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The Principal
Futures College
Thorpe Bay
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Dear Dr Alder

Fresh Start: monitoring inspection of Futures College

Introduction

Following my visit with David Gutmann and Anne Shapiro, Additional Inspectors to your school on 24 March 2009, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools to confirm the inspection findings.

The visit was the third monitoring inspection since the school opened in September 2009.

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with students, senior and middle managers, the chair of governors, and a representative from the local authority (LA).

Context

The new buildings to be used jointly by Futures College and its further education partner Prospects College are rising impressively on the school site. The numbers of students on roll continues to rise steadily, exceeding 600 for the first time in March 2009. As with other schools in the local authority, the numbers of students from eastern European ethnic backgrounds continues to rise, with many of these at an early stage of English language acquisition. The proportion of students eligible for free school meals is rising significantly. Two acting vice-principals, with responsibility for Years 7 and 9, have been added to the senior management team.

Achievement and standards

The proportion of students making satisfactory progress in lessons continues to improve. Students made satisfactory progress in nearly 90% of lessons; in some cases showing progress from a low base. As previously reported, in those lessons where the teaching was focused on learning outcomes, students made appropriate and often good progress. Students from Polish and Czech ethnic backgrounds form the majority of the recent arrivals in the school. A number of support staff with bi-lingual skills have been engaged to help with English language acquisition. The school is significantly increasing the number of students entered for level 2 functional literacy and numeracy courses, to prepare individuals for future employment, education and training.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the monitoring inspection in December 2008:

- Review the arrangements for English and mathematics to enhance provision and raise standards – satisfactory

Personal development and well-being

Attendance has improved across all years, largely as a result of the school's decision to employ additional bi-lingual staff and an attendance manager who robustly monitors those students with poor attendance. The college also focuses on building stronger home-school relationships with parents of persistent absentees. One student awarded a 100% attendance certificate for the second year running described how his parents no longer take holidays in term time because of the clear relationship between good attendance and good progress. Attendance was given a further boost following a local authority review, which renewed a commitment of an educational welfare officer to the school. Exclusions continue to fall. The inclusion unit looks to support those at risk of permanent exclusion, providing a calm environment where vulnerable students make appropriate progress.

The college's inclusion support teams are led by a vice principal. The aim is to establish a pyramid model with intensive support available early in the students' time at Futures College with core intervention going into the more serious issues that might arise. The school works collaboratively with external partners, including Safer Partnerships.

Currently the school's special needs coordinator (SENCO) also holds a full-time teaching and tutoring roll. In a school with a significant number of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, she is also the designated teacher for looked after children. These responsibilities are demanding and consume time in both statutory and networking meetings. The files held on looked after children do not contain sufficient, up-to-date information or data on student progress, achievement and attainment.

Individual education plans for those students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are derived from a commercial programme. While the language used in the plans is generally helpful, the plans do not always provide sufficiently clear information for staff, nor are they always written in child friendly language with targets negotiated with each child. Much commendable work is carried out by staff who support students learning English as a second language and those who find learning difficult. Where the pastoral systems and the academic support are at their best, learners are well supported. A Young Carer reported that the support she receives at school makes a considerable difference to her capacity to succeed academically, manage her family commitments and to aim for a place at a further education college.

Inspectors have noted the improvement in the students' attitudes to learning, particularly where the focus of the lesson is clear, and students understand what they are expected to learn. Students enjoy taking responsibility; older students at Futures College and from the neighbouring selective school volunteer to support younger students to develop their reading skills.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the monitoring inspection in July 2008:

- Continue to challenge the attitudes of some parents and students to education in order to improve overall rates of attendance - satisfactory

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning are improving with the help of better coaching and sharing of good practice. A third of lessons seen were good, one being outstanding. This proportion is double that seen on the last monitoring visit. Teachers are planning lessons more effectively; learning objectives are clearer, tasks are meeting the students' learning needs more consistently and as a result, more students are making good progress. While plenary sessions at the end of lessons help students review their progress, on some occasions these are somewhat rushed. Staff are using resources such as computers and electronic whiteboards to make activities stimulating. The proportion of inadequate lessons has halved from the previous visit but too many inadequate lessons were seen in mathematics and English.

