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Mr B Huddart
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Dear Mr Huddart

Ofsted survey programme visit - National Strategies survey 2008-09

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 10 December 2008 to look at the impact of the National Strategies on raising standards and narrowing the attainment gap.

As outlined in my initial letter, the visit focused on the work of the National Strategies in improving outcomes for children and young people. The visit focused particularly on the school's view of the impact of the National Strategies and how this is evaluated.

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 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 outcomes of the visit included: interviews with the headteacher, the deputy headteachers and other key members of staff. Two part-lessons and the work of the Special Educational Needs department were observed. Relevant documentation was scrutinised.

The headteacher and senior leaders consider that the National Strategies have had a positive impact on improving the quality of teaching and learning. In particular, they identify Assessment for Learning as a strategy which has enabled teachers to deliver lessons that ensure all students to make at least satisfactory progress. The headteacher reports that the local authority (LA) has been effective in identifying those strategies considered most appropriate for the school's needs. For example, strategies around transition have helped forge productive links with feeder primary schools to better support students' transfer to secondary school.

Teaching staff consider that the focus on developing Students' skills in literacy has been influential in improving outcomes in English. However, they also consider that other strategies, for example, Year 9 booster sessions in English, have had limited impact, whilst the fact that the staff team includes a number of external markers and moderators has had a greater influence. Staff say this expertise ensures they are well placed to understand what students need to do to improve their work. Teachers are appreciative of the work of the LA consultants in helping them access the most appropriate initiatives to support learning. Nevertheless, they feel strongly that the National Strategies and other national initiatives produce a volume of material that is overwhelming. Constant change, they say, sometimes makes it difficult to embed and evaluate the usefulness of one initiative before there is a pressure to adopt and implement another.

Lesson observation provided evidence of teachers sharing lesson objectives clearly and giving students a range of opportunities to be involved in their learning, including paired and group work. In one lesson the business-like pace, frequent changes of activity and good use of questioning, kept students engaged and interested in their work. This contrasted with another lesson in which the main activity was too lengthy; students' interest began to wane and this resulted in some off-task chatter. As a consequence progress was satisfactory rather than good. The Special Educational Needs department used the dedicated space well to provide one-to-one support in a nurturing environment. The whole-school strategy to provide additional literacy sessions for the most vulnerable students has been identified as good practice within the LA. The small group observed on this visit were engaged well in their learning and making good progress.

Between 2005 and 2008 the proportion of students gaining five A* to C grades including English and mathematics has shown an improving trend. In 2008 the school closed the gap considerably to within three percentage points of the national average. However, the achievement gap for those students receiving free school meals widened in 2008. The upward trend in the number of 14-year-olds attaining the higher Level 6 continued in 2008 and the proportion achieving the expected level increased from the 72% seen in 2006 and 2007, to 74%.

I hope you find this feedback useful.

Yours sincerely

Cathy Kirby
Her Majesty's Inspector