

Alexandra House  
33 Kingsway  
London  
WC2B 6SE

T 08456 404040  
F 020 7421 6855  
[enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk](mailto:enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk)  
[www.ofsted.gov.uk](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk)



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Sir Alasdair Macdonald  
Headteacher  
Morpeth School  
Portman Place  
Bethnal Green  
London  
E2 OPX

Dear Sir Alasdair

Ofsted survey inspection programme – narrowing the gap in literacy and numeracy

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 7-8 October 2008 to look at work in literacy and numeracy.

As outlined in the initial letter, as well as looking at key areas of literacy and numeracy, my visit had a particular focus on how effectively the school is narrowing the gap for students at risk of not reaching the expected level of attainment for their age. The visit also evaluated the level of expertise within the school to support students with learning English as an additional language.

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 students, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of students' work and observation of four parts of lessons and additional projects to enhance the curriculum or students personal development.

The overall effectiveness in narrowing the gap for students at risk of not reaching the expected level of attainment for their age in literacy and numeracy was judged to be outstanding.

Achievement and standards

Achievement in literacy and numeracy is outstanding. Standards of attainment are above average by the end of Key Stage 4. The achievement of students at

risk of working below the expected level of attainment for their age is outstanding.

- Students make outstanding progress so that by the end of Key Stage 4 in 2008, the proportion of students attaining A\* - C grades at GCSE in English and mathematics was greater than the national average for 2007.
- When attainment is compared with other schools with similar levels of disadvantage, Morpeth is one of the highest performing.
- All but one student, with a statement of educational need and all students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, achieved five or more A\* - G grades at GCSE in 2008.
- The attainment gap between boys and girls has closed and in 2008, the proportion of boys and girls achieving five or more A\* - C grades at GCSE was almost identical.
- All ethnic groups attained similar proportions of five A\* - C grades at GCSE.
- Attainment at the end of Key Stage 3 remains below average but the school has achieved a gradual trend of improvement and more students in 2008 achieved the higher Level 6 in English, mathematics and science. All students make significantly better progress between Key Stages 3 and 4 than is the case nationally.
- Students' personal development is exceptionally high: staff and students share common core values and principles about how to work together. Mutual respect between all adults and students permeates throughout the school community.
- Adults' high expectations of students and positive behaviours are modelled at every level: consistently supportive and non-confrontational.

Quality of teaching and learning of literacy and numeracy

The quality of teaching and learning is outstanding.

- Robust and regular analysis of students' attainment accurately identifies groups of students at risk of underachieving.
- Precise, targeted and tailored support successfully reduces the variance in performance between groups of students. The school is now rightly focusing on discrepancies between individual students performance.
- Students for whom English is an additional language are supported well in lessons. For example, visual prompts reinforce newly introduced vocabulary.
- At all levels, staff's persistent effort to win over students hearts and minds, as well as develop students self belief, confidence and positive attitudes, has resulted in the students' high levels of engagement, motivation and effort.
- Outstanding progress in lessons was characterised by maximum student engagement, for example, cooperative group work; discussions; individual demonstrations of solutions to problems using the interactive white boards; and extended explanations including subject specific vocabulary.

- Mixed ability classes capitalise on cooperative work so that students can learn from each other. Teachers' consistent high expectations from one subject to another and between each lesson reinforce your vision that every student can achieve. The students belief that teachers, 'never give up on you,' is reinforced day in, day out.
- Some staff live within the community. As a consequence, adults have a good understanding of students cultural and local needs and experiences and conversely, students see first hand, that people from their neighbourhood go on to attain successful, well respected, professional roles. These positive role models go a long way in raising students' professional aspirations and improving their ability to resolve conflict and differences.

## Quality of the curriculum

The quality of the curriculum is outstanding.

