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15 June 2012

Mrs A Schofield
Headteacher
Southern Cross School
200 Yew Tree Lane
Northen Moor
Manchester
M23 0FF

Dear Mrs Schofield

Special measures: monitoring inspection of Southern Cross School

Following my visit to your school on 13 and 14 June 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 third monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures following the inspection which took place in June 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 - good

Progress since previous monitoring inspection - good

Up to one newly-qualified teacher may be appointed at each site.

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 Manchester.

Yours sincerely,

Brian Padgett

Her Majesty's Inspector

January 2012



Annex

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

- Improve students' achievement by:
 - raising teachers' expectations of what students can achieve
 - ensuring that assessment systems are comprehensive, focus on learning and provide continuity in learning between key stages
 - extending good practice of the new Key Stage 4 performance tracking system to the whole school
 - ensuring the school monitors the performance of different groups of students accurately and takes effective action to secure improvements where necessary
 - ensuring realistic and challenging targets are set for individual students.

- Improve the quality of teaching by:
 - ensuring all teaching staff have the necessary subject skills and training
 - focusing more closely in lesson plans on what pupils are to learn
 - assessing students' previous learning to build progress more effectively.

- Raise attendance by:
 - improving tracking and monitoring systems to include those groups and their parents and carers that are hardest to reach
 - tailoring the curriculum to provide individual programmes which engage the interests, needs and aspirations of all students
 - using information from the analyses of trends and patterns in attendance to ensure an attendance rate at both key stages of at least 85%.

- Strengthen the school's leadership, management and capacity for sustained improvement by:
 - developing leaders' skills of monitoring and evaluating all aspects of school performance so that they are able to manage school improvement successfully
 - ensuring members of the interim executive board rigorously challenge senior managers and leaders and hold them to account for improving students' outcomes
 - taking prompt action to ensure identified priorities are tackled.

- Improve the school's safeguarding practices by:
 - ensuring robust monitoring and care for the welfare of students who are not attending school, those who are excluded and those most at risk.

Special measures: monitoring of Southern Cross School

Report from the third monitoring inspection on 13 and 14 June 2012

Evidence

The inspector observed eight lessons, including an off-site session at a public library, scrutinised documents and met with the principal of the federation, the heads of centre and staff. Meetings were also held with parents and carers at both sites and with the Chair and Vice-Chair of the interim executive board. The inspector held a telephone conversation with a representative of the local authority and attended a meeting of the school council.

Context

Since the previous monitoring inspection the head of centre and the deputy head of centre at the Castlefield site, where students in Key Stage 4 are taught, have resigned, with effect from the end of August 2012. Arrangements to appoint successors on a temporary basis were being finalised at the time of the inspection.

At the Yew Tree Lane site, where students in Key Stage 3 are taught, one teacher has leave of absence and one teacher has resigned. The arrangements to relocate Key Stage 3 to new, purpose-built accommodation remain on track. Key Stage 3 students will be taught at the new site from September 2012.

At the time of the inspection, students in Year 11 were undertaking their GCSE examinations. Consequently, most Year 11 students were on study leave.

Achievement of pupils at the school

Students continue to make good progress at both sites. At Key Stage 3, the range of attainment is wide, from standards below those of most pupils of 7 years of age, to those expected of 13 year-olds. Records of students' progress at Key Stage 3 show clear, incremental gains each half term regardless of students' starting points. The great majority is in line to achieve challenging targets in the core aspects of reading and mathematics and in the subjects of the National Curriculum. Work in students' books continues to improve, although there are currently few pieces of extended writing and more might be expected of standards of presentation. A number of students have made exceptional progress in reading. Because of the complex nature of students' learning difficulties the majority finds change difficult. These may be minor changes to daily routines or the more major changes associated with the move to Key Stage 4 and getting used to a new teacher. Considering the changes the students have faced recently, they have coped well and their improving progress has not been interrupted to any significant degree. Progress is better across all groups of students, within year-group classes, within the nurture group and for those students educated off-site.

Year 11 students at the Castlefield campus remain on track to achieve the best examination performance yet seen at the school, continuing the year-on-year improvement in GCSE results and in the percentage of students acquiring at least one qualification. For the first time, students are expected to attain five good GCSEs or their equivalent. Expertise in several subjects is improving, for example, in English, mathematics, science, information communication technology (ICT), history, art and physical education. Good progress is also being made in acquiring life skills, such as in food technology and in taking on responsibilities.

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

- Improve students' achievement - good

The quality of teaching

The quality of teaching at both Key Stages has continued to improve. This is particularly significant at Key Stage 3, where changes of teachers have occurred and where staff, including new staff, must quickly build the good relationships so vital to the successful teaching of students with social, emotional and behavioural learning difficulties. Regular monitoring by the head of centre and the assistant head of centre indicates that 70% of teaching is now good or better at Key Stage 3 and that there is no inadequate teaching. This is a clear improvement since the last monitoring inspection that is confirmed by the inspector's lesson observations.

