

Tribal Education
1-4 Portland Square
Bristol
BS2 8RR

T 0300 123 1231
Text Phone: 0161 6188524 Direct T 0845 123 6001
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk Direct F 0845 123 6002
www.ofsted.gov.uk email:sarah.cartlidge@tribalgroup.com

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

Dear Mr Whiteford

Special measures: monitoring inspection of Denefield School

Following my visit with Deborah Wring and Robert Smith, additional inspectors, to your school on 6 and 7 July 2010, 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 fourth 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 – good

Progress since previous monitoring inspection – good

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 the Governing Body and the Director of Children and Young People's Services for West Berkshire.

Yours sincerely

Mary Massey

Her Majesty's Inspector

Special measures: monitoring of Denefield School

Report from the fourth monitoring inspection on 6 and 7 July 2010

Evidence

Inspectors observed parts of 24 lessons, scrutinised documents and met with the headteacher, the Chair of the Governing Body and vice-chair, senior staff, teaching and non-teaching staff and groups of students.

Context

The school has reorganised staffing to ensure that it matches the needs of the curriculum. This was achieved through a combination of voluntary redundancy, staff redeployment and natural turnover

A new partnership governor has been appointed, and elections are under way for two parent governors. The school is in the process of appointing a new manager and two more permanent staff for the Nursery.

The school will be re-roofed and all the toilets refurbished during the summer holidays. A new science/technology block is scheduled for completion in May 2012, and planning for improved nursery accommodation is under way.

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

The school's predictions for the current Year 11 indicate that GCSE results are likely to be slightly above the national average this summer and thus continue a steady upward trend over time. The anticipated improvement in science attainment is particularly marked. There was a legacy of underachievement from previous years, and students in Year 11 who were not making enough progress were accurately identified early in the year. Interventions were put in place to ensure that these students met their targets through, for example, extra classes and one-to-one tuition. Every student in Year 11 received mentoring over the year, and the considerable personal commitment of many teachers to ensuring individual students' success has had an impact on the results they will achieve. Evidence for this can already be seen in module and coursework grades.

The tracking system used to monitor students' progress is now used very effectively to provide data for analysis and target setting, and so is able to provide robust evidence to demonstrate that students in other year groups are now making faster progress. The school is well aware of where there needs to be further acceleration, and this has been shared with staff. For example, inspectors observed some teachers making a conscious effort to ensure that girls took an active part in lessons, in order to ensure that they made progress. Students with special educational needs

and/or disabilities continue to make satisfactory and sometimes good progress. The school has recognised the need to tackle some students' low literacy skills, and is beginning to use tutor time to support this. A coordinated and strategic approach to encouraging literacy across the curriculum is at an early stage of development.

The progress that students make is linked to the quality of teaching. Where teachers are providing pace, exciting activities, students rise to the challenge and enjoy their learning so both behaviour and progress are good. Students say that teachers are now providing a greater range of interesting activities, helping them take more responsibility for their progress and keeping them busier in lessons. However, teachers' expectations of students are not consistently high enough, particularly the presentation and completion of their work. As a result some students do not take enough pride in their written work.

A new system was introduced this year to ensure that homework (now referred to as extended learning) is more valuable and supports learning more effectively. Students report that the quality and marking of homework has improved, but some older students say that sometimes teachers do not take account of the pressure of work in other subjects, for example from module tests and coursework. Overall, students value both the opportunity to complete some work in school during tutor sessions and the support they receive from their tutor. As a result of evaluation, the recording system will be modified for the next academic year with the return of students' diaries.

Progress since the last visit 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

Other relevant pupil outcomes

The atmosphere in school is calm. Inspectors found students articulate, friendly and happy to engage in conversations. They work cooperatively in groups, and generally contribute well to lessons, although unless actively encouraged, some girls still remain passive. Diversity is valued and there is an atmosphere of tolerance of difference. Behaviour across the school is good, and exclusions continue to fall. Although there are some instances of challenging behaviour this is generally managed well, and only manifests itself when teaching is less stimulating and activities are poorly matched to students' needs. Students acknowledge and appreciate the presence of senior staff around the school and checking on lessons during the day. They describe the headteacher and his senior team as having a high public profile, and feel that they are known as individuals.

Senior leaders regularly check students' views and act on their comments. Students feel that their opinions and ideas are heard and taken seriously. Sixth formers have

been invited to have a greater involvement with younger students and now feel that they have a positive contribution to make to the main school; for example supporting teaching and helping in the Nursery. They also provide advice and guidance to Year 11 before they enter the sixth form. Newly appointed prefects, from Year 10, take a pride in their contribution to the school.

Attendance continues to improve and is now higher than expected for this academic year. The proportion of students who are persistent absentees has halved in the last 18 months, and is now lower than the national average. Systems are based upon high expectations from senior leaders, which are shared with staff, parents and students. As soon as one target is met, new, more challenging ones are set. This process has led to a systemic change in culture.

Progress since the last visit on the areas for improvement:

- Improve students' attendance – good. This area for improvement has now been dealt with very comprehensively.

