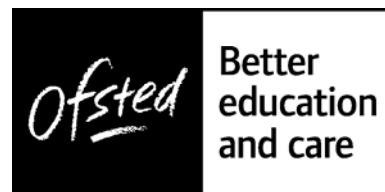


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26 April 2006

Mr P Cohen
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Cohen

SPECIAL MEASURES: MONITORING INSPECTION OF OAK BANK SCHOOL

Introduction

Following my visit to your school on 22 and 23 March 2006, 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 September 2004.

This letter will be posted on the Ofsted website.

Evidence

HMI observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the headteacher, the two assistant headteachers, the home school liaison officer, the co-ordinator for special educational needs provision, the chair and one of the vice chairs of the governing body and a representative from the local authority (LA), and talked with staff and pupils.

Context

Following interviews in February, the acting headteacher has been appointed to the post of substantive headteacher from 1 March 2006. The governors have decided to advertise internally for an acting deputy headteacher for the summer term, prior to making a substantive appointment for the start of the

autumn term. The chair of governors has resigned from his post as chair but is becoming one of the vice chairs. One of the former vice chairs has become the new chair.

Achievement and standards

The pupils' attainment in national tests and examinations in 2005 was reported on fully in the previous monitoring letter.

Better planning and teaching combined with a much improved ethos and more effective management of behaviour means that many pupils' progress is satisfactory, and sometimes better. Standards are beginning to rise accordingly. During the monitoring visit, pupils made excellent progress in an outstanding science lesson, which was extremely well taught and fully met their needs. In this lesson, most pupils attained standards which were in line with age-related expectations. Progress in English has improved since the previous visit; schemes of work are better planned to meet the pupils' needs and their work folders show evidence of progress over time. A few pupils receive individual teaching to meet their specific literacy needs and are making satisfactory or better progress. The school is aware that more pupils need similar provision to help them improve their skills. Assessment and tracking have improved and are beginning to be better used by the senior staff to identify pupils who are not making sufficient progress across the curriculum. Further attention needs to be paid to tracking the development of the pupils' social, emotional and behavioural skills.

Personal development and well-being

The pupils' behaviour and attitudes during the monitoring visit were satisfactory, and sometimes good. In an exceptionally well taught science lesson, they were outstanding. In this lesson, pupils were highly enthusiastic; they co-operated well and supported each other. They compromised and negotiated, and thoroughly enjoyed their successful learning. In Year 11, the pupils enjoyed a well-taught food technology lesson in which they made a range of pizzas. They shared resources, evaluated their work sensibly together and took responsibility for aspects of the lesson. Pupils behaved very well in a very good assembly led by the headteacher. They were calm and respectful and listened attentively. Extreme outbursts by some pupils remain a challenge for the school, although the number of exclusions has reduced gradually over the last year. Continuing to reduce the variability of pupils' behaviour and attitudes from one lesson to the next remains a priority for the school.

The headteacher has sensibly set up a working party to review the school's systems for managing the pupils' behaviour. Importantly, initial discussions have begun among the senior team about the underlying principles which they believe would result in effective behaviour management. Recent improvements to the current system, such as the use of 'help sheets' following an incident are providing the senior team with valuable information about some of the reasons for which pupils are removed from lessons. A greater emphasis has been placed on the importance of learning and pupils are appropriately expected to make up any lesson time which is lost. Pupils are also given valuable opportunities to reflect on their behaviour.

Overall attendance remains low. This reflects a number of older pupils who are on the school's roll but do not attend at all or whose attendance is very poor. However, in Years 7 and 8, attendance is 89% and 93% respectively. In Year 9 the attendance of pupils who joined the school in Years 7 or 8 is also above 80%. This reflects the differing success which the school has had with pupils who join early in Key Stage 3 compared with those who do not join until Years 9 or 10. The LA has begun to take some steps to ensure that it identifies pupils who need to attend Oak Bank earlier, so that they have the maximum chance of success by joining the school at the start of Year 7.

The school has significantly improved the provision it makes for pupils who are unable to attend the school full time. The appointment of a highly effective home-school liaison officer has enabled the school to implement an individual programme of support for each pupil whose attendance is unsatisfactory or who is on a pastoral support programme. The home-school liaison officer has forged secure links with a variety of agencies, including social services, Connexions and the Youth Offending Team. Where pupils' attendance is very low, the school is doing all it can to remain in close constant contact with pupils' families and support workers to try to ensure that they attend or that appropriate alternatives are arranged, with some notable success. The co-ordinator for special educational needs has just been given responsibility for overseeing the gradual return of pupils. Plans are at an early stage of development but the school has recognised the need to adapt the curriculum, management and teaching for these pupils, who find it exceptionally difficult to succeed through conventional approaches.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the inspection in September 2004:

- improve the attitudes, behaviour and attendance of the pupils – good progress.

