

21 October 2005

Mr D Sibbit
Netherhall School
Netherhall Road
Maryport
Cumbria
CA15 6NT

Dear Mr Sibbit

SERIOUS WEAKNESSES: MONITORING INSPECTION OF NETHERHALL SCHOOL

Introduction

Following my visit with Andy Henderson, Peter McKay and Chris Penter, Additional Inspectors to your school on 19 and 20 October 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 was found to have serious weaknesses in February 2005.

This letter will be published 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, senior leaders, heads of department, groups of pupils, the chair of governors and a representative of the local education authority (LEA).

Context

Since the inspection in February 2005 there have been considerable changes in staffing, especially in the mathematics department. Eight teachers have left the school and nine have joined the staff. Otherwise there have been no significant changes in the school's circumstances.

Achievement and standards

The 2005 GCSE results have improved compared with the previous year and the school met its realistic targets. Results improved significantly in mathematics, English

and physical education but overall remain below the national averages. The 2005 GCSE results were comparable with schools of a similar context, but the added value from the end of Year 9 to Year 11 and from Year 7 to Year 11 is below that expected for all schools. The best results were in religious education, physical education, citizenship and English literature. The weakest results were in science and geography. The school has set realistic targets for 2006 GCSE results and, currently, the school's tracking system indicates that Year 11 pupils are on course to achieve those targets.

There was modest improvement in the Key Stage 3 results for English, mathematics and science in 2005 but they remain below average. The school did not meet its targets in English, mathematics and science and pupils did not make enough progress between the end of Year 6 and the end of Year 9. There was little difference between girls' and boys' results in science. Boys gained better results than girls in mathematics but did not do as well as the girls in English. Higher attaining pupils did not do as well as they should. Not all pupils capable of gaining an above average grade did so. Based on information provided by the school's tracking system, pupils are making satisfactory progress towards the realistic targets set for them in English, mathematics and science. However, the 2006 results for Year 9 pupils are likely to dip, matching the lower prior attainment of this group.

Results in the sixth form remain below average. Advanced Level examination results for Year 13 students dipped in 2005 in line with the low prior attainment of the students. More than half of the students (58%) achieved or bettered their target grades. Most students achieved the grades necessary to gain entry to their first choice of university. The most successful subjects were business, media and general studies. The least successful were geography, physics and mathematics. In Year 12, over half the students (53%) gained or bettered their target grades at AS level. The most successful subject was religious studies.

In lessons seen in Years 7 to 11, pupils generally made sound progress towards the intended outcomes and in around half of lessons they made good progress. Pupils' progress is directly related to the quality of the teaching they receive. In two lessons in Key Stage 3, one in English and one in science, progress was inadequate because teaching did not challenge pupils enough or challenging behaviour was not well managed.

In most of the lessons seen in English, pupils made at least satisfactory progress. In two out of six lessons pupils made good progress. However, standards seen were generally below average except among higher attaining pupils in Key Stage 4 who achieve well and are working at above average levels. In a Year 11 lesson, higher attaining pupils contributed well to a powerful debate that helped them to appreciate the layers of meaning, construction and links between two different poems. In one lesson in Key Stage 3 progress was inadequate because the teaching did not engage all of the pupils and one third of the class made insufficient progress.

In mathematics in Years 7 to 11, pupils make satisfactory progress. In half the lessons seen progress was good or better. No inadequate lessons were seen. This is

an improvement since the previous inspection. Standards overall are below average but pupils are achieving satisfactorily. Some pupils lack confidence in their speaking, listening and writing which impedes their understanding. In the two lessons observed in the sixth form, students made good progress and were achieving well in response to challenging teaching.

In science, progress was at least satisfactory in the majority of lessons. Progress was good in two out of five lessons. In one lesson in Key Stage 3 progress was inadequate because teaching failed to engage all the pupils in learning and there was insufficient pace and challenge. In most lessons pupils were able to follow instructions and to carry out investigative work effectively. Many had difficulty in expressing their ideas and insights and would benefit from more structured opportunities to communicate their understanding.

Personal development and well-being

The incidence of misbehaviour in lessons has been reduced, though not totally eradicated, as a result of more challenging teaching and the more consistent application of behaviour management strategies. Pupils say that teachers treat them equally and fairly. Inspectors found pupils' behaviour outside lessons to be satisfactory. The establishment of a Seclusion Unit, which accommodates both pupils referred for a one-day placement and those given a fixed-term exclusion, has had a significant impact on behaviour. Its success is evident in the low number of pupils who return to the unit. The school Inclusion Panel is also effective in the close monitoring of referred pupils. As a result of these strategies the number of fixed-term exclusions is now significantly lower than for the corresponding period in the previous year. There are no pupils currently at risk of permanent exclusion, of which there have been no instances this year.

