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22 May 2009

Mr Glyn Whiteford
Headteacher
Denefield School
Long Lane
Tilehurst
Reading
RG31 6XY

Dear Mr Whiteford

Special measures: monitoring inspection of Denefield School

Following my visit with David Williams and June Woolhouse, Additional Inspectors, to your school on 13 and 14 May 2009, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector to confirm the inspection findings.

The visit was the first monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures in December 2008. The monitoring inspection report is attached and the main judgements are set out below.

Progress since being subject to special measures – satisfactory
Newly qualified teachers may be appointed.

This letter and monitoring inspection report will be posted on the Ofsted website.

I am copying this letter and the monitoring inspection report to the Secretary of State, the chair of governors and the Director of Children and Young People's Services for West Berkshire.

Yours sincerely

Cathie Munt
Her Majesty's Inspector

Special measures: monitoring of Denefield School

Report from the first monitoring inspection on 13 and 14 May 2009

Evidence

Inspectors observed parts of 22 lessons; monitored behaviour around the school during teaching and break-times; scrutinised documents; and met with the headteacher, members of the senior leadership team, a group of middle managers, the chair of governors and another governor, a representative from the local authority and the School Improvement Partner.

Context

Since the last inspection, the acting headteacher and an acting senior leader have been appointed to their substantive posts. Three local authority governors have been appointed to strengthen the governing body and a new School Improvement Partner took up post in September 2008. A new head of science takes up her post in June and a head of English has been appointed from September 2009.

Achievement and standards

Improving achievement across the curriculum is the school's priority. It is addressing the legacy of low expectation among the student body robustly through, for example, mentoring and the provision of additional booster classes. This has increased attainment in Year 11 so that mock examinations results for five A* to C grades (47%) are very close to the target figure of 50%. Catch-up classes for Year 10 have been implemented this term in order to make a greater impact on next year's results. The success of the school's focus on maintaining pace and challenge in lessons is evident in the sound progress being made by students in other year groups. However, there has been too little time for this progress to have translated into sufficient improvement in standards across all subjects. In 2008 sixth form students made better progress at AS Level than at A level. This is partly because of the low starting point of some of the students and partly because some students were not entered for appropriate courses.

The school has identified that its aspirational targets, based on students' prior attainment, are too challenging for some students. Therefore, it intends to balance this by also setting baseline targets, which are based on the progress made by similar students nationally.

Achievement and standards in the Nursery were not reviewed during this visit.

Personal development and well-being

Attitudes and behaviour are largely satisfactory. Students are mainly polite and showed respect for their peers and for adults. They move around the site and

buildings considerately and take appropriate care in practical lessons, such as javelin throwing in physical education.

Attendance is monitored and analysed by year group, gender, ethnicity and special educational need. Student absence is followed up promptly. Strategies such as writing to parents personally to explain the impact of their child's poor attendance on exam grades have had a positive impact on attendance figures this year. In the main school, attendance for this academic year has improved and is just 1% below the local authority target of 92.5%. The percentage of persistent absenteeism has dropped from over 11% last year to just over 7%.

Analysis has highlighted issues that the school is working to resolve. These include the perceived link between girls' underachievement at Key Stage 4 and the drop in their attendance in Years 10 and 11, and the more positive attendance figures registered for Year 12 than for Year 13. Although they attend their lessons throughout the day, some older students do not register at the beginning of the morning and the current system is unable to reconcile this.

The Nursery children's personal development and well-being were not reviewed during this visit.

Progress since the last inspection on the areas for improvement:

- improve students' attendance – satisfactory

Quality of provision

Teaching

The school's analysis of lesson observations shows that teaching and learning are satisfactory in the sixth form and are increasingly good in other years. As a result of well-directed training, most lessons have a good pace and identify what students are to learn by the end of the session. Teachers help students to understand how to improve their work, often through the use of questions that challenge students' thinking. In the best cases, marking provides helpful feedback but this remains inconsistent. Time limits ensure that students are on task and ready to provide feedback to each other when required. Consequently, the level of challenge and expectation is rising and students are gaining confidence in assessing their own learning. When planning addresses the range of learning needs, with active participation through small-group discussion and problem solving, students respond enthusiastically and behave well. Conversely, where teaching does not interest or motivate them sufficiently, a small minority of students sometimes interrupt the learning of others. Homework provision in the school and teaching in the Nursery were not reviewed during this visit.

Care, Guidance and Support

The school has taken prompt action to improve the quality of its academic guidance and to ensure that it meets government requirements for record keeping in relation to safeguarding students. Efficient systems for tracking students' progress and attainment cover all subjects in Key Stages 4 and 5 and the core subjects in Key Stage 3. Leaders recognise that this is an area for development. In the Nursery, statutory health and safety and insurance requirements have been met and procedures for the handover of children at the end of the day have been improved.

A good range of strategies supports students who are identified as underachieving. Regular feedback is provided through termly reports and review days involving students, parents and form tutors. Improved guidance in the choice of subjects in Key Stage 4 and the sixth form is helping students to choose options that are better suited to their needs and aptitudes. From September 2009, three pathways will cater more effectively for sixth form students.

Progress since the last inspection on the areas for improvement:

- improve the rate of students' progress by ensuring that teachers' expectations are high, and that work set in lessons and for homework is interesting, challenging and done with good pace – satisfactory
- improve academic guidance in the written and oral feedback on students' work, in the setting and reviewing of targets, and in the advice about what courses to study – satisfactory

Leadership and management

The highly regarded headteacher provides an excellent model of commitment, determination and transparency in his leadership and management of the school. Staff and governors support him fully and together they are developing a strong team who are making a significant difference to their students' opportunities and experiences.

Weaknesses in provision and in the leadership and management of the Nursery have been clearly identified and with the insightful support of local authority advisor, work has begun to address these issues. The grounds have been developed to provide a more aesthetically pleasing area and work has commenced on improving the children's portfolios. A governor with experience in this area will liaise with the Nursery staff and support improvement in this setting.

Impressive improvements in the collation and dissemination of data have resulted in senior staff having a timely and accurate idea of student performance. Vibrant and effective senior leaders are working effectively with staff to eradicate weaknesses in teaching. Governors and heads of department have increased the accuracy of their evaluations and planning for raising standards is thorough.

Specialist technology college status has had a positive impact on the development of collaborative team work and on the provision of resources such as electronic, palm held devices. It has also contributed to improvement by promoting students' understanding of culture, developing new technology and inspiring innovation through methodical and tested frameworks.

Progress since the last inspection on the areas for improvement:

- Improve leaders' and managers' skills in reviewing, judging and lifting the quality of educational provision, both in the main school and in the Nursery: this includes governors as well as staff – good

External support

Staff appreciate the wide range of support and the excellent advice provided by the local authority advisory and management colleagues and the new School Improvement Partner.

The local authority statement of action provided a clearly set out, fully costed plan with target dates, relevant success criteria and named officers for each identified area of weakness. At this visit, the majority of the plan had been put into action, with discernible success in some areas. The support and challenge to the Nursery has begun to make inroads into the areas for improvement identified in the last report. The School Improvement Partner has supported the leadership team exceptionally well, assisting with the monitoring of teaching and learning and providing highly effective coaching for middle leaders. Denefield will be included in the new 'Gaining ground' programme.

The governing body was well supported in the appointment of the substantive headteacher and has had tailored training in a range of subjects. National Strategy consultants have effectively supported improvement in subject leadership; teaching and learning in the core subjects; and assessment for learning across the school.

