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Mr P Benaiges
Headteacher
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North Yorkshire
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Dear Mr Benaiges

Special measures: monitoring inspection of The Wensleydale School

Following my visit with Les Schubeler and Keith Worrall, Additional Inspectors, to your school on 31 March and 1 April, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector to confirm the inspection findings.

The visit was the third monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures in January 2008. The monitoring inspection report is attached and the main judgements are set out below.

Progress since being subject to special measures - satisfactory

Progress since previous monitoring inspection – satisfactory

This letter and monitoring inspection report will be posted on the Ofsted website.

I am copying this letter and the monitoring inspection report to the Secretary of State, the chair of governors and the Corporate Director of Children and Young People's Services for North Yorkshire.

Yours sincerely

Christopher Keeler
Her Majesty's Inspector

Special measures: monitoring of the Wensleydale School

Report from the third monitoring inspection on 31 March and 1 April 2009

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the headteacher, members of the teaching staff, the chair of governors, a representative from the local authority and a group of students.

Context

There have been no significant changes since the previous monitoring visit.

Achievement and standards

This aspect was not evaluated in depth during this monitoring visit. In 2008, the achievement of students in Year 11 was inadequate. From generally above average standards on entry, students reached well below average standards overall in Year 11. The gap between boys and girls was significantly greater than it should have been. The school is confident that about two-thirds of students will attain five GCSE passes at grades A* to C in 2009 with over 50% gaining 5 A* to C including English and mathematics. These figures are based on teachers' assessment which has been moderated by the local authority. Furthermore, the attainment gap between boys and girls is predicted to be significantly reduced. If these predictions are confirmed it would represent significant progress. Students make satisfactory progress in Years 7 to 9. Improvement has been made in tracking and reporting progress in Year 9 but there remains further work to do across Key Stage 3.

Progress since the last visit on the area for improvement:

- Establish robust, consistent systems to track the progress of all students and implement measures to tackle underperformance quickly to close the gaps between boys' and girls performance – no judgement made on this visit.

Personal development and well-being

Standards of behaviour have improved significantly since the school first went into special measures in January 2007. At the time of the previous monitoring visit behaviour was described as satisfactory overall and this remains so. However, there is still room for improvement and the school leadership is conscious of the need to raise expectations of what constitutes acceptable behaviour and good working habits as they impact on students' progress. In some lessons the behaviour of a minority of students, in the main boys, is unacceptable. Features include; an undeserved lack of

respect towards their teachers; attention seeking by calling out during lessons, and a failure to appreciate the implications of their actions on their future life chances and those of their peers. Some inconsistency remains in the implementation of agreed policy in respect of behaviour between faculties. Students that enter the school in Year 7 are not given sufficient guidance as to standards of behaviour and the seriousness of the ramifications of non-compliance. Changes to the line management arrangements of faculty heads have recently been made so that they are more directly accountable to the headteacher with a view to ensuring a consistent approach to student management. Improvements in teaching have made a contribution to improved behaviour and learning attitudes of many students and this is impacting positively on their progress.

Progress since the last visit on the area for improvement:

- Implement consistent approaches to improve student's behaviour, ensuring students know the standards of behaviour expected of them – satisfactory

Quality of provision

The quality of teaching and learning in the main school has improved since the last inspection. A higher proportion of good as opposed to satisfactory teaching is now evident. However, teaching is not consistently good enough to enable all students make the necessary good progress and overcome past underachievement. Elements of outstanding teaching were seen in some lessons, although these were rare. Nonetheless, significant work has been undertaken by the school's leadership with the support of the local authority and a neighbouring successful school to improve teaching and learning, most notably through improved lesson planning procedures and the work of three separate teaching and learning groups, which is now resulting in many teachers becoming more reflective about their classroom practice.

In effective lessons, teachers demonstrate high expectations and plan their lessons well to meet the needs of all students. Students are engaged and enthusiastic because they are suitably challenged. Good questioning promotes students' thinking skills and makes appropriate demands of students of all abilities. Opportunities for students to assess their own and others' work are also more frequent, particularly at Key Stage 4. Students are secure in knowing what is required of them in order to meet their learning targets. Teachers continue to provide good opportunities for students to work together, share ideas in small groups and develop confidence through discussion in larger groups. The use of information and communication technology (ICT) by both students and teachers is becoming more widespread and is adding a further dimension to students' learning by generating higher levels of interest and, in some cases, active participation among all students.

A significant minority of students still fail to engage productively in lessons. A noticeable lack of urgency is evident in the indifferent, casual attitudes of too many students, especially, but not exclusively, boys. The ability to work independently is

still underdeveloped in most students. The quality of marking and feedback remains variable. Some students are provided with a clear understanding of how to improve. However, this is not universal practice and in some subjects students still receive brief comments about their work which offer little to support their understanding of how well they have done or what they should do next.

