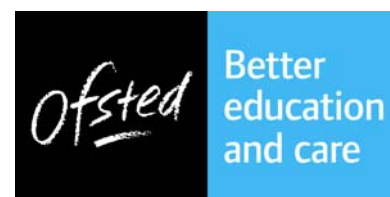


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22 May 2006

Mr P Birch
Headteacher
Grarstang High School
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Dear Mr Birch

OFSTED MONITORING OF SCHOOL WITH NOTICE TO IMPROVE

Thank you for the help which you and your staff gave when I visited your school on 19 May, for the time you gave to our phone discussion and for the information which you provided before and during my visit. Please also pass on my particular thanks to those pupils and staff who met with me.

Having considered carefully all the evidence presented by the school and the local authority, I am of the opinion that at this time the school is making satisfactory progress overall on the issues identified at the last inspection.

As a result of its inspection in October 2005, the school was asked to look urgently at several matters: the quality of teaching in certain subjects, raising the expectations that teachers and pupils have of achievement in those subjects (particularly with more able boys), improving monitoring and evaluation, and setting suitably challenging targets.

This visit considered overall leadership and management, the state of progress in two of the subjects identified for improvement in October 2005, and the impact of support by the Local Authority (LA). Discussions were held with yourself, the deputy head teacher, the head of mathematics and the acting head of science. There were meetings with more able boys in Year 8 and Year 9. Five mathematics lessons were seen and two were seen in science. The mathematics and science books of pupils in Years 8, 9 and 10 were sampled. In addition, management documentation and LA reports were perused. A half hour telephone conversation was held with the schools' LA adviser.

There are now very effective procedures to monitor and evaluate the quality of provision. Recorded lesson observations, discussions with pupils and other monitoring approaches have led to secure evaluation which is in close agreement with Ofsted evaluation during this visit. Senior staff have a clear and reliable appreciation of the strengths and weaknesses in the school and how things can be improved. Better use is made of data, for example on pupils' attainment when they enter school, to set targets for the school and for individuals. Senior staff leadership and management are strong, and intervention in the work of departments by senior staff and with LA support, has been robust, well judged and sensitively handled. Results in Key Stage 3 national tests and GCSE results in science and mathematics are likely to show some improvement in 2006, but the improvements that are underway and those yet to be put in hand are unlikely to show a substantial impact before 2007. The school is unlikely to meet all the targets set for GCSE in 2006. Limiting factors are the time needed for the resolution of personnel matters and the time for professional development of staff to impact on pupils' standards. Nonetheless, there has been very good progress on the points for improvement relating to leadership and management functions, including monitoring, evaluation and target setting.

In science, good and outstanding work was seen in lessons. The marking of books was sometimes good or outstanding but elsewhere sometimes inadequate, with perfunctory ticks on transcribed work that was occasionally less than perfect. There are some lesson plans of high quality, which show a clear insight into what pupils need to know and how they can learn. Certain members of the department have devoted much effort to coaching pupils in preparation for GCSE and national tests at age 14, in order to maximise outcomes at crucial thresholds, such as GCSE grade C. However, the staffing of this department is not yet stable. Only three of the present members of the department are likely to be in school at the start of the next academic year; but, the leadership of the department is well placed to ensure that ongoing development will be vigorous. Pupils could talk with confidence about their work in science, reflecting the productively discursive approach in the lessons seen. However, the variable experience of learning in science that some pupils have had over the last few years is likely to be reflected in GCSE and Key Stage 3 results which are not yet as high as they eventually should be.

In mathematics, several good lessons were seen and all were at least satisfactory. However, a number of things could have been better. Lesson plans for the few weeks prior to the visit were often inadequate. Some of those that were well set out on paper for lessons seen were no guarantee of clarity and dynamism of presentation or that expectations would be high enough. The groups containing the most able pupils actually have a wide

span of capability within them. It is essential that plans show clearly how the most able will be challenged sufficiently and that tasks are not so underpinned by prompts and aids that they become trivial. There should be clarity about how those who understand quickly and those who struggle will be provided for efficiently. On occasion, explanation of a common routine, such as manipulating proportions, was not presented adroitly. The management of the department on a day-to-day basis is competent. However, there is a need for more polished classroom practice, and a stronger commitment to thinking through lessons before teaching them. Staff should explore opportunities to observe the teaching of able pupils elsewhere, and sample the outcomes in coursework and other aspects of the subject that are achievable. In discussion, able Year 10 pupils were less confident in talking about mathematics than might have been expected, for example from their response on science topics. This reflects their patchy experience in mathematics lessons over the years, sometimes with frequent changes from one temporary teacher to another. GCSE results in 2006 are likely to show some improvement at the C boundary, as a result of coaching for pupils at that level. However, overall results are likely to be limited by the legacy of pupils' indifferent learning over time. Younger pupils were more confident for their age in talking about mathematics, and there is prospect of steady improvement in standards so long as the necessary further improvements in teaching can be realised. Provision in mathematics at present is only satisfactory.

Perusal of documentation for history, geography and RE shows that there has been appropriate intervention by senior staff and the LA. Initiatives with a wider focus, such as behaviour management and assessment of what pupils know and how to take them forward, have brought about general improvements and raised the morale of staff and pupils. The school's action plan and the monitoring and progress reports from the LA support team show that there is careful and reliable tracking of improvements and that intervention is well considered. Senior staff, the LA advisory team and consultants are working well together in partnership for the improvement of the school. Overall, improvement is slow but sure.

Yours sincerely,

Jim Bennetts

Jim Bennetts
Her Majesty's Inspector