

14 June 2007

The Headteacher
North Denes Middle School
Jellicoe Road
Great Yarmouth
Norfolk
NR30 4HF

Dear Mrs Heywood

SPECIAL MEASURES: MONITORING INSPECTION OF NORTH DENES MIDDLE SCHOOL

Introduction

Following my visit with John Godwood, Additional Inspector, to your school on 5 and 6 June 2007, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector to confirm the inspection findings.

The visit was the first monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures in November 2006.

This letter will be posted on the Ofsted website.

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents, observed lessons and met with the headteacher. They also met with subject leaders, groups of pupils, parents informally, the vice chair of governors and two representatives from the local authority (LA).

Context

Since the last inspection in November 2006 the subject leader for mathematics has left the school and there is a new Year 7 leader in place.

Achievement and standards

Pupils' attainment on entry to the school is below average. In the last inspection, standards in English and mathematics were exceptionally low and pupils' progress was inadequate. Progress in science was broadly satisfactory. In the 2006 Year 6 national tests, girls had achieved less well than boys.

There has been satisfactory improvement in raising pupils' standards and achievement. In lessons the teaching is more consistent. In English and mathematics, pupils now have clear targets at three different levels of difficulty in each class. The school has monitored pupils' attainment through regular testing and has carefully checked the progress they have made over the year, providing additional support for pupils who have not made enough progress. The school's tracking of pupils' progress shows that they have made better progress in English and mathematics over the past year. Girls and boys are performing similarly.

Recent assessments indicate that Year 6 pupils are on course to meet the school's targets for English and mathematics, which are realistic. However, standards are higher in mathematics than English. This is because pupils' writing is significantly weaker than their reading.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the inspection in November 2006:

- Improve achievement and raise standards, particularly in English and mathematics, by accelerating the rate of pupils' progress – satisfactory progress

Personal development and well-being

In the last inspection, pupils' personal development and well-being were satisfactory. Although most pupils behaved well, there was some low level disruption in lessons resulting from a lack of challenge in the tasks pupils had to do or uninteresting work. Pupils have themselves noticed an improvement in behaviour since the last inspection because teachers have raised their expectations and are giving more rewards for good behaviour. They also feel that lessons have been made more interesting and give them more opportunities to be actively involved. This has increased their enjoyment of learning, which is satisfactory. Most pupils cooperate and behave well in lessons. Some pupils are at times inattentive and this slows their learning. Most pupils are friendly and polite. They believe that bullying has reduced and is managed effectively. The school is effective in developing pupils' self awareness and social skills, and in providing additional support for pupils who have emotional or behavioural difficulties.

The school council is particularly effective in enabling pupils to make a positive contribution to their community. Pupils' views are taken seriously, including their views on how to make lessons more interesting. The council organises activities and charity fundraising. Pupils also make a positive contribution as prefects, playground buddies and reading buddies.

Attendance has improved over the past year and is now broadly average. Unauthorised absence has reduced. Pupils' healthy lifestyles have improved through encouragement to walk to school and pupils report that the number of cars coming to school has dropped by 10%. The school recently held a successful Parents' Day, attended by more than 40 parents. Many joined their children for a healthy lunch, attended classes or listened to a talk about sex education.

Quality of provision

At the time of the last inspection, teaching and learning were judged unsatisfactory. The quality of teaching and learning has improved. No unsatisfactory lessons were observed, but the proportion of good lessons where pupils make rapid progress is still not high enough. Inspectors' observations closely reflect the findings of the school's recent monitoring programme. For example, the teaching in Year 7 is now satisfactory. The management of pupils' behaviour is better, but there are improvements still to be made in how some teachers maintain pupils' good attention without frequent reminders to them to concentrate and work hard.

In many lessons, targets are clear and teachers explain what they mean to pupils at the start of sessions. Planning in English and mathematics uses the 'must, should, could' approach to lesson targets. The three target levels are used effectively to match work to pupils' abilities because teachers make efficient use of assessment information. The pace in good lessons is brisk and pupils' attention well managed. Well chosen references to previous lessons help to capture pupils' attention and interest, and carefully planned questions focus their thinking on earlier learning. Pupils take an active part, contributing and considering ideas and solutions that help to move their learning forward. Towards the end of lessons, plenaries successfully highlight pupils' gains in skills, knowledge and understanding and relate these to their earlier learning and future lessons. Pupils understand why they are doing what they are doing.

