

Tribal
Kings Orchard
One Queen Street
Bristol
BS2 0HQ

T 0300 123 1231
Text Phone: 0161 6188524
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.ofsted.gov.uk

Direct T 0117 311 5359
Email: christina.bannerman@tribalgroup.com

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Mr A Wills
Headteacher
Ferndown Upper School
Cherry Grove
Ferndown
Dorset
BH22 9EY

Dear Mr Wills

Serious weaknesses monitoring inspection of Ferndown Upper School

Following my visit to your school on 13 January 2015 with Christine Raeside HMI, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the outcome and findings of the inspection. Thank you for the help you gave during the inspection and for the time you made available to discuss the actions which have been taken since the school's previous monitoring inspection.

The inspection was the third monitoring inspection since the school was judged to have serious weaknesses following the section 5 inspection which took place in January 2014. The monitoring inspection report is attached.

Having considered all the evidence, I am of the opinion that at this time:

The school is making reasonable progress towards the removal of the serious weaknesses designation.

However, I recommend that the school receives a further monitoring visit before it is next inspected.

This letter and monitoring inspection report will be published on the Ofsted website. I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the Chair of the Governing Body, the Director of Children's Services for Dorset and the Education Funding Agency.

Yours sincerely

James Sage
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection which took place in January 2014

- Improve the quality of teaching across all subjects, especially in English, so that it is consistently good by:
 - ensuring teachers use the information about how well students are doing to plan lessons that help all students learn more, especially the most and least able
 - making sure that the work set for students is always set at the right level so that all students, including those who are disabled and those with special educational needs, achieve as well as they can
 - ensuring that activities and approaches used in lessons capture students' interests and help them become more involved in their learning and think for themselves
 - ensuring that marking gives students clear and detailed feedback on how well they are doing, and information about how to improve their work, reach their targets and understand examination requirements
 - improving the consistency in performance in the sixth form by eradicating the variances of teaching between AS and A2 examination courses.
- Raise attainment and accelerate progress for all groups of students, especially boys, the most able, students who are eligible for the pupil premium, disabled students and those who have special educational needs, across a range of subjects, especially in English, by:
 - ensuring the gaps in attainment and progress between different groups of students across the school are narrowed so that they all achieve well
 - ensuring that students who are persistently absent achieve better examination results by attending more regularly and that strategies are in place to ensure they catch up
 - reducing the number of fixed-term exclusions so that all students are able to achieve their potential by being in school and attending lessons.
- Ensure leaders and managers, including governors, secure more rapid improvements by:
 - increasing the pace with which changes are introduced to improve achievement and progress
 - ensuring there is greater consistency in the quality of teaching and marking across all subjects
 - developing the skills of governors so that they can check that leaders are bringing about necessary improvements
 - sharing more widely the good practice that currently exists in school.
- An external review of governance should be undertaken in order to assess how this aspect of leadership and governance may be improved.
- An external review of the school's use of the pupil premium should be undertaken in order to assess how this aspect of leadership and governance may be improved.

Report on the third monitoring inspection on 13 January 2015

Evidence

The two inspectors met with the headteacher, other senior leaders and the Chair and another member of the Governing Body. They looked at key documents provided by the school and analysed the school's data on students' current progress and achievement. Inspectors visited lessons, some with school leaders, to look at students' work and talk to them about it. One inspector looked specifically at English, including visiting lessons, looking at students' work and meeting with the curriculum leader for English and the senior leader with oversight of teaching and learning. The lead inspector looked at the sixth form, including meeting the sixth form leader, looking at the school's analysis of current achievement data, visiting lessons and talking to students and looking at their work.

Context

There have been no senior staff changes since the previous monitoring visit in September 2014. However, four teachers joined the school at the start of this term. Several teachers are on long-term absence. There have been significant staff changes in the science department.

The quality of leadership and management at the school

The school continues to improve, but senior leaders need to do more to raise the quality of teaching further. Senior leaders have reinforced all of the strategies they had already put in place and taken additional actions to address the areas for improvement identified at the monitoring visit in September 2014. For example, senior leaders have instigated formal capability procedures for teachers where necessary. However, these actions have not led to the level of improvement expected by senior leaders in all areas of the school. In particular, the steps taken to improve teaching have had only partial impact.

