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27 February 2009

Dr I Melvin
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Dear Dr Melvin

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 25-26 February 2009 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 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 parts of ten lessons.

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 outstanding.

Achievement and standards

Achievement in literacy and numeracy is outstanding. Standards are well above average. The achievement of students working below the expected level of attainment for their age is outstanding.

- Students join the school working at levels that are broadly average in English and mathematics but reach well above average levels of attainment by the end of Year 11.
- Lower attaining students, both boys and girls, make exceptional progress from Key Stage 3 to Key Stage 4.
- All groups of students including those from vulnerable groups make significant progress from Year 9 to Year 11.
- A higher than expected proportion of lower attaining students go on to achieve five or more A* to C grades at GCSE, including English and mathematics.
- Lower attaining girls make very good progress from Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 4.
- Very high GCSE results in languages play a significant part in raising students' levels of literacy.
- The behaviour and attitude of students in lessons is of a very high standard.
- Lower attaining students respond well to the help and support they receive and are willing to engage in practical activities and discussions.

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 outstanding.

- Teachers consistently have positive attitudes which are reflected in the feedback they give to students.
- Students respond well to lessons that give them the chance to make choices about their work and be involved in assessing how well they are doing.
- Students enjoy activities that are practical and give them the chance to engage in discussion about their work.
- Well staffed smaller groups in lower mathematics ensure that lower attaining students receive additional support.
- Teaching assistants play a valuable part in providing support for lower attaining students.
- The very best marking ensures students know exactly how to achieve the next grade or level.
- Students in Year 9 are not as secure about how well they are doing and what they need to do to improve.

Quality of the curriculum

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

- The well staffed homework club gives students a valuable opportunity to receive one to one support.
- Literacy and numeracy links are very strong in the curriculum planning of other subjects such as history and science.
- Students receive a wide range of curriculum subjects which contribute to their developing literacy and numeracy.

- An experience of practical subjects such as design and technology contribute significantly to their developing speaking and listening skills.
- GCSE courses starting in Year 9 such as media studies give students more time to achieve higher grades.

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 outstanding.

- The key to the success of the school in raising the achievement of lower attaining students is your inspired leadership, strongly supported by a senior leadership who have in your words a relentless optimism in raising standards. The ethos of the school is built on success.
- Many staff start their careers at the school and go on to receive further training within the school. This ensures there is a common approach and purpose within teachers.
- All English and mathematics teachers are specialists and leaders ensure that they all teach a range of abilities and levels.
- Achievement data is used well to track the progress of groups of learners and plan intervention at an early stage where necessary.

English as an additional language

This aspect was not a feature of this survey visit, although the school has trained a teaching assistant to act as a specialist in English as an additional language.

Inclusion

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

- The Thomas Hardye is an inclusive school where all groups of learners, including lower attaining students, make outstanding progress in literacy and numeracy, and do well to reach well above average levels of attainment in English and mathematics by the end of Key Stage 4.
- All groups of learners do very well including the very small number of minority ethnic students and those from vulnerable groups.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- ensuring that students in Year 9 receive consistent written feedback so that they know how well they are doing and what they need to do to get to the next level of attainment.

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

Mark Sims
Her Majesty's Inspector