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08 January 2007

Mr D Watchorn
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Dear Mr Watchorn

Ofsted survey inspection programme - Attendance for Learning in Secondary Schools

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit with Mike Maddison HMI on 11 October 2006 to look at your work in promoting attendance.

The visit provided valuable information which will contribute to our national evaluation and reporting. Published reports are likely to list the names of the contributing institutions, but individual institutions will not be identified in the main text. All feedback letters will be published on the Ofsted website at the end of each half-term.

The evidence used to inform the judgements made included: interviews with staff and pupils, scrutiny of relevant documentation, observation of five lessons and discussion with a representative of the local authority.

The overall effectiveness of the school's work in promoting attendance was judged to be satisfactory, with many strong features.

Achievement and standards in relation to attendance

- Attendance in the last full year was about 88% and unauthorised absence was about two and a half percent. In the first few weeks of the current term, attendance was better than this. Procedures for recording attendance as unauthorised are rigorous. The school logs measures of pupils' ability (cognitive ability tests) at different ages, and their scores on national tests at age 11 and age 14, against attendance. With some individuals, improved attendance is showing rewards in the classroom, for example, outperforming other pupils in a teaching set in which the pupil has been placed on the basis of past test marks. There are well documented case studies of pupils who

have seen success at GCSE against considerable odds, including a history of problems with attendance. For a few individuals, underachievement linked to poor attendance is more resistant to the help the school offers – generally due to particular learning difficulties or home circumstances.

- The school's attendance figures need to be considered in the context of the high number of pupils with learning difficulties and disabilities. Some pupils from distant parts of Manchester choose this school and it is favoured by many Muslim families of a variety of world wide cultural heritages. Some of these pupils have a range of religious obligations that can relate to school attendance. A large number of pupils join the school, or leave it, other than at the normal stages; some of the arrivals are from overseas.

Quality of teaching and learning in relation to attendance

- Five parts of lessons were seen; all were at least satisfactory and three were good. Pace was often brisk and relationships were good.
- Teachers generally knew well the pupils whose attendance was being tracked and were aware of improvement as a result of better attendance, or of on-going difficulties. In two classrooms, team teaching was effective in maximising support.
- Two of the lessons seen were in personal, social and health education (PSHE): the scheme of work for this explores highly relevant issues.
- Behaviour was generally good in classrooms and on corridors. Almost all pupils wanted to do their best for their teachers. In the few lessons seen, classes made satisfactory to good progress. There was a mixed picture with regard to the small number of pupils whose attendance was being tracked in this survey.

Quality of curriculum in relation to attendance

- From observations of tracking small numbers of pupils in relation to the survey, the curriculum was satisfactory with regard to the promotion of maximum attendance. The school has some vocational courses available in its option scheme for 14-16 year olds, together with some provision for those who are operating below the GCSE threshold. Moreover, for the significant number who have deep seated problems in adjusting to school, suitable alternative arrangements are negotiated, often involving providers outside school; pupils are positive about such arrangements.
- About a third of the two dozen pupils whose attendance was tracked in this inspection said that they did not like school, and particularly some school subjects. This was as evident with the younger as with older pupils. The school might look into the way courses and other things, such as the number of teachers that younger pupils encounter, are organised.

Leadership and management in relation to attendance

- Leadership and management of attendance are satisfactory, with many strong features. The school improved attendance from 80% in 1999 to its present level of about 88%. The unauthorised absence figure has improved from 2005. However, the overall attendance figure has been fairly static for about three years. The attendance situation is complicated by absence for religious observance (currently 1.43%, increased from 1.31% in 2004-5) and long holidays to, for example, Pakistan, which account for much of the 0.88% 'holiday' registration and also the 1.61% 'other' registration by which it is recorded after the first ten days.
- The headteacher has been tireless in acting as attendance leader. He personally checks registration records meticulously and takes part in multi-agency case conferences to support individual pupils with serious attendance problems.
- Pupils speak very positively of the support and counselling that they have had from staff, including the school's education welfare officer and a number of learning mentors. There is no doubt that the school's caring and resolute support for pupils has been enormously successful in helping many pupils through difficult times and, amongst other things, improving attendance.
- The recent Ofsted full inspection report states that the school's partnership with others to promote pupils' well-being is outstanding. Liaison with the local authority's attendance service and with certain other players regarding attendance has not always been productive. Local authority staff accept that in the past the authority's provision on attendance management was not effective. The school feels strongly that attendance cannot be dealt with in isolation from other difficulties that individual pupils have, and is understandably cautious with regard to proposed approaches that are not convincingly helpful. Nonetheless, the school might explore the potential for benefit in working more closely with others who have expertise relating to attendance, and in reviewing further the school's policy on attendance – particularly on matters such as rewards and sanctions with which the local authority might be able to lend much support.
- As the great majority of pupils have commitment to the Muslim faith, the local authority considers, and inspectors agree, that the school might review term dates so that likely days of religious obligation are planned as school closure days, thus avoiding large scale disruption.
- Staff know their pupils well, but different staff encounter the low attenders in different situations. The school might consider simple procedures to pool information on the range of these pupils' behaviours. Patterns, and notes of both welcome and unwelcome developments, may help gaining additional leverage in managing improvement in attitudes.

Inclusion in relation to attendance

- The recent Ofsted full inspection report rates the way pupils are cared for, guided and supported as outstanding. So too is the promotion of equality of opportunity and the tackling of discrimination so that all pupils can progress as well as possible. Impressions from this visit are consistent with the judgements in the recent full inspection report.
- Staff at all levels do their utmost for pupils. In particular, pupils state that whenever they have been away from school, for whatever reason, and no matter for how long, they are given thorough and systematic help in catching up what they have missed.

Areas for improvement in relation to attendance, which we discussed, included:

- consideration of more radical alternative approaches to the curriculum for pupils of all ages, to accommodate younger and older pupils who resent formal schooling
- closer liaison with the local authority and other players in review of the written policy and possible strategies for rewards and sanctions
- the means of pooling the perceptive information that many staff have about pupils whose attendance is a problem.

I hope these observations are useful as you continue to develop your attendance work in the school.

As I explained in my previous letter, a copy of this letter will be sent to your local authority and will be published on Ofsted's website. It will also be available to the team for your next institutional inspection.

Yours sincerely

Jim Bennetts
Her Majesty's Inspector