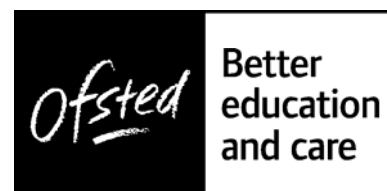


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Ms Karen Healey
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21 December 2005

Dear Ms Healey

SPECIAL MEASURES: MONITORING INSPECTION OF BIRCHES HEAD HIGH SCHOOL

Introduction

Following my visit with Nina Bee and Susan Walsh, additional inspectors, to your school on 30 November and 1 December 2005, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector to confirm the inspection findings.

The visit was the second monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures in January 2005.

This letter will be posted on the Ofsted website. Please inform the Regional Inspection Service Provider of any factual inaccuracies within 24 hours of receipt of this letter.

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents, and met with the headteacher, the chair of governors, a number of the staff team, groups of pupils and a representative from the local authority (LA).

Context

The school is now on a single site. However, building work is still ongoing and the next phase is due to start in April. The school has had several teaching vacancies in mathematics and music. The leadership posts in mathematics and music will be filled in January 2006. The school has still not been able to appoint a member of staff with responsibility for inclusion to the senior team.

Achievement and standards

Attainment on entry to the school remains below average. In 2004 the national test results at the end of Key Stage 3 were well below average. In 2005 the proportion of pupils reaching the expected Level 5 or above rose in English from 62% to 64%, in mathematics from 60% to 61%, and in science from 53% to 56%. Nevertheless, standards remain well below average with too few pupils reaching the higher levels.

At Key Stage 4 unvalidated examination data suggests that the proportion of pupils achieving five or more higher grades at GCSE has improved from 32% in 2004 to 36% in 2005, but this is still well below the national figure. The average point scores and capped average point scores have also improved. There has been a significant improvement in the number of pupils gaining five A* to G grades and one or more A* to G grades in GCSE examinations. However, the proportion reaching the very highest grades remains low. Although results have improved in some subjects such as art and design and geography there has been insufficient improvement in English language, mathematics and science.

End of key stage tests and GCSE examinations indicate that many pupils have not made sufficient progress over time. However, it was clear from the lessons inspected that their progress is improving. Where teaching was good or better and work was accurately matched to their needs the pupils achieved well. Some pupils' achievement is still hampered by a lack of a work ethic and erratic attendance.

A good effort has been made to improve pupils' literacy levels. In addition to providing support to those pupils who enter Year 7 with low levels of literacy there is a drive to improve the skills of all pupils. Opportunities for speaking and listening have improved and there is consistent use of key words. Strategies and resources to support the pupils' extended writing are increasing in impact. Numeracy across the curriculum is improving but not sufficiently fast because leadership in this area is less effective. Although many subjects are trying to use numeracy skills in lessons, including producing graphs and charts, poor presentation is often tolerated such as failing to insist on the use of rulers.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the inspection in January 2005:

- improve pupils' skills in literacy and their use of number across the curriculum—satisfactory progress.

Personal development and well-being

The pupils' personal development has improved significantly and is now satisfactory. The school's ethos has changed and there is a more positive

environment in which pupils can enjoy school, grow as individuals, and learn more effectively.

The pupils' attitudes to learning are generally satisfactory. Where teaching was good pupils were willing to apply themselves well and work hard. Many pupils took an interest in their assessments tasks and wanted to improve their grades; a work ethic is developing. Most pupils were considerate and reacted well to visitors. In many lessons pupils have good relationships with each other. When relationships between pupils and teachers were good and praise was used well, pupils were motivated and their confidence improved.

Behaviour in lessons and around the school is good overall. Expectations regarding behaviour and levels of supervision have improved. The school has worked hard and, in the main, very successfully to change pupils' attitudes and behaviour, but there remains some boisterous behaviour. Although bullying and racism are quickly addressed when reported some pupils are reluctant to report incidents. Improvements to accommodation so that all pupils are based on the same site have made behaviour and truancy easier to manage. However, the use of temporary classrooms still affords some pupils the temptation to go off site.

Attendance is still too low and it is too early to judge the impact of a good range of strategies designed to reduce absence. Attendance in Year 7 is good and few pupils miss school but the erratic attendance of a significant number of older pupils continues to have a negative impact on examination results. The number of exclusions remains high because of higher expectations regarding the pupils' conduct.

Quality of provision

The quality of teaching has improved since the last inspection. Inspectors' judgements were in line with those of the school. The best lessons were underpinned by high expectations and an ethos of respect for learners and their ideas. Activities were exciting and well organised to promote effective learning. Pupils felt valued, motivated, and confident to achieve. During one lesson pupils spoke out confidently and questioned the opinions of others sensibly. Learning was good because they all listened attentively and behaved well because expectations were clear. Similarly, in another lesson, pupils learned well because the tasks were interesting and well matched to individual needs. In addition, the pupils knew that the teacher set high expectations with regard to listening and getting on with the activities they were given. As a result, learning was good.

