

15 November 2005

Mr P Cohen
Oak Bank School
Sandy Lane
Leighton Buzzard
Bedfordshire
LU7 3BE

Dear Mr Cohen

SPECIAL MEASURES: MONITORING INSPECTION OF OAK BANK SCHOOL

Introduction

Following my visit with Mr Alan Lemon, Additional Inspector, to your school on 7 and 8 November 2005, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector to confirm the inspection findings.

The visit was the third monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures in September 2004.

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Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the acting headteacher, the two assistant headteachers, the headteacher consultant, a group of pupils, the chair and a vice-chair of governors and a representative from the local authority (LA).

Context

Since the previous monitoring visit one of the joint headteachers has resigned from her post and has left the school. The remaining headteacher has taken over the headship in an acting capacity. Three new teaching staff and three new teaching assistants have joined the school since September 2005. A home-school liaison officer has also joined the staff. The changes in leadership in particular led to an unsettled period for the school during the summer term. Four of the teachers are unqualified.

Achievement and standards

The standards attained by the pupils are generally below those which are expected of their age group. The pupils' levels of attainment are adversely affected by their social, emotional, behavioural or other learning difficulties. In lessons, standards were generally below age-related expectations.

The school was particularly pleased with the mathematics results for Key Stage 4 in 2005. Nine of the ten pupils who were entered for GCSE mathematics gained a grade; of these, three pupils gained a Grade C or above. Given the pupils' prior attainment these results represent a good achievement for the pupils and for the school. Two of the pupils who gained a GCSE in mathematics were in Year 10, so passed their examination a year early. Four pupils were entered for GCSE English, of whom three gained a grade although no pupil gained a C grade or above. One pupil gained a D grade in GCSE Spanish.

A high level of absenteeism affected the school's Key Stage 3 national test results in 2005. Results in English were particularly poor. No pupil gained a national curriculum level in English; the school assessed most of the pupils as working below the level of the test. Mathematics and science results were much better than English. In mathematics one of the 11 Year 9 pupils gained a Level 3 and 4 pupils gained a Level 4. One pupil gained a Level 5 in science, four pupils gained a Level 4 and one gained a Level 3. The school is aware of the discrepancy between the pupils' attainments in mathematics and English at both key stages; the senior team is exploring ways of improving the pupils' attainment in this essential curriculum area.

Pupils' progress in most areas of the curriculum is broadly satisfactory, although progress in English is still unsatisfactory. During the monitoring inspection, progress was at least satisfactory in almost all lessons observed, and good in several. This was directly related to the quality of the teaching. The school now has assessment data which is helping staff to be more accurate about the pupils' current levels of attainment, although this needs to be used more rigorously to ensure that progress is well tracked and underachievement is quickly identified.

Personal development and well-being

Pupils' attitudes to school are mixed, but are satisfactory overall. When the pupils receive good teaching, their attitudes are often good. During the monitoring inspection a lively mathematics lesson meant Year 9 pupils remained very engaged and enjoyed learning about equations. Antipathy towards some aspects of school and the lack of confidence to succeed means lessons need to be especially interesting to involve pupils. When they are not, pupils can be unmotivated and invest little effort in achieving. However, in most lessons the pupils behaved

satisfactorily and were generally cooperative and sensible around school. Relationships between staff and pupils are good, and many pupils interact reasonably well with each other. In a very good assembly, pupils listened extremely well and showed a high level of respect to the assistant headteacher who was leading it.

The school's system for managing pupils' behaviour is becoming increasingly established and is being used more consistently by the staff. It is particularly effective in ensuring that pupils know what is expected of them and what is unacceptable. Their involvement in monitoring their scores for good behaviour is leading to them giving serious consideration to their conduct. Pupils generally understand their behaviour targets. The school has made a concentrated effort to seek the pupils' views about the system, and discussions with pupils took place as part of this visit. While pupils know why they need to keep a close track on the progress of their behaviour, some find the system complicated. The review of behaviour at the end of lessons can also sometimes lead to conflict which then adversely affects the start of the next lesson. However, pupils recognise that the school is calmer and that a lot less damage is inflicted on people and property, which means everyone is much safer. Crucially, the senior team is well aware that the management of behaviour needs to be continually reviewed. Sensible additions to the system this term have increased the opportunities which pupils have to reflect on their behaviour. Alterations have also been made to ensure that there are manageable but demanding steps for the pupils to move through the system's levels. Importantly, the number of exclusions has decreased. Attendance is below average and has not yet improved sufficiently.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the inspection in September 2004:

- improve the attitudes, behaviour and attendance of the pupils – satisfactory progress.

Quality of provision

The quality of teaching and of the pupils' learning has improved since the previous monitoring inspection. The amount of unsatisfactory teaching has decreased significantly: during this visit the teaching was satisfactory overall with some good elements. Several good lessons were observed. In the best lessons the pupils were engaged from the outset. This was generally achieved by a simple, timed and structured task which enabled them to focus. This then led quickly into interesting work with a reasonably high level of demand which captured their imagination. Low level disruption was firmly and calmly managed but the focus was clearly on learning throughout. Specific words and phrases were well used to remind the pupils of the purpose of the lesson. The best lessons included a practical element such as handling materials. Where the teaching was good, the pupils made good progress.

In less successful lessons the tasks tended either to be more mundane or did not have sufficient structure to allow the pupils to settle into what was a potentially interesting activity.

