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Mr C Anderson, Headteacher
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Dear Mr Anderson

SPECIAL MEASURES: MONITORING INSPECTION OF ST NICHOLAS SCHOOL

Introduction

Following my visit with Adrian Lyons HMI to your school on 2 and 3 November 2005, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector to confirm the inspection findings.

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

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 the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the headteacher, teaching and support staff and a group of pupils. Meetings were held with the chair of governors and a representative from the LEA.

Context

The inspection was conducted concurrently with inspectors from the Commission for Social Care Inspectorate (CSCI) and CSCI will report on aspects of pupils' care, safety and well being.

Despite exceptionally windy and wet weather the school was calmer and more stable than previously. This was largely due to the success of the new leadership team.

The substantive headteacher took up his post in September. The deputy headteacher designate will start his appointment in January and was already employed on a temporary contract and the new consultant headteacher was employed part time. (The latter arrangement will only continue for the rest of the academic year.) The new arrangements were effective and morale amongst teachers and pupils was good. Improvements to the building enhanced the school's image and had a considerable impact on improving behaviour. Nevertheless, inevitably, the changes had resulted in some loss of information and continuity.

Achievement and standards

As for most schools with a similar intake the majority of pupils achieve standards which are below and well below expectation. Caution has to be taken when analysing standards as the number of pupils sitting tests is small and the pupils may not have been at the school very long. However, at Key Stage 4 it was pleasing to note that in 2005 more pupils were successful at the higher levels of literacy and numeracy achievement tests than in previous years. Three pupils achieved success in science at GCSE level, but none of the lower attaining pupils obtained accreditation in science. At Key Stage 3, test results in mathematics were similar to the previous year and in science they were higher than the previous year. Standards in English at Key Stage 3 remained very low but three pupils made greater progress than might be expected between Key Stage 2 and 3.

Although some individual pupils had made significant improvements, overall achievement was uneven and a number of pupils with very low reading ages had made little improvement over a significant period. In general, subject coordinators were not sufficiently focused on raising achievement in relation to the pupils' starting points and the progress that they should be making. Subject coordinators, for example, were unaware of the end of Key Stage 2 test results for the new intake of Year 7 pupils.

During the inspection pupils made good progress in more than half of the lessons but their learning was inadequate in science, history, and personal, social and health education. Nonetheless, overall, opportunities to make progress had improved because more pupils attended lessons and spent a longer time in class. Also pupils had access to some subjects which were previously not available.

Progress, since the last inspection visit, on the areas for improvement identified by the inspection in January 2004:

- Raise pupils' achievement overall – satisfactory progress
- Raise pupils' achievement in science - inadequate progress
- Raise pupils' achievement in geography - satisfactory progress
- Raise pupils' achievement in history - unsatisfactory progress.

Personal development and well-being

Pupils' behaviour and attitudes were markedly improved. They were more willing to accept help to overcome episodes of disaffection and they were prepared to be

dissuaded from bad behaviour. Pupils were very positive about the recent changes to the school. In particular, they valued the new and clearer sanctions, changes to school uniform and the new arrangements for lunchtime. They appreciated that staff, including the headteacher, listened to them more and asked for their views and that the staff smiled more often!

Attendance had improved overall and very good attendance by Year 7 pupils bodes well for the future. However unauthorised absence had increased to an extremely high level. This was caused by changes to residential provision and the situation warrants immediate review. The number of serious incidents was much lower than previously and all staff expected the high rate of exclusion to fall as new systems and expectations became established.

Despite these positive developments there were several outstanding matters of concern regarding pupils' safety and welfare. They included weaknesses in: the selection of staff, the admission of pupils, physical restraint and catering. The Commission for Social Care Inspectorate intends to discuss these issues more fully in its report.

Progress, since the last inspection visit, on areas for improvement identified by the inspection in January 2004:

- Improve pupils' attitudes and behaviour – good progress.

Quality of provision

The quality of provision had improved in some areas but it remained unsatisfactory overall because of the high proportion of inadequate teaching. Although the pupils receive consistently sound lessons in some subjects, teaching is barely adequate and sometimes inadequate in other subjects. This situation has continued for too long and efforts to improve the quality of teaching have not been successful in raising unsatisfactory teaching to the level of satisfactory.

