

Alexandra House
33 Kingsway
London
WC2B 6SE

T 08456 404045
F 020 7421 6855
enquires@ofsted.gov.uk
www.ofsted.gov.uk



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Mr T Hitch
Principal
The Neale-Wade Community College
Wimblington Road
March
Cambridgeshire
PE15 9PX

Dear Mr Hitch

Ofsted survey inspection programme – Evaluation of the Primary and Secondary National Strategies

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit with Tony O'Malley HMI on 4 - 5 December 2007 to look at work in the Secondary National Strategy (SNS).

As outlined in my initial letter, as well as looking at key areas of the Strategy in English, the visit had a particular focus on the impact of assessment for learning (AfL) and the quality of programmes for disengaged / disaffected pupils.

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 pupils, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of pupils' work and observation of 14 part lessons.

The overall effectiveness of the SNS was judged to be inadequate.

Achievement and standards

Students' achievement in English is inadequate as is the impact of assessment for learning.

- In 2007, standards in English at Key Stage 3 were broadly average and continued the rising trend of previous years. Students made satisfactory progress from their starting points.

- Standards at Key Stage 4 fell significantly and were low in comparison with the national average. Students' progress was inadequate and in the lowest 10% nationally.
- Although students' progress was satisfactory in a majority of lessons observed on this visit, it was inadequate in too many.
- Assessment for learning has yet to have a distinct impact on achievement because its use and regularity are inconsistent across the subject.
- Students enjoyed working collaboratively and assessing their own work or that of their peers, but these opportunities varied too much in frequency and quality.

Quality of teaching and learning in English

The quality of teaching and learning is inadequate overall, as is the impact of assessment for learning.

- In the 14 lessons observed during the visit, teaching ranged from good to inadequate but overall, too many lessons did not ensure that students made sufficient progress in their learning.
- Teachers shared the objectives for lessons with students but these varied in quality.
- Lesson plans rarely targeted work at students' differing abilities.
- In the better lessons, teachers made learning interesting; used questions effectively; involved a wide range of students; and checked their understanding.
- In the less effective lessons, students were not clear what they should be learning; teachers talked too much; and students lost concentration.
- Teachers' marking varied in quality. The best was very detailed and provided students with clear guidance on what to do to improve. However, other marking was irregular and too general.

Quality of curriculum

The quality of the curriculum in English is satisfactory, as is the impact of assessment for learning.

- Analysis of students' performance at Key Stage 4 has led to a review of courses, providing appropriately varied pathways through GCSE for different groups of students in the current Year 10.
- Schemes of work provide a broad range of topics and meet National Curriculum requirements.
- There are good opportunities for targeted students to gain support through mentoring in Year 9, booster and revision sessions.

Leadership and management

Leadership and management in English are inadequate. The overall leadership of the strategy and assessment for learning are satisfactory.

- There are clear expectations across the school for the use of lesson objectives and structured planning. The quality of these varies in English.
- There are developing systems for monitoring performance and evaluating progress.
- The analysis of weaknesses in recent test and exam performance has identified areas for action with particular success in Key Stage 3.
- Key aspects of planning, teaching, marking and assessment for learning are inconsistently implemented across the subject. This variance affects students' achievement.
- Regular support from the local authority has not yet led to key elements of practice being consistently implemented to bring about improvement.

Assessment for learning

The impact of assessment for learning in English is inadequate.

- Assessment for learning is underdeveloped.
- Teachers' use of level or grade criteria with students is at an early stage.
- Teachers' questioning technique varies considerably in quality and is weak in too many lessons.
- The recently introduced system to link the tracking of students' progress to target setting shows promise.

The quality of programmes for disaffected pupils

The quality of programmes for disaffected pupils is good.

- Adaptations to the curriculum, particularly in Key Stage 4, successfully motivate and engage lower attaining and disengaged students.
- Additional and flexible support for disaffected or disengaged students, especially through the 'Steps' programme, enables them to reintegrate successfully into mainstream provision.
- Overall, students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities make expected progress.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- urgently improve standards and achievement in English at Key Stage 4
- improve the quality and consistency of teaching by ensuring a strong focus on matching learning to pupils' needs
- ensure that teachers use a range of questioning techniques to involve students more and develop their understanding.

I hope these observations are useful as you continue to develop English and assessment for learning in the school.

This visit has raised concerns about an aspect of the school's work. I will report these to the Regional Divisional Manager who will consider what action to take and may arrange an inspection of the whole school.

As I explained in my previous letter, a copy of this letter will be sent to your local authority/ Local Learning and Skills Council and will be published on Ofsted's website. It will also be available to the team for your next institutional inspection.

Yours sincerely

Martin Cragg
Her Majesty's Inspector