

30 September 2005

Mrs K Thomas
Acting Headteacher
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Gosforth
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Dear Mrs Thomas

SPECIAL MEASURES: MONITORING INSPECTION OF GOSFORTH WEST MIDDLE SCHOOL

Introduction

Following my visit with Steve Hardwick HMI and Iain Rodger, Additional Inspector, to your school on 19 and 20 September 2005, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector to confirm the inspection findings.

The visit was the first monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures in March 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 the receipt of this letter.

Evidence

Inspectors observed 19 lessons, scrutinised a range of documents and met with the associate headteacher, the chair of governors, a number of the staff team, groups of pupils, and representatives from the local authority (LA). Using this evidence, HMI made the following observations to the associate headteacher, the assistant associate headteacher, an assistant headteacher, the chair of governors and two representatives from the LEA.

Context

Since the school was placed in special measures in March 2005 there have been a number of significant changes to the management structure. An interim associate headteacher was appointed on a full-time basis, having previously acted as the

school's attached adviser and then as a part-time associate headteacher. He was succeeded in September 2005 by the deputy headteacher and Key Stage 4 co-ordinator from Gosforth High School, as associate headteacher and assistant associate headteacher respectively. The substantive headteacher has been absent since the beginning of May 2005.

The LA withdrew delegation of funding in July 2005. It has also supported the development of a core group of the governing body to act as an executive committee, although the governing body does remain constituted.

Achievement and standards

Overall, in the national tests at Year 6, the proportion of pupils making the target Level 4 has remained much the same over the last three years, though there has been a rise in the percentages reaching the higher Level 5. However, there has consistently been a considerable difference in the pupils' performance in each of the three core subjects: in 2005 the percentage of pupils reaching Level 4 was 90 in science, 83 in mathematics and 68 in English. This variation has also been reflected in the gains made by the pupils during Key Stage 2: in 2004 their progress from Year 2 to Year 6 was above average in mathematics, average in science and significantly below average in English. Within English, the pupils' standards in writing have been much poorer than in reading.

This weakness in English adversely affects the pupils' work in other subjects, particularly in their ability to express what they know, both orally and in writing. The school has analysed test results and is well aware that standards in writing need to rise; several strategies, such as extra time for English, have thus been introduced.

In lessons, the pupils' overall standards were around, and occasionally just below, the standards expected for their ages. Their rate of progress was at least satisfactory in all the lessons, but it was too rarely good. The gains made by the pupils' need to be brisker if they are to reach the standards of which they are capable, especially in English.

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

- continue to raise attainment, through setting challenging targets – inadequate progress.

Personal development and well-being

The pupils' attitudes to learning are generally satisfactory. They listen attentively and do all that is asked of them. They have good relationships with their teachers and are keen to please them. However, in too many lessons they are rather subdued and reluctant to contribute to lessons unless directly asked to do so. In the best lessons the teachers go to considerable efforts to engage the pupils through the use of, for example, talk partners, games, competitions and challenges. The pupils respond well to these teaching methods and are prepared to show some initiative for their own

learning. Similarly, when asked to reflect upon what they have learnt, they do so sensibly and with some insight.

Behaviour in lessons and around the school is good. Pupils move between lessons without any undue fuss and in class are respectful and polite. At breaks and lunchtime they play together sensibly and collaboratively. The senior management has introduced standardised, mixed-gender seating arrangements and these have been effective in helping the pupils to maintain their concentration. There have been two in-school and one fixed-term exclusions so far this term.

Overall attendance for the current term is 96 per cent, which is an improvement since the last inspection. Absences are followed up and good attendance is rewarded by certificates and tickets to local sporting events. There is still some unauthorised absence and the school is rigorously tackling this.

The provision for the pupils' social development is good; pupils recognise the school council as a useful vehicle for having some say in how the school is run. The council has made several suggestions for activities at lunchtime and these have been successful at improving behaviour then. Pupils readily accept responsibilities and carry out minor chores efficiently. They like the range of out of school activities available to them. Cultural development is enhanced by some stimulating provision for music.

