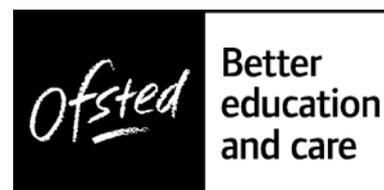


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Mr C Anderson
The Headteacher
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Dear Mr Anderson

SPECIAL MEASURES: MONITORING INSPECTION OF ST NICHOLAS SCHOOL

Introduction

Following my visit to your school on 22 and 23 February 2006, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector to confirm the inspection findings.

The visit was the fifth 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

HMI observed the school's work, attended assembly, scrutinised documents and met with the headteacher, teaching and support staff and visited boarding provision. Meetings were held with a representative from the local authority.

Context

The school is a stable and safe environment. The appointment of a temporary assistant headteacher with responsibility for behaviour, outdoor education and aspects of physical education has completed the senior leadership team. Although leadership support from a consultant headteacher will soon cease, an extended handover is appropriately planned. A recently agreed new staffing structure should

further improve delegation and accountability. Several other new members of staff have been appointed, including a new coordinator for science. Induction arrangements, including mentoring, have been well received. Improvements in leadership, staffing, organisation and premises have had a positive impact on behaviour. For example, alterations to the toilets exemplify the leadership's concern for the boys' safety and welfare and, in return, damage and graffiti have reduced.

The school continues to be monitored by the Commission for Social Care Inspectorate (CSCI) and a recent report which followed the November 2005 CSCI inspection recognised good improvement in several aspects of pupils' care, safety and well being. However, some aspects, and in particular recruitment practice, the admission of pupils, physical restraint and catering continued to cause concern. The school has been in correspondence with CSCI to demonstrate improvement.

Achievement and standards

Progress in lessons has improved because the quality of teaching is better. For the first time during a monitoring visit, progress in most lessons was good and pupils made sound progress in science. Achievement was accelerated because pupils were willing to improve their answers and work. However, progress was inadequate in mathematics and barely adequate in information, communication and technology (ICT).

A number of measures have been established to ensure that achievement and standards can be tracked. Pupils' attainment has been assessed in each subject and the information provides the baseline for a whole-school tracking system. Individual targets for each subject help staff to plan and deliver interventions. Every pupil's progress is reviewed each term and the next stage of action is agreed with the pupil. Additional provision plans record strategies for extra support. The least able pupils receive support in both literacy and numeracy.

However, several of these initiatives are at an early stage of development. The school is not in a position where it can systematically demonstrate academic achievement over time. Some reviews indicate a lack of rigour. Targets and differentiated are heavily focussed on behaviour and, although the information is useful, there is insufficient consideration of pupils' academic needs and attainment. In particular, there is little focus on developing pupils' literacy and numeracy skills across the curriculum.

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 – good progress; geography and history - satisfactory progress.

Personal development and well-being

Pupils' behaviour and attitudes continue to improve and are satisfactory overall. Although a minority of pupils left lessons without permission, most disturbances did not disrupt the whole class and some pupils returned quickly and settled back to work. Behaviour during assembly and on departure from school was good. Lunch times, break times and breakfast in the units, and the club were pleasant occasions. An internal exclusion base is supervised as necessary throughout the day and the school reports that, since the base opened, absence from class has reduced. The rewards systems for behaviour and learning are taken seriously by boys and staff and pupils' achievements are sensitively celebrated and rewarded.

The school council is fully established and minutes of meetings demonstrate a commitment to improvement. Pupils recognise that their school has improved and respond well to the regular opportunities to give their views. The results of a recent questionnaire showed that the pupils have a strong desire to do well. Nevertheless, although serious incidents have reduced, exclusions remain high and the anticipated fall in number has not yet materialised.

Attendance is monitored daily and all absences are checked. The rate of attendance, at just over 83%, has been maintained at the same level as last year and attendance by Year 7 pupils is very good. Unauthorised absence has reduced and approximately two thirds of the pupils have attendance rates of 90% and above. The absenteeism of three pupils with very poor attendance, which is beyond the school's control, accounts for approximately 5% of absences. When these figures are removed, the school's attendance profile is comparatively good. However, disappointingly, during the inspection, only about 75% of the cohort was in attendance. The school reported that illness and statutory appointments had prevented many pupils from attending and that few absences were unauthorised.

