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3 February 2012

Mr D Baker  
Principal  
Thorns Community College  
Stockwell Avenue  
Brierley Hill  
DY5 2NU

Dear Mr Baker

**Special measures: monitoring inspection of Thorns Community College**

Following my visit with Sue Morris-King HMI, and my additional inspector colleagues Christine Bray and Lesley Voaden, to your college on 1–2 February 2012, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the inspection findings.

This was the second monitoring inspection since the college became subject to special measures following the inspection which took place on 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.

Progress since the previous monitoring inspection – 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 Metropolitan Council.

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 second monitoring inspection on 1–2 February 2012**

#### **Evidence**

Inspectors observed the college's work, scrutinised documents and met with the Principal, other senior and middle leaders, a group of teachers with no additional responsibilities, a variety of different groups of students, the Chair of the Interim Executive Board, representatives from the local authority and the college's partner National Leader of Education (NLE).

#### **Context**

Since the last monitoring inspection, an Assistant Principal has been seconded from another school to the leadership team to focus specifically on student pastoral care and behaviour. He took up his role in November 2011.

#### **Achievement of pupils at the school**

Current predictions for the proportion of students who in 2012 are likely to achieve five GCSEs at grades A\* to C including English and mathematics indicate an improvement on previous years' results. If the predicted grades are achieved this would place the college in line with the current national average. Predictions are partly based on the number of students who have already achieved GCSE English and mathematics qualifications. College leaders have an accurate knowledge of individual students most at risk of not achieving this measure and there is a range of intervention strategies to support them. Awareness of the progress being made by students overall and by different groups of students is less secure. Unvalidated data from 2011 indicate that the achievement of disabled students and those with special educational needs was inadequate, which is in sharp contrast to previous years. The college does not have a secure awareness of the current progress of these groups of students.

In lessons, the progress students make is linked directly with the quality of teaching and to their behaviour and attitudes. Where progress is strong, students of different abilities work well collaboratively, apply prior knowledge and skills to new learning and take responsibility for setting themselves targets for improvement. One barrier to good achievement for many students is their relatively weak application of accurate literacy skills, particularly in writing across the curriculum.

#### **The quality of teaching**

Inspectors observed a full range of teaching quality during the inspection. Some of the lessons were observed jointly with college leaders. Most were either satisfactory

or good. The strengths mentioned in the previous monitoring visit letter still apply, and there were other characteristics of good and better teaching observed. Where students make the best progress, lessons are planned well to take into account their prior knowledge and skills, and teachers incorporate a range of learning activities that actively involve students. In these lessons, teachers use their good subject knowledge and enthusiasm to motivate and engage students. In almost all lessons, even those judged less than good, teachers shared learning objectives with the students. This is clear evidence of the impact of recent teacher training. Students also spoke of this practice being more consistent in lessons and felt that it helped them to understand what they were learning and what they need to achieve. In a good Year 7 English lesson, students' understanding of role play was developed well because they used the learning objectives to establish success criteria and set themselves targets.

Students make less progress when teachers do not tailor activities to meet the needs of different groups, often because they make insufficient use of the available prior attainment information. This results in a lack of challenge because the teacher has the same expectation of what all students will learn, regardless of their different capabilities. Slow starts to lessons, laboured attention given by teachers to stating the learning objectives but then not expecting students to engage with them during the lesson and teachers talking too much are also features of weaker teaching. The in-class support for disabled students and those with special educational needs too often does not enable them to develop as independent learners. Additional adults are not strategically deployed to have greatest impact and, when in classrooms, their support is not always used efficiently. The quality of written marking is inconsistent and opportunities to reinforce the development of literacy skills are too often missed.

### **Behaviour and safety of pupils**

In the lessons observed during the inspection, there were many examples of students demonstrating positive attitudes towards their learning. Students worked well together when given the opportunity to do so, supporting, and at times challenging and extending, each other's learning. When teaching was less effective, students sometimes had no choice other than to be passive learners. Even when this was the case, students generally behaved well, with few incidences of low-level disruption. Students describe an improving picture of behaviour in their lessons. They do, however, describe some variation between lessons. Students in lower ability groups, in particular, reported that their learning was still disrupted at times. Greater consistency is emerging in teachers' application of the college's behaviour management approaches, although senior leaders are aware that inconsistencies remain. Praise is used increasingly well to motivate and encourage students, including those whose behaviour is more challenging, but the rewards system is not used frequently or consistently enough. The college has revised its rewards policy and this is about to be introduced to teachers and students.

Following the previous monitoring visit, the school took swift action to improve students' movement around the building. The impact of this can be seen in more orderly movement inside the school buildings and a greater awareness of others' personal space, although some boisterous behaviour still remains. College leaders have sensibly placed a clear emphasis on encouraging self-managing behaviour during social and unstructured times. Some impact of this is evident around the school site but inspectors would endorse an emphasis on what the desired behaviours are in and out of lessons as a continued priority for the college.

Students say that they feel safer in school, largely because incidences of serious misbehaviour have declined and there is a much calmer atmosphere around the school site. College leaders regularly seek the views of parents and carers. Their views on this aspect of the school's work, as well as on all other aspects, are increasingly positive.

