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5 December 2005

Mr H Gilfillan
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Dear Mr Gilfillan

SPECIAL MEASURES: MONITORING INSPECTION OF BRANKSOME SCHOOL

Introduction

Following my visit with Tom Grieveson HMI and Jackie Barnes, Mary Sewell, Iain Rodger, Additional Inspectors, to your school on 30 November and 1 December 2005, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector to confirm the inspection findings.

The visit was the second monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures in December 2004.

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Evidence

During the visit 34 lessons, five registration sessions and one assembly were inspected. Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and examined samples of pupils' work. Meetings were held with the headteacher, members of the senior management team, the chair and one other member of the governing body, and a representative from the local authority. There were two meetings with teachers, as well as informal discussions with them and with pupils.

Context

Since the last monitoring visit in June 2005, there is a new chair and vice-chair of the governing body. The senior leadership team has been extended by two additional assistant headteachers, both internal appointments. The new heads of

department for PE and geography, both weak departments at the time of the school's inspection, have also taken up their posts.

Achievement and standards

Standards in national tests and examinations in 2004 were reported in the previous monitoring letter; pupils' attainment was below or well national averages at both Key Stage 3 and GCSE. Provisional results for 2005 indicate a marked improvement in the national test results at Key Stage 3, which marginally exceeded the school's targets. Pupils achieved standards in line with the national averages and with their prior attainment. This meant they made satisfactory progress over the first three years in school. Results in the GCSE examinations in 2005 are largely the same as in 2004. The proportion of pupils gaining five or more GCSE A*-C grades remains well below the national average and the school's own target. The gap between the school's results and the national picture is widening at GCSE. Pupils made significantly lower progress than expected between Key Stage 3 and GCSE. The school is predicting improvement in standards at both key stages in 2006, but this is not entirely borne out by the current assessments in its tracking system. The school is not currently making sufficient use of available data to analyse the patterns and trends in pupils' attainment and progress. As a result, senior managers do not know enough about the detail of the school's performance, and hence are not in a position to target action effectively.

Pupils made satisfactory progress in most lessons observed. They made good progress in lessons which were interesting, challenging and which built effectively on their prior learning. They made less progress in dull lessons which were overly prescriptive. Progress was unsatisfactory in a small minority of lessons.

Personal development and well-being

The school has rightly focused on improving pupils' behaviour, attendance and punctuality. There has been a significant improvement in overall behaviour which is now good. In lessons, this has resulted in improved attitudes to learning throughout the school. In almost all lessons, most pupils are keen to learn, attentive and co-operative. On the few occasions when they have been given the opportunity to use their initiative and work independently, they have responded well. Many pupils are now ready to take more responsibility for their own learning. When moving around the school between lessons, and in the playground, pupils are generally aware of the needs of others and behave sensibly despite the limitations of narrow staircases and corridors. A small percentage of pupils continue to find it difficult to meet the school's expectations for behaviour. The school's approach to improving this behaviour has had an element of success in reducing the average number of days pupils are excluded by a third compared with the same period last year, although for a small number of pupils there has been little improvement.

Attendance has improved, reaching an average of 90.9% this term, compared with 88.4% at the last monitoring visit. However, this is still below the national average. Punctuality has also improved, with a sustained decline in lateness during the current term from 3.2% to 1.4%. Pupils are beginning to get into the habit of

arriving promptly, encouraged by having to account to a senior member of staff if they are late. The school has improved its collection of data on exclusions, attendance and punctuality. This is monitored regularly, but there is not yet a clear link between this data and strategic plans for pupils' learning.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the inspection in December 2004:

- work with pupils, families and support agencies to improve pupils' attendance and punctuality – satisfactory progress

Quality of provision

Teaching is now predominantly satisfactory. This represents an improvement from the previous visit, as fewer lessons were inadequate. However, this improvement is fragile; there are still too many weak features in lessons and there is insufficient good teaching. No outstanding teaching was observed. The school has taken steps to improve teaching and learning, in line with the recommendation at the previous visit. This includes devising a monitoring and evaluation framework, a standardised lesson planning format and focused support for weaker teachers. In addition, the school has undertaken a substantial lesson observation programme, drawing appropriately on external support. Partnership work with a leading edge school is improving teaching in targeted areas.