Students' achievement overall has improved, but gaps in achievement still remain between boys and girls and between disadvantaged students and others, particularly in English. In mathematics, the large majority of students make at least good, and many better, progress. However, students with the lowest prior attainment do not make as much progress from their starting points as others. The improvements indicated in the school's own analysis of students' current achievement are not fully supported by the quality of work seen in some lessons and students' books. Attendance is improving and is above the national average for all groups, except for around 20 disadvantaged students whose attendance is not good enough. Students' behaviour has improved and fixed-term and internal exclusions have fallen significantly. However, in too many lessons students show little enthusiasm for their work because teachers fail to inspire their interest.

The role of the three heads of house, which changed at the start of this school year, has been effective in identifying those students that need support. The new house managers deal with immediate concerns about attendance and behaviour, releasing time for the house heads to focus on improving achievement. House leaders accurately identify those factors that could adversely affect a student's achievement so that they can put support in place. However, not all teachers follow up the agreed actions.

The quality of teaching and students' achievement in English is improving. Gaps in achievement between boys and girls and between disadvantaged students and others remain too wide, but are narrowing. However, there is still too much variation in the quality and quantity of students' work. The attention given to improving achievement in Year 11 is having a positive impact. Students are making better progress because teachers are giving them clear advice about how to reach their target grades. This is developing students' confidence and raising their aspirations. The best teaching inspires students' best efforts because it is focused well on filling gaps left by previously weak practice.

However, there is too great a contrast with Year 9, where too many students are working below their capabilities. Some teachers are assessing Year 9 work inaccurately, giving the false impression that it is better than it is. This lowers expectations and compromises the reliability of whole-school measures of progress. Some Year 9 students have too little work to show for the autumn term, or their books show limited development of ideas and skills over time. Although there are examples of well-developed sequences of work which show a deepening of understanding, this is not yet the norm and is more easily found in girls' books than boys'.

Achievement in the sixth form has improved as a result of strong leadership, changes to the curriculum, improvements in teaching and better use of students' independent study time. Good arrangements are in place for those students who join the sixth form without at least a grade C in English and/or mathematics. The leader of the sixth form is clear about what needs to improve further and is providing focused support for those teachers that need it. In many subjects there is still wide variation in the achievement of students who enter with the same starting points.

Senior leaders have not yet done enough to tackle the inconsistencies in teachers' use of assessment information, in tracking students' progress and using this information in their planning and teaching. This is limiting the school's rate of improvement. The system introduced by senior leaders is a step in the right direction, but is not fully understood or applied well by all teachers. As a matter of urgency, senior leaders must ensure that all teachers follow the example of the best practitioners in the school so that they:

- take full account of the information they are given about their classes at fixed assessment points

- analyse assessment information, for example the results of tests, to identify strengths and weaknesses in the class's understanding, as well as that of individual students
- accurately monitor the progress of all students in the topic being covered and quickly identify those at risk of, or actually, falling behind and those for whom they need to set even higher expectations
- use all of this information about progress to ensure that their teaching leads to all students making at least good progress
- identify specific strategies for dealing with individual students and liaising with the house leaders when necessary
- quickly report to their curriculum leader information about any students not making sufficient progress, and make sure that the house leaders are aware of this
- ensure that their marking of students' work takes full account of what they know about the student's progress and that the feedback they give makes clear to the student what they need to do to improve
- allow time for students to make these improvements and give them the help they need.

Since the previous monitoring visit, the Governing Body has responded well by introducing monthly checks on the school's progress against the key improvement points arising from the last inspection and monitoring visit. Governors are clearer about how to judge success and about the wider range of evidence they need. However, they need to do more to test the reliability and accuracy of reports from school leaders.

Strengths in the school's approaches to securing improvement:

- The approach taken in Year 9 to deal with the large number of students who join the school with very low levels of reading and writing has been particularly effective. The students currently in Year 10 who benefited from this have made rapid progress. The school should consider how some of the strategies used could benefit other students.

Weaknesses in the school's approaches to securing improvement:

- Senior leaders' checks on the performance of each subject area are still not frequent and rigorous enough to ensure that all actions are applied effectively, and best practice is shared, across the school.

External support

The local authority has provided no specific support since the previous monitoring visit. The school has an informal partnership with an outstanding secondary academy in Dorset and is beginning to use this to provide support in those areas of the school that need it most, for example in providing external moderation of

assessment. Senior leaders and governors are now considering how to make more of this partnership, for example by carrying out subject reviews and helping governors gather their own information to hold the senior leaders to account more rigorously.