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 remains unsatisfactory because the teaching of mathematics is inadequate. There is too little attention to pupils' previous experience, attainment or needs and as a result they badly misbehave. Provision in an observed ICT lesson was adequate, but there was not enough challenge and time was not fully utilised. At other times, ICT provision was inadequate because classroom management was weak and the use of technology across the curriculum did not enhance learning. Good efforts to improve the quality of teaching have not made enough impact in mathematics and ICT. Relationships in these lessons were not as strong as elsewhere in the school, and staff made errors which escalated bad behaviour.

Nevertheless, efforts to improve the quality of teaching have been successful in several areas. Planning is more consistent. Provision for science has significantly

improved and practical science and the assessment of learning feature strongly in planning. Planning for history and geography is good. It demonstrates good subject knowledge, awareness of different learning styles and includes interesting activities. Pupils delighted in using the vocabulary they had learned to accurately describe snowy weather. Design and technology teaching has been resumed and judged successful when monitored internally. The physical education programme has been strengthened and pupils enjoyed their experience of gymnastics and outdoor education. Older pupils spoke positively about their college courses. Further opportunities for work related learning are planned to compensate for unsuccessful work experience arrangements. Additional tuition for numeracy is available for pupils with the greatest need and extra tuition for reading is of good quality. The school's evaluations accurately identify all those areas in need of improvement.

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

Leadership and management

The quality of leadership and management is good and the school has proven capacity to improve. The senior management team has authority and is already well respected. Other members of staff praise their supportive behaviour and the clarity of their expectations. New staff quickly gain in confidence because induction procedures are effective and because 'everyone looks out for each other'. Coordinators have begun to develop their roles in relation to attainment and achievement. However, there is much still to be done and there are indications that some assessments lack accuracy.

Hard work, vigilant supervision and a genuine concern to achieve excellent education and care are making a difference. The headteacher drives school improvement well and has positive relationships with staff, pupils and governors. The pace of work is appropriately fast, and difficult actions have been taken to benefit pupils. Strengths and weaknesses are accurately identified through self-evaluation. The school's leaders can identify why and where problems arise and accurately recognise that, too often, incidents result from inappropriate teaching. The leadership team correctly recognises that teaching which is, at best, only satisfactory is not good enough to redress the pupils' underachievement.

Monitoring is thorough and accurate. However, greater clarity about the purpose of recording incidents may help reduce workload and improve analysis. Suitable actions follow evaluations and include good use of internal and external support. Although an improvement plan has not been published, priorities for urgent and mid term development are known. The school has made good progress in a very short

period of time and its leadership is understandably positive about the future. However, there are significant challenges still facing the school. For example, there is little recognition that a large budget deficit has the potential to threaten development work or that some planned developments rely on gifts or grant applications.

Governance is satisfactory and external support has been appreciated. It is timely that governors have begun to provide challenge and more strategic leadership as well as support. The vacancy for a local authority governor has been filled, but long term vacancies for parent governors continue. An admissions policy has been agreed (its quality was not inspected) and this should assist planning for the future and the development of an effective induction policy.

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 use the information to improve pupils' achievements and behaviour – good 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

Local authority support has been good; comprehensive and well focussed. Support for assessment and planning have had a positive impact. The leadership team has benefited from strong contributions from the consultant head, the advanced skilled governor, and the funding of an assistant headteacher. Personnel and financial support, including monies for refurbishment, have improved provision. There are wise plans to continue much of this high level intervention, and a pragmatic response to the budget deficit of approximately £70 000. Nevertheless, due to resource difficulties, no pupils receive support from a specialist mental health worker.

Main Judgements

Progress since being subject to special measures – satisfactory

Progress since previous monitoring inspection – good.

Priorities for further improvement

- Improve the quality of provision in mathematics and ICT
- Plan the next stage of development to include time scales and those responsible for actions.

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