

Serco Education
Boundary House
2 Wythall Green Way
Middle Lane
Birmingham
B47 6LW

T 08456 40 40 40
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.ofsted.gov.uk

Direct T 0121 683 2048
victoria.mortimore2@serco.com

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Mr Stephen Cox
Headteacher
Aston Fields Middle School
Drummond Road
Bromsgrove
Worcestershire
B60 2ET

Dear Mr Cox

Ofsted monitoring of schools with a notice to improve

Thank you for the help which you and your staff gave when I inspected your school on 10 December 2009 and for the information which you provided before and during my visit. Please pass my thanks to the chair of governors, pupils and staff for the time they gave to share their views with me.

Following the last inspection a new headteacher has been in post since September 2009. The school leadership team has also been temporarily augmented through the addition of an acting Deputy Headteacher and two acting Assistant Headteachers from the school's existing staffing.

As a result of the inspection on 4 and 5 June 2009, the school was asked to:

- raise standards in Key Stage 2 by ensuring that full and frequent use is made of all assessment information to track students' progress, set challenging targets and ensure that underachievement is quickly identified and remedied
- ensure all teachers make full use of assessment information to inform their lesson planning so that work is precisely matched to the needs of all students
- ensure that students are regularly informed about the progress they are making, so that they have a better understanding about how they can improve their work and reach the targets set.

Having considered all the evidence I am of the opinion that at this time the school is making good progress in addressing the issues for improvement and in raising the pupils' achievement.

The 2009 English and mathematics national test results at the end of Year 6 were below average and indicated low levels of progress. Since the inspection, pupils are making better progress as a result of improvements the school has made to teaching and learning. This is most evident at Year 6 where pupils are now making good progress. When compared to other year groups, pupils make less progress in Year 5 but effective action is being taken to remedy this situation. Pupils spoke very positively about the greater challenge they experience in lessons. This is because teachers are paying much more attention to enabling them to reach the highest level, particularly in English and mathematics. The school is much more accurately assessing pupil progress and rapid action is being taken to ensure support is provided to any pupil in danger of falling behind. The better, more consistent use of teaching assistants is enabling pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities, to make improved progress.

The school's plans communicate a clear set of priorities and high ambition. The switch to more challenging targets has been used to raise expectations generally. Pupils' progress is now reviewed far more frequently and steps are being taken to ensure teacher assessments are reliable so there is not an over-reliance on formal testing. Assessment information is analysed increasingly well, for instance to regularly check the school is on course to reach its targets. Crucially, this information is being used to hold teachers to account for the progress their pupils make. The school's senior leadership team are ensuring that the enthusiasm of staff is well directed towards improvement.

The emphasis on increased accountability has been matched by the development of improved approaches to learning. The school has agreed a whole school approach to learning based on its identification of best practice. The results of this were apparent in many of the lessons observed during the visit. All lessons include pupil friendly succinct learning objectives. In the better lessons teachers link these directly to pupils' targets using criteria that are sometimes generated by the pupils. In the less effective lessons teachers are not ensuring pupils are sufficiently aware of what they must do to achieve success.

In most lessons, teachers further reinforce the importance of the learning objectives by stressing the importance of application to the real world. For instance, in a lesson on long multiplication, pupils' motivation was enhanced because the teacher helped pupils appreciate the occupations where such a skill might be needed. Teachers are now using assessment to design activities for different ability groups. Teachers regularly review learning as the lesson develops in order to check on pupils' understanding and further clarify the required outcomes. In the more effective lessons, teachers are targeting questions on specific groups of learners and have adopted strategies that require all pupils to consider their responses. Evidence was seen of teachers modifying plans in lessons in the light of pupils' responses. Most teachers are sensitively recognising that pupils have covered some topics previously and take account of this in their teaching.

Pupils' work is regularly marked and comments to help pupils improve are included. In the best practice seen, these comments link to individual targets and teachers ensure pupils respond to these suggestions. A noteworthy success is the development of peer and self-assessment, encouraged by the higher profile given to the levels pupils are expected to achieve. Higher attaining pupils possess more of the independent learning skills needed to take advantage of this clarity of expectation. Lower attaining pupils experience a great deal of interaction with adults so they are clear about what they must do to improve. The school is aware that middle attaining pupils need further guidance to enable them to improve. The levels pupils are expected to attain are stated in the front of pupils' books. In the best practice seen, pupils and teachers are highlighting when there is evidence of levels being attained. In addition, expectations are further raised by the inclusion of levels above those associated with their targets, in order that teachers can fully exploit the occasions when pupils make exceptional progress.

The quality of support provided by those external to the school is satisfactory. The local authority adviser, consultants and the School Improvement Partner, are providing support that is helping the school improve. With the authority's support partnership are developing with other local schools in order to develop a consistent view of standards. The local authority statement of action originally submitted to Ofsted following the school's inspection in June 2008 was not fit for purpose. The statement has been improved although there have been delays in the school receiving support in some areas.

I hope that you have found the visit helpful in promoting improvement in your school. This letter will be posted on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Kevin Sheldrick
Her Majesty's Inspector