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14 January 2011

Miss K Kelly
Acting Headteacher
The Phoenix Centre
Eldon Street
Darlington
County Durham
DL3 0NS

Dear Miss Kelly

Special measures: monitoring inspection of The Phoenix Centre Pupil Referral Unit (PRU)

Following my visit to your school on 12 and 13 January 2011, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the inspection findings.

The inspection was the second monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures following the inspection which took place in January 2010. 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 and the main judgements are set out below.

Progress since being subject to special measures – satisfactory

Progress since previous monitoring inspection – satisfactory

This letter and monitoring inspection report will be posted on the Ofsted website. I am copying this letter and the monitoring inspection report to the Secretary of State, the Chair of the Management Committee and the Director of Children's Services for Darlington.

Yours sincerely

Andrew Johnson
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection which took place in January 2010.

- Carry out a thorough review of safeguarding arrangements and:
 - ensure that all information relating to students' well-being and safety is recorded
 - analyse information regularly in order to ensure that the provision made for students meets their needs and helps them to improve their behaviour
 - ensure that information is accessible and cross referenced so that staff can identify potential problems at an early stage.
- Improve outcomes for students by:
 - implementing a behaviour management strategy which helps students to remain in the centre
 - rewarding positive behaviour
 - maximising opportunities to engage and motivate students
 - ensuring that students develop skills and attitudes which will support their successful eventual reintegration into mainstream schools.
- Improve the centre's effectiveness by:
 - ensuring that the headteacher and senior leaders implement a regular and robust system of self-evaluation which helps the centre to measure the impact of its actions and identify strengths and areas for improvement
 - providing teachers and other staff with well-targeted guidance which will help them to improve their practice and the provision made for students
 - implementing policies which reflect the centre's ambitions for its students and ensure that all staff, students and parents are clear as to what is expected of them.

Special measures: monitoring of The Phoenix Centre

Report from the second monitoring inspection on 12 and 13 January 2011

Evidence

The inspector observed the work of the PRU, scrutinised documents and met with the acting headteacher, deputy headteacher, groups of pupils, the Chair of the Management Committee, the School Improvement Partner, members of staff from partner organisations and teachers.

Context

The Phoenix Centre supports 28 students in Key Stage 4 and 10 students in Key Stage 3 who have a wide range of social, behavioural and emotional difficulties. The vast majority of students have been permanently excluded from mainstream schools and around 60% are boys. Seven students are in the care of the local authority, one has a statement of special educational needs and almost all come from a White British background. A high proportion of students are known to be eligible for free school meals. The headteacher at the time of the previous inspection, after an extended period of absence, has now left the PRU. The acting headteacher appointed in January 2010 continues in this role. Since the previous monitoring inspection, one part-time teacher of English and one teaching assistant have been appointed. The inspector visited three external providers of vocational education during this monitoring inspection.

Pupils' achievement and the extent to which they enjoy their learning

Most students have a history of low attendance and poor attitudes to learning. As a result, their educational standards are well-below average when they join the centre. In the lessons observed, standards remained low for most students. A more robust system to analyse academic progress has been introduced and it indicates that there are signs of improvement to rates of progress in English, mathematics and information and communication technology (ICT). However, a significant minority of students continue to make inadequate progress due to their poor behaviour. Students studying vocational subjects at external providers usually enjoy learning and make at least satisfactory progress. Most students who left the PRU at the end of the summer term attained a basic level qualification in English, mathematics and ICT. Several also gained entry level vocational qualifications.

Other relevant pupil outcomes

Students' behaviour during this monitoring inspection varied significantly between lessons. In some lessons behaviour was very poor. For example, there were several incidents where students swore at staff and each other, ignored staff's instructions and refused to participate in learning. In other lessons, students were more compliant and this meant that they developed satisfactory skills, knowledge and understanding in a range of subjects. Students generally get on well with each other

around the centre and during breaks and lunchtimes. The behaviour monitoring system used at the end of lessons to record students' behaviour provides the basis for teachers to reward positive behaviour and take sanctions against poor behaviour. However, it is not used effectively or applied consistently by all staff.

The number of fixed-term exclusions has been reduced since the last visit and data provided by the PRU indicate that, overall, attendance has improved. However, levels of attendance are still low. Early plans are in place to improve the transport arrangements for students, which, it is predicted, will have a significant impact on improving attendance and punctuality. A realistic individual assessment of every student has taken place since the previous monitoring inspection. It identifies long-term objectives for each student in Key Stage 4. In the vast majority of cases it has been agreed that there is little potential for them to be reintegrated into mainstream schools. Therefore, alternative targets have been put in place to ensure successful progression to local colleges or providers of work-based learning. This approach proved successful at the end of the summer term when all students progressed to further education, training or employment. Since the previous monitoring inspection no students from Key Stage 3 have been successfully reintegrated into mainstream schools and no students have moved on to specialist provision.

