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6 February 2015

Stuart Reynolds
Headteacher
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Southend-on-Sea
SS2 4UY

Dear Mr Reynolds

Special measures monitoring inspection of Futures Community College

Following my visit with Kevin Morris, Additional Inspector, to your school on 5–6 February 2015, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the inspection findings. Thank you for the help you gave during the inspection and for the time you made available to discuss the actions which have been taken since the school's previous monitoring inspection.

The inspection was the third monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures following the inspection which took place in March 2014. The full list of the areas for improvement which were identified during that inspection is set out in the annex to this letter. The monitoring inspection report is attached.

Having considered all the evidence, I am of the opinion that at this time:

The school is making reasonable progress towards the removal of special measures.

The school may appoint newly qualified teachers following discussions with me.

I am copying this letter and the monitoring inspection report, which will be published on the Ofsted website, to the Secretary of State, the Education Funding Agency, the Chair of the Interim Executive Board and the Director of Children's Services for Southend-on-Sea.

Yours sincerely

Asyia Kazmi
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection which took place in March 2014

- Improve the quality of teaching in order to raise standards and enable all groups of students to make at least expected progress in English and mathematics, by ensuring that:
 - teachers make effective use of assessment information and plan lessons that take account of what students know and can do, and what they need to improve
 - teaching in all subjects contributes to developing students' basic skills, particularly in writing
 - marking improves throughout the school to match the good practice which exists in some subjects.

- Strengthen the effectiveness of all leaders and the interim executive board by:
 - revising the systems for checking students' attainment and progress so they provide accurate information for use by students, teachers and leaders in planning for further improvement
 - evaluating the impact on achievement of all new initiatives and broadening the programmes of study in the sixth form
 - strengthening leadership in mathematics and science
 - ensuring teaching staff are suitably trained and reducing the number of cover and supply teachers used
 - improving systems for checking behaviour so that all students feel safe in school
 - ensuring that all staff implement the school's behaviour policy consistently
 - taking students' progress into account when evaluating the quality of teaching
 - ensuring that the interim executive board monitors the school's effectiveness and holds leaders and managers to account for students' attainment and progress.

Report on the third monitoring inspection on 5–6 February 2015

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, visited lessons and evaluated learning in students' books. They scrutinised a wide range of documents including: the school's monitoring of its own work, students' progress and attendance data, records of meetings, behaviour logs, and the single central record. Inspectors met with the headteacher, senior leaders, middle leaders, teachers, groups of pupils, the Chair of the Interim Executive Board and a representative from the local authority.

Context

There are currently six vacancies and four long-term illnesses in the school being covered by long-term supply teachers.

Achievement of pupils at the school

Since the last monitoring inspection, further details of the 2014 examinations have been published. These confirm the scale of the challenge facing school leaders: students in Futures Community College attained over two grades below the national average per subject and their achievement was inadequate.

The school's own data, as well as students' books, show that their progress is improving. Much work has been done by middle and senior leaders to ensure that teachers are more accurate in their assessment of students' work, giving more confidence to the school's data. This is particularly the case in English, mathematics and science. Good examples of support by additional staff were seen, which enabled students new to English to make more rapid progress.

Students, particularly in Year 11, are making better progress as a result of improved teaching and a range of intervention classes. They are tackling some more challenging topics and covering a greater volume of work. Analysis of students' strengths and weaknesses, and teaching to address the latter, is driving up standards in the core subjects.

Students have a lot of catching up to do and their weak literacy skills continue to hamper their progress. Reading programmes and some individual teachers are having a positive impact on improving students' literacy standards. However, insufficient work has been done across the school to ensure rapid improvement in this area. So, although students are able to communicate their understanding verbally, they are not able to do so in writing. This hinders their ability to attain higher standards. While, in some lessons, students' progress is rapid, lack of continuity in staffing, in subjects such as humanities and in Key Stage 3, hinders greater gains and make the recent improvements fragile.

Teachers clearly understand the urgency of improving standards. Lessons in registration, lunchtimes and after school are all contributing to the catching up that is needed.

The quality of teaching

Students are astute in their evaluation of teaching. One noted, 'A lot more work is being done in lesson time to a higher standard.' Teaching is improving. A mandatory programme of fortnightly 'twilight sessions' is helping to raise expectations of what students can achieve. Senior leaders have ensured that basic things such as schemes of work and lesson objectives are in place. The several strongest teachers in the school are supporting their colleagues through coaching and mentoring programmes. This is having an impact in driving improvements, particularly in providing clarity about what will be learnt in lessons and how it will be assessed. However, not all teachers are adept at checking whether students have understood key teaching points or technical vocabulary in a lesson, and so they move the lesson on too quickly.