The school has put in place an intensive action plan to identify and address the causes of poor attendance, particularly that of pupils in Years 10 and 11. The attendance of some 30 of the latter has improved through the use of part-time timetables, extended work placements and work-related skills programmes offered through the local Achievement Zone. The attendance of habitual absentees in all years has shown sustained improvement following referral to the school Attendance Panel, which agrees and monitors an action plan in partnership with parents and the pupils themselves. The school's Inclusion Panel offers effective multi agency intervention to individually referred pupils. Periodic 'School Attendance Matters' days are effective. On these days pupils who achieve between 80 and 90 per cent attendance have a personal interview followed by contact with their parents. Truancy sweeps in the local area and the provision of peer escorts for pupils reluctant to attend have had some effect. Good attendance is recognised and rewarded. Collectively these strategies, effectively co-ordinated by the attendance officer, have brought about a small but nonetheless satisfactory improvement in attendance overall. However, poor attendance continues to affect adversely the achievement of a very small minority of pupils in Year 10 and 11.

Quality of provision

The quality of teaching shows some improvement since the last inspection and broadly reflects the school's own view of its quality. Forty two lessons or parts of lessons were seen during the visit; teaching was at least satisfactory in more than nine out of every ten lessons, including half in which teaching was good or better. Just two unsatisfactory lessons were seen, a considerable reduction from the position at the previous inspection and testimony to the school's concerted efforts to improve the quality of teaching and learning.

There are strengths in the relationships that many teachers have with their pupils and in the calm, non-confrontational manner in which they are managed; as a result, teaching and other pupils' learning is rarely interrupted. Lesson planning is thorough and consistent with due consideration given to the learning needs of pupils with differing abilities. In around half of lessons seen teaching is sound rather than inspirational with teachers less prepared to be adventurous in seeking to challenge and enthuse their pupils. Consequently, some pupils are not pushed to achieve the standards of which they are capable. Pupils say they enjoy those lessons where they are involved in varied and stimulating activities, but not those where they are largely passive during lengthy teacher explanations. The teaching was most effective where expectations for work and behaviour were high, where pupils clearly understood what they were learning and why, and where they were actively responsible for their learning, for example, through discussion, role play, presentations, or independent research. These sorts of activities help pupils to improve their communications skills and build their self-confidence. Where activities lacked variety or were too teacher directed, progress was slow, behaviour often slipped and learning was sometimes inadequate.

Across the school, teachers are regularly observed in their work. There is a well structured system in place that identifies and shares good practice, and provides focused support where improvements are required. The impact of this work is apparent in the school's improving teaching profile. Systems of assessment and target setting are improving also. The school has a good deal of information about pupils' performance; their progress is systematically tracked and those making slower than expected progress are given additional support. Teachers are growing in confidence in using this information in helping them to plan suitable activities that build on pupils' prior learning. Marking of pupils' work is variable; at its best it is informative, lets pupils know how well they are doing, and guides them towards further improvement. More often, however, pupils are not routinely informed of the standards they are reaching in terms of National Curriculum levels or GCSE grades nor what they must do to improve in each subject.

The quality of teaching in mathematics has improved since the last inspection. No teaching was inadequate and it was good or better in half the lessons seen. One lesson was outstanding and here the pace, variety of activities and challenge supported very good attitudes to learning and exceptional progress. Overall, planning is thorough and consistent. Teachers show good subject expertise and communicate their enthusiasm effectively. Activities are well matched to learners' capabilities and provide appropriate challenge. In the best lessons teachers provide

opportunities and activities designed to increase participation and encourage the development of communication skills. Information and communication technology (ICT) was well used across the department to support learning. Where learning was only satisfactory, teaching was more directive and pupils were not given enough responsibility for their own learning. The staffing difficulties reported at the last inspection have been overcome and the appointment of two experienced teachers has already had a direct and positive effect on teaching and learning. The head of mathematics provides good leadership and has a strong vision for the development of the subject. Developing systems, particularly in relation to assessment, use of ICT in the classroom and sharing good practice, are beginning to have a positive effect on the quality of teaching and pupils' progress. Improvement is satisfactory overall but capacity for further improvement is good.

