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7 October 2011

Miss K Kelly
Headteacher
The Phoenix Centre
The Phoenix Centre, Eldon Street
Darlington
DL3 0NS

Dear Miss Kelly,

Special measures: monitoring inspection of The Phoenix Centre

Following my visit to your school on the 5 and 6 October 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 fourth 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 are 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 - good

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 Governing Body 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 re-integration 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 inspection of The Phoenix Centre

Report from the fourth monitoring inspection on 5 and 6 October 2011

Evidence

The inspector observed the work of the Pupil Referral Unit (PRU), scrutinised documents and met with the headteacher, staff, students, the chair of the management committee and a representative of the local authority.

Context

Since the last monitoring inspection there have been significant changes to the organisation of the Education other than at School Service (EOTAS) in Darlington. The other Key Stage 4 PRU has closed. The primary purpose of the Phoenix Centre has been redefined; it is to prevent permanent exclusion or where this is not possible, provide a support and assessment service that allows speedy re-integration or referral to specialist provision. A 'High Impact Team' is being established to provide behavioural support for students in mainstream schools who are at risk of exclusion. The ultimate goal is to reduce permanent exclusions from secondary schools in Darlington to zero.

The acting headteacher was appointed to the permanent position in May 2011. A review of the staffing, leadership and curriculum resulted in the redundancy of some staff and the creation of two new vocational trainer posts, an additional teacher post and two support staff roles. The secondary behaviour and attendance partnership has taken a more proactive role in controlling funding allocations, although the overall responsibility for the centre remains with the local authority.

The local authority will continue to provide separate services to educate students in hospital, pregnant schoolgirls and school-aged mothers and anxious or vulnerable pupils. These students will not be registered at the Phoenix Centre.

Twenty-nine students are registered at the centre. Most have a wide range of social, behavioural and emotional difficulties and have been permanently excluded. The majority are boys and come from a white British background. Most are entitled to free school meals. Three students are in the care of the local authority.

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 arrive. School data indicates that most students make the expected rate of academic progress in English, mathematics and information and communication technology (ICT). However, because of their previous underachievement, they do not reach average levels of attainment by the time they leave.

In the lessons observed, most students developed better understanding, knowledge and skills in a range of areas, but most particularly when studying vocational subjects.

Other relevant pupil outcomes

Students' behaviour has improved. The behaviour monitoring system indicates there are still a few incidents of extremely poor behaviour that result in short-term exclusions. The number of students leaving the centre without permission is much reduced. A very small number of students continues to have temper tantrums, often sparked off by minor incidents in the classroom, they swear at staff and refuse to work. The centre provides effective support to re-engage these students in lessons safely and successfully. However, it has been unable to access specialist advice to examine the root cause of this sort of behaviour and prevent its reoccurrence.

Attendance has improved. A clear new attendance policy and straightforward guide for parents and carers is working well. The centre is considering how to use its transport resources to improve attendance even further.

Progression and re-integration rates have improved. Since the previous monitoring inspection four students from Key Stage 3 and two from Key Stage 4 have been successfully re-integrated into mainstream schools. At the end of Year 11, fifteen out of sixteen students moved on to employment, education or training.

Progress since the last monitoring inspection on the areas 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 re-integration into mainstream schools – good

The effectiveness of provision

The quality of teaching and appropriateness of the curriculum have improved. For example, students enjoy the challenge of working in the new construction area and develop good skills in practical subjects. Practical cooking, sport and health and social care continue to provide students with good opportunities to be re-engaged with learning. Information and communication technology resources have been improved, but their use is limited. In the less successful lessons, teachers do not allow students to work on personalised programmes and do not adapt teaching or learning to meet the needs of individuals. It is in these circumstances that most disruption occurs.

Many students arrive having received extensive assessment and support in mainstream schools. When they join the centre the process of ensuring their special needs are assessed and met is extremely slow. Despite its best efforts the centre has been unable to speed up this process. The PRU is not a special school or unit, yet a small number of students with

statements of special educational needs are educated there for several years and others go through a process of assessment which takes many months.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

A new vision to challenge the perception of the centre as a 'sin bin' and replace it with one of a 'stepping stone' has been established. The crux of this new approach is that the centre should provide a short-term solution for most students. A maximum period of eight weeks' stay has been set as a target. During this time assessment of need, referral or re-integration should take place. It is too early to judge the success of this approach because there have been no new students accepted into the PRU this term. One reason for this is that almost all available places are taken by students who have attended for many months. For example, there are four Year 10 students, three Year 9 students and two students in Year 8 who have been attending for long periods. For these groups, there is little sign of imminent re-integration or referral to specialist support. For most students in Year 11 goals have been set to ensure progression to further education, employment or training.

Although a robust self-evaluation was carried out last year, the newly-defined functions of the centre have not yet been linked to an appropriate set of performance indicators. The development plan has yet to be finalised. Detailed safeguarding checks meet government requirements.

Progress since the last monitoring inspection on 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 is accessible to ensure that potential problems are identified at an early stage – good

External support

The local authority and School Improvement Partner continue to provide effective support and advice and useful additional support has been provided by a range of national advisers.