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29 March 2007

Mrs H Salmon
The Headteacher
St James School
Summer Lane
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Devon
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Dear Mrs Salmon,

SPECIAL MEASURES: MONITORING INSPECTION OF ST JAMES SCHOOL

Introduction

Following my visit with Jo Pike and Andrew Bird, Additional Inspectors, to your school on 20 and 21 March 2007, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector to confirm the inspection findings.

The visit was the third 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 the school's work, scrutinised documents, and met with the headteacher, teachers, groups of students, governors, and a representative from the local authority.

Context

There have been no significant changes to leadership or in the school's circumstances since the time of the last inspection.

Achievement and standards

The 2006 national test and examination results indicate that achievement is inadequate and that standards are well below national expectations at both

key stages. Standards in the Key Stage 3 national tests for mathematics and science improved significantly compared to the previous year, with a rise in the proportion of students entered and achieving the higher levels. However, there was no marked improvement in students' performance in English and achievement overall was inadequate. At Key Stage 4, the proportion of students achieving higher grade passes at GCSE in 2006 was well below the national average.

Since September 2006, students' progress has improved. Recent mock tests in Year 9 and mock examinations in Year 11 indicate an improving trend in both achievement and standards for mathematics, English and science across both key stages. The school keeps central records which are updated every six weeks when performance is reviewed, underachievement is identified, and challenging academic targets are set. Performance data are regularly shared with students in one to one meetings with heads of learning.

Personal development and well-being

Students have positive attitudes towards school and particularly enjoy participating in the after school clubs and activities. Students' attendance has improved and now reflects the national picture owing to the school's strong procedures for monitoring and following up absences. Students' behaviour has improved and is generally good. This is due in part to teachers' more consistent use of strategies to manage behaviour in lessons. Also, the school's focus on recognising students' achievements and celebrating their successes has had a positive effect on students' self-esteem and their feeling of pride in the school. There is a calm atmosphere around the school and students are pleased to talk to visitors about their work. The work of the 'on call' support class, where students attend for short periods following a behavioural difficulty, has helped significantly in improving behaviour and reducing the number of exclusions. Students learn to take responsibility, for example, when they raise money for charity or take part in the school improvement group. Students are encouraged to eat healthy food at lunchtime and are rewarded for doing so. The emphasis on developing skills in information and communication technology (ICT) is preparing students well for their next stage, although there are too few opportunities for them to take part in discussions in lessons, limiting the development of their speaking and listening skills.

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 – good.

Quality of provision

The quality of teaching and learning has improved since the last monitoring inspection, with more good lessons and slightly fewer inadequate lessons. This is as a result of the appropriate strategies which the school has implemented, highlighting and sharing the features of good teaching and learning. Together with regular training and monitoring, this has helped teachers to become more aware of how to improve their practice. Consequently, most lessons now include elements of good teaching, such as letting students know what they are expected to learn in the lesson, and clear behaviour management. However, a sharper focus on one or two key aspects for improvement would better support teachers in developing their skills further.

In good lessons, students are enthused by a variety of interesting activities which extend learning in small steps. Students actively participate and thoroughly enjoy their learning. Teachers provide opportunities for students to express their ideas or evaluate their work. This results in students having to think and explain their ideas. Students generally lack independent learning skills. However, in good lessons, they are successful in working on their own because teachers described clearly what students need to do to complete the task effectively. These lessons start briskly and end with students reflecting on their learning or with the teacher explaining the next step. Relationships are harmonious and this encourages students to say when they do not understand a topic and need further explanation.

Inadequate teaching is characterised by dull activities which fail to interest students. For example, teachers talk for too long and students are not clear about the task they are expected to complete. Teaching focuses more on work, rather than learning, which results in students making unsatisfactory progress. In some lessons, students lose interest and their behaviour deteriorates. Students also lose concentration in some of the satisfactory lessons because the activities are not engaging, the teacher uses a narrow range of teaching strategies, or work is not closely matched to students' different levels of ability. In many lessons, students do not have sufficient opportunities to contribute, discuss their own ideas or develop their skills in literacy.

Academic guidance has improved because teachers are making better use of their assessment information. All students know the level or grade they are working at because teachers regularly tell them. They also know their target level. In many lessons, students are told what level they could achieve but they do not always have a chance to reflect on whether they were successful or not in achieving it. Increasingly, students know what they need to do to improve, but this is not consistent across the school. Marking is also variable in telling students how to improve. In some subjects, such as French, students know in detail what their next learning step is because of the

excellent feedback they receive. A positive development has been the introduction of half termly reports and the involvement of parents and students in setting targets during annual academic review days.

The quality of the curriculum is satisfactory and has some good features. The school has extended the curriculum to include a broad range of academic, vocational and applied courses which is being developed further. These are supported well by links with other city schools and colleges. Provision for ICT is good, with a number of imaginative initiatives to consolidate the school's specialist status, focusing specifically on music, art and design, design and technology, and science. The curriculum is well supported by the new buildings and resources. A good range of extra-curricular activities is provided to support learning and the numerous sporting activities and after school clubs are popular with students.

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 headteacher provides strong leadership and, together with her senior leaders, provides a clear direction for improving the work of the school. The sharper focus on recognising achievement and celebrating success is appreciated by parents and students. The school's performance is regularly monitored and areas for improvement identified. Successful initiatives have improved students' behaviour, strengthened management at all levels, provided support for students with English as an additional language, and broadened the curriculum. The school is also developing appropriate plans to meet the increased number of students with learning difficulties and disabilities who will enter the school in September 2007. Good procedures are in place for the regular monitoring of teaching, although measures to improve teaching and learning have not yet had sufficient impact. There are good induction arrangements for teachers who are new to the school.

The school continues to develop its role as a specialist mathematics and computing college. Links with partner schools have extended the curriculum. Teachers are using ICT confidently to improve the quality of teaching and learning. A wide range of popular ICT courses is provided. The school is meeting its agreed targets for the number of passes in examinations and national tests in mathematics and ICT.

Governors are more involved in the life of the school and provide satisfactory support. Committees have been established to monitor different aspects of the school's work and their work is developing well.

Given the strength of the school's self-evaluation and its success in ensuring that positive changes are firmly established, the capacity for further improvement is secure.

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

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

External support

The school continues to benefit from good support from the local authority. Financial support has been provided to maintain the strength of the senior management team and to develop the behaviour unit. Several subject advisers, the school improvement partner, and a behaviour consultant have also given good advice.

Main Judgements

Progress since being subject to special measures – satisfactory.

Progress since previous monitoring inspection – satisfactory.

Newly qualified teachers may be appointed, provided they receive support from highly skilled colleagues in their specialist subject area.

Priorities for further improvement

- Improve the quality of teaching and learning by increasing opportunities for students to participate in lessons and discuss their learning.

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