given opportunities to show responsibility and independence. In two lessons where the teaching was good, however, the pupils' progress was limited by poor retention of prior learning and weak basic skills. In a few lessons where the teaching was satisfactory but rather dull, the pupils made insufficiently rapid progress because they were not engaged with the work or motivated enough. The pupils interviewed by HMI knew and understood their targets in most subjects; many pupils talked confidently about how detailed marking and assessment related to test and examination criteria helps them improve their work. Portfolios of work provide a good opportunity for the pupils to develop their skills in self- and peer-assessment and raise their levels of self-confidence and motivation.

Together, the headteacher and executive principal provide very good leadership for the school. They have established the confidence of the staff and the pupils. A clear strategic direction has been laid down and is portrayed in a good quality school development plan. A positive ethos in the school has quickly emerged. Staff morale is good; a shared vision has been established and staff are committed to the school. The staff absence rate for the period from September 2004 to mid April 2005 has reduced markedly in comparison with the equivalent period in the previous year in the former school. The number of potential candidates seeking further information when vacancies occur is encouragingly high and applications for places at the school is also increasing; the school, with some justification, sees these as indicators of its improving reputation.

A team approach has been fostered at senior staff level, allied to clear roles and lines of responsibility for each member of the team. Senior staff have a high profile around the school and they provide good role models for other staff and pupils. Communication is good and is aided by the effective use of electronic systems. A useful monitoring and evaluation policy has been drafted and good progress has been made in the establishing an annual schedule of school self-review; this is becoming well embedded in school practice. Senior staff hold middle managers to account appropriately; departmental targets, development plans and reviews have been established. Middle managers are generally taking responsibility for their areas with eagerness; they are welcoming the initiative afforded them and are rising well to the challenges being set by the senior leadership team. Teachers receive oral and written feedback following observations of their lessons and there are suitable arrangements to provide differentiated support, including mentoring,

training and coaching where needed. A performance management cycle is underway for all levels of staff.

Appropriately, the first priority in the school development plan is to improve teaching and learning. However, targets to increase the proportion of good and very good teaching are an unhelpful omission from the plan. There is a strong emphasis on continuing professional development at all levels. The school timetable enables all staff to meet for training one afternoon each week. This time is used well in promoting consistent practices. In addition, most staff with management responsibilities are undertaking leadership and management training.

The governing body, which was newly formed in September 2004, is at full complement and attendance is good. Suitably, governors have been linked with programme leaders, with whom regular meetings take place. The professional and personal strengths of the governors have been capitalised upon in judiciously determining their roles. The governing body is supportive and committed and is operating appropriately as a critical friend of the school.

The support from the LEA has been extensive. In particular, the school has valued the support of the link adviser who has a thorough insight into the strategic and operational running of the school. The LEA has helpful plans to contribute to the school's self evaluation processes by undertaking a review of senior leadership.

The school has made good progress overall in establishing strategies to improve behaviour and attendance. Classrooms are invariably orderly and the corridors are quiet during lessons. Behaviour was good or better in over two thirds of lessons; no unsatisfactory behaviour was seen. There are clear guidelines on behaviour and the pupils know what is expected of them and cite improvements in behaviour as one of the most significant changes they have experienced. A range of support mechanisms, including effective liaison with outside agencies, is available to help pupils in need in the short and longer term. Intervention records are kept so that trends and individual pupils' use of support, and its impact, can be monitored. Nevertheless, the rate of fixed-term exclusion remain high. The school justifies this as part of a short-term deliberate strategy to reinforce behaviour management and expects the number of exclusions to reduce in the near future.

Substantial effort goes into tackling low attendance rates and poor punctuality. There has been a significant rise in attendance this school year compared with the situation in 2003-04. Attendance so far this school year has been around 90 per cent. During the inspection, attendance in lessons was around 80 per cent. This is set against the school records, on the first day of the inspection, of about 88 per cent. Home study packages are used to support a hard core of non-attendees. Good strategies are in place to collect data, track pupils and

monitor and evaluate systems. Additional staff are deployed well to support senior learning co-ordinators in monitoring and following up lateness. However, punctuality to school and some lessons remains unsatisfactory.

Those pupils interviewed were clear about the positive changes in the school. Notably they applauded the clear discipline policy and consequent improvement in the behaviour of many of their peers; they feel confident and safe and are beginning to recognise what the school can offer them. The Year 7 pupils felt their transition into the school prepared them well for the start of their secondary education.

At this stage of the school's development, its main strengths are:

- the very effective leadership provided by the headteacher and executive principal, supported well by other members of the senior leadership team;
- the positive ethos in the school;
- the effectiveness of senior and middle managers;
- the programme of continuing professional development for all staff;
- the behaviour of the pupils in lessons and around the school;
- the development of imaginative curriculum pathways in Key Stage 4.

The weaknesses are:

- there are too few lessons where teaching and learning are judged to be very good and better;
- the judgments made by the school about the proportion of good and very good teaching are too generous;
- work is not matched sufficiently well to the pupils' needs;
- lesson plans contain little detail about the role of learning support staff.

Progress overall has been good.

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

Yours sincerely

Andrew Reid
Head of Institutional Inspections and Frameworks Division