Limited pace in lessons and lack of challenge, particularly for pupils who have the potential to reach above average standards is an element of weaker teaching. In these lessons, pupils do not fully concentrate, sometimes chattering or distracting others rather than getting on with their work. The

presentation of a minority of lessons is dull, and they do not reflect the general improvement in teachers' use of resources, such as interactive whiteboards, to make lessons more interesting. Some teachers do not spend enough time revising what pupils have learned at the end of lessons.

While the school has used progress monitoring constructively since the last inspection to check on the progress of groups of pupils and intervene where necessary, there remain gaps in the school's use of pupils' performance information. In particular, it has no system for analysing this information in order to track pupils' attainment over their time in school. It is, therefore, unable to compare pupils' standards and progress with national expectations. It now has a large amount of information, but does not always use this well enough to gain a clear picture of strengths and weaknesses. For instance, the school does not monitor the achievement of pupils from different ethnic backgrounds.

As at the time of the last inspection, there is a satisfactory curriculum that includes French in Year 6. Improvements in the planning of the curriculum have helped pupils to make better progress in English and mathematics recently. The provision for pupils in the Learning Support Centre is good and pupils make good progress towards their individual targets. The 'Haven' is also successful. Here, pupils learn, for example, to behave better in very small groups and it has helped to reduce exclusions. These are well below the school's maximum target for this year. Pupils with learning difficulties in class receive appropriate support. Work is matched to their abilities and they make satisfactory progress.

Care, guidance and support are satisfactory, as in the last inspection. Pastoral care is good. Guidance for pupils about their learning has improved since the last inspection and this has contributed to the improvements in teaching and pupils' progress. Pupils find the class targets for English and mathematics to be helpful. They know what they are aiming for. However, the targets are not always worded well enough to be easy for them to understand. Pupils have some opportunities to review their own learning and let teachers know where they need more help. Marking of pupils' work has improved. It is more regular and relates to pupils' targets, but it generally lacks comments on pupils' next steps and some pupils find it rather impersonal. The improvements in academic guidance are having a positive impact but are at an early stage.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the inspection in November 2006:

- Improve the quality of teaching and learning and use accurate assessment information to set pupils challenging targets and inform teachers' planning - satisfactory progress

Leadership and management

At the time of the last inspection, leadership and management were judged unsatisfactory. In the last six months, the school has made satisfactory progress in tackling the areas for improvement. The headteacher has coordinated action to remedy the school's weaknesses with a sense of determination. The school's action plan considers each area and details progress and further areas to work on clearly. The evaluations of progress made are accurate. The school's timeline for the plan has been met to date. There has been a worthwhile programme of monitoring visits to classes, which has helped to improve teaching and learning. Newly qualified teachers are well supported by their mentors.

Several important new ways of organising the school's work have been put in place, the most important being the 'Intensifying Support Programme'. The quality of teaching has improved, partly because of this programme, to the extent that no unsatisfactory teaching was seen during the inspection. The value of the programme is that teachers have studied, for example, what makes a good lesson and have been determined to put what they have learned into action.

A Project Board, consisting of school staff, governors and LA representatives has been created to oversee the school's progress in addressing the three issues from the last inspection. Close contacts between the school and LA have led to worthwhile evaluations of actions and progress. The governing body continues to support the school. Governors have begun to make visits to see the work of the school and make checks on progress towards meeting the targets for development. The school, therefore, is increasing its capacity to improve.

Subject leaders in English, mathematics and science have a realistic understanding of the strengths and weaknesses in the school's provision. The subject leader for literacy has been the most effective in developing the provision. Teachers, for example, now frequently record assessments of pupils' work in reading, writing, and mathematics so that they can check their rates of progress more accurately. Pupils are now making better progress than they were because of the work of subject leaders and senior staff.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the inspection in November 2006:

- Improve the quality of leadership and management, in particular that of middle managers, and develop greater rigour in the checks made on teaching and learning to ensure they are always strongly focused on raising achievement and standards - satisfactory progress

External support

The LA's statement of action is satisfactory and is having a positive effect on the school's work. The quality of the external support provided for the school is satisfactory. There is a range of support available from the LA for all three areas where the school needs to improve. The school is clearer how to plan for positive change as a result. The LA provides useful sources of information and practice that the school uses to guide its work, principally through the Intensifying Support Programme.

Main Judgements

Progress since being subject to special measures – satisfactory

Newly qualified teachers may be appointed

Priorities for further improvement

- Develop a system to track pupils' attainment throughout their time at school so that standards and progress can be compared with national expectations, using information and communication technology.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the chair of governors and the Director of Education for Norfolk.

Yours sincerely

Roger Fry

Additional Inspector