Progress since the last monitoring inspection on the area for improvement

- Improve outcomes for students by implementing a behaviour strategy which helps them remain in the centre, rewards positive behaviour, maximises motivation and ensures that they develop skills and attitudes that support their reintegration into mainstream schools – inadequate.

The effectiveness of provision

The development of better teaching has been identified as a key priority by the acting headteacher and extensive professional development work has begun. Much time and effort has been devoted to producing detailed assessments of students' skills and abilities. In the best lessons these assessments are used to personalise students' learning. However, in some lessons teachers spend too long talking to the whole group and set general learning objectives that have not been adapted to students' needs and abilities. Students spend too little time learning independently and the pace of lessons is too tightly controlled by teachers. Although classrooms are clean and tidy, the PRU is sparsely decorated and students comment that it does not provide a welcoming environment for learning.

A relevant personalised vocational curriculum is provided for most students in Key Stage 4. This means they enjoy learning and are well prepared for progression to further education, employment or training. In addition, students receive a suitable mix of opportunities, with an appropriate focus on developing literacy and numeracy skills. The PRU does not provide an adequate education for students in Key Stage 3. It is not intended or designed to be a long-term solution to their needs; despite this, once placed there, many students spend the rest of their school career in the PRU.

The pupil placement panel does not assist the PRU in determining the long-term goals for these students. After a settling-in period and assessment, staff at the PRU often conclude that referral to specialist educational provision would benefit some students. However, it is very rare for their conclusions to be followed up with specialist assessment and subsequent placement. On some occasions students with statements of special educational needs spend many years in the centre without the appropriate educational provision. Students are often taught in very small groups or on an individual basis and are given adequate pastoral support.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

The acting headteacher with the support of the School Improvement Partner has produced a thorough self-evaluation of the work of the centre. It accurately identifies strengths and weaknesses and the new PRU development plan sets out a broad agenda for change. However, a few of the targets are not sufficiently precise and therefore success is difficult to measure. The acting headteacher has developed performance indicators to measure progress for individual students. However, a few of these indicators are too broad; for example, students are encouraged to act in a more mature manner without being told precisely how this will be measured. Performance criteria to measure the overall success of the PRU are not formally set either by the management committee or the local authority. Therefore, leaders are not held to account sufficiently robustly. The acting headteacher and new Chair of the Management Committee have an ambitious vision for the future and would like to bring about changes to its purpose and structure. However, these ambitions have still to be formally agreed with the local authority. This means that there remain several areas of work that are confused and there is overlap with other local authority agencies and mainstream schools. For example, there are few links between the PRU and the authority's behaviour intervention team to ensure a smooth transition of students into and out of the centre. Partnerships with mainstream schools remain underdeveloped particularly in relation to the reintegration of students in Key Stage 3 and the prevention of permanent exclusion. There is recognition among senior leaders of the PRU that there is a need to strengthen partnerships and develop a shared vision for the future.

The detailed safeguarding checks meet requirements. Extensive work has been done to ensure that students feel safe in the unit. Security has improved and all staff have received appropriate training. More detailed recording takes place in relation to students' well-being and safety. The number of students leaving the premises without permission has been reduced.

Progress since the last monitoring inspection on the areas for improvement:

- Improve the centre's effectiveness by ensuring that the headteacher and senior leaders implement a robust system of self-evaluation which helps the centre measure the impact of its actions; provide teachers and other staff with well-targeted guidance and support; implement policies which reflect the centre's ambitions for its students and ensure that all staff, students, and parents and carers are clear as to what is expected of them – satisfactory.
- Carry out a thorough review of safeguarding arrangements and ensure that all information related to students' well-being and safety is recorded, analysed regularly and accessible to ensure that potential problems are identified at an early stage – satisfactory.

External support

The statement of action, developed jointly with the local authority, focused on key areas for improvement after the last inspection, it has not been reviewed or updated since the last monitoring inspection. The 'Education Other Than at School' (EOTAS) service of the local authority, of which the centre is part, has been subject to various reviews over the last year. There remains considerable uncertainty regarding the vision and mission of this PRU. This makes strategic long-term planning almost impossible. The local authority's lead officer who supported the PRU has left the authority and not been replaced. The School Improvement Partner continues to provide effective support and advice. Useful additional support has been provided by national advisers and consultants from other local authorities.

Priorities for further improvement

- Work more effectively with the pupil placement panel and local authority assessment service to devise appropriate long-term objectives for students who are in Key Stage 3.
- The management committee needs to work with the local authority to develop a long-term mission for the centre so that an effective strategic plan can be developed.
- Teachers need to use the behaviour management system more consistently and develop better strategies to engage students in independent learning.