- Curriculum provision is unapologetically rooted in academic achievement and personal development.
- The curriculum is broad and balanced but enhanced richly with exciting and creative experiences which link directly to current learning.
- Creative projects give students ample opportunities to work cooperatively in teams, solve problems imaginatively, build on prior skills and perform to very high standards.
- The capabilities of external agencies and business partners are harnessed to enrich the students' experience of learning, model and raise professional aspiration and target specific support.
- Links with other learning institutions such as the Guildhall School of Music and Trinity College of London as well as gospel choirs, business partners both locally and abroad and high quality performance venues enrich students' experience of learning and provide them with events in which they can be justifiably proud.
- The staff's personal commitment to classes before and after school, as well as additional Saturday sessions, reinforces students' conviction that they are worthy of success. They in turn, give up willingly, their free time to catch up with course work, finish off tasks or practice and consolidate skills.
- Intervention classes, in addition to those above, are highly focused on the acquisition of skills to succeed in literacy, numeracy and personal behaviour.
- The successful development of students' personal skills is intrinsic to their future academic success. The systematic reinforcement of students' self esteem, together with rich learning experiences, forms a firm foundation for self motivation, independence and confidence.

## Leadership and management of literacy and numeracy

Leadership and management are outstanding.

- Your belief that, 'our students are as able as young people elsewhere,' is fundamental to the vision, commitment and belief adopted by this school.
- The staff and students interviewed were unanimous that your vision and dedicated sense of purpose, drives the school forward and inspires their loyalty and dedication to achieve shared goals.
- Every year group benefits from a member of the senior leadership team serving as a year group manager. As a consequence, the year group managers know personally every student and their families and are well aware of the challenges facing individuals. Adults never permit this shared understanding to become an excuse for failure.
- This arrangement means that the senior leadership team hold a vital pool of knowledge about students which drives strategic development and informs policy. Together with time made available for departmental planning, all developments are grounded in the needs of students. While students' views are gathered and acted upon, their opinions could be collected more systematically to help shape future policy.
- Robust analysis of performance data; extensive targeting for intervention and support; skilful tailoring of schemes of work and lesson plans combine seamlessly to create a learning community which is responsive to the changing needs of each cohort.
- External agencies, partners and consultants are coordinated skilfully to inform staff training and professional development so that initiatives are planned with sufficient depth, understanding and purpose.

## English as an additional language

The level of expertise within the school to support students with learning English as an additional language is outstanding.

- Specialist staff, for example those who support students who speak English as an additional language and speech and language therapists, provide effective support in lessons and in classes such as those after school.
- Rigorous scrutiny and analysis of students' performance data helps the school to appropriately target resources to specific groups. Outcomes of such intervention are evaluated candidly and the staff remain suitably flexible to adapt to a different group's needs over time.
- The skills associated with learning how to learn were a focus in all lessons observed.

## Inclusion

Inclusion of students working below the expected levels of attainment for their age is outstanding.

- Staff with certain expertise, for example in dyslexia or autism, provide 'open sessions' so that staff can 'drop in' as required to extend their own knowledge and understanding. This frequent updating of skills enables staff to reflect on classroom practice and pedagogy; adapt schemes of work; and tailor lesson plans around the needs of students.
- Teaching assistants often work within particular departments and, as a consequence, build up suitable levels of expertise.
- The special educational needs department maintain close links with others. It is proactive in identifying complex needs and providing knowledgeable and specific support for staff and students.
- One member of staff described students' support and intervention as, 'holding their hand to cross another bridge.' This perception was typical of the entire staff who are aware of the changing needs of each cohort; prepared to adapt the curriculum and lessons accordingly; and customise published materials to meet specific needs.
- Staff discuss informally and formally students' individual needs as they arise and considerable effort is directed at involving parents. In the past, the focus of such contact tended to be associated with behaviour matters whereas now, the focus is on attainment and increased expectation.
- Past students, who themselves needed particular support at school, have returned, fully qualified, as learning mentor or coach. These staff have achieved a certain credibility within the school community because they had similar dispositions, difficulties and backgrounds as current students but went on to succeed academically. They are living proof that the school's aspiration for its students is well founded.
- Teachers search continuously for 'the hook' to replace disaffection with positive attitudes. They persistently remind students they are valued and continuously invent new ways to capture students' imagination as both the school and the community evolves.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

Continue improvements in line with the school's own identified priorities to:

- refine further the specific support for individual students
- gather and act on students' views more explicitly to inform future developments.

I hope these observations are useful as you continue to develop narrowing the gap in literacy and numeracy 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 the Ofsted website. It will also be available to the team for your next institutional inspection.

Yours sincerely

Deana Holdaway  
Her Majesty's Inspector