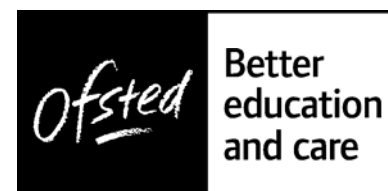


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18 January 2006

Mrs K Thomas
Gosforth West Middle School
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Dear Mrs Thomas

SPECIAL MEASURES: MONITORING INSPECTION OF GOSFORTH WEST MIDDLE SCHOOL

Introduction

Following my visit with Ann Wallis and Geoff Henshall Additional Inspectors to your school on 16 January 2006, 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 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 18 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, two assistant headteachers, the chair of governors and two representatives from the LA.

Context

Since the last monitoring visit, the school's staffing has been stable overall, although some members of the senior management team have been absent due to illness. This has inevitably held up some of the planned developments, such as the

assessment policy and the SEF. However, creative decisions made by the strong leadership team have reduced the impact of these delays. Staff expertise, particularly at middle management level has been developed. The staff is now at full complement again. The school's position has been greatly strengthened by the decision to extend the secondments of the associate headteacher and assistant headteacher to January 2007. This is intended to extend the current period of stability, enable consolidation of developments to date, and support longer term strategic planning. It is a very important development which demonstrates the strong commitment to the improvement process of the LA and the supporting High School.

Achievement and standards

Overall standards reached by pupils in Year 6 in 2005 were average and similar to those of the previous year. Pupils' progress was also average when compared to their prior attainment in tests at the end of Year 2. However a significantly lower percentage of pupils reach the expected level in English compared with mathematics and science. Progress in English is significantly below average but is average in science and above average in mathematics. In English some pupils are not yet reaching the standards they are capable of and are underachieving.

The school has recognised the weakness in English and measures introduced to raise standards are beginning to have a positive impact. The school has introduced new systems for tracking pupils' progress and identifying those who are underachieving. Although there has not yet been time to fully evaluate the impact of these strategies, early indications are that most of these pupils are now making better progress. Challenging targets have been set for pupils in Year 6 which, if achieved, would show a further improvement in standards in mathematics and science and a substantial improvement in English. Recent test results indicate that the majority of pupils are on track to reach their targets in mathematics and science but there is still much work to be done to ensure pupils reach their targets in English.

In lessons pupils are making good and sometimes outstanding progress in mathematics and science and satisfactory progress in English. Pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities make similar progress to their peers and are given good individual support by teachers and classroom assistants. Standards are average overall. The school is now placing a greater emphasis on the teaching of literacy across all curriculum subjects and this is helping to raise standards. Pupils' writing is now improving significantly.

Personal development and well-being

Pupils' attitudes to learning are good. They react positively in lessons to opportunities to work independently and their interest and enthusiasm are engaged when teachers involve them in practical activities or games. The atmosphere is now much more purposeful and committed, owing to the learning strategies which teachers have more recently adopted. Pupils enjoy their lessons more and have a high regard for their teachers.

Behaviour in lessons and around the school is good. Pupils show consideration for others in the corridors and behave sensibly at break and lunchtime. In class they maintain good concentration. The school has addressed the priority of improving pupils' attitudes to learning by implementing a rigorous and well-constructed behaviour for learning policy. Pupils are fully aware of the various levels of caution and the sanctions they bring. The implementation of in-school exclusion in the plan has resulted in a noticeable fall in fixed term exclusions. In a recent survey four-fifths of pupils were in favour of the scheme which works alongside a well-appreciated merit and reward scheme. There are several instances of imaginative and clearly focused initiatives, such as five a side football challenges to minimise disruptive behaviour at lunchtime.

Attendance declined as the autumn term progressed, but statistics have been influenced by authorised absence for a religious festival. However, it remains around the national average. Unauthorised absence is low.

Pupils are very positive about the range and variety of out-of-school activities offered. The school council is highly regarded; pupils are encouraged to express their ideas and their contribution to the life of the school is valued. The school itself has canvassed pupils' opinions on various aspects of what it offers: in particular, opportunities offered in lessons, what they enjoy, how aware they are of the levels they have attained, and how to improve. The training of a small number of Year 8 pupils to act as mentors for younger peers enables them to feel safe.

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

- improve the pupils' attitudes to learning – good progress

Quality of provision

Good use is now being made of attainment data to plan pupils' future learning and help them meet their targets. In many subjects marking is thorough and helpful diagnostic comments ensure that pupils know how to improve their work. In some lessons teachers use probing questioning to check learning regularly and guide pupils in assessing work for themselves. However, good assessment practice is not yet consistent across the school. The new assessment policy aims to endorse, promote and develop existing good practice.

