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Dear Dr Nepaulsingh

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 06 and 07 November 2008 to look at work in literacy and numeracy.

As outlined in the initial letter, as well as looking at key areas of literacy and numeracy, my 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 evaluated the level of expertise within the school to support students with 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 senior managers and students, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of students' work and observation of seven lessons and visits to registration and other settings.

The overall effectiveness in narrowing the gap for students at risk of not reaching the expected level of attainment for their age in literacy and numeracy was judged to be good.

Achievement and standards

Achievement in literacy and numeracy is good.

- Almost all students enter the school with literacy and numeracy needs because they are recently settled in this country. Almost all the girls have English as an additional language.

- Students make outstanding progress in literacy with most reaching standards in reading and spelling expected for their age within two years.
- Progress in numeracy is satisfactory. The school has had difficulties with staffing in mathematics.
- Standards at the end of Key Stage 3 are well below the national average for 2007. However, by the end of Key Stage 4, students achieve above average standards.

Quality of teaching and learning of literacy and numeracy

The quality of teaching and learning for students working below the expected level of attainment for their age is good.

- Specialist teaching within the literacy support programme is outstanding. Teachers are very familiar with the modern computer technology and the software programmes available to develop literacy.
- An experienced team of teaching assistants, familiar with a wide range of languages, provide effective and specialist support for girls most recently arrived in the United Kingdom.
- Students come into a secure and well-organised environment in which they feel supported and helped as individuals.
- Their individual needs are precisely identified and their progress is very closely monitored.
- Students value lessons in which they have opportunities to develop their skills and confidence in speaking and listening, for example in English, citizenship, and drama.
- Teachers regularly identify and share lists of key words to be employed and used during lessons, but reference to them thereafter is inconsistent. Some teachers miss opportunities for further literacy development
- Students are extremely keen to answer questions and debate. They work hard and are keen to make the best progress they can.
- Marking is satisfactory but there was no evidence that marking of students' work has a particular emphasis on supporting literacy and numeracy across the curriculum.
- Schemes of work refer to aims and objectives for literacy, but these references tend to be generic and aspirational.

Quality of the curriculum

The quality of the curriculum for students working below the expected level of attainment for their age is outstanding.

- There is a strong emphasis in the curriculum on developing literacy and numeracy skills, particularly literacy.
- The percentage of teaching time allocated to English and mathematics is above average.
- Small class sizes enable teachers to provide high degrees of support to students who need it.
- Teaching assistants each work with 20 students, but they provide support to a wider range of students within the classrooms.

- Support arrangements for students with significant literacy and English as an additional language needs are excellent. Students are identified by a comprehensive system of tests to assess their needs and then placed in groups to receive targeted support. Their progress is closely monitored and reviewed.
- All students are encouraged, when appropriate, to take a qualification in their first language.
- The school has a good range of vocational programmes that matches the needs of students very well. There is a strong programme of work related learning and good arts related provision, stemming from the school's specialist status. These elements of the school's curriculum contribute to the good literacy and, to some extent, numeracy provision.
- There is excellent provision to support literacy and numeracy out of normal hours. Extra sessions are provided after school, at lunchtime, and there is additional provision on Saturday mornings.

Leadership and management of literacy and numeracy

The leadership and management of provision for students working below the expected level of attainment for their age are good.

- You are a highly regarded leader who has established a happy and supportive ethos which enables the majority of the girls to make good progress. In most cases this experience enables them to achieve and participate in further learning.
- You are supported by an experienced team of senior leaders who are very aware of the needs of the girls as they arrive at the school.
- Senior leaders are responsible for a well-established system of assessment and monitoring of progress. All students who receive specialist literacy programmes or those supported by a teaching assistant have individual education plans.
- School policies for literacy and numeracy do not make clear the expectations of literacy and numeracy coordinators.

English as an additional language

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

- The English as an additional language coordinator is a highly experienced and committed assistant headteacher who also acts as the school's special educational needs coordinator.
- The large team of support staff receive appropriate training and development opportunities.
- Mainstream staff have had some training for English as an additional language.

Inclusion

Inclusion of students working below the expected levels of attainment for their age is outstanding.

- Handsworth Wood is a highly inclusive school which provides a secure, caring environment. The school fosters pupils' gradual inclusion by developing their skills, confidence, and a sense of belonging.
- Attendance figures for the most recent academic year are broadly average. The most up to date figures for this year indicate that levels of attendance have risen.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- review the expectations of the head of English and head of mathematics roles to strengthen monitoring and guidance functions
- clarify the expectations for heads of department and teachers across the school with regard to support across the curriculum for literacy and numeracy
- consider ways to develop and improve numeracy provision for students who are working below the expected level of attainment for their age.

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

Bob Roberts
Additional Inspector