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Mrs R Allen
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Dear Mrs Allen

SPECIAL MEASURES: MONITORING INSPECTION OF READING GIRLS' SCHOOL

Introduction

Following my visit with Linda Killman HMI to your school on 7 and 8 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 February 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

The inspection team observed the school at work, including 20 lessons, an assembly and six registration periods, and scrutinised a range of documents. Inspectors met with pupils from all year groups, the headteacher and nominated staff, the chair of governors and a representative from the local authority.

Context

Difficulties with the recruitment and retention of teachers remain: 19 teachers left the school during the 2004 – 2005 academic year, and 17 joined in September 2005.

Achievement and standards

The overall value-added measures between Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 3 indicate levels of progress well above the national average. The school records that in the 2005 Key Stage 3 results, 68% of the pupils achieved Level 5 or above in English, 64% in mathematics, and 63% in science. The percentages of the pupils achieving the higher Level 6 or above were 37%, 43% and 32% respectively.

Progress made by pupils between the end of Year 9 and end of Year 11 continues to be inadequate when set alongside similar schools. In 2005 at GCSE, 33% of the pupils achieved five or more A* - C grades, below the school's own target, the national average and that of schools in similar contexts. The figure for those achieving five or more A* - G grades, including mathematics and English, was 74%, with 93% achieving at least one A* - G grade; these results were also below national averages. All pupils achieved at least one external qualification.

The variability of achievement in the core subjects in 2005 is rightly an urgent focus for the school: 58% of pupils achieved the higher GCSE grades in English, compared with 33% in mathematics and 16% in science. The school's current predictions indicate that about 40% of Year 11 is set to achieve five or more higher GCSE grades next summer, although the original target was 50%. Robust systems for tracking progress at GCSE are not in place.

Progress in lessons across the key stages is satisfactory or better where the teaching is good; where teaching is satisfactory overall, pupils' progress is sometimes barely adequate. The progress of many pupils in lessons is too slow.

Personal development and well-being

The teachers' expectations of pupils' attitudes and behaviour vary, and outcomes are erratic. In some lessons, where expectation for a productive work ethic is high and intolerance of poor attitudes prevails, pupils behave well and make good progress. In other lessons, low-level disruption and interruption are usually challenged, but the consequences are left undelivered, resulting in pupils doggedly persisting with their unacceptable behaviour. The same applies in and around the school building, before school, at lesson changes and during break times; there is a lack of consistency and decisive action from staff in challenging the girls' careless behaviour. A minority of pupils continues to smoke on school premises, a fact commented on with dismay by their peers who are well aware of what the school is trying to do to promote healthy lifestyles.

Attendance has improved: the average this term is 93.6%; on the first day of the monitoring visit, attendance was 91.9%. Pupils are congratulated in assembly for good attendance and awarded certificates. A prize is offered for the best overall attendance for the year and has stimulated discussion among the girls on the subject of good attendance. The newly appointed attendance officer vigilantly keeps track of attendance patterns and any issues are followed up urgently.

Pupils feel safe and free from bullying; they feel consulted and consider that their views are taken seriously. The school council has been instrumental in bringing about a number of positive changes. Several pupils shared the view that 'the praise notice board' is highly valued. Pupils have offered suggestions about the colours chosen for lively redecoration of some parts of the school. However, the generally dull and uninviting interior of the building created by out of date furnishings, floor coverings and décor does not contribute to a sense of personal well-being for pupils or staff. Litter remains a problem, discarded thoughtlessly by too many of the girls.

Quality of provision

Since September 2005, the school has striven to improve the quality of teaching and learning. One pupil told inspectors: 'Things are so much better since September. They have appointed some really good new teachers but the teachers are being let down by the resources they have to teach with. We need new equipment and lots of new books'.

Inspectors agree with the school's judgements that the amount of good teaching has gradually improved, and that the amount of inadequate and barely satisfactory teaching is reducing, but remains too high. Where teaching is consistently good, the purpose and outcomes of the lesson are clear to everyone and pupils are challenged to exceed their targets. Time is used most productively and pupils are adroitly prepared for the next stage of learning. In the words of one Year 10 girl, lessons are at their best when 'the teacher gives us lots of different activities, particularly practical ones'. Where teachers are confident with the technology, they harness the interactive whiteboards effectively, and displays of pupils' high quality work in classrooms and on corridors are more in evidence.

