

Prospects Learning Services Ltd
Prospects House
19 Elmfield Road
Bromley, Kent
BR1 1LT

T 08456 40 40 40
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk Direct T 020 8315 1250
www.ofsted.gov.uk Direct F 020 8315 1279



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Mr Derek Trimmer
Headteacher
Mayfield School
Mayfield Road
North End
Portsmouth
PO2 0RH

Dear Mr Trimmer

Ofsted monitoring of schools with a notice to improve

Thank you for the help which you and your staff gave when I inspected your school on 11 December 2008, for the time you gave to our phone discussions and for the information which you provided before and during my visit. Also, please extend my thanks to the students with whom I spoke; they are a credit to your school.

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.

As a result of the inspection on 7 and 8 May 2008, the school was asked to:

- raise standards and improve the achievement of all students
- improve the consistency of teaching and learning
- improve the capacity of middle leaders to bring about improvements in teaching, learning and students' achievement.

Having considered all the evidence, I am of the opinion that at this time the school is making good progress in addressing the issues for improvement and in raising students' achievement.

In the 2008 Year 9 tests and Key Stage 4 examinations, students' achievement improved and was satisfactory overall. However, in English and mathematics there is still some way to go to eradicate the legacy of underachievement. The overall improvement is the consequence of a number of successful actions. Attendance has been improved and the early completion of coursework is a focus. More regular assessments, and the effective use of data to identify underachieving students and to determine appropriate action, are more rigorous. For example, boys were identified as underachieving in literacy. Specialist subject teachers helped raise their

motivation and improve achievement levels by using drama to bring a Shakespeare text to life.

More consistent teaching and learning have resulted in improving standards, which are now broadly average. In 2008, at the end of Year 11 English and mathematics remained the weakest core subjects. However, GCSE results in 2008 were the best ever, with a 50% increase in the number of students attaining five A* to C grades. This exceeded the school's target. Students attained above average standards in vocational qualifications such as the GCSE in applied engineering. The alternative basic skills programme enabled more students to attain five A* to C grades. At Key Stage 3 standards improved in mathematics and science.

The school has embedded a wide range of monitoring procedures designed to improve teaching and learning. This includes valuable feedback and peer observations between teachers, with one student noting that 'teachers are interacting more'. The result is that teaching has improved. The number of outstanding lessons has increased, although some inadequate teaching remains. The school acknowledges that more good teaching is required if students' progress is to be accelerated. It is on track to meet ambitious, short-term improvement targets.

More practical activities and positive relationships help ensure that students are willing to participate. Learning objectives are now explained in lessons. Students say expectations have increased and lessons are more challenging. One student said, 'We now get tired by the end of our lessons.' However, inconsistencies remain. Not all teachers plan work that appropriately challenges students of different abilities. In these instances, progress slows down. In marking, there are inconsistencies in the degree to which poor presentation is highlighted, incorrect spelling picked up and clear guidance given as to the next steps in students' learning.

The role and impact of middle leaders has been well developed. All have dedicated time for monitoring and carry out a variety of activities. They observe lessons, and work alongside the Teaching Strategy Group to improve teaching. Improved assessment data enable them to track students' progress, be more accountable and have an increased focus upon standards and achievement. New leaders such as the Standards and Progress managers track students' progress, hold teachers to account and monitor the impact of any interventions. The data manager collates and analyses the assessment information, and makes this easily accessible to staff, students and governors.

Middle leaders now have good opportunities to develop strategic management skills when they work with senior managers on specific projects such as developing active learning methodologies.

Self-evaluation has a sharper focus on standards and achievement. More thorough monitoring ensures that leaders have a good understanding of their areas of responsibility, and identify relevant development plans. Not all use measurable

success criteria in this planning, consequently they are unable to identify the impact of their actions accurately.

The school is a specialist arts college. In 2008, the number of students attaining A* to C grades in GCSE dance were well above average, and in drama above average. This constitutes good improvement. In art, the number of students gaining A* to C was below average but the proportion attaining A* to G was above average. New courses such as photography have been introduced, and resources such as a modern dance studio help motivate students. Specialist staff are helping to improve the quality of teaching. For example, teachers' use of their voice and body language is an aspect of teaching being developed by drama staff.

Support from the local authority is satisfactory. It contributed to a whole-school teaching review that led to training and coaching support. Regular monitoring visits take place and a School Improvement Partner works alongside the school.

I hope that you have found the visit helpful in promoting improvement in your school.

Yours sincerely

Michael Pye
Additional Inspector