The effectiveness of provision

The proportion of good or better lessons continues to rise, and the proportion that is inadequate is now very small. Overall, relationships between staff and students are positive and promote learning. Teachers plan thoroughly, and generally show an awareness of different learning styles. Lessons are now less dominated by teacher talk, and good quality questioning is used to encourage students' thinking. However, in some lessons observed by inspectors, students were anxious to get going and the teacher did not capitalise on this enthusiasm. The lack of a 'hook' to set the context and a snappy start to the lesson slowed progress. Teachers are not always thinking sufficiently about students' learning and so do not always provide activities that ensure progression. Next steps to learning are not always clearly written into planning and linked to precise learning objectives, and different resources to meet a range of students' needs are still lacking in some lessons. In some lessons teaching assistants were used very effectively to support learning, but this is still inconsistent in quality. Some teaching assistants have extensive experience and knowledge of specific needs, and this expertise is increasingly valued by teaching staff. A programme of professional development for teaching assistants is just getting under way. Overall, support for students with special educational needs and/or disabilities is effective, particularly for those who are withdrawn from lessons.

Developing the role of the tutor to give a far greater emphasis on academic guidance has been a priority over this academic year, and there are still more changes planned that will strengthen the impact of this role. Students are very positive about the changes that have already taken place, saying that the opportunity to discuss their progress regularly is very helpful, and encourages them to take more responsibility for their learning. Good quality oral feedback from subject teachers helps students progress and the quality of marking has improved,

although there is still some inconsistency between teachers. Students are able to say how well they are doing, what their targets are and largely know what they need to do in order to improve. However, they are not always given time in lessons to act on the advice they are given.

Year 10 students are very positive about the quality of advice they were given to help them decide on GCSE courses. The school helps them focus beyond Year 10 and 'looks into the future' for them, ensuring that the choices they make are relevant. The school has also sought the views of this year group in order to provide information for planning the sixth form curriculum. Sixth form students are equally positive about the guidance and support they receive. Marking consistently provides them with targets and next steps in learning, and they discuss their progress regularly with their tutor. Students particularly value the opportunity to assess one another's work regularly in lessons.

The curriculum in both main school and sixth form broadly matches students' needs and has improved from previous years. The school is aware that it does not yet provide enough vocational courses that will appeal to girls. Students report that extra-curricular provision, particularly for sport, has improved.

Progress since the last visit on the areas for improvement:

- 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

The effectiveness of leadership and management

The headteacher and his senior team have ensured a good balance between providing appropriate intervention to tackle the legacy of underachievement for older students, and embedding long-term sustainable change in the quality of teaching and learning. They have developed a culture of openness where staff feel confident to share their strengths and weaknesses and benefit from each other's skills. High quality, practical training has been provided regularly for teachers over the year, for example, through peer observation, coaching, showcasing, sharing resources and pooling ideas. The positive results of this training were clearly seen by inspectors, demonstrating teachers' commitment to improving their teaching and thus outcomes for both current and future students. Teachers feel very accountable for their contribution to raising standards. There are secure, well-understood systems and structures for monitoring the quality of teaching that are contributing to sustainable improvement. The analysis of data is thorough and encompasses all groups, identifying areas that need further development. There is a constant effort to ensure that the data are reliable and used effectively to drive improvement. The actions of the senior team are based on constant monitoring and evaluation, modifying and developing wherever necessary.

Middle leaders are starting to take a much stronger role in school improvement and are benefitting both from the expertise of more experienced colleagues and from recent training. Their judgements about the quality of teaching are perceptive and accurate. They now feel part of the management team, accept the accountability that their role brings, and are enjoying the opportunity to share expertise.

Governors have a clear view of the school's strengths and weaknesses as a result of regular monitoring. They regularly challenge the headteacher and ask difficult questions. Extensive training means that they now understand the data and the implications of the 14–19 curriculum, and how to make best use of their regular visits to the school and manage the finances confidently. They are just starting to consider how to improve the way in which they canvas and then act on the views of parents and students.

After the last monitoring visit, the school decided, with the local authority, to enhance provision in the Nursery. The use of an early years consultant, three mornings each week, is having a positive impact on aspects of health and safety, on staff skills in identifying and assessing next steps in learning, and on the environment. The process of appointing a new manager and two permanent members of staff is now under way.

The impact of the school's technology status is developing, with a technology week taking place at the end of the summer term, and the school continues to make a positive contribution to technology provision in local primary schools. It has not yet had a marked impact on outcomes across the school.

The school's single central record meets statutory requirements.

Progress since the last visit on the areas for improvement:

- Improving 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

The School Improvement Partner continues to provide very effective and focused support to develop the skills of senior and middle leaders and governors. He has also made a substantial contribution to improving the quality of teaching and learning. The local authority advisory service is also maintaining its input to individual departments but is mindful of the need to encourage the school to develop independence. An independent early years consultant has made significant improvements very quickly. Her measured approach has helped to maintain morale and give confidence to the staff.