These initiatives, albeit belated in some instances, are valid and have the potential to improve aspects of teaching and learning. However, some of the monitoring is focused at too superficial a level, such as noting the presence rather than the quality of learning objectives. More importantly, the various activities designed to improve teaching and learning lack coherence, and the relationship between them is not explicit. There is insufficient agreement and understanding in the school about what good and outstanding learning represents and how teaching can promote this.

Good lessons are taught by enthusiastic teachers who know their subject well. Learning intentions are relevant and understood by pupils. Pupils are attentive, interested and engage productively with teachers and their peers. The pace of these lessons is brisk. Teachers use probing questions to challenge pupils and set clear expectations for the quality and quantity of work expected.

Lessons which are satisfactory overall are often, as at the time of the previous visit, unexciting and uninspiring. There is too much teacher-talk, teaching strategies are too narrow and allow pupils little opportunity to show what they know and can do. There is insufficient opportunity for pupils to engage in purposeful discussion or debate which would enhance their learning and contribute to greater progress.

In the weakest lessons, learning objectives are not shared with pupils, leaving them confused and unaware of what they are supposed to learn. Expectations of what they can achieve are low. Teaching strategies lack imagination, producing low levels of pupil motivation and increased levels of pupil disinterest. Pupils become disheartened by overly-prescriptive lessons. Teachers use closed questions requiring

one word responses. Few pupils take part, preferring to talk to their classmates. In the worst examples, low level disruption results and pupils' progress is minimal.

These features are very similar to the strengths and weaknesses outlined at the time of the previous visit. Other persistent weaknesses include the limited use of ICT to support learning, the excessive use of dull, commercially produced worksheets and the mediocre quality of much marking. Although there are some helpful comments on pupils' work, these are the exceptions. The school's emphasis on assertive discipline has had a variable impact in classrooms. At best, praise is used effectively and this motivates pupils well. However, this is relatively rare and teachers more commonly use negative strategies.

The quality of learning overall has improved and reflects the quality of teaching in lessons. In the higher sets in particular, when learning is good, it reflects the very good contribution and commitment of pupils to their own progress. As already noted, their learning is constrained by limited expectations of what they can achieve, and opportunities for them to demonstrate their abilities are still too infrequent. This is particularly true of opportunities for pupils to develop skills as independent learners.

The school has made little progress in developing its provision for literacy, numeracy and ICT across the curriculum since the last monitoring visit. The co-ordinators have been appointed, but neither the numeracy nor the ICT co-ordinators have started working with the staff across the curriculum. The literacy co-ordinator has provided subject-specific dictionaries and prompt books for pupils, but these are so very recent that there is no impact on standards. Although senior staff recognise the need to implement these strategies to raise the quality of teaching and learning, no further progress has been made.

Provision for pupils with learning difficulties and disabilities is improving. The special needs co-ordinator has continued to focus on the key priorities, with good support from the local authority. The work to develop the expertise of individual teachers has improved their behaviour management. In addition, the use of team teaching to refine planning and give support is developing teachers' awareness of teaching and learning styles. Close monitoring by the local authority and the co-ordinator has given clear evidence that progress has been made in adapting the content of the lesson and the teaching style to meet the needs of individual pupils. Despite the quality of their individual work, the impact of the teaching assistants is limited because they are relatively few in number and not always deployed to match the needs of pupils with statutory statements.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the inspection in December 2004:

- improve teachers' strategies to manage the poor attitudes and behaviour of pupils – satisfactory progress
- ensure that all pupils experience literacy, numeracy and ICT across the curriculum – inadequate progress

- ensure the quality of support for pupils with special educational needs is consistently good – satisfactory progress

Leadership and management

Senior leaders have taken action to improve their monitoring procedures and the rate of progress which the school is making. There have been some improvements in outcomes for pupils, including the standards at Key Stage 3 and better behaviour, attendance and punctuality. The school has also sought external advice and support, which has benefited teaching and learning and the expertise of senior and middle managers.

