

17 October 2006

Miss M Magrs
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Dear Miss Magrs

Ofsted survey inspection programme – Attendance for Learning in Secondary Schools

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 10 October 2006 to look at your work in promoting attendance.

The visit provided valuable information which will contribute to our national evaluation and reporting. Published reports are likely to list the names of the contributing institutions, but individual institutions will not be identified in the main text. All feedback letters will be published on the Ofsted website at the end of each half-term.

The evidence used to inform the judgements made included: interviews with staff, pupils and a representative from the local authority, scrutiny of relevant documentation and observation of four lessons and lunchtime.

The overall effectiveness of your work in promoting attendance was judged to be good with some outstanding features.

Achievement and standards

- Achievement by the end of Key Stage 4 is outstanding but many pupils do not make sufficient progress in Key Stage 3. Standards at Key Stage 4 have shown a continuing rising trend for the last five years and the number of pupils gaining 5A*-C grades or equivalent is well above the national average. Attendance is above the national average for secondary schools and has been slowly increasing for three years due to a slow decline in unauthorised absence. However there are still a significant number of pupils who take extended holidays during term time.
- The school works hard to encourage good or better attendance but at the same time works tirelessly to ensure that periods of absence result in minimal disruption to pupils' achievement.

- As a result of a vast range of strategies to help pupils 'catch up', achievement by pupils with poor attendance is rarely significantly different to that of their peers, particularly in Key Stage 4. However there is evidence that pupils make faster progress when attendance is good or better. Pupils were keen to report how much more they achieve when they attend school regularly.
- The school places great importance upon ensuring all pupils are up to date with course work and on track to meet their targets in Key Stage 4. Pupils lower down the school would welcome some more structured support to help improve on learning they have missed due to absence.
- Pupils observed and interviewed were well behaved, articulate and confident young women who had a good understanding of the consequences of their attendance records.

Quality of teaching and learning in relation to attendance

- Teaching was good overall. In all the lessons observed there were good relationships helping to motivate pupils. Staff and pupils worked in a relaxed but purposeful atmosphere.
- Good or better learning took place where teachers ensured that pupils understood concepts being taught by adapting the lesson as a result of ongoing assessment. The school has rightly identified the need to ensure that this is common in all lessons.
- When there was active involvement, teaching effectively engaged the pupils' interest.
- The vast majority of pupils spoken to were able to identify someone at the school in whom they could confide. They felt genuinely valued as individuals and appreciated the concern for their educational progress shown by these staff.

Quality of curriculum in relation to attendance

- The curriculum is outstanding, offering a broad range of opportunities for the pupils. There is outstanding commitment to enable Key Stage 4 pupils to access their preferred subjects. This is achieved by arranging the timetables after choices have been made, and by running courses with small cohorts.
- The school has a suitable range of vocational options which interest the pupils.
- Extremely good personalised learning opportunities are provided as a matter of course within the school day and during extra sessions before school, after school and on Saturday mornings.
- Pupils commented on their preference for active participation in lessons but also reported that this active involvement was not developed in some lessons.

Leadership and management of attendance

- Leadership and management are good. The school has a very good understanding of the challenges it faces to raise achievement and attendance. There has been considerable progress in raising achievement at Key Stage 4 and the school has rightly determined the need for this to be replicated at Key Stage 3.
- The leadership team have a clear understanding about the relationship between attendance and achievement. They are thorough in their analysis of data for individuals and have developed creative solutions to the problems faced by pupils.
- The pastoral action plan appropriately identifies steps to continue the improvements in attendance. However the success criteria are not clearly focussed on the outcomes for pupils.

Inclusion

- Inclusion is outstanding at Key Stage 4 because a highly effective personalised approach ensures that pupils are able to access the necessary support and guidance required to help them improve their progress. This approach is less well established at Key Stage 3.
- The school is very flexible in its approaches and seeks to support even the most challenging pupils, demonstrated by the low exclusions in the last few years.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- implementing strategies similar to those used in Key Stage 4 to help pupils with high levels of absence in Key Stage 3 to improve their progress
- establishing higher levels of consistency in the use of ongoing assessment in lessons
- working with the community to establish a clear message about how high levels of absence hamper the progress made by pupils and how this can limit opportunities for the future.

I hope these observations are useful as you continue to develop your attendance work in the school.

As I explained in my previous letter, a copy of this letter will be sent to your local authority and will be published on Ofsted's website. It will also be available to the team for your next institutional inspection.

Yours sincerely

Janet Thompson
Her Majesty's Inspector