



11 January 2007

Mr S Bullen
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Bullen

OFSTED MONITORING OF SCHOOLS WITH NOTICE TO IMPROVE

Thank you for the help which you and your staff gave when I inspected your school on 10 January 2007, for the time you gave to our phone discussions and for the information which you provided before and during my visit.

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.

As a result of the inspection on 7 June 2007, the school was asked to

- improve achievement and standards
- improve consistency in implementing policies
- improve the curriculum
- improve management.

Having considered all the evidence I am of the opinion that at this time the school is making inadequate progress in addressing the issues for improvement. Ofsted will continue to monitor the school's progress on the issues where improvement has so far been inadequate.

This visit considered overall leadership and management and associated attention to policies and curriculum development. The state of progress in English, mathematics and science was evaluated. The school's self-evaluation of progress across a range of subjects and issues was tested, and the impact of intervention by the local authority (LA) was explored. Discussions were held with yourself, four other members of the senior leadership team, heads of English, mathematics and science, the chair of governors, the LA's improvement adviser, and with members of the school council. Eight lessons were seen, two in English, three in mathematics, two in science and one in drama. Pupils' books from Years 9 and 11 were sampled. In addition, whole-school and departmental documentation, LA reports and data were perused.

Achievement and standards are inadequate. There is little tangible improvement since the last inspection; therefore, despite well directed and pertinent initiatives by senior staff and the LA, progress on this point for improvement is judged to be inadequate. The last inspection took place close to the end of the summer term of 2006 and identified low standards and inadequate achievement. Data now available shows that in national tests at age 14 and in GCSE, standards in 2006 were a little lower than in 2005. On some indicators, the progress which pupils made by summer of 2006 is in the bottom two or three per cent of that found nationally. Indicators for mathematics have been very low for years. During the few weeks at the end of the 2006 summer term, some headway was made in facing up to the causes of inadequate achievement. Since the present headteacher took up post in September 2006, major headway has been made in pinpointing areas of strength, together with weaknesses in teaching, departmental organisation, assessment of pupils and guidance to them. The school is determined, and now well placed, to deal decisively with practice that is unsatisfactory or that could be better.

Of the eight lessons seen during this visit, one was outstanding. It was characterised by excellent assessment of what pupils did, with immediate feedback to them and palpable improvement in their skills. Two lessons seen were inadequate. In one, several older boys were unsure how to do their work, did not seek help, and the teacher did not intervene sufficiently. The problem was exacerbated by a practice in tackling the work that differed from that used elsewhere in the department. Thus, some pupils did only a third as much work as others. The lesson continued with illustration of a further development, but the example used inadvertently had such a degree of complexity that it was an unhelpful model. Such a lesson indicates fundamental weaknesses in teaching skills. Some others, though satisfactory overall, could have been better. In one, several pupils said 'I don't get it', or made comment to that effect; one boy slouched in his seat and copied incorrectly an illustrative example from the blackboard. The teaching was dull and pupils' approach to the work lacked motivation. In another lesson, pupils copied diagrams from the board whilst chattering at considerable volume about, for example, their activities out of school. About eighty lesson observations were made by senior school staff or LA advisers in the autumn term. These are very well documented, giving a vivid description of strengths and weaknesses. There was very close correspondence between my impressions and those in these observations. This indicates that the school's overall self-evaluation is accurate and robust. On this basis, probably a quarter of the teaching in the school is in need of some improvement. That said, the majority of staff teach effectively and are keen to cooperate in whatever way might be necessary in order to do even better.

There are some examples of conscientious marking of books with perceptive comments to help pupils improve. In too many books the marking is thin,

sometimes with comments such as 'more detail required', which are well intentioned but insufficiently specific to help the pupil. There is often not enough marking by teachers in mathematics to find patterns in errors that should identify misconceptions that need sorting out. Therefore, unsurprisingly, three mathematics teachers complained that pupils did not understand things they had been taught the previous year.

Many teachers in the school are effective classroom practitioners and to expect from them detailed lesson plans is unnecessary and would be unhelpful. (Nonetheless, it would be useful if there were fuller records of what has actually been covered, to safeguard pupils' progress if a teacher should be away.) Where practice is not good enough, lesson plans of the kind I saw are not adequate. There needs, for instance, to be sufficient detail for senior staff to know how much time is to be spent on a task and how exactly pupils are to be engaged. Lesson plans should offer a means of quality control before a lesson is taught; those seen were not good enough for that.

Intense efforts, particularly at senior leadership level, and with well focused support by the LA, have produced a robust diagnosis of what needs to be done. There have been some definite improvements, for example in pupil and staff attendance. Much is being put in place by way of advice and coaching where there are weaknesses in classroom practice. The school is aware that certain personnel matters need to be attended to as a matter of urgency. In the time since the headteacher took up post, the strategy for improvement in achievement has been entirely appropriate. It is yet to bear fruit in terms of actual rise in standards.

In the short term, the LA should as a matter of urgency assist the school with the provision of effective booster classes in English and mathematics for Year 11 pupils who are at risk of missing grade C in GCSE.

Progress in ensuring consistency in application of policies has been good. The new headteacher has been relentless in insisting on compliance with the school's well conceived policies. In the hands of capable departmental managers, these are promoting good practice. For example, the science department's approach to departmental self-evaluation is a model of good practice. Yet there is more to be accomplished. For instance, marking is very uneven in quality, and some departments are at an early stage in making the most of assessment. In mathematics, different teachers tackle the same algebraic manipulations in different ways; there is no policy.

A review of the curriculum has secured satisfactory improvement for those in Year 10, with further appropriate developments planned. For instance, there has been an increase in the time for English and mathematics and adjustment to the options system. The early entry of about half of Year 11 for GCSE English language is sensible; however re-entry should be facilitated for a substantial number who might improve grades in June. There has been

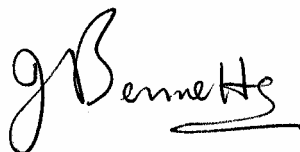
increased provision in literacy for those who join the school at low levels in English. The provision for those who need learning support is generally effective; more weak pupils might be entered on the special needs register.

Progress in the improvement of leadership and management has been good. The headteacher's leadership is outstanding. He has the support of his senior colleagues and teachers who are keen to take their part in shouldering the burden of the thrust for improvement. The LA and governing body have been pivotal in their practical and moral support for these endeavours. Middle management is variable in its effectiveness. There is vigorous leadership in science, where, for example, the assessment and tracking of pupils' progress are excellent, and the head of department enjoys the strong support of colleagues. There are some encouraging developments in English. In mathematics, there has been attention to the scheduling of time for teaching each topic, in the light of worrying slippage in the past. However, there is little leadership or management in the subject. The senior leadership team and LA have a clear and convincing evaluation of how things stand. Interventions and initiatives over the last term have been the necessary preliminaries for elimination of inadequate provision and the cultivation of improved practice. The school has very good capacity for improvement, but this will require patience and persistence; material improvement in standards will not be established overnight. Despite the admirable work of the headteacher and the majority of staff, results in public examinations in 2007 are likely to fall short of the targets which are set reliably from data on pupils' standards when they came to the school.

Pupil numbers have fallen year by year and numbers in Year 7 are only about half those in Year 11. This has implication for the already seriously overdrawn budget, and the school's means of entering upon developments which have a financial cost. The school can rely on the continued staunch support of the LA and the governing body during the coming terms. In pulling through, it needs and deserves the support of the community it serves.

I hope that you have found the visit helpful in promoting improvement in your school.

Yours sincerely



Jim Bennetts
Her Majesty's Inspector