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Ms C Robins
Headteacher
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Dear Ms Robins

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 23-24 February 2009 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 ten lessons.

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 good.

Achievement and standards

Standards are exceptionally high. Achievement is good in numeracy and outstanding in literacy.

- The attainment of students when they join the school in Year 7 is above average in English and mathematics.
- Students make good progress overall, and their rate of progress in English is outstanding.
- The proportion of students who achieve five or more good passes at GCSE including English and mathematics is well above the national average.
- The very few students who join the school with little knowledge of English do well.
- There is a small but growing number of students joining the school with standards well below the expected level for their age in literacy. The school makes special provision for them and their progress is good.

Quality of teaching and learning of literacy and numeracy

The quality of teaching and learning of literacy and numeracy is good.

- Most lessons across the curriculum are taught well, especially those for lower attaining students. Specialist teaching in literacy is good with outstanding features.
- A few subjects other than English promote literacy well. Teachers regularly identify and ensure the learning of key words and technical terms used during lessons. However, opportunities for developing speaking and listening skills are sometimes missed.
- The quality of marking of students' work varies. Assessment of students' work does not have a strong emphasis on supporting literacy or numeracy across the curriculum.
- Students regard teachers as helpful and teaching as good. They speak highly of the support they receive from the experienced and committed team of teaching assistants.
- Students understand their targets and know what they have to do to improve.

Quality of the curriculum

The quality of the curriculum for literacy and numeracy is good.

- The curriculum in English and mathematics enables students to make good progress in developing their literacy and numeracy skills.
- Students who join the school working below the expected levels for their age in English are provided with additional literacy lessons to enable them to catch up. These students study a modern foreign language but are provided with a limited experience of other cultures.
- Some students benefit from additional time for English and/or mathematics in Year 11.
- Early entry for GCSE mathematics has proved an incentive for a small number of lower attaining students who become motivated to re-sit and improve their grade.

- There is a wide range of additional activities designed to help students improve their literacy and numeracy skills, such as a paired reading scheme, mentoring arrangements, and the introduction of individually tailored away days for revision and help with English or mathematics.
- Effective support for the very few students with English as an additional language is provided by teaching assistants or through mentoring arrangements.
- Schemes of work across subjects are good but make little specific reference to the development of literacy and numeracy.

Leadership and management of literacy and numeracy

The leadership and management of provision to develop students' literacy and numeracy skills are good.

- You and your senior leaders and managers are strongly committed to raising standards for all groups of students.
- Students' progress is monitored rigorously.
- All staff collaborate effectively to identify students' needs. Strenuous efforts are made to provide programmes and support arrangements to suit individual students.
- The high levels of achievement indicate that there is very effective leadership within the English and mathematics faculties.
- As a designated training school there is a well-established culture of professional development for all staff, involving teaching assistants as well as teachers.
- There are no specific up-to-date policies for literacy and numeracy within the school and no roles for the co-ordination of such work.

English as an additional language

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

- There are very few students who join the school learning English as an additional language. Those who do so have their individual needs effectively met.
- A senior manager with some experience in this field has led training sessions for new teachers on supporting learners of English as an additional language. These have been well received by those attending.

Inclusion

Inclusion in literacy and numeracy is good.

- Most students who join the school with levels of attainment below those expected for their age make very good progress, with many achieving good GCSE pass grades in English and mathematics.

- The proportion of students achieving five or more passes at A* to G in their GCSE examinations is consistently very high and in the most recent examinations all students achieved at least five grades.
- There is a wide range of arrangements to support individuals with their progress, for example the provision of laptop computers for students with dyslexia, and personalised programmes in Years 10 and 11 to keep students actively involved in their learning.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- developing policy arrangements for the support of literacy and numeracy across the curriculum, to enable a consistent approach across departments
- monitoring and develop the understanding and skills of all teachers in supporting literacy and numeracy.

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