

8 January 2007

Ann Davies
The Acting Headteacher
Woodlands School
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Nottingham
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Dear Ms Davies

SPECIAL MEASURES: MONITORING INSPECTION OF WOODLANDS SCHOOL

Introduction

Following my visit with Jill Bavin, Additional Inspector to your school on 14 and 15 December, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector to confirm the inspection findings.

This monitoring visit was the first since the school became subject to special measures in March 2006.

This letter will be posted on the Ofsted website.

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents, held a telephone call with the chair of governors, and met with the headteacher, associate headteacher, deputy headteacher, teachers, teaching assistants, groups of pupils, and a representative from the local authority (LA).

Context

Since its last inspection, the roll has reduced to 52 pupils as more appropriate placements have been provided for pupils with autism, including those with more challenging behaviour. The school now provides mainly for pupils with complex learning and communication difficulties, and associated behavioural difficulties such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). The school is still experiencing major staffing difficulties which continue to have a negative impact on the capacity for the school to improve. Classes have been re-organised so that pupils are now taught in age groups instead of disability

groups. The LA plans to re-organise special school provision in the future and after a period of consultation and careful consideration has decided not to close this school. Instead it has set a very ambitious target for the school to be removed from Special Measures by March 2007. Key staff have left and most of the teaching is provided either by supply teachers or teaching assistants. A strong link has been made with a local Academy to provide design and technology. An associated headteacher has been appointed to support school leadership and management.

Achievement and standards

At the time of the last inspection, pupils' progress was hindered by the high rate of exclusions, poor attendance, weaknesses in the curriculum and too much inadequate teaching. Although there has been satisfactory improvement in the curriculum and a reduction in the rate of exclusions, the achievement of pupils overall remains inadequate. Continued staffing difficulties continue to affect the quality of teaching and this impacts negatively on pupils' learning and progress. Pupils are not making sufficient progress in lessons because there is still too much unsatisfactory teaching in school, including unsatisfactory use of assessment to move pupils' learning forward. However, in the few good lessons seen, such as art and English, pupils made good progress in their knowledge and understanding. There is no effective back-up system in place for teachers and support staff to share assessment outcomes to enable pupils to build on their learning and make sufficient progress over time. Poor attendance by a significant minority of pupils impacts negatively on their progress. Most Year 11 pupils who regularly attend school are achieving satisfactorily in their accredited courses, which include the ASDAN Award, a range of Entry Level certificates and a small number of GCSEs, with nearly all Y11 pupils achieving at least one qualification in 2006. It is not possible to determine the progress pupils make towards their individual education plan (IEP) targets because these are too vague and are immeasurable. Most pupils make satisfactory progress in their personal and social development, reflected in improvements in attendance, in improved relationships and their participation in college courses.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the inspection in March 2006: No specific area identified (see area for improvement under teaching).

Personal development and well-being

Pupils say they enjoy school, especially art and food technology, and feel safe within it. They are enjoying the recent curriculum developments that give older pupils a chance to work with resistant materials at the local Academy, and give everyone greater access to computers. Since the previous inspection the school has reviewed and improved behaviour management policies and strengthened its partnership with parents. This has also been helped by

reducing the proportion of pupils with very challenging behaviour who join the school. This has contributed to the good progress in reducing exclusions from 23 fixed term exclusions during the autumn term 2005 to four fixed term exclusions and one permanent exclusion this term. Most pupils behave appropriately in lessons and are generally well behaved around school. Systems for recording attendance are more robust than in the recent past and because of this attendance rates appears to have fallen. The school is working hard to increase pupil attendance through awarding attendance certificates. This is beginning to have a positive impact. For example, this term, 68% of pupils have managed 100% attendance, compared with 49% of pupils for the same period last year.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the inspection in March 2006:

- Reduce the number of exclusions by taking more effective steps to manage and improve pupils' behaviour. – good progress

Quality of provision

The quality of teaching remains inadequate overall. Since the previous inspection the school has agreed a common format for lesson plans but too often learning objectives are not identified clearly enough. This constrains pupils' learning, prevents them from being involved in assessing their own progress and limits the assessment information available to plan further lessons. The absence of clear learning objectives and detailed individual assessment information means that work is not consistently adapted to suit the different abilities and needs of pupils. When lessons are inadequate too few pupils make sufficient progress because of these difficulties.

When teaching is satisfactory the practice in the classroom is often better than the planning. For example, in spite of a lack of clear learning objectives the organisation of the class and the resources being used means that pupils work at their own individual level and make sufficient progress in their learning in that lesson. In these lessons behaviour is managed effectively and good relationships between pupils and staff lead to a calm and purposeful ethos. However, there are relative weaknesses in some elements, such as the level of independence expected of pupils, or missed opportunities to extend pupils' thinking with skilful questioning. In these lessons work is adjusted for some pupils but not for others. The shared lesson objective may be clear,

although individual targets and expectations of different pupils are not identified in the planning. When teaching is good lessons proceed at a brisk pace helped by clear learning objectives and high expectations of pupils. Even

in these lessons a relative weakness remains in planning effectively to meet differing needs of pupils within the class.