Some of the weaknesses identified in the teaching during the last monitoring visit have not been addressed with sufficient rigour. Less effective teaching is rooted in lacklustre activities that do not match pupils' abilities and drab resources which do not motivate even the more diligent learners. Inadequate teaching is centred on unimaginative and trivial activities set at too low a level for the pupils' abilities and aptitudes, and a failure to challenge the low-level disruption of a minority which slows the pace of the lesson for all pupils.

Modest progress has been made by the school in addressing the shortcomings of its assessment systems and procedures. The school has a secure database of pupils' prior attainment but this is not communicated effectively to all staff. In turn, there is too great a variability within and between departments in the use of this data to inform lesson planning. Pupils who have individual needs are identified, but provision for those needs is absent in many lessons. The best marking is valued by the pupils and is thoughtful and formative; some work in exercise books is marked cursorily and irregularly.

Some departments provide high levels of intervention and support for pupils who have lost momentum in learning and output. For example, in art and design, food

technology and English additional catch-up classes provide much appreciated support and guidance for girls wishing to improve their coursework. Pupils on GCSE courses are generally aware of their target grades, but pupils' awareness of levels and targets in Key Stage 3 is variable. Parents are kept informed by letter of both success and underachievement. Staff care about the pupils and support their emotional needs well; the girls are confident that, if they have a problem, they will be always be listened to by staff.

The curriculum broadly meets national requirements, apart from provision for information and communication technology in Key Stage 4; the vocational courses meet the needs of many senior girls. The school's personal and social education scheme of work, together with the citizenship programme, is taught appropriately by a team of specialists; it provides a positive foundation for learning linked to the Every Child Matters outcomes. The school's two-week timetable does not always provide an even distribution of subject teaching. The grouping of pupils by ability in five sets leads to pupils feeling that less progress is expected by some teachers of those in the middle and lower groups, in comparison with teachers' high expectations of set one.

Progress on the area for improvement identified by the inspection in February 2005:

- improve the quality of teaching and learning – satisfactory progress.

Leadership and management

The headteacher has a clear understanding of the emerging strengths and underlying weaknesses in the school. She has begun to look afresh at the school's acceptance of mediocrity in a number of aspects of its provision. The senior team is growing in its effectiveness and has charted progress on the action plan with reasonable accuracy. However, the team has underestimated the urgency required in some areas of improvement. The team has focused effectively on providing well judged challenge and support to teachers as they develop classroom practice; the next steps have been identified clearly and appropriately. Suitable training has been put in place. Action on introducing assessment for learning strategies has been slow, although the team now has a clear agenda for accelerating the rate of improvement required.

Middle managers continue to have a varying appreciation of their accountabilities; some have responded positively to what is expected of them. Currently, there is no substantive curriculum leader for either mathematics or science, the two significantly underperforming core subjects. Subject leaders have been involved in lesson observations and are increasingly confident in their judgements about the constituent features of effective teaching. By contrast, the programme of book scrutiny has had little impact on, for example, the quality of presentation and accepted standards of literacy in pupils' books. Year heads and tutors have not responded consistently to the pupils' variable attitudes towards their planners, identified in the previous monitoring visit. Morning tutor sessions are not always used to establish the correct climate for learning.

Systems for self-evaluation have made progress, and a number of initiatives recently launched and others planned for introduction in January 2006 are timely.

Progress on the area for improvement identified by the inspection in February 2005:

- improve the quality of leadership and management – satisfactory progress.

External support

The governing body has been further strengthened with the addition of new members and is challenging the leadership team from a more informed perspective. Systems for monitoring progress on the action plan are in place, with governors linked usefully to all curriculum areas, and meetings of the board are properly concentrated on the key issues. The local authority has been constructively involved in the school's gradual improvements: extensive subject advice has been well targeted and fruitful links with a range of external support have been brokered.

Main Judgements

Progress since being subject to special measures – satisfactory.

Progress since previous monitoring inspection – satisfactory.

Priorities for further improvement

The governors and headteacher should

- secure consistency in teaching approaches to pupils of all levels of ability
- address the underlying inadequacies in assessment
- ensure senior and middle managers respond fully to their accountabilities.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the chair of governors and the Director of Education and Community Services for Reading.

Yours sincerely

Roy Blatchford
H M Inspector