Quality of provision

The school has paid good attention to improving the school environment. A teaching assistant is responsible for the good quality displays, which include pupils' work and photographs of them taking part in various activities. Pupils have been appropriately involved in preparing the displays.

Teaching continues to improve. Monitoring by the senior staff and the LA indicates that teaching is generally satisfactory with some good elements, and the inspection findings support this judgement. Areas of weakness are being addressed suitably by the headteacher and senior team. The support given to staff is usually well received and is having a positive impact. The senior team is planning how to ensure that the different strengths of the staff can be shared more widely and better utilised to support whole-school development; for example in creating a positive classroom climate.

The school has begun to pay closer attention to the way in which the pupils' work is marked and assessed. Information about the National Curriculum level at which each pupil is working has been gathered and used to produce a useful grid upon which the pupils' progress can be tracked. This information now needs to be collated to show the progress each individual pupil is making in all of his or her subjects so that any discrepancies can be quickly noticed and acted upon. The school has identified that some staff need further support to accurately assess pupils' attainment. Marking has improved; the school has adopted a simple but effective system, which involves giving the pupils positive comments and targets for improvement.

The school has taken a range of suitable actions to develop the Key Stage 4 curriculum. Practical difficulties have slowed this development, but the plan to introduce a new vocational curriculum is due to be operational by September 2006. Thus, the school aims to broaden considerably the opportunities which are offered to the older pupils. In addition, music and a modern foreign language are currently missing from the curriculum at Key Stage 3. The school is exploring ways of re-introducing these subject areas.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the inspection in September 2004:

- improve the quality of teaching and learning so that pupils make better progress – good progress.
- develop links with mainstream schools to promote staff development and reintegration of pupils – satisfactory progress.

Leadership and management

Despite a sustained period of uncertainty surrounding his role, the headteacher has ensured that the school has continued to improve. He has thought carefully about his vision for the future; this is well defined and wide-ranging. He has identified the values that he wants to promote and has begun a productive process of involving governors and staff in developing these principles. The headteacher has rightly decided that the school needs an acting deputy for the summer term to strengthen the school's leadership, prior to a substantive appointment being made. He has developed a clear staffing structure in line with his vision for the school, which he is gradually implementing. The headteacher has a good presence around the school: his manner with the pupils is calm but authoritative and the pupils respond well to him.

The assistant headteachers have improved aspects of the areas for which they are responsible. A new system of line management is being well implemented by the senior team. This is rigorous and is having a clear impact on improving the accountability of the staff and the support that is offered to them. Monitoring and evaluation of planning, teaching and learning are effective. The leadership of other staff has also begun to develop and they are taking more responsibility for improvement, with good results.

The skilled and dedicated governing body continue to spend a considerable amount of time and energy providing good quality support and challenge to the headteacher and the school. Governors are keen to work closely with the LA in planning the future direction of the school in the context of Bedfordshire's review of special educational needs provision.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the inspection in September 2004:

- improve the quality of the leadership and the strategic management of the school - good progress

External support

The school continues to be well supported by the National Strategy consultants. The headteacher now holds termly meetings with them to prioritise the support for the school, which is maximising the impact of their work. The consultant headteacher's role has changed to become more advisory and less practical, in accordance with the school's needs and his input continues to be valued by the headteacher and senior team.

Main Judgements

Progress since being subject to special measures – satisfactory

Progress since the previous monitoring inspection – good

Newly qualified teachers may not be appointed without prior consultation with HMI.

Priorities for further improvement

- Ensure that music and a modern foreign language is included in the Key Stage 3 curriculum, and implement the vocational curriculum at Key Stage 4, as planned
- Develop the teaching of literacy skills for specific pupils, and across the curriculum
- Share the headteacher's vision with staff and develop and implement the new school values
- Review the way in which pupils' behaviour is managed, ensuring that any new system is in line with the school's redefined vision and values

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the chair of governors and the Strategic Director of Education for Bedfordshire.

Yours sincerely

Sue Morris-King
H M Inspector