In less successful lessons, students with difficulties and disabilities do not make satisfactory progress when learning support staff are not used effectively. Similarly, missed opportunities to provide more challenging tasks for average and higher attaining students limit lesson outcomes. The assessment and monitoring of learners' progress has improved but marking remains inconsistent. In the best practice, target setting is a regular developmental process and staff track student progress well, helping learners to self-assess. In the best lessons, students know the levels at which they are working and how to improve.

The curriculum is satisfactory with further enhancements planned for the next academic year, with BTEC catering and public services courses available from September 2009. In partnership with other local schools and colleges, a range of diploma courses is expected to be available from 2010. The mixed Year 9 and 10 options have improved the challenge provided and the progress made by Year 9 students. Year 11 provision in English and mathematics has been enhanced by employing more specialist staff to support students. A local mathematics consultant regularly visits the breakfast club to mentor students. All Year 11 students recently spent the day with the chief GCSE examiner for mathematics, and commented that it 'helped them understand the questions and what you had to do'. Tutor periods are used constructively; better opportunities are provided to improve student literacy through discussions and structured reading. Many students participate in sports, drama and musical activities at the end of the day. However, student participation is not monitored and therefore it is not possible to evaluate the impact of this provision.

Although the integrated courses in Year 7 have proved successful in terms of the students' progress in the humanities subjects, these arrangements have been less beneficial in terms of the students' progress in English. Assessment data is available to staff but a significant number of students remain unaware of the levels at which they are working and how to improve. Students reported that where assessment for learning is most helpful, the work is marked with a teacher comment about what has been achieved and what the student needs to do next.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the monitoring inspection in July 2008:

- Improve the quality and consistency of teaching, particularly to ensure that all students are sufficiently challenged and make good progress - good
- Use assessment data more effectively to help students understand how to review and improve their progress. – satisfactory
- Ensure that all lessons focus on the quality of learning – good

As provision has improved, the areas for development given last year will be revised; new foci for improvement are given in the priorities for further improvement section at the end of this letter.

Leadership and management

The principal continues to drive the college forward on all levels and new acting vice-principals have added fresh impetus to areas of the leadership team. There are inconsistencies in the leadership of some subject areas and although there is one senior colleague with responsibility for the whole pastoral and care agenda, there are aspects of this work where those with responsibilities for key roles are not

managing their area sufficiently well. For example, the provision for looked after children.

A wide range of middle managers were involved in the joint observations of lessons with inspectors. A formal evaluation of this exercise revealed that all participants identified the major strengths and areas for development in each lesson, although the grading offered on some occasions was more positive than the judgement given by inspectors. It was evident from this exercise that the renewed senior management team focus on the quality of learning, since the last monitoring visit has been a positive initiative.

The rapidly developing new premises are making further demands on the time and resources of the senior team. It is important for the continued development of the college that the principal is not drawn into site-based negotiations. Governors need to consider which member of the senior management team can monitor these developments on their behalf in order that the college and Prospects Learning Foundation (PLF), the sponsoring trust, are able to open the premises they envisaged on schedule.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the monitoring inspection in July 2008:

- Develop senior and middle managers strategic use of systems for reviewing students' progress to guide their work – satisfactory

External support

The college's national challenge adviser has provided useful guidance on the collation and interrogation of the college performance data. The college's assessment management system does not yet produce the monitoring and evaluation reports required by class teachers, subject leaders, senior staff and governors.

Main Judgements

The school's overall progress is satisfactory

Priorities for further improvement

- Delegate the management responsibilities for the commissioning of the new college buildings to a member of the senior management team, other than the principal.
- Improve the proportion of good or better teaching available to all students by continuing to develop amongst all staff the importance of the quality of learning to student progress

- To aid the monitoring of student progress, ensure that the college's assessment database can readily provide summary data on student progress by teaching group, and for different groups identified by the college.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the chair of governors, the Prospects Learning Foundation and the Corporate Director for Children and Learning, Southend on Sea.

Yours sincerely

David Jones
Her Majesty's Inspector