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13 November 2008

Ms J Tapper
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Dear Ms Tapper

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 11 and 12 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 and observation of seven lessons and visits to registration and other settings.

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

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- Students come into the school working at levels that are well below the national average but achieve broadly average levels of attainment by the time they leave at the end of Year 11.
- Both girls and boys make excellent progress during their time in the school, particularly those who achieved below the expected level at the end of Key Stage 2.
- Students' progress is more marked during Key Stage 3 than Key Stage 4.
- Students make outstanding progress in both literacy and numeracy at both key stages.
- Although standards on entry have remained consistently well below average over time, the gap between the school and the national level of attainment at the end of Key Stage 3 in English and mathematics has been significantly reduced in recent years.
- By the end of Key Stage 4 the proportion of students who achieve five or more A* to C grades at GCSE including English and mathematics is broadly average.
- The proportion of students who achieve five or more A* to G grade at GCSE is still below the national average although it rose significantly in the most recent examinations.

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.

- Teachers are reflective in their planning and assessments. Lesson plans are well-structured. They consistently take account of the different needs and starting points of learners, including students learning English as an additional language and those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. According to one senior leader, "all teachers are teachers of literacy" and this is reflected in the regular planning for literacy opportunities in lessons and setting of literacy targets for everyone. Marking is detailed and across all subjects consistently gives students a literacy target to aim for.
- Relationships between teachers and students are very good. Teachers encourage students who still lack confidence and self belief. One teacher said "We never give up on them." Teachers place an emphasis on rewards over sanctions whilst insisting on very high standards of behaviour at all times. Any potential low level disruption is quickly defused by staff's positive attitudes to students and their sense of humour. Students are challenged to do as well as they possibly can but this is never confrontational because of the very good relationships already established.
- During end-of lesson plenaries, teachers check whether or not students have achieved the learning outcomes and confirm what level they are working at. In one mathematics lesson a short series of activities enabled students to check themselves how well they had done and what level they had achieved.

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- Speaking and listening skills are developed well in mathematics lessons because students discuss how they solved problems and evaluate how they or their peers could have achieved the answer differently.
- Formal assessments in English, mathematics and science are carried out every six weeks. Not only does this regularly inform teachers how well students are doing but allows teachers to intervene quickly for those students who are not making the expected progress.
- Students reported how teachers willingly give of their time to help and support students. "The best thing about this school is the staff," commented one student.

Quality of the curriculum

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

- The supported curriculum provided in Key Stage 3 enables students working below the expected level of attainment to catch up very quickly. Students who are placed in the supported curriculum from Year 7 work predominantly with one teacher to allow for a smoother transition from the primary phase. They are placed in single gender groups and class sizes are very small. They receive a full curriculum of subjects but there is a greater emphasis on literacy and numeracy. Once they have caught up they revert to a full mainstream curriculum.
- Speakers of other languages are encouraged to take a GCSE if one is available and they have sufficient literacy skills in the language. The majority of entries for GCSE are now in languages other than the taught language French.
- The portfolio for life programme introduced in Key Stage 3, although still relatively new, is already having a positive impact on literacy through the use of information communication and technology (ICT) and many opportunities for speaking and reading.
- Literacy workshops in Key Stage 3 are significantly raising students' ability to read with meaning. This has been particularly beneficial for those students learning English as an additional language who are literate in another language and very good at decoding and reading fluently but without understanding fully what they have read.
- The school has been successful in providing individualised programmes wherever possible. One student at risk of becoming disengaged in Key Stage 4 has been given the opportunity to attend an extended music workshop one afternoon a week.
- The library is used well as a facility to provide resources and to support students at an early stage of reading.

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.

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- You instill a belief in students which permeates throughout the school. There is a conviction that "all students can do".
- Systems are established consistently, for example, the implementation of the behaviour management policy has seen a rapid improvement in behaviour and a significant reduction in the number of exclusions.
- Senior managers have an intuitive awareness of their students and the community in which they live. They are fully representative of the local community and have a high degree of empathy with their students. The ethos of the school is one of listening to students, valuing and respecting them.
- A high proportion of staff are bilingual and understand the value of bilingualism in raising attainment. There are high expectations for all to achieve well.
- There is a high degree of care and support offered for vulnerable children and senior staff meet early every morning to review issues: this group is becoming increasingly strategic in its approach.
- English and mathematics lessons are fully staffed by specialists as are those who deliver the additional literacy programmes.
- The school has invested heavily in counsellors for students at risk of exclusion or disaffection.
- Despite a relentless effort to raise the level of attendance it remains satisfactory.

English as an additional language

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

- The English as an additional language coordinator is well qualified, experienced and knowledgeable.
- Staff are well aware of the needs of those learners who speak English as an additional language. As a consequence, these learners' needs are met in lessons and targets for their literacy needs are regularly set.
- Assessment information, linked to National Curriculum levels, gives the school a wealth of information about how well English as an additional language learners have progressed and what their next steps are.
- These learners make very good progress during their time in school. Staff, including the high proportion who are themselves bilingual, recognize the value and importance of developing learners' bilingual skills to help in their development of English.
- Links between English as an additional language and special educational needs are not well established for those students who are learning English as an additional language and may in addition have learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

Inclusion

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

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- Stockwell High is an exceptionally inclusive school. Students feel safe and secure in a supportive environment where staff have faith that students will achieve well. Lower attaining students make particularly significant progress during their time in school.
- Where appropriate, students are given individual personalised programmes to help them do well.
- Vulnerable students are very well cared for. New arrivals are welcomed and integrated quickly into the life of the school. Their language and culture are highly valued. Looked after children achieve highly.
- Lesson planning ensures that the needs of all groups of learners are regularly taken into account. All students have literacy targets.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- increase the proportion of students who achieve at least five GCSE grades from A* to G.

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

Mark Sims
Her Majesty's Inspector