The quality of teaching has continued to improve and shows a significant upward trend in the increased proportion of lessons which were judged to be good or better. At the last monitoring visit, more than half of the teaching observed was good or better; it is now over two thirds. Eighteen lessons were observed: four were satisfactory, nine were good and five were outstanding. There was no unsatisfactory teaching. The quality of teaching is however too variable across subjects, with a greater proportion of satisfactory lessons in English than in other core subjects. Work to improve the quality of provision in English has resulted in some demonstrable progress. A particular strength is the extent and effectiveness of cross

curricular work in English. However, the quality of teaching needs to be more consistently good if pupils are to meet the targets which have been set.

Where the teaching was good, the teachers had planned the lesson to provide a range of interesting activities which were well matched to pupils' needs and encouraged the pupils to participate and learn independently. Lessons were lively and well paced, and teachers used their subject knowledge and resources effectively. In the outstanding lessons, teachers built on this framework with regular assessment of pupils' learning by the pupils and staff. Teachers consistently picked up on areas which needed further explanation and taught these points briskly and explicitly, while maintaining a confident and free-flowing atmosphere which allowed pupils to learn imaginatively and at their own pace.

In the satisfactory lessons, planning was adequate but not as focused as in the better lessons. Teachers were less precise and rigorous in moving pupils' learning forward through careful attention to the detail of their progress. Their subject knowledge was good but their delivery was not sufficiently confident or engaging, there was not enough challenge, and the pace of the lesson was not sufficiently brisk for pupils to make good progress.

Pupils' behaviour in lessons has improved since the last monitoring visit. They are well behaved overall and are more active participants in their lessons. In lessons which were good or outstanding they responded very positively to the interest and dynamism generated by the teacher and were focused, engaged and enthusiastic throughout.

Provision for lower ability and underachieving pupils and pupils who have learning difficulties and/or disabilities (LDD) has improved since the last monitoring visit. Arrangements for identifying and monitoring these pupils have been rationalised and are now clear and effective. The intervention strategies developed by the school for underachieving pupils are good. They have the capacity to work in tandem with the LDD arrangements to provide a comprehensive set of individual and group interventions across age ranges, subjects and abilities.

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

- develop the quality and impact of assessment – satisfactory progress
- eliminate unsatisfactory teaching and increase the proportion that is good or better targets – good progress

Leadership and management

Leadership and management have continued to improve, and the school is well placed to consolidate and develop further. The associate head teacher and assistant headteacher have provided clear and purposeful leadership of excellent quality which is supported by the commitment of staff. The senior management team has provided extremely strong support. There is a strong team spirit which has further developed through professional development activities such as peer monitoring,

moderation of judgements and the production of departmental self evaluation forms (SEF). Staff throughout the school have worked hard to develop a number of areas such as professional development and review to improve the quality of teaching, and the consistent implementation of the behaviour for learning policy. The continuing improvement in these areas demonstrates the success of this approach.

The school has built on the early phases of the action plan, to provide a strategic approach which is sufficiently flexible to address varying development needs as priorities are met and new priorities formed. This is appropriate for the current stage of the school's development and is increasingly and appropriately focused on building the school's capacity for self management.

Increasingly, middle managers such as Heads of Year and subject leaders are involved in whole school leadership and management. This is still at a comparatively early stage but overall the initial developments are good quality and have the capacity to support pupils' attainment well. In particular, use of pupil tracking data to develop individual and group intervention strategies is a strength. However, there are some areas, such as assessment, and in some cases, planning where subject leaders, in their expectations of staff, are not always sufficiently explicit and well understood, and monitoring is not sufficiently rigorous. Departmental SEFs are detailed and purposeful. Self evaluation is sometimes over generous.

The school has considerable data about individual pupils and specific initiatives. However, these are not yet consolidated in an accessible format so it is difficult for senior managers to interrogate this data for trends across ages and subjects. This, together with the lack of an up to date SEF, means that overall school self evaluation is limited and over dependent on external support such as LA termly reviews.

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 – good progress

External support

The LA has continued to provide effective support. It has provided assistance by extending the senior team secondments and reviewing the school's progress on a termly basis. The LA has supported the considerable work which has gone into reviewing and improving the quality of teaching. The partnership between the school, governing body and LA continues to be strong, focused and effective. It has been further strengthened by the involvement of a School Improvement Partner (SIP) whose input has been welcomed by the school. The involvement of a range of support partners, including consultant Advanced Skills Teachers (AST), and advisers, is well co-ordinated and has had a clear influence on school practice.

Main Judgements

Progress since being subject to special measures– satisfactory

Progress since the last monitoring visit – good

Newly qualified teachers may be appointed

Priorities for further improvement

The priorities remain those identified in the inspection of March 2004, and the last monitoring letter. However, since the school has made good progress in a number of areas since the last monitoring visit, it should now maintain that improvement but focus in depth on two specific areas for development. It should continue and hasten the clear improvements in English, for example by ensuring consistently good English teaching across the school, and ensure consistently effective assessment and marking across all subjects.

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