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Dear Miss Phillips

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 27 and 28 January 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 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 nine 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 close to the national 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 below the national average in English and mathematics but reach average levels of attainment by the time they leave at the end of Year 11.
- The progress of all groups of students at both Key Stages 3 and 4 is exceptional including those at risk of not achieving the expected level.
- In the most recent GCSE examinations, the proportion of students who achieved five or more A* to C grades, including English and mathematics was close to the national average. The overall percentage has risen over the last three years.
- A higher proportion of girls than boys, who did not reach the expected level at the end of Key Stage 3, did not sufficiently close the gap in attainment by the end of Key Stage 4.
- There have been no permanent exclusions for two years.
- The level of attendance in school is very high.
- Students have regular opportunities to ensure their views are taken into account.

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.

- Relationships between teachers and students are excellent. Teachers use humour well to minimise any potential conflicts.
- Lessons are characterised by numerous opportunities for discussion through group work. Learning is purposeful and supported with tasks to which students can relate.
- Lesson planning has focussed heavily on “boy-friendly” activities so that lessons feature shorter activities, problem solving, movement around the classroom, drama and creativity.
- Information and communication technology (ICT) is used successfully in mathematics where students have access to software at home or school to complete coursework and homework.
- Students regularly check each others’ work against clear marking criteria.
- Students are very well informed by marking on how to improve their work. They receive instant feedback in mathematics through on-line marking. Occasionally marking is limited to brief comments of praise.
- Learning mentors and teaching assistants are deployed well to target students at risk of under achieving.

Quality of the curriculum

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

- Lower attaining students in Year 7 spend their time with fewer teachers, typically in humanities, to help prepare them for the transition from primary school.
- Students are starting GCSE courses earlier in Year 9 to give them more time to achieve a higher grade in English and mathematics.

- Students are given personalised and flexible timetables appropriate to their needs. Looked after children have particularly benefited from this personalised approach where they all have individual educational plans.
- The school has successfully raised the achievement of boys and girls in English and mathematics through single-gender teaching groups.
- Initially the focus was on boys' achievement but now clubs are being targeted at girls' interests too.
- Students are particularly appreciative of the time and commitment the staff give. Students trust staff because of their very high quality care, consistency of approach and regular communication and contact.
- There are fewer vocational opportunities for girls than boys.
- Some students miss out on some of their language lessons when they are withdrawn for additional literacy.

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.

- You and your senior leaders are relentless in monitoring underachievement through a programme of direct lesson observations and implementing appropriate intervention.
- The whole ethos of the school is successfully focussed on raising students' aspirations and self-esteem.
- The work of the intervention strategy group has been successful in tackling underachievement, mostly in boys, for example, through its academic champions league programme.
- All activities are carefully evaluated to assess their impact on achievement before they are repeated or modified.
- Primary liaison is a strength of the school, ensuring students are identified early and appropriate provision planned before they join in Year 7.
- The school has raised achievement through smaller classes for lower achieving students, tight setting and, where appropriate, single gender classes.
- Subject specialists are deployed to lower achieving groups.
- The school has recognised the importance of continuity of provision for its most vulnerable students and strives to ensure consistency in the teachers and support staff allocated to them.
- Links with parents and carers are very good.

English as an additional language

This aspect was not a feature of this survey visit.

Inclusion

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

- Woodchurch is a highly inclusive school where all groups of learners, including lower attaining students, make significant progress during their time in school and do well to reach the expected level of attainment English and mathematics by the end of Key Stage 4.
- The school has been particularly successful in engaging lower attaining boys whose progress in the most recent examinations out-stripped that of lower attaining girls.
- The provision for looked after and vulnerable students is excellent with high quality care from breakfast to tea time, linked to a strong focus on academic support. Students are recognised as having individual needs.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- ensuring that the highly successful strategies that have engaged lower attaining boys are extended and modified to ensure the achievement of lower attaining girls is raised further.

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