Teaching at both sites now consistently demonstrates aspects of good teaching required by the areas for improvement: good planning and assessment of progress, effective target-setting, and high expectations of what students can do. In each lesson, teachers plan for the individual needs of their students. Throughout the school, at both Key Stages, the teamwork between teaching and support staff continues to be strong with a high degree of commitment to the welfare and achievement of students. At both sites the provision for students who are particularly vulnerable, whether in the nurture groups or those educated off-site, also continues to improve and be better coordinated and accountable.

At Key Stage 4, teaching is currently 80% good or better, with no inadequate teaching and a significant proportion of lessons having outstanding aspects. Work showing exceptional progress and of high quality was seen in English, for example. Year 11 students are being very well prepared for their examinations, both in subject knowledge and for performing under examination conditions, developing perseverance. Teachers know their students very well and are beginning to become expert in adjusting their teaching to students' preferred styles of learning, which are often kinaesthetic in nature.

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

- Improve the quality of teaching - good

Behaviour and safety of pupils

Although there is little change in attendance, it is currently 84% at Key Stage 3 and 74% at Key Stage 4, senior staff at both sites continue to prioritise attendance and work hard with families and external agencies to get students in school and, if this fails, in education out of school. Some significant successes do not present well within the data. For example, the school admits students who have not attended their previous schools for extended periods. The school is often successful in reintroducing such students into education for, typically, 50% of their time. Although this is of considerable significance to the student's learning and to his or her family, attendance data for the school overall are further depressed. The rates of persistent absence and exclusions continue to fall.

Students' attitudes to learning and their conduct in school continue to present challenges because of the nature of their social, emotional and behavioural difficulties. Thus, any lesson may be disrupted. However, in all lessons observed, students who were disruptive for a time also became absorbed in their work at a later stage. In Key Stage 3, some Year 9 students were particularly difficult to engage. These students have recently suffered a change of teacher and are preparing for the move to the Castlefield site as they enter Key Stage 4. Despite the best efforts of staff, students are anxious about the changes to their routines, the prospect of working for new staff and the loss of those staff familiar to them. By contrast, students from the nurture groups at each site coped exceptionally well when working with members of the public. At Key Stage 4 students received praise for their attitudes and behaviour from volunteer staff from a major bank, who were working with the students on developing the financial awareness. Students from the Key Stage 3 nurture group showed themselves capable of working responsibly and effectively within a public environment, a library. So good was their behaviour that members of the public worked comfortably within the group and alongside students without any indication that the situation was other than perfectly normal. Parents and carers who spoke to the inspector gave extra confirmation of the good progress and improvement in behaviour and attitudes of their children.

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

- Raise attendance - satisfactory

The quality of leadership in and management of the school

The loss of two teachers from Key Stage 3 has tested the capacity of the leadership's resilience to cope with setbacks, planned and unplanned. The head of centre and assistant head of centre have managed the situation very effectively. There has been no loss in resolve amongst staff to focus on improvement. Existing and new staff have risen to the occasion and taken on extra responsibilities. Students have found the changes unsettling and learning has been affected to a degree. However, students have not lost ground and continue to make improving progress overall.

At Key Stage 4, with the challenge of accommodating new, temporary leadership yet to come, the leadership and management at Castlefield have continued to improve. The school is working more effectively than ever, a judgement backed up by one long-serving member of staff and the evidence provided by parents and carers. The momentum and ambition for further improvement is well-rooted, with middle leaders in particular keen to implement new ideas. Teamwork and commitment are strong at both sites, as is the consistency with which management systems are understood and carried out. Support staff are taking on increasing responsibility. At Key Stage 4, for example, teaching assistants run the school council. They relate extremely well to students and provide exceptional role models.

Staff and parents and carers are clear that the improvements described in this report are the result, ultimately, of the effective work of the heads of centre and their senior staff. However, there is a considerable degree of anxiety at Key Stage 4 about the future, with the imminent departure of the most senior staff. At both sites, too much is uncertain and temporary. The changes ahead bring new opportunities but overall, at present, the balance is more towards a threat to the school's capacity for sustained improvement. The interim executive board continues to provide satisfactory support for the school within the federation, particularly behind the scenes in monitoring the work of leaders and in securing the financial resources for the school's development. However, the relationship between staff and the board is not sufficiently well-grounded and communication between governance and staff is in general underdeveloped. These factors have a significant impact during the current times of uncertainty and change.

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

- Strengthen the school's leadership, management and capacity for sustained improvement - good
- Improve the school's safeguarding practices for those students who are not attending school, those excluded and those most at risk - not inspected, having been fully resolved during the first monitoring inspection.

External support

The local authority continues to provide satisfactory support to the school. The commissioning of a consultant to provide an external view of improvement is highly valued by the heads of centre. The interim executive board comprises highly-qualified professionals who are active on the school's behalf. The federation is currently working to secure temporary appointments for the two parts of the school so as to support continuing improvement. Meanwhile, the local authority is reviewing the longer-term strategy for its special schools.