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Mrs Fitz-Gibbon
Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Fitz-Gibbon

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 16-17 September 2008 to look at work in literacy and numeracy.

As outlined in my initial letter, as well as looking at key areas of literacy and numeracy, the visit had a particular focus on how effectively the school is narrowing the gap for students at risk of not reaching the expected level of attainment for their age. The visit also considered 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 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 and students, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of students' work and observation of eight part-lessons.

The overall effectiveness of provision to narrow the gap in literacy and numeracy was judged to be good.

Achievement and standards

Students' achievement in literacy and numeracy is good and standards are high.

- Students make good progress in literacy and numeracy. Progress is particularly good in English.

- High standards in literacy and numeracy are evident in the above average proportion of students, around two-thirds, who obtain good passes in five subjects at GCSE, which include both English and mathematics. In recent years, virtually all students have left the school with passes at GCSE level in English and mathematics.
- A small number of students start in Year 7 with standards below the level expected for their age in English and mathematics. They make very good progress in Key Stage 3 and nearly all reach the expected standard in these subjects by the end of Year 9. However, for some of these students, progress slips in Key Stage 4 and they do not obtain grade C passes in English and mathematics at GCSE.
- Students who join the school with little knowledge of English usually do well, often exceeding predictions at GCSE by a considerable margin.

Quality of teaching and learning of literacy and numeracy

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

- The effectiveness of teaching is seen in the good progress students make from their starting points.
- The lessons observed, all with lower attaining students were, for the most part, taught well. Staff have good relationships with the students and precise, methodical teaching of small groups in calm, work-focused classrooms was successful. Students generally enjoyed the challenge of demanding work. They tried hard and responded well to opportunities to evaluate their own learning.
- In sessions of additional literacy and numeracy support and those to develop study skills there was a sympathetic but businesslike atmosphere and the work was tailored well to match students' learning.
- The quality of marking of students' work varies greatly, particularly in Key Stage 3. In Key Stage 4 much marking helps students to see what they need to do to meet their targets. In Key Stage 3, marking is sometimes cursory and comments on students' work are more often too general to indicate how it might be better.
- For the few students at an early stage of learning English specialist teaching is of a good quality, but the teaching observed showed that in class lessons such students' needs are not as well met.

Quality of the curriculum

The quality of the curriculum for literacy and numeracy is satisfactory.

- The curriculum in English and mathematics enables students to make good progress in developing literacy and numeracy skills.
- The additional support for students who are at risk of not reaching the standard expected for their age is especially effective in Key Stage 3.
- Students have some planned opportunities to use literacy and numeracy skills across subjects and to use information and communication technology (ICT) skills in English and, to a lesser extent

mathematics. However planning for such opportunities is not yet embedded across the curriculum.

- The school has begun to extend the range of options for students beyond traditional academic courses. Students who take these options respond positively and are successful.

Leadership and management of literacy and numeracy

The leadership and management of provision to develop pupils' literacy and numeracy skills are good.

- The senior team is committed to providing schooling that ensures no student falls through the net and that, by the time they leave, pupils obtain qualifications in literacy and numeracy and have the skills they need to prosper in further education training or employment.
- Students' progress towards their predicted results in the end of key stage tests and examinations is monitored soundly. Last year the frequency of such monitoring was increased and senior staff believe this contributed to higher standards.
- At whole-school level, planning for improvement shows effective self-evaluation and appropriate matters have been given priority. At subject level, the planning seen was of variable quality. Nonetheless, action planning for English is of a good quality.
- The school analyses performance data to support development planning. However, it does not sufficiently evaluate the effectiveness of additional provision to support learning in literacy and numeracy.

English as an additional language

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

- The vast majority of the students for whom English is an additional language are bi-lingual. Few are at the early stages of learning English. In recent years, such students have made very good progress. However, this term an influx of students with very limited English has highlighted the limitations of the school's mainstream teachers to support them.
- Specialist teaching is of a good quality but is available for only part of the week so, at present, these students have only one session each week with a specialist teacher.
- Other staff are not trained to teach English as an additional language. They adapt work for the students and check their understanding frequently but the quality of support in class lessons lags behind the specialist teaching.

Inclusion

Inclusion in literacy and numeracy is good.

- Staff are determined that every student should achieve functional literacy and numeracy and acquire study skills. Students' success in examinations shows that this commitment is fulfilled effectively.
- The school's records show that additional support leads to an accelerated rate of progress for many students, especially in Key Stage 3.
- Analysis of performance has shown a relationship between the extent of students' participation in school life and their success in school work. Consequently, the school has extended the range of opportunities for students to take responsibility and contribute to the life of the school.
- The senior team has recognised the need to adapt and extend the school's curriculum to meet students' changing needs and has begun to provide non-traditional options.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- ensuring that students who catch up to the standard expected for their age by the end of Key Stage 3 do not fall behind in Key Stage 4
- planning more extensive opportunities for students to develop and use literacy and numeracy skills across the curriculum and to use their skills in ICT to support learning of literacy and numeracy
- evaluating with more rigour the impact of interventions aimed at enabling lower attaining students to achieve as well as they can.

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

Pat Kime
Her Majesty's Inspector