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26 November 2009

Mr D Willson
Acting Headteacher
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Dear Mr Wilson

Special measures: monitoring inspection of Stretford Grammar School

Following my visit with Christine Harrison and Jon Lovgreen, additional inspectors, to your school on 23 and 24 November 2009, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the inspection findings.

The visit was the second monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures in February 2009. The monitoring inspection report is attached and the main judgements are set out below.

Progress since being subject to special measures – good

Progress since previous monitoring inspection – good

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 Education and Early Years Services for Trafford Metropolitan Borough Council.

Yours sincerely

Marguerite McCloy
Her Majesty's Inspector

Special measures: monitoring of Stretford Grammar School

Report from the second monitoring inspection on 24 and 25 November 2009

Evidence

Inspectors carried out 30 lesson observations and observed other aspects of the school's work. They scrutinised documents and met with members of the senior leadership team and other staff, groups of students, and representatives from the governing body and local authority.

Context

The school continues to be led by the acting headteacher and associate headteacher, in an arrangement supported by the local authority and facilitated by the governing body of Sale Grammar School. Since the first monitoring visit, the governors are recruiting for the substantive post of headteacher and the selection process is underway for an appointment for Easter 2010.

There is currently one teacher on long-term sickness absence. Staffing changes took place prior to the start of this academic year in September 2009, most of which were known about and planned for during the summer term. Seven teachers left the school. Twelve teachers joined the school, some on part-time or temporary contracts and one as an acting assistant headteacher on secondment from another high school in the local authority.

Students' achievement and the extent to which they enjoy their learning

Standards of attainment across the school remain high. As reported in the June 2009 monitoring visit, the school's assessments predicted a small rise in the proportion of Year 11 students achieving the highest GCSE grades A* to A. Unvalidated data from 2009 examination results confirm this, with 43% of students attaining five or more A* to A grades. This is actually a 6% improvement since the 2008 results and is now just 2% below the school's challenging target. However, within this positive picture the proportion of students attaining grades A* to A in English fell significantly in 2009. The school was aware of some disruption in that year group due to staffing changes and other factors that affected their performance. Despite the school's efforts to chase up students' coursework and provide intervention and revision sessions, a number of students missed their challenging target grades in English.

Students now enjoy most of their lessons and when teaching is really effective there is a buzz of excitement throughout the class. More interesting and active approaches, with group work and discussion, are leading to more stimulating lessons. The progress that students made in lessons observed during the visit was always at least satisfactory and often good. Most students concentrate well and play an active part in lessons,

asking questions when they need further clarification. Few lessons are now affected by the 'low-level chatter' noted in the February 2009 inspection, as this is mostly dealt with by teachers, although some students feel that it can still be a distraction. A small minority of teachers do not set clear enough guidelines for talk and attention levels during oral work. Brisk questioning which allows students time to think and answer is a good feature of many lessons. A weaker feature in some lessons is the missed opportunities to follow up students' ideas.

Other relevant pupil outcomes

Students are attentive, positive and keen to do well. Their personal development was good at the time of the last inspection and remains so. Behaviour and attitudes are good, though on occasions, some boys are rather too relaxed and lack a sense of urgency about their work. Some girls tend to be rather quiet in class, particularly where teachers accept answers from volunteers rather than directing questions to test out the understanding of those less willing to answer.

The effectiveness of provision

During the visit, no Year 11 classes were observed as students were taking their mock examinations. Thirty lessons were observed across a range of subjects in all other year groups, including the sixth form. The quality of teaching is improving further because of the significant efforts of senior managers and teachers. Extensive lesson monitoring is a regular feature. Most teachers appreciate its value and how the ensuing dialogue about learning can help them improve. While the school has an accurate picture of the strengths and weaknesses of teaching, there is an occasional tendency to be overgenerous in judgements. This is because of the very detailed focus on teaching processes rather than how well students are learning. Lessons are planned to the school's consistent format and students talk appreciatively about how lesson objectives are clear and usually well explained. Improved information about students' standards of attainment and potential is giving teachers a clearer steer on how to plan lessons to challenge the differing levels of ability in classes. This is improving provision for the most able students, although the tasks they are set can be predictable and lacking in imagination.

Marking has improved and students comment that it is much more helpful in giving guidance. Most 'formal' pieces of work are assessed and students are given individual targets for improvement, often noted down for reference. Students have an accurate idea of their standards and progress. Teachers make success criteria more explicit so that students are learning more from commenting on and assessing each other's work. However, more could be made of quick references to skill levels and their grade implications for tasks in lessons. Many books show neat work and presentation is improving. Some notes and draft pieces done under time pressure are written in neat book sections, giving students mixed messages about neatness and accuracy levels. A

small minority of teachers are not diligent enough in following up incomplete or poor quality work in students' books.

At the time of the previous monitoring visit, the school had detailed plans in place for improving the curriculum and these were implemented at the start of the new school year. This has introduced better arrangements for information and communication technology (ICT), personal, social and health education, citizenship and physical education. In addition, the opportunity to study double award science, rather than three separate sciences, offers more appropriate option choices for students in Key Stage 4. The school now meets all statutory requirements for the curriculum in both Key Stages 3 and 4, and leaders have taken the opportunity to enhance the quality of the curriculum being offered, for example, with more specialist teaching of personal and social education and citizenship. The timing of the school day has been adjusted to make it easier for students to take part in extra-curricular activities, some of which have been moved to lunchtime. Nevertheless, students' involvement in extra-curricular activities is still limited by difficulties in being able to stay late after school when they have a long way to travel or have other commitments. New sporting extra-curricular activities have been introduced in the sixth form, but the absence of physical education within the sixth form curriculum remains a weakness in the provision for these students.

