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Mr J Goodchild
Headteacher
Smithdon High School
Downs Road
Hunstanton
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Dear Mr Goodchild

Special measures: first monitoring inspection of Smithdon High School

Following my visit with Michael Merva and Isobel Randall, additional inspectors, to your school on 18–19 January 2012, 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 school became subject to special measures following the inspection which took place in 6 July 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 not be appointed, unless individual cases are approved by 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 Governing Body, the Young People's Learning Agency and the Director of Children's Services for Norfolk.

Yours sincerely

Adrian Gray
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

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

- Improve the quality of students' learning, accelerate their progress and raise standards by:
 - eradicating inadequate teaching and increasing the proportion of good and outstanding lessons
 - planning interesting learning activities that actively engage all students
 - improving the quality and impact of assessment and marking
 - promoting more positive attitudes to learning so that students are keen to succeed and proud of their achievements.

- Improve provision and outcomes in the sixth form by:
 - making effective use of assessment information to raise students' aspirations, review their progress and guide their improvement
 - ensuring that the curriculum and teaching meet the needs and aspirations of the students
 - providing clear strategic leadership and effective day-to-day management.

- Ensure that leaders and managers at every level deliver improvement by:
 - modelling best practice in their own work
 - fulfilling their strategic roles
 - monitoring rigorously and evaluating effectively to plan further development.

Special measures: monitoring of Smithdon High School

Report from the first monitoring inspection on 18–19 January 2012

Evidence

Inspectors visited the school and spoke with the headteacher, senior and middle managers, a group of teachers, and pupils from Year 11 and the sixth form. They observed teaching in lessons and spoke with pupils, both in lessons and around the school. Three representatives of the governing body and a representative of the local authority were also interviewed. In addition, three lesson observations were conducted jointly with school staff.

Context

Since the last inspection, there has been substantial staffing and structural change at the school. A deputy headteacher has left and a new deputy headteacher has joined from the local authority's advisory staff. A consultant, who is a former headteacher, is working 1.5 days per week with the school but one senior manager was absent at the time of the inspection. There have also been structural changes at middle management level and some reduction in other staff as pupil numbers have fallen, though this is not the result of the school going into special measures. A number of teaching staff have left since July 2011.

Achievement of pupils at the school

Attainment has remained stubbornly well below the national level for the last three years. The negative difference between the school's performance and the national figure for GCSE average points score has trebled in the last three years. In mathematics, standards have started to rise but, in English and science, they are well below the national level. Progress between the ages of 11 and 16 is also much too low. Achievement is notably weak for middle ability pupils. Although progress is now accelerating, during the inspection pupils' learning was no better than satisfactory in too many lessons.

Achievement on post-16 courses was low in 2010-11, with the latest available data showing that attainment was well below national levels on both AS and A courses. The proportion of higher grades, and therefore the average points score, was significantly below the national figures for both A level and AS level courses, although there was a slight improvement in AS courses last year. There were several subjects where achievement was very poor.

The quality of teaching

Although progress has been made in eradicating inadequate teaching, some still remains and there is too much that does not promote good learning. In science, for example, pupils said that topics are not explained clearly and teachers do not ensure that learning is consolidated or that key terms are understood. Teachers' planning does not always clearly identify what will be learnt, nor does it pay sufficient attention to the needs of different ability learners within a class. More attention needs to be paid to issues across the curriculum such as literacy, numeracy and pupils' social and cultural development; there are too few opportunities for pupils to work together creatively or to solve problems, and too few demands placed upon them in what they are expected to do. Few inspiring learning activities were seen during the inspection.

The school's formal assessment processes have improved significantly. Staff and pupils are now much more aware of the progress being made. Staff appreciate the value of a more centralized system of regular assessment and analysis, although the value of this still depends on the extent to which data is gathered accurately and consistently. Data shown to inspectors suggested that many pupils in Years 10 and 11 are still making less progress than they should.

At an individual classroom level, much still remains to be done with assessment practice; some teachers still have only insecure understanding of pupils' starting points and how their learning might progress through stages of development. As a result, learning objectives do not signpost the steps in learning that are intended. Although some teachers make very good use of exam criteria and subject levels to guide progress, others do not. Some teachers do not have systematic approaches to assessing what pupils recall from previous lessons and whether what they have learnt about in the current lesson has been properly understood; the problem is exacerbated where pupils are hesitant to express their lack of understanding. Some pupils said they do not get enough homework, and Year 11 pupils agreed that learning should be more effectively reviewed at the end of each lesson.

Since September, a tracking system has been set up for the sixth form and students' progress is monitored regularly so that interventions can be targeted. Assessment systems are improving, with some good use of assessment approaches observed in lessons. Students say they feel well informed about their progress and what they need to do to improve.