Pupils respected those staff who challenged them to gain new knowledge, skills and understanding and pupils correctly recognised that they cooperated best and learned most in these lessons. The pupils were also able to describe accurately the features of unsuccessful lessons: too little work, unchallenging and uninteresting tasks and (their) bad behaviour. When asked to describe weak teaching one pupil perceptively replied, 'Well, if he talked less we'd get more done'.

Nonetheless, because expectations about work and behaviour were clearer for both staff and pupils, more time was spent in lessons and this was a significant improvement. Disruptive incidents also occurred less frequently. Although most were handled effectively there were occasions where staff pandered to the pupils and allowed themselves to be manipulated and distracted from teaching.

The quality of lesson planning was inconsistent and the use of individuals' subject targets was not embedded. This was partially due to lack of understanding about the criteria for success in subjects. The curriculum had improved but weaknesses

remained. A challenging outdoor curriculum had been established and there was a strong drive to ensure all pupils experienced work related learning. Whole school assemblies and meetings provided good opportunities for reflection and for social and moral development. History and geography were taught regularly and schemes of work were being developed in science and geography.

However science schemes of work were incomplete and the pace of improvements in science had been extremely slow. Pupils were not receiving their full curriculum entitlement in a modern foreign language or design and technology. The latter is expected to be taught from January 2006. The teaching of information and communication technology (ICT) was adequate but its use to enhance learning across the curriculum remained very limited. Additional numeracy tuition was not available for pupils with the greatest need.

Progress, since the last inspection visit, on the areas for improvement identified by the inspection in January 2004:

- Improve the overall quality of teaching and learning – inadequate progress
- Raise the expectations set for pupils' achievement and behaviour - good progress
- Improve the curriculum for, and teaching of pupils in:
 - geography - satisfactory progress in curriculum only;
 - history - unsatisfactory progress;
 - ICT - unsatisfactory progress.

Leadership and management

The quality of leadership and management was good and the school has the capacity to improve. The senior management team had made a positive impact on behaviour, relationships and the school environment. The headteacher was already well regarded by pupils, staff, governors and the LEA. Staff appreciated the clear direction from the leadership. They felt better supported and in turn were working hard to support the new regime. There was a tangible sense of the whole school desiring improvement. Staff absence was significantly reduced. These changes were underpinned by better communication and organisation and clearer rules and routines. Pupils and staff said that the school was a safer and happier place.

The headteacher had an astute understanding of the school's strengths and weaknesses and has taken fast action to resolve issues. Understandably formal school self evaluation was at an early stage of development but the structures were beginning to be established through performance management, the observation of lessons and the monitoring of behaviour. An enormous amount of work and positive outcomes had been achieved in a short space of time. However, and understandably, the analysis and evaluation of the information gleaned from monitoring was not rigorous or refined enough and the next stage of development was not fully planned.

The governors and LEA had worked well together to stabilise and improve leadership and the LEA was providing support for the headteacher and curriculum development. However the LEA and governors had not agreed an admissions policy for the school and this was long overdue. Governance was satisfactory and improving because the governors had begun to develop a systematic role in monitoring and evaluation. However the governing body was overstretched. It had three vacancies, including one for an LEA governor and the LEA had not chosen to appoint additional governors.

Progress, since the last inspection visit, on the areas for improvement identified by the inspection in January 2004:

- Improve procedures for finding out how well the school is doing and using the information to improve pupils' achievements and behaviour – satisfactory progress
- Ensure that governors play an active part in the life of the school and that they receive good information so that they can contribute to the improvement of the school – satisfactory progress.

External support

The headteacher had chosen to spend his first half term in post without a high LEA presence in school, which had proved an effective strategy. Consequently the LEA had been in a responsive role. Its support for recruitment and in financing building works and the cost of the assistant headteacher were making a positive difference. However matters of governance, admissions and the quality of teaching now require further action.

Main Judgements

Progress since being subject to special measures – inadequate

Progress since previous monitoring inspection – satisfactory

Progress since the start of the autumn term - good

Priorities for further improvement

- Plan the next stage of development to include time scales and those responsible for actions
- Take prompt and effective action to improve the quality of teaching and learning and eradicate unsatisfactory teaching
- Improve subject coordinators' ability to focus on achievement
- Take immediate action in respect of all health, safety and welfare requirements (see CSCI report)

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the chair of governors, John Smith of Merstham Diocesan Board and The Executive Director for Children and Young People, Surrey.

Yours sincerely

Tina Herring
H M Inspector