There is not a strong enough link between assessment and lesson planning to ensure at least satisfactory achievement. Evidence from a combination of pupils' work and lesson observations demonstrates that too often a previously learned skill, such as cursive writing or multiplication, is not developed in subsequent lessons. The quality of marking is weak. Too much work is not marked at all. When there are written comments teachers celebrate effort or independence but rarely explain to pupils what skills or understanding they have achieved and how to move their learning forward. When work is graded against national levels the grade awarded is often inaccurate. Too often targets on Individual Education Plans are too vague to be helpful on a day to day basis and to enable staff and pupils to recognise success.

The school's curriculum now includes the required range of subjects. Recent changes have ensured that pupils are taught for the recommended time, and lessons now include French. There is an increased use of ICT throughout the school which pupils enjoy. The school has successfully used its links with a local Academy to introduce design and technology (resistant materials) for pupils in Key Stages 3 and 4 where it was previously lacking. Since the last inspection the school has also increased its range of accredited courses. These initiatives are too recent to have had a clear impact upon standards and achievement. Although medium term plans are now based on national guidance there is no structure in place to ensure that what pupils can already do is acknowledged and developed in each lesson.

Although pupils are well cared for and feel safe, the quality of support and guidance from teaching assistants varies significantly in different lessons. Sometimes they are deployed to manage the most inappropriate behaviour, whereas in other lessons they support learning by asking supplementary questions of pupils and helping them concentrate. Often they provide the key teaching role in a teacher's absence. Too often there is a very high staff ratio which impedes pupils' independent learning because they learn to rely too heavily on adult support.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the inspection in March 2006:

- Improve the quality of teaching and learning to make sure that the pupils' work is matched to their differing learning needs and that they make faster progress – inadequate progress
- To ensure the curriculum meets requirements - satisfactory progress

Leadership and management

The acting headteacher has worked hard since the last inspection to produce a realistic school action plan with clear timescales and success criteria to bring about improvements. However, the impact of this has been considerably hampered by continued staffing difficulties. This has resulted in the lack of an effective senior leadership team and inadequate improvements to subject co-ordination to bring about the necessary improvements to the quality of teaching quickly enough. The deputy head, who is able to provide a role model for good teaching has also needed to spend more time in supporting developments away from her classroom teaching commitment. The lack of a core stable group of good teachers means that the current subject co-ordinators do not have sufficient knowledge or skills to monitor their subjects sufficiently in order to improve the quality of teaching and learning and pupils' progress.

The support of the associate headteacher has improved the skills of the acting headteacher who is now more confident and assertive in dealing with staffing issues, which impact negatively on teaching and learning. She now monitors teaching and learning more systematically through regular lesson observation and half-termly scrutiny of planning. She has effectively developed the curriculum to overcome the shortcomings identified in the last report. The headteacher has a good knowledge of the schools' strengths and weaknesses and has evaluated its work satisfactorily. Governors have carried out a self audit of their skills and identified areas of training which are now planned. The chair of governors is providing good support for the school, particularly through regular visits and regular dialogue with the LA, in order to help the school move forward. Although a schedule of visits has been implemented from January 2007, strategic monitoring and evaluation by the governing body is not yet established firmly enough to have an impact on the areas for school improvement.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the inspection in March 2006:

- Improve the leadership and management at all levels, especially strategic planning, the monitoring and evaluation of all aspects of the school's work and the use of information to plan for improvement. – inadequate progress

External support

The LA has provided satisfactory support in reducing the numbers of pupils with autism on roll and providing ongoing advice to the school. However it has not been effective enough in ensuring that teaching improves. It has given careful consideration to the closure of the school and has decided that this is not in the best interests of pupils and to wait until its proposed re-

organisation of special schools before taking any decision on the long term future of the school. In the meantime the LA has put in place a range of support mechanisms, including an associate headteacher, which are having a positive impact on developing the role of the headteacher. The associate headteacher is being replaced with an executive headteacher and deputy head for two days per week for the Spring term. Their role is to support the leadership team, develop IEPs and develop the teaching assistant role within the school. The LA has also provided support from its Human Resources section to minimise staffing difficulties. However this has had a limited impact on improving the staffing situation and minimal impact on improving the quality of teaching and subject leadership in the school. The LA has assigned an educational consultant to the school for the spring term with a focus on creativity and improving teaching and learning 2007. It continues to monitor the school closely through assigned visits from the link adviser. However, the support provided by the LA has yet to have full impact on addressing the key issues of teaching and leadership, particularly subject co-ordination and senior leadership. Therefore the statement of action proposed by the LA does not sufficiently address the area of establishing a stable group of good teachers to raise pupils' achievements and strengthen subject leadership.

Main Judgements

Progress since being subject to special measures– inadequate progress

Quality of LA's statement of action – inadequate

Newly qualified teachers may not be appointed

Priorities for further improvement

- To improve the quality of teaching so that there is no inadequate teaching and at least 50% is good or better.
- To develop individual education planning so that targets are specific, measurable, achievable and suitably challenging.
- To ensure all assessment information is accurate and organised in such a way that staff can access it and use it to inform lesson planning, teaching and learning.
- To strengthen subject leadership and senior leadership within the school so that teaching learning and pupils' achievements within subjects are monitored and improved.

- The LA needs to ensure that more rigorous action is taken to address staffing difficulties which impact negatively on school improvement.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State the chair of governors and the Corporate Director for Children's Services for the city of Nottingham.

Yours sincerely

Declan McCarthy

Additional Inspector