The school is seeking the Healthy Schools Award and has entered into an agreement with a local supermarket to foster principles of healthy eating amongst the pupils. Pupils willingly raise money for local, national and international charities. The school is well aware of its responsibilities under the government's guidance in *Every Child Matters* and senior managers have action plans for promoting safe and healthy life styles.

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

- improve the pupils' attitudes to learning - satisfactory progress.

Quality of provision

The school has been delayed in updating the computer program it uses for recording and collating the results of assessments and tests, but in other respects actions related to this area of work have been completed on schedule. The school has the necessary information and systems to track each pupil's progress: their National Curriculum level is assessed and recorded each term, and there are targets for the end of the year. The co-ordinators for the core subjects have analysed the outcomes of the national tests for Year 6 pupils; highlighting areas where pupils struggled, notably in writing. The school is acting on what has been identified, by giving emphasis to particular aspects of work and additional help to certain pupils. The pupils for their part are told their level of performance and in some cases the details of the steps they need to take to move forward. This approach could

valuably be standardised, adopting the best of the practice from the various subjects.

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

- develop the quality and impact of assessment – satisfactory progress
- continue to raise attainment, through setting challenging targets - inadequate progress.

The quality of teaching has improved since the last inspection. More than half of the teaching observed was good or better. Nineteen lessons were observed: eight were satisfactory, nine were good and two were outstanding. There was no unsatisfactory teaching.

Where the teaching was good, the activities were varied, well planned to meet the needs of the pupils, and enabled the pupils to participate actively and take responsibility for their own learning. Teachers used a variety of approaches, were lively and enthusiastic, and frequently drew pupils' attention to their progress against targets or lesson objectives. In the few lessons where teaching was only just satisfactory, the planning was adequate and the teachers showed good subject knowledge, but the delivery was pedestrian and teachers tended to dominate the lesson.

Where the teaching encouraged pupils to participate, explore and take responsibility for their learning they often responded well. They were able, whenever given the opportunity, to understand their progress relative to the lesson objectives or their own levels, and in some cases to assess their own or other pupils' progress accurately. In some lessons, however, even good teaching did not always elicit an enthusiastic response, and pupils remained well behaved but unforthcoming.

Provision is variable for lower ability and underachieving pupils and pupils who have special educational needs (SEN). The best lessons were very tightly structured, with small scale activities which were well matched to pupils' needs and built to a coherent whole. Teachers were lively and dramatic in their approach and consistently maintained pupils' attention. Pupils made demonstrable progress and had a real sense of achievement. However, in some lessons, the work provided did not specifically address individual pupils' very low levels of literacy and the activities and delivery did not encourage their active participation.

There is little whole-school co-ordination of approaches to teaching some specific groups of pupils, such as pupils with SEN and gifted and talented pupils, although there is good guidance for pupils with English as an additional language. Weaknesses in SEN management have been identified and the school has rightly developed an assistant headteacher's role to encompass pupil learning and support. This is intended to enable a specific focus on developing whole school support for

pupils' learning across a range of needs, in line with *Every Child Matters*, and with a strong steer towards raising standards. This is a promising development.

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

- eliminate unsatisfactory teaching and increase the proportion that is good or better – good progress.

Leadership and management

There has been good progress over improving leadership and management in the short term but the longer-term picture is uncertain.

The school's action plan addresses all the key issues from the inspection report. The proposed actions are detailed, clear and specific, and are well linked to produce a consistent approach across the key issues. The broad and inclusive approach to managing the improvement process is beginning to be reflected not only in each individual area, but in concomitant gains in related areas: for example, improvements in the quality of teaching are influencing the improvements in pupils' behaviour and attitudes to learning, and vice versa.

Implementation of the action plan has been strongly supported by regular monitoring and evaluation, and by the development of an effective partnership between the school, governing body and LA.