The college's analysis of behaviour has improved, which has given them a growing picture of information about behaviour patterns, particularly those of individuals. This analysis is at an early stage and is still not wide-ranging or systematic to take into account the possible impact on behaviour of aspect such as times of day, subjects, teachers or times in the term. The recently seconded Assistant Principal has made a positive start in extending this analysis and directly challenging some of the inconsistencies that exist. He also understands the need to work with the leaders of teaching and learning to look much more closely at the learning needs of pupils who are displaying challenging behaviour. The planned revision of the behaviour policy has not yet taken place, although procedures for managing unwanted behaviour have been clarified. The impact of the college's student support centre is evident in the analysis completed by the leader of this area, which includes taking into account students' views of what helps them. Exclusion rates continue to decline, as do the numbers of internal referrals.

Progress since the last monitoring 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 – good
- improve behaviour and reduce exclusions to below national average by March 2012 by ensuring that procedures for managing behaviour are applied consistently and effectively by all staff – satisfactory.

### **The quality of leadership in and management of the school**

The Principal continues to set high expectations of achievement and has enabled more of the senior leadership team to have demonstrable impact on improving aspects of the college's work. However, this impact is not considered as a whole to support systematic and strategic self-evaluation.

The college has a good amount of information about the current attainment of individual students. This is particularly strong for Year 11 students. Identification of and intervention to tackle individual underachievement in Year 11 is related to those students not on track to achieve target grades. Leaders at all levels, including heads of house as well as form group mentors are involved in this, and the impact of these interventions is tracked and evaluated. Therefore, on an individual basis, the extent of a Year 11 student's progress is known. There is not, however, a strategic overview which enables leaders to identify which groups of students are making expected, slow or rapid progress in all year groups. The comprehensive tracking information available to college leaders means that it should be possible to gather quickly this overview.

Targets are set for students which are based on prior attainment data, nationally expected progress as well as professional dialogue. The review of these targets at classroom and subject level, to take into account previously quick or good current progress is inconsistent, resulting in some students having already exceeded the targets that continue to be set. A calendar of regular meetings has been established to increase the level of accountability of middle leaders and to extend their understanding of how data analysis supports increased achievement. These meetings have had a positive impact, for example in relation to the identification of Year 11 students at risk of not achieving in one or more subjects. There is, however, an insufficient focus on the progress made by groups of students and variability in the effectiveness of middle leadership remains.

Those taking the lead on improving teaching have secure long-term development plans with an appropriate focus on systematically developing teaching and learning. The impact of their work so far is evident in the greater consistency with which teachers are considering learning objectives when planning lessons, and the use of the college's lesson planning process. These leaders have a secure understanding of what makes for good teaching and offer an appropriate level of support and challenge to colleagues in the subject areas for which they have particular responsibilities. As yet, they have not established systems to enable a broader awareness of strengths and weaknesses in all aspects of the quality of students' learning across subjects. Evaluation of the impact of teaching over time, for example as shown by the quality of students' work and the progress different groups of students make, is not secure.

As aspects of the college's work have improved, it has become evident that the provision and outcomes for disabled students or those with special educational needs is a serious cause for concern. There is no systematic way of identifying which students have special educational needs and which are underachieving as a result of previous and currently weak teaching. Similarly, the review and evaluation of the progress and current needs of those previously identified is weak. Students who join the college with specific reading, writing and communication difficulties are not given any targeted intervention to help them to make rapid progress as they move

through the school. The deployment of the college's learning support practitioners is not providing good value for money.

The work of college leaders on improving students' social and cultural development is evident in students' better attitudes to learning and the ways in which groups of students from different backgrounds get on well together. The other positive developments referred to in the previous monitoring inspection letter remain. However, the impact of these has not been systematically evaluated.

A revised curriculum for Key Stage 4, and some modifications to the curriculum at Key Stage 3, have now been finalised to begin from September 2012. An information evening for parents and carers was held during the monitoring inspection, and the college's own evidence indicates that a very high proportion of parents and carers attended and were very positive about the proposed changes.

Members of the interim executive board continue to add capacity and to gather first-hand evidence of the college's work through visits to the college and discussions with middle and senior leaders. As was the case at the time of the previous visit, there is no systematic way in which members evaluate the progress the college is making in relation to the priorities for improvement identified by Ofsted, or how different groups of students are currently achieving.

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

- strengthen leadership and managements 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
- 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 – satisfactory.

### **External support**

The college's partner NLE, commissioned by the local authority, continues to support leadership capacity and provides training and development for leaders and teachers. This tailored package of support is highly valued by the Principal and continues to have a positive impact. This is evident, for example, in aspects of teaching and middle leadership. The local authority has a systematic process by which it evaluates this support. There has been a lack of clarity about the respective roles of the NLE and authority officers in evaluating the school's progress towards being removed from special measures. This was explored during the monitoring inspection and the local authority and NLE now intend that future monitoring and evaluation reviews

will be more evaluative and therefore decrease the need for lengthy discussions at review board meetings or for further extensive evidence to be provided.