The less effective lessons were dull and often depended on a limited range of teaching strategies. At times the activities were too difficult for some pupils. Higher attaining pupils were not consistently challenged. In a few lessons, teachers allowed pupils' poor behaviour to interrupt the learning of others. In these lessons teachers spoke over chatter from pupils and disruptive

behaviour was either tolerated or responded to ineffectively. Some teachers muddled learning objectives and learning outcomes.

The quality of marking in the pupils' books is inconsistent. The best examples show that the pupils are given clear guidance on how to improve. However, some work has not been marked to promote improvement. The way teachers use assessment information collected on individuals is inconsistent. When assessment information is not used well pupils are given work that is either too difficult or does not challenge them sufficiently.

Statutory requirements are now met. The school has revised its curriculum in mathematics, religious education, physical education, design and technology and citizenship, taking account of the findings of the last inspection. A programme that ensures that all pupils attend an act of daily worship has been put into place. All pupils attend one year group assembly each week, plus four tutor group sessions where they focus on a 'thought for the day'. None of these were seen during this monitoring visit.

The number and accessibility of computers have improved. There is better access to information and communication technology (ICT) and resources such as interactive whiteboards are often used to make lessons more interesting and enhance learning. The use of ICT is carefully monitored by senior staff and is managed well to ensure that limited resources have the maximum impact on learning. The availability of software and improvements in ICT such as the teaching of Cad Cam techniques in design and technology has ensured that the curriculum now meets statutory requirements.

The provision for pupils with special educational needs is variable and has been reviewed and developed. All pupils who are having difficulties are clearly identified and have individual education plans which have targets that focus on their specific needs. Detailed records are kept of annual reviews for pupils with statements of special educational needs. Reviews for other pupils with less severe needs are planned for but, as yet, have not taken place. Pupils with special educational needs and those with English as an additional language are clearly identified in teachers' planning. However, there was little evidence of teachers referring to the targets in pupils' individual education plans to develop learning further. When the teaching was inadequate and work was not well matched to the pupils' needs attitudes and behaviour deteriorated.

The school is aware that some pupils who receive extra support outside the classroom sometimes miss important parts of lessons. This is to be addressed when the new timetable is developed in 2006/07 but at present is unsatisfactory. All staff has been given extra training to support pupils with special educational needs to enable them to cater more effectively for them in their classes.

Pupils with English as an additional language are appropriately assessed on entry to school. They receive additional help developing their language skills from a teaching assistant who has been specifically trained. None of these lessons were observed on this visit.

Pupils receive satisfactory care, guidance and support. Good features include the pupils' tracking system which enables pupils to be well aware of the grades they are working towards. Procedures for child protection issues are well documented. Most pupils feel safe at school but a few of the pupils do not feel that there is an adult that they can speak to when concerned about issues such as bullying and race.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the inspection in January 2005:

- improve provision for pupils with special educational needs and those with English as an additional language—satisfactory progress
- ensure that statutory requirements in mathematics, design and technology, physical education, citizenship, religious education and for a daily act of collective worship are met—satisfactory progress
- improve the effectiveness of teaching through better use of assessment and rigorous implementation of the various national strategies—satisfactory progress
- improve the use of information and communication technology across the curriculum—satisfactory progress.

Leadership and management

Leadership and management have improved. The headteacher is showing strong leadership. She has effectively edited the action plan. It is more strategic and appropriate milestones are identified. This has enabled its effective implementation and evaluation. Senior managers have received effective training which has ensured appropriate and consistent monitoring. The school now has an accurate picture of its strengths and weaknesses. It has the capacity to improve further.

Middle managers are effectively held accountable for their departments. There remains inconsistency in the quality of middle managers' leadership. Where leadership is poor subject managers do not monitor teaching and learning effectively. The senior leadership team is aware of this. It has put appropriate support in place with clear targets for improvement. All managers have received coaching. This has helped them to develop a tool kit for leadership and management that focuses on improvement. For example, training has improved middle managers' skills in giving effective feedback after lesson observations.

The governance of the school is good. The governing body is now effectively holding the school to account. The governors have acted on the comments from the previous visit. They have a clear understanding of the school's

strengths and weaknesses based on a confident analysis of data. Governors now monitor and evaluate their own performance and this has ensured that their training is matched to needs. The governors' involvement in monitoring the absence rates of staff has had a positive impact. The school's overall rate is now below the city average.

The support to newly qualified teachers is effective and they are very positive about working in the school.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the inspection in January 2005:

- improve the effectiveness of management and ensure that governors discharge their responsibility fully—satisfactory progress.

External support

The LA and other partners have provided a considerable amount of high quality support. This has contributed significantly to the progress the school has made.

The school development adviser knows the school well. She has the confidence of the staff and has promoted improvement in the school's management. An effective support package has ensured that all the priorities for improvement have been addressed. A clear exit plan is appropriately linked to school improvement. Thus the sustainability of the school's improvement is a realistic goal.

Main Judgements

Progress since being subject to special measures—satisfactory.

Progress since previous monitoring inspection—satisfactory.

Priorities for further improvement

- Ensure that all higher attaining pupils are challenged sufficiently
- ensure that pupils with special educational needs and those with English as an additional language are given activities that accurately meet their individual needs.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the chair of governors and the Director of Education for Stoke on Trent.

Yours sincerely

Michelle Parker
H M Inspector