Many of the staff are beginning to implement successfully strategies which have been discussed and agreed during staff meetings and training. This is beginning to lead to greater consistency, to which the pupils are responding well. The senior leadership team has sensibly rearranged the timetable to allow some teachers to support each other in specific lessons. Each pairing has a clear rationale which is related to sharing a clearly defined strength, allowing teachers the opportunity to learn from each other. Some good practice has already been shared to good effect. For example the technique of listing the parts of the lesson and the tasks on the board, and ticking them off as they were completed, dispelled some pupils' anxiety and helped them to focus better.

Lesson planning has become more consistent although weaknesses remain in some curriculum areas. Importantly, however, the senior leadership team's monitoring and evaluation of the quality of planning has improved significantly. The acting headteacher's systematic comments to teachers on the quality of their planning are highly evaluative and thoughtful and have had a clear impact. He is well aware of which teachers consistently plan well and has used this knowledge to encourage teachers to support each other with specific issues. The assistant headteachers have begun to take a role in this process; they are well supported by the acting headteacher who has rigorously monitored their work and supported them in making pertinent evaluations. Better attention is paid to meeting the pupils' needs through short-term planning. Initial work has begun on revising schemes of work in the light of the pupils' current needs.

The school has begun to give appropriate attention to the need to extend the formal accreditation of the pupils' learning. Links with local colleges are giving some pupils in Key Stage 4 the opportunity to attend a variety of accredited courses. Resources have been improved by the very recent addition of interactive whiteboards, which some teachers have already begun to use competently to support their teaching. Some attention has been paid to the development of pupils' literacy skills although this area continues to need improvement. Assessment practices in the school have improved; a wealth of data exists which now needs to be used to inform the pupils' future learning so that accelerated progress is made.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the inspection in September 2004:

- improve the quality of teaching and learning so pupils make better progress – satisfactory progress.
- develop links with mainstream schools to promote staff development and reintegration of pupils – satisfactory progress.

Leadership and management

The acting headteacher is providing the school with good, firm leadership and clear direction. He led the school effectively through the unsettled period of the summer term. With the support of the governing body he made some well thought out staffing appointments. As a result the school was able to start the autumn term with a full complement of staff. In addition, the careful attention which he has paid to the reorganisation of the staff team has led to staff being able to teach in curriculum areas in which they have the greatest expertise. Key decisions about organisation have led to staff being better placed to support each other in their professional development. The acting headteacher has made considerable improvements to the quality of the school's monitoring and evaluation. The monitoring of planning is particularly thorough and has led to important improvements in quality. The acting headteacher's monitoring of other aspects of the school's work is now well established; sensibly he has begun to find ways to refine some of this monitoring or to delegate it to other senior staff. The acting headteacher has a good understanding of the need to define the school's vision and core values and has begun to think carefully about the next steps in the school's development.

As well as beginning to improve provision within the school the acting headteacher has begun to influence wider aspects of the school's role and has made contact with some key personnel in the local authority. As a result he has been involved in some important discussions about the school's future role and about how current pupils can receive the best possible provision. Better co-ordination by the school of the work of the local authority advisers is beginning to lead to more focused intervention.

The acting headteacher continues to be well supported by the assistant headteachers. They are increasingly taking responsibility for areas of the school's work, although it is important that these responsibilities are further extended to maximise the senior team's capacity to improve. Being asked to present reports to the governing body has increased their accountability. The leadership roles of some key subject leaders have also begun to develop.

The governing body continues to provide the school with an impressive level of support and challenge. The dedication of the chair, vice-chairs and other key governors to the school's improvement is exceptional; they are highly knowledgeable and continually use their skills and expertise to the school's benefit. They are closely involved in the strategic direction of the school, yet retain a good level of knowledge of operational matters. Their recent decision to increase the administrative staff in order to provide better support for the acting headteacher in his new role is just one example of their understanding of the school's needs.

Overall, there have been significant improvements in the leadership and management of the school, particularly since the previous monitoring visit. Some of the more recent actions are at too early a stage to have had a significant impact on the overall quality of provision in the school. However, with sound systems and structures coupled with the beginning of a new vision and redefined values, the school is well poised to take the important next steps in its development.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the inspection in September 2004:

- improve the quality of the leadership and the strategic management of the school - good progress.

External support

The LA continues to provide the school with a good level of advisory and consultant support. This is increasingly well co-ordinated by the school, which has improved its effectiveness. Refinements have ensured that the support has begun to be targeted to meet staff's individual needs, as well as focusing on whole school issues. The consultant headteacher's support and advice are still highly valued by the school. He has continued to adapt his work with great sensitivity as the school's needs change. He is keenly aware of the next steps for the school, and has led some important initial discussions with staff.

Some improvement has been made to the support provided to the school by the education welfare service and the educational psychology service. Both services are making good efforts to tailor their work to the school's needs. Further discussions have taken place about the difficulties with the pupils' transport to and from school but no improvements have been made.

Main Judgements

Progress since being subject to special measures – satisfactory.

Progress since previous monitoring inspection – good.

Newly qualified teachers may not be appointed.

Priorities for further improvement

- Use the much improved information about the quality of teaching and learning to tailor support, intervention and further monitoring to the teachers' individual needs.

- Develop a system which will allow the pupils' progress in all areas of learning to be tracked, underachievement to be noticed quickly and acted upon, and individual curricular targets to be set.
- Explore how the pupils' generic learning skills, such as listening and concentration, can be further developed to improve their rates of progress.
- Begin to define the school's core values, and a vision for the school's future.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the chair of governors and the Strategic Director of Education for Bedfordshire.

Yours sincerely

Sue Morris-King
H M Inspector