The school is not well positioned to make dramatic improvements to its sixth form. It is delivering a core of academic courses but, with numbers small, vocational options can be better delivered elsewhere. Whilst good teaching was seen in a number of sixth form lessons, continuing work will be needed to establish a solid tradition of high academic achievement. However, the school's improved approach to assessment and monitoring should allow it to respond more decisively to these issues in future. Sixth formers say that most teaching is good, and they appreciate

the chances to work in small groups and the increasing expectations being asked of them.

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

- improve the quality of the students' learning, accelerate their progress and raise standards – satisfactory
- improve provision and outcomes in the sixth form – satisfactory.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

Pupils' attitudes to learning are improving and behaviour observed in lessons during the inspection was generally satisfactory and often good in the younger classes. However, in a few lessons, behaviour was inadequate, and pupils' contribution to learning in lessons was often weak: teachers do not demand enough of them either in their responses to questioning or in the types of learning activity they are expected to become involved in. Nonetheless, pupils have increasing pride in their work and many talk in detail about their assessment results. Many like the new uniform. Exclusions have been reduced but the school needs to analyse classroom behaviour issues in relation to pupils' special educational needs; planning and support for students with these needs is inconsistent, and too many then get into trouble. Attendance has improved in general to 93%, but there remain areas of concern: attendance declines in Key Stage 4, there is persistent absence by a significant minority, and the attendance of some pupils with special educational needs gives cause for concern.

The quality of leadership in and management of the school

The restructuring of the middle management has been designed to provide more consistent leadership by linking some small subject areas together. This has been more effective in some areas than others as the expertise of individual managers in modeling best practice is still too varied and, in turn, this has an effect on the quality of classroom teaching. School initiatives, such as the centralised approach to assessment data, thus have more impact on day-to-day teaching in some subject areas than others.

Although progress is being made, the ability of middle and senior leaders to model genuinely high quality practice is still limited. Individual expertise is not always deployed across the school; thus high quality assessment practice in English, which is leading to clear progress in that subject, is not replicated elsewhere. Middle managers are very varied in their ability to effect change; some are having a strong impact in driving improvement, others less so. Some have good understanding of

the issues but the impact in their subject areas is more muted because there is not a clearly understood vision for what good teaching looks like.

The capacity of the senior team has been enhanced through the new deputy headteacher and the deployment of a consultant, both of whom are well supported in their efforts by many staff. The absence of another senior teacher, however, means that there is considerable pressure on a relatively small team who need to be able to cascade responsibilities to middle managers in order to concentrate on the strategic.

The senior leaders have developed a strategic focus on developing a learning staff who are more responsive to new ideas. Many staff have accepted that the school is not good enough and are determined to see it improve. As confirmed by the governing body, the headteacher has correctly prioritised managing staff performance issues and changing the learning culture of the school. A group of staff spoke very positively about the significant improvements in developing a community approach to developing better teaching and learning. One observed, 'For the first time we feel like a community.' Senior leaders have also been right to prioritise raising the quality of teaching through increased monitoring. The group of staff interviewed expressed clear support for the policy of unannounced lesson observations, which they felt to be both more realistic and less stressful than announced observations. They find evaluation of their lessons helpful and welcome feedback, but there are some indications that lessons may be overgraded. Observation reports do not always convincingly analyse the impact of teaching on learning.

Senior leaders have developed a set of six working groups who are concentrating on well-chosen themes of teaching and learning. Monitoring needs to provide a systematic analysis of whether the six groups are having sufficient impact across the school. The six groups model depends on the ability of individuals to cascade ideas to their teams. This is done inconsistently, and some strands are having too little apparent impact. There is a need to develop and insist upon a robust school model of basic good practice for every classroom which goes beyond the current approach to developing better practice in particular areas.

Current processes are also not developing a sense of the strategic issues in teaching and learning across the school, for example in literacy; differentiation; assessment for learning; expectations of pupils; pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development; consistent planning for special educational needs, and the use of imaginative learning activities. The focus could now helpfully shift forwards from the core competencies of individuals to the strategic needs of the school and its pupils.

The management of the sixth form has been restructured, with the deputy headteacher taking over its strategic management and a head of sixth form retaining day-to-day control. The sixth form has been relocated and centralised, allowing for a more consistent ethos and culture to be developed, which students welcome.

Changes in governing body over the last year are enhancing its capacity. The governing body provides some challenge to the school's leadership and has discussed progress and exam results. Particularly given the circumstances of the school, there should always be a written and analytical report from the headteacher and it would be helpful if the reports on progress could be kept with governing body minutes so that specific challenges could be itemised. There needs to be a clear accountability trail by which the governing body can hold senior staff to account. Governors visit departments, but feedback from these visits does not appear to get through to the full governing body, and the process could have greater impact. Visits need to have clear focus and contribute to improvement.

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

- ensure that leaders and managers at every level deliver improvement – satisfactory.

External support

Support from the local authority has been appropriate. Its action plan is helpful and is well understood in the school. It has supported well improvements to the sixth form. The authority has played a key role with the school project board and it is funding half of the costs of a consultant as well as supporting some staff in improving teaching and learning.