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Mr Stuart Reynolds
Headteacher
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Southchurch Boulevard
Southend-on-Sea
SS2 4UY

Dear Mr Reynolds

Special measures monitoring inspection of Futures Community College

Following my visit with John Lucas, Her Majesty's Inspector, and Russell Ayling, Ofsted Inspector, to your school on 18 and 19 November 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 fifth 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:

Leaders and managers are taking effective action towards the removal of special measures.

The school may appoint newly qualified teachers before the next inspection after discussions with me.

This letter and monitoring inspection report will be published on the Ofsted website. I am copying this letter and the monitoring inspection report to the Secretary of State, 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 pupils 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 pupils know and can do, and what they need to improve

    - teaching in all subjects contributes to developing pupils' 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 pupils' attainment and progress so they provide accurate information for use by pupils, 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 pupils feel safe in school

    - ensuring that all staff implement the school's behaviour policy consistently

    - taking pupils' 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 pupils' attainment and progress.

Report on the fifth monitoring inspection on 18 and 19 November 2015

Evidence

Inspectors visited lessons, many jointly with members of the school's middle and senior leadership teams, and evaluated learning in pupils' books. Inspectors scrutinised a wide range of documents, including the school's monitoring of its own work, pupils' progress and attendance data, records of meetings, behaviour logs and the single central record of checks on staff.

Inspectors met with the headteacher, senior leaders, middle leaders, teachers, groups of pupils, the chair and a member of the interim executive board, the school improvement partner and a representative from the local authority.

Context

Since the last monitoring visit in June 2015, 10 teachers have left and another 10 have joined the school. This represents nearly a quarter of the teaching workforce and includes a new head of humanities and three new teachers in this department. Eight staff will be leaving in December 2015, including three from the mathematics department; this is a substantial turnover of staff. The headteacher is in the process of recruiting replacements. In addition, one teacher is on long-term leave.

The sixth form closed in August 2015.

Outcomes for pupils

Standards in the 2015 GCSE examinations rose substantially, including for disadvantaged pupils. The proportion of pupils achieving five GCSE passes at grades A* to C rose from 15% in 2014 to 32% in 2015. While this is more than double the figures for 2014, standards remain well below national averages and below government floor targets.

Good improvements were seen in many subjects, including English, mathematics and science. Nearly half of the pupils made the expected progress in English and mathematics. While remaining well below the national rates, this was a substantial improvement on 2014, when less than a third of the pupils made the expected progress. Pupils' progress, as seen in lessons and in their books, is much improved. Most teachers are teaching work that is pitched at the right level and demonstrate high expectations of pupils. This is seen throughout the school and across many subjects. Year 7 pupils are now building on work they learned in Year 6 rather than repeating it all. Due to pupils' much-improved attitudes to learning, many persevere in their tasks and are willing to attempt work that is stretching them. All the pupils who left the school in the last academic year have gone on to training, education and employment.

Many pupils join the school with standards below those found nationally: this is evident in their weak reading and writing skills. Senior leaders have done much work to improve reading and its impact is seen in the increasing confidence with which pupils are reading. Many are found in the library every morning reading with teachers and taking part enthusiastically in the reading competitions. Pupils are improving their knowledge and understanding of grammar through the small group tutor sessions taught by committed, enthusiastic staff. Expectations of the most-able pupils are still not high enough, including in the English tutoring sessions, and teachers are not skilled at moving these pupils on to more stretching work quickly.

Work has also started on improving pupils' writing, but this is not yet embedded in teachers' practice. Teachers are not consistently challenging pupils enough to produce higher-quality written work. There is very good practice in the school to learn from in subjects such as English, where pupils regularly act on teachers' guidance, redrafting and improving their work.

Improvements made are at risk of stalling, particularly in mathematics, because of the substantial turnover of staff due in January 2016. Although senior leaders have rightly focused on ensuring experienced staff cover Year 11 classes, this must not halt the progress of pupils in lower years.

Subjects in 2015 with poor examination results included design and technology, music and physical education. This was due to poor decisions made in the past regarding the examinations to enter pupils for, insufficient understanding of the course demands and a legacy of poor teaching. All three of these subjects have new leaders, who are much better informed about the requirements of the courses. They are translating their higher expectations into improved teaching and learning for pupils, as seen in lessons.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Nearly all pupils report that teaching is much improved and they value the support provided by their teachers. However, turbulence in staffing due in January 2016 puts these improvements at risk.

Teachers have much higher expectations of their pupils and know what they should be teaching because schemes of work are now in place. However, teachers are still not stretching the most able in their lessons. Many subject leaders are sharing lesson planning in their departments to ensure a common understanding of the curriculum. Teachers are now much more regular and accurate in assessing the level at which pupils are working. This was a critical weakness at the time of the inspection in March 2014, and leaders have undertaken a lot of work in addressing this.

A new assessment system of half-termly tests is now in place, which is used and understood by teachers. Subject leaders are playing a key role in checking this system is working as it should be. Pupils who are not achieving the required 'step' are given additional opportunities to catch up. Heads of year also meet to discuss the academic achievement of pupils and put in place intervention support for those pupils who fall behind. Additional intervention activities, such as the weekly small group tutoring in English and mathematics and 'second chance' sessions in science, help pupils to consolidate and address the gaps in their learning.