The work of the governing body is continuing to improve. There is a high level of commitment from all governors and the new chair of governors maintains weekly links with the school to review progress. There is currently a vacancy for a teacher governor. The governors' sub-committees are now operational and links between individual governors and departments have been identified, although not yet established fully. The governing body receives regular reports on the progress of the school's action plan, but the quality and usefulness of this information varies.

This variation reflects the effectiveness of the school's procedures for monitoring and evaluation. There is now a clearer monitoring timetable which is being followed, including departmental review. The school has amassed considerable data on pupil performance but, as noted above, the headteacher and senior staff have undertaken insufficient analysis to identify patterns of performance at anything other than a superficial level. Hence, during the monitoring visit, there was a lack of awareness of the relative performance of some groups of pupils and of the widening gap between the school's performance at GCSE and the national averages. The key weakness, in the use of both data and other monitoring evidence, lies in the rigour of evaluation, to know what is making a difference and why. In addition, the school acknowledges that it does not have a sufficiently rigorous performance management system in place.

Although senior managers are exerting much effort, there are two significant concerns about their overall effectiveness at this stage. The first is the degree of reliance on external support to bring about improvement. The second is the limited expression of how all the various improvement activities fit together. There is no clear, coherent strategy which underpins school improvement.

The school has been successful in making permanent appointments to the weak departments of PE and geography, with some early benefits. The school is making good provision for those newly qualified teachers which it appointed, but it has not raised the overall quality of teaching sufficiently to warrant the appointment of any more new teachers. Some recruitment issues remain, mainly in PE, ICT and English and the headteacher is not adequately informed about some staffing arrangements, notably the proposal to appoint a newly-qualified teacher on a supply contract. There have been no major changes to classroom accommodation since the previous visit, but administrative facilities are being improved to support the school's

attendance and punctuality work. Aspects of the school's accommodation continue to impact negatively on teaching and learning, notably dimly-lit classrooms and unattractive visual environments. Although some classroom and corridor displays are good, many are dated and of poor quality.

The school has improved its provision for collective worship through more frequent assemblies and a planned 'thought for the day' for tutor groups. However, there is some inconsistency in the use of 'thought for the day'.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the inspection in December 2004:

- ensure governors have an understanding of the school's strengths and weaknesses and have effective procedures to support the headteacher and school – satisfactory progress
- work to resolve the staffing problems in mathematics, geography, French and PE and to improve the accommodation – satisfactory progress
- ensure statutory requirements are met for collective worship – satisfactory progress

External support

The local authority has provided satisfactory support overall. It has enabled the school to develop a better understanding of teaching and learning, not least through its participation in a two-day review. As noted, the support for work with pupils who have learning difficulties and disabilities has been good, but there has been insufficient development of the school's expertise in using data. The work of the local authority is building capacity in some areas of the school's work, including the training programme for middle managers, but the school remains very reliant on its support, which is still substantial. The local authority's exit strategies are currently unclear.

Main Judgements

Progress since being subject to special measures – satisfactory

Progress since previous monitoring inspection – satisfactory

Newly qualified teachers may not be appointed.

Priorities for further improvement

- develop strategic leadership, so that there is a clear rationale which underpins the various improvement activities
- improve the rigour of monitoring, the calibre of evaluation and the use of information gleaned to target further improvement
- improve the overall quality and consistency of teaching and learning
- secure the improvements made in behaviour, attendance and punctuality

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

Yours sincerely

Heather Richardson
H M Inspector