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Mr D Baker
Principal
Thorns Community College
Stockwell Avenue
Brierley Hill
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Dear Mr Baker

Special measures: monitoring inspection of Thorns Community College

Following my visit with Sue Morris-King HMI, Kevin Harrison, additional inspector, and Margaret Jones, additional inspector, to your college on 12 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 first monitoring inspection since the college became subject to special measures following the inspection which took place in 28 March 2011. 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

Newly qualified teachers may only be appointed after consultation with HMI.

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 Interim Executive Board and the Director of Children's Services for Dudley.

Yours sincerely

James McNeillie
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection which took place in March 2011.

- As a matter of urgency, seek students', parents' and carers' views on why students do not feel safe in school and take action to address their concerns.
- Improve behaviour and reduce exclusions to below the national average by March 2012 by ensuring that procedures for managing behaviour are applied consistently and effectively by all staff.
- Strengthen leadership and management at all levels beyond that of the headteacher by developing the skills of managers in monitoring, evaluating, analysing data and planning for improvement in order to promote consistency of approach, especially with respect to teaching.
- Carry out a full audit of students' needs in terms of community cohesion, plan and implement actions to promote their interest in, and understanding of, other faiths and cultures, and evaluate the impact of the actions on students' social and cultural development.

Special measures: monitoring of Thorns Community College

Report from the first monitoring inspection on 12–13 October 2011

Evidence

Inspectors visited a total of 45 lessons or parts of lessons, and observed mentor sessions and other aspects of the college's work. In addition, inspectors scrutinised documents and met with the Principal, other senior and middle leaders, groups of students, the Chair of the Interim Executive Board and representatives from the local authority.

Context

Since the previous inspection, there has been a restructuring of the leadership team, resulting in the loss of one assistant principal post. The post of director of learning was created, starting in September 2011 and a serving member of staff was appointed to the position. For the summer term only, there were two part-time secondments to the leadership team from local schools. From September 2011, the leadership team has been extended by a full-time, fixed-term secondment, again from a local school. The Interim Executive Board remains in place and is receiving regular advice from a National Leader of Education.

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

Students' current attainment remains low. However, invalidated 2011 results indicate a modest rise in the proportion of students achieving five GCSE grades at A* to C, and those achieving this measure including English and mathematics. This figure takes into account an 11% rise in the number of students achieving a grade C or above in GCSE mathematics. The college's early analysis of these results indicates that the achievement of boys and those students known to be eligible for free school meals is lower than that of their peers. This analysis also indicates that the number of students making expected progress in English was lower than in 2010 and is below average. However, the number of students making expected progress in mathematics has risen and is broadly average. The college is currently carrying out a more detailed analysis of the progress of all groups.

The progress students made in the lessons observed during the visit was in line with the quality of teaching. Many students showed positive attitudes to learning, which assisted their progress, sometimes even when teaching was satisfactory.

Other relevant pupil outcomes

Students' views on their safety have been sought by the school and this audit reflected the responses of those students spoken to by inspectors. They feel safer as

a result of a calmer atmosphere around the site, a better approach to behaviour management by teachers and a higher level of staff presence to deal with any issues that may arise. All students spoken to during the visit welcomed the change to the mentoring system and said that this contributed to them feeling safer. For example, one student explained that having different year groups together demystified the view that older students were frightening. Another commented that it was good to know that they would be meeting their mentor during the day. Year 7 students told the inspector that the transition from primary school helped to alleviate concerns when they arrived at Thorns. There were still some concerns raised by students, particularly about movement around the site during lesson changes.

The college has held a session for parents and carers that gave them an opportunity to express their views and ask questions of the Principal. Their thoughts related to perceived bullying and behaviour have been taken into account. A very recent survey of parents and carers confirmed that those who responded feel that the college is a safer place. In addition, feedback from recent open mornings for prospective parents and carers has also confirmed a higher level of satisfaction. Further structured approaches to gathering the views of parents and carers, such as having 'Parents' Champions' are not yet in place.

At the beginning and end of the college day, some cars and students riding bicycles are in close proximity with students walking on the school site. College leaders acknowledge that steps should be taken to mitigate any risk.

Behaviour during the inspection was satisfactory overall. Students were unanimous in their views that the Principal's presence around the college, and his insistence on them behaving well, has had a significant positive impact on improving behaviour. In lessons, students were almost always responsive to teachers' expectations. They usually arrived promptly and ready to learn, although some lateness was observed, particularly when students had to move from one end of the college site to the other. Low-level disruption occurred in a few lessons and was not always challenged appropriately by staff. In some lessons, students were fairly passive and lethargic, although they worked steadily. In the best lessons, however, teachers capitalised well on students' willingness to cooperate and turned this into enthusiasm for learning. The college's above average attendance rate is an indication of many students' positive attitudes.

Behaviour at break times and lunchtimes was generally calm and students interacted positively with each other. However, movement around the college was sometimes boisterous and careless, particularly on staircases. Students showed little awareness of the college's expectation that they would walk on the left-hand side and staff seldom reminded them. Too many students drop litter on the ground outside.

After a peak of fixed-term exclusions between November 2010 and March 2011, exclusions fell during the summer term. Early indications this academic year are that

exclusions are remaining at a reasonably low level. The development of additional provision in the college in the form of the 'Student Success Centre', combined with a generally more positive approach to managing students' behaviour, has contributed to this improvement.

