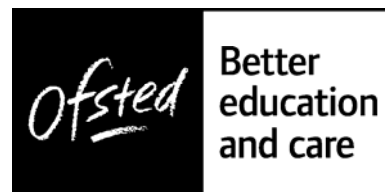


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Mr S Maddern
The Consultant Headteacher
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12 June 2006

Dear Mr Maddern

SPECIAL MEASURES: MONITORING INSPECTION OF ST JAMES SCHOOL

Introduction

Following my visit with Fran Ashworth, Geoff Hancock and Sally Hall, Additional Inspectors, to your school on 24 and 25 May 2006, 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 became subject to special measures in November 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 26 lessons, scrutinised documents, and met with the consultant headteacher, senior managers, the chair of governors, groups of students, and a representative from the local authority. The majority of lesson observations were of Key Stage 3 classes since Year 11 students were taking examinations.

Context

There have been significant changes to the senior management team since the last inspection. A consultant headteacher has replaced the previous headteacher. A deputy headteacher has been seconded from another school

and one member of staff has been promoted to fill a vacant assistant headteacher post. The school has recently moved into new premises adjacent to the site of the former school buildings which have been demolished.

Achievement and standards

Achievement and standards are inadequate overall. In just over a fifth of the lessons observed, the students' progress was unsatisfactory. Boys achieve much less than their potential, particularly in English and science at Key Stage 3. The school's data suggests that girls make satisfactory progress based on their previous achievement. Students with learning difficulties make slower than expected progress because the work is often pitched too high. Similarly, more capable students do not achieve as well as they might because the work contains insufficient challenge.

At the time of the last inspection, poor behaviour in Key Stage 3 classes was identified as a reason for students making inadequate progress. Also, a high number of students were absent for the national tests at the end of Year 9 in 2005. Lesson observations indicate that more effective behaviour management strategies are now in place. This practice is creating a more settled atmosphere in many classes and is helping students to focus on learning. The school has been successful in increasing the number of students who have taken national tests at the end of Year 9 in 2006.

The school is setting up a better system for recording students' progress and this has the potential to enable the school to use data to identify and support those students who are falling behind.

Personal development and well-being

Whilst there have been improvements, the students' personal development and well-being remain unsatisfactory overall.

Behaviour has improved significantly since the last inspection. There is a calm atmosphere as students move around the school. The assistant headteacher has worked hard with staff and local authority advisers to devise a clear code of conduct which is understood by the whole school community. Students enjoy receiving praise and are keen to 'cash in' their credits at the reward shop. They understand the consequences of their actions if they misbehave. The number of exclusions and incidents when students are removed from lessons is decreasing. Rewards and sanctions are used consistently by nearly all staff. However, there is still too much low-level disruption and chatting in lessons which often occurs when teaching is dull or work is not matched to students' needs. Many students find it hard to concentrate on writing tasks for any length of time and are often unable to work independently.

There has been a continued improvement in rates of attendance and a reduction in unauthorised absence since the last inspection. Even so, attendance rates are still below the national average. Good systems are in place to swiftly follow up dips in attendance levels and unexplained absences. The school has established strong links with the education welfare service and a local police officer to support the drive to improve attendance. The school recognises that punctuality is not good enough and is working hard to reduce lateness.

Students are proud of their school and say that they enjoy school life more than at the time of the last inspection. There is a growing sense of community and students feel that the school is a friendly and happy place. Students explain they feel safe and incidents of anti-social behaviour are dealt with effectively.

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

- raise standards of behaviour so that all students are able to learn effectively – satisfactory.

Quality of provision

The quality of teaching has improved, although it varies considerably and is still unsatisfactory overall. In just over a third of the lessons seen teaching was good or outstanding. In these lessons, teachers' planning focused clearly on what the students were expected to learn. There was a brisk pace and interesting activities were used to challenge students and encourage them to think for themselves. As a result, students' behaviour and attitudes were positive. However, in a fifth of the lessons observed, teaching was inadequate. In several other lessons that were judged to be satisfactory overall, teaching failed to capture the students' interest and imagination. In the inadequate lessons, the teachers' planning did not use assessment information to set work at the right level for students. Work was either too easy or too hard and there were too few opportunities for students to develop their own ideas. Behaviour was not well managed and classroom rules were applied inconsistently. As a result, the students' concentration fluctuated, students engaged in private conversations and they failed to make the expected progress.

