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Mr D Derbyshire
The Headteacher
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Dear Mr Derbyshire

SPECIAL MEASURES: MONITORING INSPECTION OF WADHAM SCHOOL

Introduction

Following my visit with Geoff Hancock and Alan Dobbins, 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 fourth monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures in October 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, including 23 parts of lessons, a form period and an assembly. A range of documentation was scrutinised and meetings were held with the headteacher and other staff, a group of students, the chair of governors, and a representative from the local authority.

Context

After consultation, a new staffing structure has been agreed and is being implemented.

Achievement and standards

Students join the school with standards that are broadly average. Whilst improvement was secured in national tests and examinations in 2006, standards remained below average and achievement was inadequate. However, there are clear signs of rising achievement. Modular tests in mathematics and science indicate improved value added scores. The school's data and mock examination results show the school on track to achieve targets in national tests at the end of Year 9 and GCSE examinations at the end of Year 11.

Data is being used more efficiently to set students meaningful targets. Most students in Key Stage 4 know their current level of attainment and what they should be aiming for. There are good systems in place to identify underachievement and check students' progress in subjects, but moderation exercises to ensure the accuracy of teachers' judgements are not sufficiently systematic. The use of assessment information to evaluate learning in lessons also requires further development. Nevertheless, an increasingly effective range of intervention strategies is resulting in students making better progress. Progress in 19 of the 23 lessons seen during this visit was judged to be at least satisfactory. In just over half of the lessons progress was good or better.

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

- raise achievement at GCSE – satisfactory
- monitor students' progress more effectively – good.

Personal development and well-being

Students see the value of the strategies for improving behaviour and for recognising good behaviour. These are being applied with greater consistency by staff and are having a positive effect. Some behaviour in lessons is inappropriate, but where it is well managed learning proceeds without interruption. Where teachers fail to implement the good behaviour management systems disruption impedes learning and progress is slowed. Overall, students' behaviour is satisfactory and improving.

The school is working hard to capture students' interest in learning and is being increasingly successful as demonstrated by students' attendance. The target for attendance set by the local authority for last year was exceeded and attendance compares favourably with the national average.

Students say incidents of bullying are rare and that they feel safe at school. Older students think they are better guided in their learning. They appreciate the feedback given about their current attainment and what they should be aiming for. Younger students are not so clear about their progress.

Opportunities are sometimes missed in form periods to develop students' readiness for learning.

Students say they feel well prepared for the next stage of their education and benefit from the opportunities provided to practise their personal and social skills in the adult world during their work placements.

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

- improve behaviour and attendance in the main school – good.

Quality of provision

The school's monitoring procedures are securing improvement in teaching and learning. Of the 23 lessons seen, 12 were good or better and 7 were satisfactory. Whilst the proportion of inadequate teaching has not reduced, there are more good and outstanding lessons. There is growing evidence that teachers are adding variety to their lessons and, in some cases, taking risks with more adventurous ways of learning. This is encouraging but not always successful because although students are urged to participate more, they are not always required to think for themselves and apply their learning. Compounding this, not all teachers and teaching assistants are sufficiently expert in evaluating learning in lessons and building on progress.

Nearly all teachers are now attempting to identify learning objectives as a focus for lessons. But, some describe tasks rather than the skills, knowledge and understanding students are expected to acquire by the end of the lesson. Where practice is at its best, teachers are clear about the learning expected and build a series of challenging, interesting activities that are well matched to students' needs and stretch their thinking. Objectives are shared, linked to previous learning, and have relevance and purpose. Success is modelled, explored and exemplified so that students grasp how it feels and what it looks like. Consequently, they develop independence and confidence because they know how to learn. It is this depth of engagement with learning that accelerates progress and distinguishes the most effective lessons from others.

Assessment is having a positive impact in a number of subjects. The most formative practice involves students in evaluating their own and other's work by using success criteria to determine exactly what must be done to improve.

The broadening of the curriculum to encompass four distinct pathways provides a clear progression route for most students. The collaboration between the school and a range of consortia is resulting in an increased choice of courses. This is helping to capture and sustain students' interest in learning.

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

- improve attitudes to learning in lessons – satisfactory.

Leadership and management

The good leadership of the headteacher and senior team has developed a sense of common purpose among staff and built good, collaborative working relationships. Governors are developing a sharper, more detailed understanding of the school's performance. They are contributing to the strategic direction of the school. For example, the chair of governors is in the forefront of planning the review of specialist status. Other governors have been instrumental in developing the new and appropriate staffing structure which is now being implemented. The development of leadership for learning is quite rightly central to the structure.

Self-evaluation is making better use of data and lesson observation to identify strengths and areas for development. A systematic approach to tracking the performance of individuals and groups of students is helping to accelerate progress and raise standards. Senior leaders are effectively focused on developing teachers' and teaching assistants' accountability for students' achievement. In support of this, some subject teams evaluate their work well. However, this good practice has not been shared sufficiently. The variable quality of subject leadership is reflected in the unevenness of students' performance across subjects and the inconsistency in the impact of good management policies.

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

- improve the impact and consistency of management policies – satisfactory.

External support

Support from the local authority has been effective. An appropriate focus on improving teaching and learning has been sustained, with a range of lessons observed as part of a monitoring visit. The process added to, and corroborated, the school's monitoring.

Main Judgements

Progress since being subject to special measures – good.

Progress since previous monitoring inspection – good.

Priorities for further improvement

- Ensure that leadership at all levels is effectively focused on improving learning.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the chair of governors and the Director of Children and Young People for Somerset and the Diocesan Director of Education for Bath and Wells.

Yours sincerely

Jacqueline White
Her Majesty's Inspector