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Dear Mrs Roberts

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 10-11 November 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 senior managers and students, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of students' work, the observation of five lessons and visits to a number of other types of provision.

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 are good. The achievement of students working below the expected level of attainment for their age is outstanding.

- The students' attainment on entry to the school is below average. Many students arrive with significant needs in terms of skills in literacy and numeracy.
- In 2008, standards at the end of Key Stage 3 were close to the previous year's national average.
- The excellent progress made by students continues throughout the school and results in the GCSE examinations in 2008 were above the national average for 2007.
- The personal development of students is outstanding. Their attendance, behaviour, and attitudes to learning are all very good and their participation in the out of school provision is excellent. Students respond very well to the positive ethos of the school and contribute well to it.

Quality of teaching and learning of literacy and numeracy

The quality of teaching and learning for students working below the expected level of attainment for their age is outstanding.

- All students are aware of their ambitious targets and their progress is closely monitored so that teachers can provide effective support where it is needed.
- Teachers in all subjects paid considerable attention to the students' literacy needs and, to a lesser extent, numeracy. Key words were identified in plans and were explained and demonstrated clearly.
- Teaching assistants work well in support of the needs of lower attaining students. Information about progress is effectively shared at regular meetings.

Quality of the curriculum

The quality of the curriculum for students working below the expected level of attainment for their age is good.

- There are exceptional transition and induction arrangements. Although the main focus of this work is on securing continuity and providing good care throughout the transition period, it is the literacy and numeracy needs of students that are particularly addressed.
- Four hours of teaching time is allocated to English in Years 7 and 8.
- Staffing allocations lead to a small group size, particularly for the lowest attaining set. In Years 10 and 11 additional teaching allocations for English facilitate team teaching arrangements and provide better support for students.

- In Year 7 National Strategy Progress Units are well used to meet literacy needs, primarily for students who are below expected level of attainment for their age.
- Opportunities to take examinations and obtain qualifications early, before the normally expected points, are increasingly used by the school. This strategy creates additional time for students to receive extra tuition and preparation in other subjects and meets their learning needs more effectively.
- A wide range of activities before and after school as well as weekends are provided to support students' welfare and their academic progress. A range of external bodies contribute to this work, including the voluntary sector.
- The provision for information and communication technology (ICT) is excellent. In one geography lesson the teacher used a set of hand held transmitting devices with a class to get immediate feedback on the degree of students' understanding.
- Courses and qualifications are carefully selected and they are already showing benefits to students in the results obtained through modular units.
- Immersion days, when the normal timetable is suspended to allow sustained periods of time to be spent on one particular area of study, are used effectively across the school, but particularly to help students prepare for examinations.

Leadership and management of literacy and numeracy

The leadership and management of provision for students working below the expected level of attainment for their age are outstanding.

- The highly effective and committed senior leadership team have established, a positive and supportive school ethos which results in students making exceptional progress.
- Senior leaders and managers have placed a high priority on improving literacy and numeracy which has led to rising standards.
- You and your senior leaders constantly strive to improve.
- A recently reviewed literacy policy sets out the role of the coordinator for well-being.

English as an additional language

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

- Although many of the school's students speak English as an additional language, relatively few require additional support.
- Responsibility for English as an additional language rests with the special educational needs coordinator (SENCO) who receives advice from the council but has no specific qualifications, experience or training.

- Mainstream staff have had no specific training for providing for students with English as an additional language. However, two teaching assistants provide effective support.

Inclusion

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

- Attendance for 2007-08 was in line with national the average and is an indicator of the school's effectiveness in providing a secure, positive environment in which all students feel valued.
- Participation levels in extra-curricular provision are high.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- improving standards in numeracy to bring them closer in line with those of literacy
- enhancing the expertise and training of staff involved with students who have English as a additional language
- monitor and support the progress of low attaining students.

I hope these observations are useful as you continue to develop 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

Bob Roberts
Additional Inspector