Students are generally happy about the levels of care, guidance and support provided for them. Staff know the students well and place equal importance on pastoral care and academic guidance. Students value this and several spoke to inspectors about how members of staff will 'go the extra mile' in giving their time to provide support and advice should this be needed. The mentoring system for Year 11 students and the guidance for Year 12 students in the transition to sixth form studies are also appreciated.

Progress since the last visit on the areas for improvement:

- Improve the quality of teaching and learning so more of it is good or better – good
- Ensure that information on students' performance is used consistently and effectively to meet challenging targets – satisfactory
- Provide a curriculum that meets statutory requirements and is better suited to students' needs and interests, especially in Key Stage 4 – good

The effectiveness of leadership and management

A restructuring of the senior leadership team came into effect at the start of the autumn term, taking into account the school's changing needs as its capacity to improve is strengthened. Senior leaders make the school's vision and expectations clear. They are successfully driving the pace of improvement and holding staff to

account for their role in raising students' achievement. Clear roles and responsibilities support the implementation of the school's performance management arrangements. There are appropriate links between teachers' individual targets for improvement, their subject department targets, and those in whole-school action plans. Induction procedures and information for teachers who are new to the school have enabled them to quickly become part of the team. There is a common view that, despite the inevitable demands on their time and workload, staff feel well supported. Communication across the school is effective and transparent; staff are consulted and appreciate the 'open door' approach of the leadership team.

The improved knowledge and confidence of subject leaders make an effective contribution to quality assurance systems as these are becoming embedded in the school. Any underachievement of individual students, for example in particular subjects, is being identified quickly and actions taken to remedy this. More staff now understand that all teachers have leadership responsibilities in the classroom, for example in ensuring that students' learning and progress are monitored and improved. Well-focused professional development opportunities have contributed to this. In particular, a whole-school training day at the start of the term enabled staff and governors to work together; this was much appreciated and helped to develop very good relationships and understanding of each other's roles. The chair of governors meets with senior leaders on a regular basis. The vice-chair of governors led a recent session on developing the school's vision based on a set of shared values, receiving positive feedback from staff. The governing body also meet with the School's Improvement Partner, establishing constructive dialogue to review progress and hold leaders to account. Governors worked well with guidance from the local authority when advertising and recruiting for the substantive headteacher post and were pleased with the good level of interest generated. Interviews are due to take place before the end of this term.

The school is aware that its specialist school status is not yet being used to full effect in raising standards or in giving a particular scientific dimension to the general life of the school. Leaders and managers know what needs to be done and have adjusted planning in the light of guidance they have received. However, full implementation of the plans has been delayed by the absence of the director of specialism. Nevertheless, there has been some progress in developing science and mathematics as leading subjects in the school. Both subject departments have, with support, successfully improved their own teaching and are starting to share their expertise with staff in other subjects. The school works with local primary schools but has not so far been sufficiently rigorous in evaluating the impact of its work in this respect. The leader of the specialism is now receiving support from a colleague in another specialist science school, the specialism has been relaunched and there is a shared determination to use its status to better effect. Exciting plans exist to work with the local community on making better use of a local park and the school is investigating the possibility of introducing a wider range of science courses into the Key Stage 4 and sixth form curriculum.

The well-thought-out and extensive racial equality policy has been considered by staff and students, and it has been available to parents for comment. Leaders and governors are aware of the potential to incorporate this into an all-encompassing equalities policy so that its impact can be evaluated as part of the school's analysis of the performance of different groups of students. There has been steady development of community cohesion. The school has sought views and is encouraging dialogue with the local community about the use of its facilities. It seeks opportunities for students to be involved beyond the school. Recent work by Year 10 students on a Black History Month project was of particular value to both the students and the community. Participation in a public debate, about the importance of freedom of speech as a basic right, likewise gave students insights into views and experiences beyond those they would normally experience. While in its early stages, and at this stage only having an impact on small groups of students, the initiative is soundly managed and gaining momentum.

This monitoring visit included a check on the school's safeguarding procedures and found them to be secure and meeting current requirements.

Progress since the last visit on the areas for improvement:

- Improve the effectiveness and consistency of governance and leadership and management at all levels – good
- Systematically monitor and evaluate the impact of both the school's equality policies and action taken to promote community cohesion – satisfactory

External support

The school has made good use of significant additional finances from Greater Manchester Challenge and the local authority. These have been well targeted towards the school's most important needs, particularly in ensuring that temporary appointments and secondments were quickly made to strengthen leadership and management. External support has also facilitated additional opportunities for professional development activities for staff, including: training for middle leaders; visits to other settings to observe and share best practice. The School's Improvement Partner and local authority advisers have worked alongside senior and middle leaders to develop expertise in moderating lesson observation judgements.

Priorities for further improvement

The school should continue its work on the five priorities identified in the February 2009 inspection.