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8 December 2009

Mr Glyn Whiteford
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Whiteford

Special measures: monitoring inspection of Denefield School

Following my visit with, Andrew Lyons and Raye Allison-Smith Additional Inspectors, to your school on 24 and 25 November 2009, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector to confirm the inspection findings.

The visit was the second 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 previous monitoring inspection is good.
Progress since being subject to special measures: satisfactory.

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 second monitoring inspection on 24 and 25 November 2009

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, including parts of 26 lessons, scrutinised documents, met with the headteacher, members of the senior leadership team, a group of middle managers, the staff in the Early Years Foundation Stage, a governor and groups of students.

Context

Since the last inspection, a new head of science and a new head of English have joined the school. The governing body has appointed a new chair and vice chair. Tailored governor training has taken place. A member of the senior leadership team has been appointed as the line manager of the Early Years Foundation Stage staff and a local authority governor has responsibility for the oversight of this provision. The school is involved in the 'gaining ground' initiative and has established a close partnership with a high performing specialist school.

Achievement and standards

Examinations results in 2009 show improvements on the previous year. Pass rates for English and mathematics rose by 10% and 5% respectively. In addition, 46% of the students achieved passes in both subjects. Despite these considerable improvements, the school did not meet its targets for five plus A* to C passes at GCSE. Following disappointing science results, applied science was removed from the curriculum.

At AS level, standards showed improvement on previous years. At A Level, the pass rate rose by 3% to 96.7%. Almost 70% of students gained grades A to C. Although there were variations across subjects, students made better progress in their learning in 2009 than in previous years. In public examinations the school's value added score rose 20.5 points to 1007.6. Students taking AS-level examinations made better progress than those taking A levels. This is evidence of the positive impact of the improvements in teaching, assessment and mentoring at an earlier stage in students' learning. While the oldest students have benefited from these improvements for a shorter part of their school career, the school's records show that all students are now building suitably on their prior achievements. Most students are on track to achieve their expected grades and some should exceed them.

In lessons, attainment in the sixth form varied. It was above expectation in business studies but below in information and communication technology where many students had not followed a Key Stage 4 course. Standards were in line with expectations in media studies, geography, French and chemistry. In the main school, attainment in top sets was judged to be above average, in middle sets attainment was broadly in line with expectations, but in lower sets it was below and sometimes well below average. The school acknowledges that ineffective extended writing skills are preventing these students from making sufficient progress in some subjects. In the majority of lessons in the main school attainment was close to, or in line with, expectations. This is an improvement on the standards seen in the previous monitoring visit.

The children in the Nursery were socialising and speaking and listening at the expected level for their ages. However, opportunities to develop independent choice when playing are hampered by the inadequate storage of resources. This prevents children from selecting activities and materials freely and, as a result, they are not able to develop their interests and skills to best effect.

Personal development and well-being

Attitudes and behaviour have continued to improve. Students spoke with pride about changes in the uniform and recognise the improvements that have occurred in teaching, care and provision. They think the headteacher has made a significant difference to the life of the school. In well over half of the classes observed, the students' behaviour was good or outstanding; helping them to make the most of the opportunities presented in lessons. However, a small number of students show more challenging behaviour. These students do not take sufficient responsibility for their actions and rely too much on staff to keep them on track. Most staff do this effectively but time is wasted and the thread of learning can be disrupted for others while classes are brought back to a working attitude. Students report that behaviour has improved significantly around the school and inspectors found this to be so. The site and buildings looked more cared for and movement around the public areas was relaxed but purposeful. Changes to the timings of the lunch break have reduced the pressure on the canteen. Moving students away from the teaching areas at lunchtimes has reduced disturbance for those in tutor sessions.

Rigorous monitoring, and consistency in the way all staff deal with absences, has seen a significant improvement in attendance for some individuals this year. The school has developed a wide range of suitable rewards and sanctions. Strategies such as fast tracking have been effective in reducing the level of absence of the most persistent absentees. Attendance has improved across the school and is almost on target. Students recognise that this has helped them make better progress. The registration of older students has been improved and is fit for purpose. Senior staff have worked tirelessly to develop effective monitoring of, and mentoring for, all groups of vulnerable students.

Judgement

Progress since the last inspection on the areas for improvement:

- improve students' attendance – good.

Quality of provision

Teaching

Teaching practices are becoming more consistent within departments and throughout the school resulting in more effective learning in most lessons. In well over half of the lessons seen teaching was judged to be good and in a further quarter it was satisfactory. The school's own rigorous monitoring shows that the proportion of unsatisfactory teaching has declined steadily from over 30% in September 2008 to about 10% currently. While this is a cause for some celebration, the school is not resting on its laurels and suitable provision is in place to reduce this further.

Decisive action to address staffing issues in the science department has resulted in considerable improvement in the quality of teaching. The improvements seen are a direct result of these changes and show the positive impact that the new head of department has had already. Throughout the school, teachers are using the much improved tracking data effectively to build on students' prior learning. In many lessons students were working collaboratively on relevant materials and often lessons included practical activities that engaged students' interest and challenged their thinking effectively. One example of this was in a Year 13 chemistry lesson where students were using model kits to test their understanding of protein structures in natural polymers. Another example was in a Year 9 religious studies lesson where lower attaining boys, having first considered the feelings of Holocaust victims and guards, were making a personal response to the film that they had just seen.

Care, guidance and support

The school meets government requirements for record keeping in relation to safeguarding students. In the Early Years Foundation Stage statutory health and safety and insurance requirements are met. Staff continue to improve the quality of academic guidance given to students. A good range of strategies, including a 'learning to learn' course and one-to-one mentoring, supports students who are identified as underachieving. Regular feedback is provided and in all lessons, even in those with unsatisfactory features, teachers helped students to understand how to improve their work. In many classes students were using level descriptors to assess their own level of work and teachers were providing helpful advice on how to attain maximum marks in examination questions. Much of the marking seen gave pertinent

advice on what had been achieved and what was needed to reach the next level, although this aspect remains inconsistent.

In the sixth form, good academic mentoring and the structured programme of support mean that those falling behind are picked up at an early stage, their problems are identified clearly and they are provided with individualised support. Inspectors agree with the school improvement partner that this aspect of the school's work has improved greatly.

Judgement

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 – good
- 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 – good.

Leadership and management

The wise leadership of the headteacher steers the school in the right direction and is acknowledged by all as an important reason for the progress made so far. He in turn acknowledges the key roles played by the senior staff and the governors in developing effective strategic planning that supports change. The senior leadership team has continued to go from strength to strength. Senior leaders provide an excellent model for middle managers, many of whom are taking good advantage of the training and support provided within the school and the county. There is a steady improvement in the skills and knowledge of this group of managers and some are leading their departments effectively and are supporting staff well. However, the senior leaders, rightly, have retained responsibility at this stage for driving improvement forward in the quality of teaching and in curriculum development. The governing body continues to develop well. It uses the available data well to challenge the school effectively.

Judgement

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 – satisfactory.

External support

The school has made good use of its links with its partner school to increase opportunities for staff development. As was the case at the last monitoring visit, all

staff spoken to appreciate the wide range of support and the excellent advice provided by the local authority advisory and management colleagues and the School Improvement Partner (SIP). The local authority has provided very good support and challenge to the Nursery that has made inroads into the areas identified in the last report. For example, visits to excellent practitioners have been made, showing the staff what improvements are possible. However, more work is required to enable the Nursery to fulfil its potential.