Identification of where students' weaknesses lie is much better developed in English, mathematics and science than in other subjects. While expectations and challenge have improved in English, mathematics and science, teachers in other subjects are still not demanding high enough levels of work from their students. This is particularly true in relation to levels of literacy. Teachers do not routinely expect that students will use higher-level vocabulary, write more complex sentences and redraft their work to produce better-quality writing. This is limiting the progress students make. There are plans to urgently address this through training.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

The impact of the school's action to improve behaviour continues to be seen and, while some poor behaviour still exists, students are generally polite and courteous. Outside of lessons, there is a calm, orderly environment which reflects students' growing sense of social responsibility, as does their success in raising funds for charities.

In the majority of lessons, students work well in groups, as well as individually, responding to teachers' instructions quickly. When pushed to think harder, they apply themselves and rise to the challenge. Studious attitudes were seen in many lessons, and students' commitment to work and to succeed was seen in many extra Year 11 lessons. Students now feel they are getting better guidance about their post-16 choices.

Although students are getting better at correcting lapses in their behaviour, inadequate behaviour persists in a minority of lessons. This is seen in the form of

calling out, not doing enough work, and being distracted by their peers. Exclusions are much reduced but still remain too high.

Presentation in books has improved and shows students are taking more pride in their work. Nevertheless, more work is needed to ensure this is the case across the school. Too much variability remains in how much work some students in the same class are willing to do and the quality of it.

Attendance is below average and improvements in this area have faltered. Insufficient work has been done by senior leaders to promote the importance of attendance and to take pre-emptive action to tackle the beginnings of poor attendance before it becomes an issue. Targets for students' attendance are not ambitious enough.

The quality of leadership in and management of the school

Senior leaders continue to refine and embed systems that did not exist in the school previously and they have managed to do this while maintaining staff morale. Improvements are also being driven by some very effective subject leaders, the majority of whom understand what needs to be done and are ensuring regular discussions are held about students' achievement and how to improve teaching. Many, but not all, subject leaders are good role models for their staff, modelling high expectation and challenge.

The majority of middle leaders clearly understand what good teaching and learning look like and are working to ensure that teachers meet their expectation. While subject leaders are accurate about what the teachers are doing well, some remain generous about the impact of weaker aspects on students' learning. This hesitancy to state when learning is not good enough hinders more ambitious rates of progress.

Departmental reviews led by senior leaders are comprehensive in the range of evidence they are considering; this includes student discussions, lesson observations, learning walks and scrutiny of data. While they show an accurate understanding of the generic teaching improvements required, areas for improvement are not specific enough. For example, they do not identify which aspects of their subject teachers need to develop. This means departments are not being given precise information about how to improve aspects of their practice in their particular subject.

Since the last monitoring inspection, an audit has been undertaken of whether students have completed the required work. This has identified weaker aspects, such as insufficient or incorrect coursework being completed. These are being tackled. Much more work has been done with external assessors and moderation with other schools on the accuracy of teachers' assessment. This is giving greater confidence about the data being reported to senior leaders.

Systems to support vulnerable students are strong. Plans to improve the pastoral system further are comprehensive and align pastoral and academic aspects well. However, the leadership of attendance has changed too frequently and lacks focus; the effects of this are seen in too little improvement in this area.

While senior leaders are prioritising the right things and putting accountability systems in place, much work to improve teaching and learning is fragile due to staffing difficulties. Students rightly raise concerns about progress being hampered when supply teachers are deployed. These have increased in number since the last inspection visit. The headteacher is well aware of these issues and is working relentlessly to address them. The planned appointment of lead practitioners, which ought to happen as soon as possible, should help to alleviate some of these difficulties.

The interim executive board has increased further its challenge to the school. Nevertheless, important areas such as progress in attendance and development in literacy have not taken place fast enough. The interim executive board needs to ensure that the actions the school is taking is having impact in these areas.

External support

The local authority continues to provide support to the school, practically as well as financially, including funding three out of the four lead practitioners which will add much needed capacity to the teaching staff. They are also funding additional catch-up classes. The new School Improvement Partner has provided strategic, practical advice to which the school has responded quickly. The local authority needs to prioritise practical guidance in addressing issues such as attendance and developing literacy.

Collaborative work with local schools for moderation of assessment and developing practice is very sensible and constructive.