The plan includes both qualitative and quantitative criteria for success, although there are too few quantitative or incremental measures with regard to the milestones or actions which are described as 'ongoing'. The roles of managing, monitoring and evaluating the school's progress are appropriately separated, and there are clear reporting arrangements. The combination of milestones for individual action points and longer-term success criteria is helpful, but the timing of actions is too heavily weighted towards the early part of the planned process. This has been successful in moving the school forward quickly in a number of areas, but now leaves the school without sufficient direction for more focused subsequent action and for the management of continuing improvement at the end of this academic year.

The school and LA invested considerable professional development time in ensuring that the plan is owned by all staff. This is reflected in the staff's commitment to the improvement process. There is a strong team spirit and a sense of corporate responsibility.

The improvements to the senior management structure have played a significant part in the school's progress. The previous associate headteacher played a major role in developing the improvement agenda and rebuilding staff confidence and morale. The new associate headteacher has already made carefully considered and effective decisions, for example to improve communications and to upgrade the school accommodation. She is committed to developing the school's capacity to

improve at all levels, and is well placed to provide strong and effective leadership. She is well supported by the assistant associate headteacher, who is already working very effectively to improve pupils' behaviour. However, there is no clarity about the associate headteacher's and assistant headteacher's roles after the end of this academic year. This is a significant concern.

The senior team and subject leaders have well-defined responsibilities, and a sense of accountability is becoming more consistent across the school, particularly with regard to raising standards in specific or subject areas. The school is in the process of developing good systems of self-evaluation. The school has rightly focused on developing self-evaluation within subject areas. Subject Self Evaluation Forms (SEFs) are in development and in many cases are good quality, although in some areas they are overly positive. Subject SEFs inform the school's overall evaluation, which is currently in draft. Training and initiatives such as Assessment for Learning are rigorously monitored, producing a clear picture of progress and direction for further action.

There is a strong governing body, which has very high aspirations for the school and has demonstrated considerable commitment to the improvement process. There are a number of appropriate procedures for evaluation and monitoring, some generated from within the executive committee, which enable the governors to form a clear picture of progress and the necessary next steps.

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

- establish strategic leadership and ensure that management at all levels is rigorous and consistent in its impact – 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 LA has facilitated and supported the successful changes to the management structure. Further external support has been arranged primarily through a combination of the attached adviser (previously the associate headteacher), and a senior school improvement adviser. The attached adviser was instrumental in drawing up the school's action plan, and, as a successful former associate headteacher, he knows the school well and has the confidence of staff. This enables him to provide effective support across all the priorities for improvement. The senior school improvement adviser has begun a process of monitoring the school each term, with succinct reports to the governing body.

The governors are fully informed of developments at the school, and LA representatives frequently attend the fortnightly executive committee meetings.

The LA has also facilitated support from a range of consultants and advanced skills teachers, and has supported the development of partnership working with Gosforth

High School and other schools in the Gosforth 'pyramid'. The impact of this intensive programme of professional development is evident in a number of improvements in teaching, planning and school management. The LA intends to involve a school improvement partner, from Northern Education, initially in a mentor role to support the associate headteacher, but plans for the use of this time are at an early stage.

The LA's statement of support is generally clear, and appropriately identifies timescales, resources and monitoring arrangements. It outlines an effective programme of support for the school which has been implemented consistently. There is a suitable hierarchy of reporting arrangements which ensures that information on the school's progress is regularly provided to senior LA personnel and council members. However, like the school's action plan, the LA's statement of support is weighted very heavily to the period immediately following the school's placement in special measures, and lacks sufficient strategic direction over the longer term. Although some aspirations for the future are described, it is not clear how these are to be realised; nor are there plans for the management of the period after the end of this academic year. The LA is aiming to have the school taken out of special measures in the summer term 2006. This is optimistic.

Main Judgements

Progress since being subject to special measures – satisfactory.

Quality of LA's statement of action – satisfactory.

Newly qualified teachers may be appointed.

Priorities for further improvement

The priorities remain those identified in the inspection of March 2004. Within this, the school's priorities are to improve standards in English, particularly with regard to writing, and speaking and listening; and to ensure that there is a clear strategic direction for improvement over the longer term.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the Executive Director of Children's Services for Newcastle and the chair of governors.

Yours sincerely

Andrea Lyons
H M Inspector

