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Mr P Barnes
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Dear Mr Barnes

Ofsted survey inspection programme – narrowing the gap in literacy and numeracy

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 9 and 10 June 2008 to look at work in literacy and numeracy.

As outlined in my initial letter, as well as looking at the key areas of literacy and numeracy, the visit had a particular focus on how the school is closing the gap for learners at risk of not reaching the expected level of attainment for their age. The visit also evaluated the level of expertise within the school to support students learning English as an additional language.

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 schools but individual schools 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 members of the senior management team, the heads of English and mathematics, the English as an additional language coordinator, students from Years 7 and 10, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of students' work and observation of six part-lessons.

The overall effectiveness of provision for literacy and numeracy was judged to be outstanding.

Achievement and standards

Standards in English and mathematics are above average. Achievement is good.

- The attainment of students when they join the school in Year 7 varies from year to year but is broadly average in English and mathematics.
- One in four students arrives at the school working below the national average. By the end of Key Stage 3 the proportion of students reaching the expected level for their age in English and mathematics is above the national average.
- Students make good progress in their learning and as a result of successful support and intervention fewer students are below the expected level by the end of Year 9.
- The progress of students entitled to free school meals is very good, as is those students learning English as an additional language and those students from ethnic minority groups.
- The outstanding personal development of students contributes to their high achievement. Levels of attendance are high and behaviour is of a consistently excellent standard. Relationships between different groups of students are very good.
- There are no examination results available at Key Stage 4 yet as this is a new school.

Quality of teaching and learning of literacy and numeracy

The quality of teaching and learning of literacy and numeracy is good.

- Teachers plan lessons consistently well to ensure that students' starting levels are identified and work planned is appropriate.
- Expectations are high for all groups of students including those in lower sets.
- Relationships between teachers and students are very good: teachers regularly praise students and give them positive feedback.
- The deployment of learning advisors to subject areas is good although they are sometimes under-utilised during teacher-led presentations.
- Assessment is of a very high standard: marking consistently shows students how well they are doing and what improvements they need to make to reach the next level; and targets are regularly shared with and set by students.
- Assessment records enable teachers to track individuals at risk of falling behind their expected level and arrange early intervention and support.
- Students say they respond well to lessons which are well-planned, funny, easy to understand and practical.

Quality of the curriculum

The quality of the curriculum in literacy and numeracy is outstanding.

- In Year 7 students benefit from booster groups to help them catch up in literacy and numeracy; individualised programmes in phonics have significantly reduced the proportion of students below the expected level in English in Year 7.

- Class sizes are smaller for students in lower sets which are also allocated additional support; experienced teachers are allocated to lower sets.
- Booster sessions for Year 9 students before and after school are having a significant impact on the proportion of students catching up to reach the expected level for their age.
- In order to address the under achievement of boys, there is a strong focus on issues specifically aimed at their interests and discussion-based activities.
- 'Shuffle days' are having a positive impact on students by developing their team work, their ability to think constructively and their practical skills.
- Some students are taken out of the same lesson, notably French and Values and Ethics, for booster sessions in literacy and numeracy.

Leadership and management of literacy and numeracy

Leadership and management of literacy and numeracy are outstanding.

- You and your senior leaders and managers have set high expectations for students and they are shared by all subject leaders.
- The tracking system, established from the primary school phase is exemplary and is used well to monitor groups or individuals at risk of falling behind. All subject leaders and coordinators are fully involved in this process.
- Early intervention is effective in ensuring few students become disengaged from learning.
- The recruitment and deployment of specialist teachers in lower sets is having a positive impact on the achievement of lower attaining students.
- There is a strong commitment to inclusion throughout the school.

English as an additional language

The level of expertise within the school to support students with learning English as an additional language is satisfactory.

- None of the staff has specific qualification for English as an additional language but the coordinator ensures the school keeps up to date through support from the local authority.
- Students for whom English is an additional language achieve well in lessons.
- In lesson planning, mainstream teachers regularly set targets for students learning English as an additional language.
- Assessment information on students learning English as an additional language is detailed based on stages of English but not based on National Curriculum levels.
- There are limited opportunities for students to be assessed in their first language.

Inclusion

Inclusion in literacy and numeracy is outstanding.

- The strong emphasis on inclusion ensures that all students at risk of underachieving are monitored closely and appropriate intervention and support is provided.
- Most vulnerable groups do well in terms of their progress in literacy and numeracy.
- Groups of students from different backgrounds work well together in lessons.
- The needs of different groups of students are met through detailed planning of tasks and activities appropriate to students' different starting points.
- Students say they enjoy coming to school in an environment that is friendly and free of any oppressive behaviour.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- ensuring that assessment of students learning English as an additional language is matched to National Curriculum levels of attainment
- ensuring that the students taken for booster sessions in literacy and numeracy are not always withdrawn from the same lesson.

I hope these observations are useful as you continue to develop literacy and numeracy 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 the Ofsted website. It will also be available to the team for your next institutional inspection.

Yours sincerely

Mark Sims
Her Majesty's Inspector