The tracking of pupils' personal development has been enhanced by the allocation of more time to heads of year, who now conduct tutorials with individual pupils to discuss academic progress and set targets based on assessment data. However, inspectors found that pupils' understanding of targets and their awareness of how well they were doing to be variable across subjects.

Since the last inspection, access to ICT facilities for sixth form students has improved with the number of networked computers available doubled. Students have open access to the facilities both within and beyond the school day and a recent survey indicates that each student accesses the ICT for between five and eight hours per week. Progress in this area has been good.

The contribution made by subjects in the sixth form to the development of students' key skills has improved. An audit of where departments can contribute to such development has been completed and provision for key skills mapped across the curriculum. Students are required to produce portfolios of evidence to support their development and any omissions are rectified within a bespoke additional studies unit.

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

- improve teaching in mathematics and tackle under-achievement in the subject – satisfactory progress

Leadership and management

Leaders, staff and governors, well supported by the LEA, are working well as a team towards a common aim. They are well focused on raising standards and improving teaching and learning and ensuring that every pupil, whatever their background or circumstances, does their best and is well cared for. They have succeeded in implementing effective systems for accountability, self-evaluation and pupils' assessment all of which have started to have a positive effect on raising standards and improving the quality of teaching and learning. The effect on raising standards has been more marked in Key Stage 4 than in Key Stage 3.

The school's action planning has supported improvements well. It sets out the right priorities and provides a well structured agenda for action set within clear time targets. The effect of the action taken is monitored regularly against the success criteria which are clearly related to improving the standards and achievement of pupils.

The school has improved its tracking of pupils' progress and has used this information to set individual, class, and subject targets. This has helped leaders and subject teachers to set higher expectations of pupils' achievement and provide suitably challenging work. Where pupils know their targets and what they need to do to improve, they are often well motivated and want to succeed. However, there is still inconsistent practice across subjects. The school's initial focus on helping pupils raise D grades to at least a C helped to improve the 2005 GCSE results and raise the aspirations of pupils.

The school has a broadly accurate view of pupils' and teachers' performance. Leaders across the school have benefited from LEA support in improving the quality of their evaluation of pupils' work and teachers' performance. Where weaknesses in teaching still persist, senior leaders ensure additional targeted support is provided.

There are systems in place that require subject leaders to take responsibility for the quality of the work taking place through their monitoring of their department's performance. These systems are well-supported by senior leaders but some subjects are more advanced than others in using this information about themselves to raise standards.

Governors are highly committed to the school's improvement and are closely involved in monitoring the school's work. Governors are linked to subjects and many spend time in school working directly with staff in a supportive and monitoring role. Governors hold leaders more robustly to account for the school's performance. Plans to reduce the school's deficit budget are on course. The governing body's annual report to parents and prospectus now meet statutory requirements. However, the school does not yet fully meet the statutory requirement for a daily collective act of worship. The school has implemented a programme of themed activities for assemblies and tutorial time and supported staff in providing this. However, these do not fully meet statutory requirements because a spiritual dimension of a broadly Christian nature is not consistently included in assemblies and form periods.

The school's specialist status is having a direct impact on its progress in raising standards. Staff from physical education and sport are actively involved in the coaching team designed to strengthen teaching and learning across the school. They are making a key contribution to middle management training programmes. The results achieved in GCSE sport studies set a high standard for others to emulate.

The school has a good capacity to improve further.

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

- ensure that the new management structure is used effectively to promote a relentless drive to improve standards by raising expectations of teachers and aspirations of students – satisfactory progress
- ensure a greater consistency in the role and effectiveness of subject heads of department in monitoring and evaluating the work of their departments – satisfactory progress
- provide a daily act of collective worship for all students – satisfactory progress
- meet all the requirements in providing information to parents – satisfactory progress

External support

The LEA's statement of action is good and they have provided effective support. The statement sets out clearly the level of support the school can expect, and how it will be given. The support is well focused on the school's identified priorities. The effect of the work of LEA consultants and advisors is evident in the improved confidence of leaders across the school. Support is helping leaders to develop increasingly accurate self-evaluation, such as analysing assessment information and judging teaching and learning, all of which are helping to raise teachers' expectations and pupils' aspirations and achievement.

Main Judgements

The school has made satisfactory progress in removing the causes of its serious weaknesses.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the chair of governors, the Corporate Director – Education for Cumbria and the DfES.

Yours sincerely

Gillian Salter-Smith

Additional Inspector