Teachers have agreed approaches to managing the students' behaviour which are having a positive effect in many lessons. These improvements have been noticed by students who also feel that teachers are now making lessons more interesting.

Teachers mark students' work regularly, although comments do not always explain how students might produce work of a higher standard. Targets for improvement are often too vague and, as a result, students do not have a clear idea of their next steps in learning. In art and drama lessons, however,

good examples were seen of students assessing their own and others' work and receiving clear guidance for further improvement.

The quality of the curriculum is satisfactory. The Key Stage 4 curriculum has been reviewed and the options for next year available to Year 9 students offer a greater choice of practical and vocational courses and link effectively with post-16 options. Insufficient time is allocated for citizenship at Key Stage 3, which is recognised by the school. The curriculum in the recently established behaviour support unit is not yet fully developed.

A large number of students participate in the good range of out of school clubs and sporting activities. Facilities have been enhanced since moving to the new premises.

Whilst many departments have developed their own systems for checking the progress of students and using data to set targets, overall, the guidance given to students is inadequate. The school recognises this and is putting in place a system that will provide teachers with clear and accurate records about how well students are doing. This system has the potential to enable staff to set realistic targets that can be built into lesson planning.

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

- improve the quality of teaching and learning so that it reaches the quality that is typically found in other schools – satisfactory.

Leadership and management

The quality of leadership and management has improved. The school's ability to monitor and evaluate its work is developing but is not yet sufficient to demonstrate a secure capacity to improve. In the term following the inspection, the pace of change was slow. Organising the school's transfer to new premises undoubtedly absorbed considerable time and energy. Since occupying the new school site in February 2006, there has been an improved sense of purpose and staff and students are more positive about the school. The present consultant headteacher is working in the school on a temporary basis. He is establishing a clear direction for the school and has realistic plans to strengthen leadership. A new substantive headteacher has been appointed for September 2006 and other senior appointments are planned.

The school's updated action plan sets out effectively the major areas for improvement with details of the training and resources needed. The initial focus of leadership was on improving systems for managing the behaviour of students which has had a marked effect. There is now an appropriate emphasis on developing the skills of managers at different levels in the school so they are better placed to monitor and improve teaching and learning. The school's status as a specialist school for mathematics and computing is

recent. It is not yet having a significant effect on the quality of teaching and learning across the school.

The governing body has been reorganised since the last inspection and almost half the members are new. The roles and responsibilities of committees have recently been made clearer with a sharper focus on monitoring the work of the school.

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

- secure leadership and management which effectively addresses the weaknesses in the school – satisfactory.

External support

The local authority has provided a satisfactory level of support. There have been visits from the local authority's subject advisers and the school's link inspector which have helped improve teaching and learning. Support from the Educational Psychology Service has helped improve teachers' strategies for managing student behaviour. There has been support for improving the membership and role of the governing body and advice on strengthening senior management. The local authority has agreed to fund an additional deputy headteacher post to improve the leadership in curriculum and teaching. This is a positive step.

The authority's statement of action usefully includes areas for improvement with named personnel responsible for action. There is a realistic target date for the school's expected removal from special measures. The action was linked with the school's own targets for improvement which initially lacked detail. Implementation of the plan has been hampered by the changes in leadership at the school.

Main Judgements

Progress since being subject to special measures – satisfactory.

Quality of the local authority's statement of action – satisfactory.

Newly qualified teachers may not be appointed.

Priorities for further improvement

- Improve the quality of teaching through the better use of assessment to inform planning so lessons are well matched to the needs of all students.

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

Yours sincerely

Andrew Redpath
H M Inspector