

18 October 2005

Mr J Chilvers
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Chilvers

SERIOUS WEAKNESSES: MONITORING INSPECTION OF STALHAM HIGH SCHOOL

Following my visit to your school on 26 and 27 September 2005 with my colleagues Sue Aldridge and John Francis, Additional Inspectors, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector to confirm the inspection findings.

The visit was the first monitoring inspection since the school was found to have serious weaknesses in February 2005.

This letter will be posted on the Ofsted website.

Evidence

The students' work and teachers' planning were examined and the school's documents were scrutinised. Meetings were held with the headteacher, senior staff, departmental heads, the chair of governors, the students themselves and two representatives of the LEA. Informal discussions also took place with pupils in lessons, and with staff.

Context

Until recently, the school had a long established staff, many working in the school a considerable number of years. New appointments have been made and the school is benefiting from the fresh ideas brought about by these changes. The senior leadership team is now smaller in number and the deputy headteacher retires at the end of this term. Governors are currently advertising for an additional assistant headteacher. The main foci of this inspection were on improvements made in teaching and learning where it was weak previously, leadership and management, particularly at senior and middle management levels, and the development of the curriculum.

Achievement and standards

In the Year 9 national tests in 2004, the results overall were at the national average. They were average in English and above average in mathematics and science. Results were comparable to those of schools where pupils had similar levels of attainment at the time of the Key Stage 2 national tests. In the 2004 GCSE examinations, results were close to the national average and part of an improving trend. However, compared with schools with pupils of similar prior attainment, the results were below average and lower than in previous years. This reflected unsatisfactory achievement overall. Girls performed better than boys and the gap was wider than the national picture.

In the 2005 Key Stage 3 national tests, compared with the 2004 results, standards were similar in English but were lower in mathematics and science. Overall since 2000, standards have risen with the greatest improvement in 2004 and 2005. There are no national figures available at present, but it is likely that standards for 2005 will be close to the national average. The gap between boys and girls is closing and is now smaller than the difference between boys' and girls' attainment nationally. The school's Key Stage 3 targets were exceeded in English and were close to those set in mathematics and science. The target the school set itself for the percentage of pupils reaching the higher Level 6 was exceeded in English and mathematics, but was not reached in science.

The 2005 GCSE results, overall, were lower than those in 2004, although the school's analysis shows that pupils' progress was similar to that seen in 2004. This was below average, although there were significant improvements in several subjects. Assessment data shows that this group of Year 11 pupils attained lower results than pupils in previous year groups. The school's targets for its GCSE results were not reached, although some results came close to these.

The pupils' progress in lessons was mostly satisfactory. It reflected the quality of the teaching. Progress was satisfactory in 14 of the 18 lessons seen, in three lessons it was good and in one it was inadequate. This lesson contained weaknesses which affected pupils' progress; insufficient attention and challenge were provided for the more able pupils and some activities were far too easy. Occasionally, in satisfactory lessons the pace of learning slowed because pupils spent too much time completing tasks which were too hard or too easy. Where progress was good, the work built carefully on what the pupils already knew and challenged them to deepen their understanding and develop their skills further.

Personal development and well being

Students' behaviour in lessons was satisfactory and often good. However, not all staff used the school's agreed strategies. On occasions this sent mixed messages to students. Students demonstrated good attitudes to work. This created the right conditions for learning and most teachers built on these positive attitudes well. Students settled quickly to their work and co-operated well. Effective use was made of paired and small group work, where appropriate. However, the way the pupils

were organised was sometimes limited by the constraints of the accommodation. Movement around the school was generally sensible and orderly and entry to school after break and lunch times was calm with students arriving reasonably promptly to lessons. Students feel safe from bullying and harassment and confident that they can access support when needed. They say, '*teachers always have time for us*'.

Assembly and form time shared common themes, such as global warming. Assembly involved the students well and created a sense of occasion. Form times have a much looser structure. While opportunity for reflection and discussion was created, much of this time was devoted to administrative matters. Occasionally, some pupils were under-occupied and the use of this time is not always monitored to ensure that pupils get the most out of it. Personal and social education are taught in specific lessons but opportunities are missed to support pupils' personal skills in the form sessions.

Attendance has improved and is now close to the national average.

Progress on areas for improvement identified by the inspection in January 2005:

- implement the school's behaviour policies consistently and rigorously in all lessons – satisfactory progress.

Quality of provision

The quality of the teaching was satisfactory overall. It was good in three lessons, satisfactory in 14 and inadequate in one. Where teaching was unsatisfactory, a few pupils' immature behaviour was insufficiently managed and their silliness slowed the pace of learning. Work was not adequately matched to pupils' abilities and they learned too little.

Overall, there was too much variation in the quality of teaching despite much of it being satisfactory. There were examples of lessons that were thoroughly planned where it is clear what all, most and some pupils were to learn. In other lessons planning was minimal, with too little attention given to the pupils' different starting points. Most classes were managed adequately and there were good relationships with pupils. Teachers have benefited from the National Strategy at Key Stage 3 and lessons followed a clear structure. However, in many the introductions were too long. Consequently, the final part of lesson was 'squeezed' and few teachers used this time effectively to assess what the pupils had learned. Little use of information and communication technology was seen. In addition, the school does not have any ways of displaying work interactively, to enliven the lesson and to take account of the different ways in which pupils learn. Many lessons used only a narrow range of teaching styles and some missed the opportunity to display information visually. Questioning was another area that varied. Some questioning challenged pupils well and pupils were well targeted. In a few lessons, pupils were asked to volunteer answers and in these, some pupils took little active part.