The quality of teaching in the sixth form is satisfactory. Lessons are well matched to the needs and abilities of the students. Students are made fully aware of the success criteria which are shared explicitly at the start of the lesson. Lessons are well planned and provide a high level of student engagement through the effective use of starters and plenaries. When undertaking group work, students work well together and share their learning. Use of ICT as a tool for teaching in the sixth form is variable. While several curriculum areas make extensive use of ICT to deliver highly engaging and interesting lessons, other subjects use it simply as a means of presenting information. In the lessons observed, all students demonstrated a positive attitude to learning. Where teaching is good, teachers maintain a lively pace characterised by enthusiastic delivery. Teachers are secure in their subject knowledge and bring the benefits of their expertise to the learning by using a variety of teaching strategies to engage and motivate students. However, learning objectives too often refer to the tasks to be completed as opposed to the skills, knowledge and understanding to be gained. Students also have limited opportunities to develop the skills of independent learning.

Progress since the last visit on the area for improvement:

- Improve teaching and learning by tailoring work to match student's needs and establishing consistent approaches to ensuring all students know how well they are performing and what to do to improve - satisfactory

Leadership and management

The senior leadership team has been strengthened by the recent appointment of an acting deputy headteacher who also has responsibility for the provision for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. The local authority has offered to fund the appointment of another deputy headteacher in order to secure the capacity of the senior leadership team. This is a positive step and is worthy of serious consideration as it would enable the headteacher to move towards a more strategic role and strengthen lines of accountability, particularly in relation to middle leaders. Heads of faculty are now line managed directly by the headteacher.

Leadership in the core subjects of mathematics and science is secure and the monitoring of teaching and learning is developing well. A newly appointed head of English commenced in January 2009. He has quickly evaluated the effectiveness of the department and as a result, has a good understanding of its strengths and areas requiring improvement. Priorities include; a review of curriculum provision so that it allows for progression and enables teachers to understand what needs to be covered

and when; regular monitoring of teaching and learning and close tracking of students' progress. These areas are entirely appropriate. Leadership of the faculty also demonstrates high expectations of students and staff coupled with a clear vision that embraces high standards and achievement. It is imperative that the head of English should focus on improving the faculty before taking a greater role in improving teaching and learning across the school. In respect of leadership and management of the core subjects, the current state is the strongest that the school has experienced for some time. However, while the impact of middle leadership is improving, the role and impact of some faculty leaders remains underdeveloped.

Leadership and management of the sixth form are firmly committed to putting the interests and achievement of learners first. A key aspect of this commitment is the recent appointment of a pastoral assistant learning mentor (PAL) who undertakes significant work with students providing academic guidance, mentoring and support to those at risk of underachievement. The head of sixth form has initiated a number of appropriate developments that have had a positive impact upon student outcomes. The intention to broaden curriculum provision to encompass more vocational courses is wholly appropriate in light of the low uptake currently of Level 2 and Level 3 courses. Monitoring and tracking systems are robust and rigorous. Regular monitoring of student progress enables faculty leaders and the head of sixth form to identify those students at risk of underachievement and initiate necessary action and support by the PAL. The head of sixth form has identified a change in culture and ethos as a key priority in the future development of the sixth form, particularly in respect of its engagement with the main school and the wider community. However, the leadership team in the sixth form do not reflect and evaluate the impact of recent developments in sufficient depth. In addition, care should be taken not to undertake such a large number of actions at once in order to avoid overload and thereby potentially reduce the impact and effectiveness of initiatives.

Hitherto, the impact of specialist status on the work of the school has been minimal. Under the direction of a dynamic, new faculty leader, things have started to develop. School data indicate that standards are rising and there is a higher take-up of students at Key Stage 4 for triple award science. Enrichment visits for most year groups have taken place this year and helped to raise the subject's profile in the school. Links with primary schools have been renewed and work on allotments is forging stronger links with the local community. There are well considered plans to extend the rural dimension of the school's work by introducing a horticultural element to the Year 7 curriculum and by developing the school farm.

The governing body is becoming increasingly involved in the development of the school. The introduction of link governors to faculties is a good way of recognising improvement and raising issues that require clarification. The governing body demonstrates a good balance between challenge and support.

Progress since the last visit on the area for improvement:

- Ensure middle leaders adopt consistent approaches to quality assure teaching and learning - satisfactory

External support

The local authority is providing a good level of support to the school by arranging the secondment of senior teachers and in reviewing progress on a regular basis. The school would welcome support with regard to the provision for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. The recent school review undertaken in February 2009 is not only accurate but has proved to be helpful in taking the school forward. These reviews need to be complemented by regular monitoring on specific issues by the link adviser.

Priorities for further improvement

- Further develop the ability of all faculty leaders to monitor provision and empower them to drive change in line with agreed school policy.
- Focus more sharply on the quality of provision and expectations of students' attitudes to learning in Key Stage 3.
- Address the unacceptable levels of behaviour during lessons of a minority of students in Key Stage 4.
- Embed and consolidate the improvements to teaching that have been realised to date.