Training for all teachers in reading and writing is beginning to have an impact. However, as this work has not been done intensively in different subjects, teachers' skills in teaching writing, in subjects other than English, are still in the early stages of development. Teachers' guidance to pupils has improved in its quality, and many teachers, although not all, are picking up pupils' spelling and, to a lesser extent, grammar errors more frequently. In the best cases, pupils' work is demonstrably improving as a result of acting on teachers' feedback.

Teachers are asking pupils questions to check understanding but they do not consistently plan questions that will challenge pupils' thinking or demand more extensive responses, particularly for most-able pupils.

Teachers' expectations of the quality of work pupils produced in their books are not high enough. Too often, pupils' books are messy and written in a way that they could not revise from later.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

The atmosphere, in and out of lessons, is calm and friendly. On the whole, pupils are polite, courteous and welcoming, holding doors open and talking to adults in an engaging manner. However, this is not universally the case.

Lessons in the main are productive learning environments. In many lessons, relationships between pupils and teachers are good, with pupils acting on teachers' instructions promptly, engaging seriously with the tasks set for them and responding to questions asked. In these lessons, pupils work collaboratively, support each other in their learning and assess each other's work thoughtfully. In examples of excellent practice, pupils maturely challenge and push each other intellectually, strive to tackle questions they find difficult, and redraft and improve their work. However, there are still lessons where pupils talk at the same time as the teacher and where pupils are not engaged in their learning. The behaviour management system has been useful in setting a more consistent set of expectations. It is, quite rightly, now being revised to better meet the needs of a minority of pupils whose behaviour is not as good as that of the majority.

Pupils are almost unanimous in reporting that behaviour has improved a great deal, as has attendance. Pupils feel safe and while they say bullying will happen in any school and cite examples of name-calling, they are confident that teachers will deal with it. Pupils, astutely, note that standards of behaviour can drop, particularly when they have different cover teachers whose expectations are not consistently high.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

The headteacher has, with the support of senior and middle leaders, brought about many improvements across the school in a quietly determined way. These include clear expectations of what pupils should be doing academically and how they should be behaving. The headteacher has taken tough decisions and challenged poor practice in teaching. Importantly, he has created a culture where teachers want to improve and do so by working together. The improvements are fragile because further changes in staffing are due in January 2016. In addition, some important developments, such as the assessment system, were slow to start, so need more time to become part of everyone's practice.

There are now more established systems across the school for reviewing and improving a range of aspects such as attendance, behaviour, assessment and intervention for pupils. Systems are now in place to monitor the quality of teaching and pupils' learning through regular learning walks, reviewing pupils' books and analysing data on the pupils who are and are not on track to meet their targets. Good practice includes having vulnerable pupils, such as those who are looked after, included as part of these reviews. These activities mean that senior leaders have a good understanding of what is working well in the school and what needs to improve.

A cohesive range of activities is in place to support the improvement of teaching, which include:

- fortnightly morning sessions to share good practice. Teachers report they try out the ideas in their lessons

- regular after-school training sessions on aspects of teaching, such as questioning, assessment and literacy, which are then followed up through reviews to assess how teachers' practice has changed. However, these reviews do not articulate key priorities for development sharply enough for all to focus on

- a 'getting to good in 10' coaching programme, which is providing intensive coaching sessions to help teachers to improve

- training for support staff in phonics (letters and the sounds they make) and training for all staff in teaching reading strategies

- regular input by a primary school deputy headteacher on developing reading and writing across the school. This work has challenged teachers' perceptions of the standards of work their pupils attained in primary school as well as providing

teachers with the skills to teach literacy more effectively. This is having a positive impact across the school.

Senior leaders have revised the curriculum so that the qualifications pupils will undertake are on the government-approved list. Links with local schools further expand opportunities based on pupils' needs, such as taking GCSE Japanese.

Middle leaders, many of whom are new, have high expectations and clarity about their roles. They are skilled in evaluating strengths and weaknesses in teaching and are much more sharply focused on checking that teachers in their subjects are accurate in their assessment than has been the case in the past. However, changes in subject leadership expected in January 2016 render some improvements fragile. Senior leaders have taken steps to minimise the impact of these changes in English, but the mathematics department will lack experienced teachers and this puts recent improvements at risk.

Governors are now more sharply focused on holding the school's leaders to account. They have established 'scorecards', which provide them with clearer information about the progress the school is making on key aspects, such as the quality of teaching and attendance. While governors have supported the headteacher in prioritising the right things in the school, they have not developed plans for the long-term governance of the school. They are rightly challenging the local authority to deliver on its financial commitments.

External support

Although the local authority is aware of developments in the school, it has not formally reviewed the progress the school has made against its own action plan for the school since March 2015. This puts the local authority at risk of being surprised if things decline. In addition, and despite this being noted at the last monitoring inspection, members of the interim executive board report that they are unclear about the resources the local authority is making available, which hampers the school's ability to plan for the future. The local authority has not clarified how the interim executive board will make the transition into a full governing body.