While there is adequate guidance for teachers on planning, teaching and learning, there is not enough insistence by leaders that procedures should be followed. Too much is voluntary and left to the individual teacher; for instance, teachers can produce planning in whatever way they want. The school has sensibly identified targets to improve the quality of teaching. However, it is unlikely to reach these until the characteristics of good teaching and learning are firmly embedded in lessons. Where intensive support has been provided to teachers to improve their teaching, this has had a positive impact. For instance, in history good progress has been made towards the teaching targets in the subject leaders' action plan; pupils were asked to justify their viewpoint, the pupils' skills in using sources were clearly evaluated and an increased number of pupils contributed in lessons by answering or explaining.

The school has satisfactorily implemented the plan for improving the curriculum at Key Stage 4. Pupils in Year 10 now follow one of four 'pathways', tailored to meet their personal needs. This approach allows for increased opportunities for vocational education and work related learning, where this is appropriate. For the most able pupils, there are opportunities to follow a wide range of courses leading to GCSE. The school is sensibly reviewing its original intention to offer as many as 11 GCSE courses to the most able pupils, as this has created excessive demands on pupils in terms of completing coursework.

The school's curriculum meets requirements. There is now sufficient time allocated to the teaching of religious education, so that the planned programme, reflecting the Locally Agreed Syllabus, can be taught in its entirety. The introduction of a theme for the week has increased opportunities for quiet reflection. Requirements for collective worship are met. A reasonable start has been made in planning to teach information and communication technology skills in all subjects. The thrust has come from the ICT co-ordinator, but as yet, not all subject leaders have embraced this in their own action planning. Suitable guidance is given on how teachers should include ICT in their lesson planning and additional ICT resources have been purchased, although there are no interactive whiteboards. The subject leader has commenced collecting samples of ICT work in subjects to show the work covered and the level of attainment.

Staffing issues have been successfully addressed and the proportion of non-specialist teaching has been reduced to a very small number of lessons in history and French. Accommodation still presents many limitations on teaching organisation and group work. However, the current building plans, now well advanced, should address many of the outstanding issues. The programme is on schedule to be completed in time for the reorganisation of schools in the area in 2007.

Progress on areas for improvement identified by the inspection in January 2005:

- ensure work is consistently challenging and matched to pupils' needs – progress has been inadequate;
- continue to appoint staff to fill posts and work with the local authority to improve accommodation – satisfactory progress;

- implement the good curriculum plans in Years 10 and 11 to meet the needs of pupils – satisfactory progress;
- ensure statutory requirements are met for religious education in Years 10 and 11, ICT across the curriculum and collective worship – satisfactory progress.

Leadership and management

The headteacher leads the school satisfactorily and demonstrates he has, with the senior leadership team, an adequate capacity to move the school forward. He has successfully raised staff morale and staff value the contribution the headteacher has made to their support.

The headteacher has a clear view of where the school needs to improve and has produced an adequate plan to remove the causes of the serious weaknesses and improve provision. Similarly, subject leaders have produced satisfactory plans which show how standards and the quality of teaching are to improve. However, no one has been identified to check on the impact of actions. While the work on improvement is keeping reasonably to time, some actions, such as improving teaching, are likely to slow without a greater determination for more rapid improvement.

The headteacher's oversight of standards and provision means he has a good knowledge of the strengths and weaknesses of the school. The school's summary of its strengths and weaknesses is reasonably accurate, although in parts it lacks evaluation. The senior management team has improved its team approach, with all members making a valuable contribution. They have more equitably delegated responsibilities in line with their status and the appointment of an additional assistant headteacher is to take place soon so that curriculum leadership can also be delegated. While the support for middle managers is effective and they are beginning to develop their skills (especially those on the national 'leading from the middle' programme), senior staff still need to ensure they pass on responsibilities, monitor the subject leaders' work and ensure that they fulfil their roles fully.

The pace of a few actions is too slow and needs to increase. Too much leeway is given with regard to planning and not enough rigour exercised in checking how teachers are planning and the effectiveness of it. Good practice is clearly apparent in some areas of the school but is not sufficiently shared.

The chair of governors is fully committed to the school and has taken a main lead in supporting it. Governors are now gaining a greater sense of their own role and the situation the school is in. They are taking greater responsibility for subjects and standards but there is still much to do to ensure that they fully act as a critical friend to the school. A recent monitoring course has helped them to gain a view of their role in holding the school to account. While the actions in the school's plan for governance are clear, governors do not have a detailed plan which outlines their strengths and weaknesses and defines their training needs.

Progress on areas for improvement identified by the inspection in January 2005:

- improve leadership and management by allocating responsibilities equitably, pushing forward improvements and supporting staff in their efforts to do so – satisfactory improvement;
- support governors in understanding the wide range of information they receive so that they are in a position to be critical and supportive – satisfactory overall.

External support

Good support has been provided by the LEA. The statement and action plan are clear and useful documents to support the school's improvement. The staff praise the support they have received and say that it has given them clarity in how they should go about fulfilling their respective roles and improve their teaching and leadership.

Main judgements

The school has made satisfactory progress since serious weaknesses were identified.

Priorities:

- increase the rigour and pace of improvement in the areas mentioned above;
- ensure that the work planned matches the differing needs of pupils and that more able pupils have activities which challenge them appropriately;
- make more use of ICT in lessons and ensure that subject leaders take responsibility for ensuring this is planned in subjects;
- share good practice and build on it.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the chair of governors and the Education Director for Norfolk.

Yours sincerely,

George Derby

Additional Inspector