Progress since the last section 5 inspection on the areas for improvement:

- seek students', parents' and carers' views on why students do not feel safe in school and take action to address their concerns – satisfactory
- improve behaviour and reduce exclusions to below the national average by ensuring that procedures for managing behaviour are applied consistently and effectively by all staff – satisfactory.

The effectiveness of provision

During the inspection, a range of good and satisfactory teaching was observed. One example of outstanding teaching was seen and no lessons were judged to be inadequate. Where teaching was good or better, lessons were planned well and teachers used different strategies to promote students' engagement and enthusiasm. A brisk pace was established from the start. In these lessons, teachers asked carefully constructed questions and gave students time to respond. They were often given opportunities to work collaboratively. The combination of these factors resulted in students making good progress. For example, in a good music lesson, students worked very well together to rehearse an ensemble piece, having carefully considered the skills needed for this activity. There was a tangible sense of enjoyment and focus. Teachers also communicated high expectations to students about what makes for good and better learning, and the students rose to the challenge.

Where teaching was satisfactory, there was sometimes a lack of clarity in teachers' explanations and often an imprecise use of assessment during lessons which slowed the progress students made. In some lessons, when students became disengaged, this led to low-level disruption that was not always managed well by teachers. Teaching assistants are not always used effectively to support students with particular needs to develop in their ability to learn independently.

The college recognises that aspects of the curriculum need improving for some groups of students and this is part of its action plan. These improvements and their impact on students' learning will be considered in more detail in a future inspection visit.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

The strong leadership from the Principal in setting a clear direction for improvement has been pivotal to the college's progress. Students spoken to were unanimous in

appreciation of the new sense of discipline instilled in the college. The effectiveness of the wider leadership of the college remains variable, with some unrealistic views of impact continuing to be held. There is an urgent need to increase the capacity of the college's senior leadership team to ensure that the wide range of improvements planned for can come to fruition. At the moment, while there are clear signs of some improvements, these are fragile.

Recent appointments at a senior level are strengthening the focus on improving the quality of teaching and learning. For example, all teachers now have a personal development plan linked to improving their teaching. The college has very recently established a quality assurance system, again to focus attention on teaching and learning. While this particular aspect has yet to have a significant impact on improving consistency, the establishment of a common lesson planning format is a step in the right direction and has begun to help teachers to include key elements of good teaching in their planning. More effective plans for improvement are being created by middle leaders in English, mathematics and science, with a clearer focus on analysing data to shape important necessary next steps. A more targeted approach to intervention has had a positive impact on improving students' achievement in mathematics.

The college has no analysis of behaviour data, other than of exclusions, despite some reasonably thorough record keeping about individual students and incidents. Leaders therefore do not have a robust understanding of variations in behaviour from day to day and week to week, or the possible causes of this, for example subject-related issues, teachers' skills in managing behaviour, group dynamics or the quality of lessons. This limits the way in which they can target actions to improve behaviour and its management.

The behaviour policy clearly states the expectations of students in various situations, for example in assemblies and in lessons. However it lacks a synthesis of the college's expectations in relation to behaviour for learning. The new in-lesson sanctions system, indicated to students by staff putting crosses next to students' names if they do not meet expectations, is clearly displayed in classrooms, but there is no evident equivalent for positive behaviour. In a few subjects, teachers have shown leadership by beginning to develop their own systems to recognise students' positive efforts, behaviour and achievement. Students find this rewarding. Alongside the judicious use of praise, it usefully reinforces positive attitudes to learning.

The recently established partnerships with the local community have enabled leaders to strengthen the college's understanding of the aspects of community cohesion that need to be tackled. All curriculum areas have been audited in relation to this and, as a result, some departments are revising schemes of work to build in relevant coverage. However, the college has not incorporated a specific audit of students' needs in this area. Many students are keen to learn about other faiths and cultures, and different groups mix well together. Parental awareness of how the college is

promoting community cohesion is featured in newsletters. The impact of the college's work in this aspect so far has not been evaluated.

The Interim Executive Board is adding capacity by supporting the Principal but also challenging where appropriate. Its records do not, however, precisely indicate how it is measuring the college's progress.

The Principal has rightly identified that the specialism is not having a substantial impact on improving outcomes for students.

Progress since the last section 5 inspection on the areas for improvement:

- strengthen leadership and management at all levels beyond that of the headteacher by developing the skills of managers in monitoring, evaluating, analysing data and planning for improvement in order to promote consistency of approach, especially with respect to teaching – satisfactory.

External support

The statement of action submitted to Ofsted was judged fit for purpose. The local authority has funded the recent and current secondments and the National Leader of Education (NLE) support. Crucially, this has provided the college with some additional leadership capacity but the local authority recognises that capacity is in urgent need of strengthening further. It has therefore agreed to fund an additional leadership post for an initial period of 12 months but with a commitment to continue to financially support the college until it is no longer subject to special measures. The college is very positive about the work of the local authority's science consultant in supporting the development of middle leadership. The local authority has not sufficiently evaluated the impact of its work. However, it has established a contract of support with the NLE which will be used to do so in a constructive and collaborative way. College leaders highly value the support provided by the two NLEs working with the college as well as support from other local schools. The combined work is showing early signs of impact, particularly in terms of improving quality of middle leadership.

Priorities for further improvement

- Analyse the data on behaviour, including the use of the pastoral call out system, incident logs, detention logs, records of rewards and data on bullying, to give a clear picture of behaviour from lesson to lesson, day to day and week to week, and target future actions accordingly.