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12 July 2012

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

Special measures: monitoring inspection of Thorns Community College

Following my visit with Sue Morris-King HMI, and Alan Dobbins, Additional Inspector, to your college on 10–11 July 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 third 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 – good.

Progress since the previous monitoring inspection – good.

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 Borough 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 third monitoring inspection on 10–11 July 2012

Evidence

Inspectors observed the college's work, scrutinised documents and met with the Principal, other senior and middle leaders, a group of students, the Chair of the Interim Executive Board (IEB), representatives from the local authority and the college's partner National Leader of Education (NLE). A sample of work of Year 10 students was reviewed. A number of lessons were observed jointly with college leaders.

Context

Since the last monitoring inspection, the senior leadership team has been restructured, with three members of the existing team being appointed to substantive posts as Vice Principals and one to the substantive post of Assistant Principal. The appointment of a senior leader to lead on coaching and supporting the achievement of gifted and talented students has been made from within the existing staff. An internal appointment has also been made to the post of Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO) from September. A new Head of English started in April. At the time of this visit, Year 10 students were on work experience and Year 11 had left the college.

Achievement of pupils at the school

As a result of improved analyses of achievement, college leaders can demonstrate that students are making increased levels of progress. Predictions for the proportion of students who in 2012 are likely to achieve five GCSEs at grades A* to C including English and mathematics continue to indicate an improvement on previous years' results. If these predicted grades are achieved, this would place the college in line with the current national average for this indicator. These results would represent average progress in English and an above average proportion of students making expected progress in mathematics. The detailed analyses show that variation in the achievement of groups of students remains, in particular for those known to be eligible for free school meals and some disabled students and those with special educational needs. Gaps, however, are closing.

Rising levels of achievement are linked directly with students' better attitudes to learning in lessons. Almost all are rising to the increased levels of challenge and expectation, with most arriving to lessons ready to learn and willing to engage sensibly in collaborative work. Weaknesses remain in students' application of accurate literacy skills, particularly in writing.

The quality of teaching

The impact of a range of the school's strategies to improve teaching was evident in many lessons observed during the inspection. In Year 9 mathematics lessons, teachers had planned to ensure that students were actively engaged in their own learning. The students' good response to these opportunities supported their learning and is evidence of their increasingly good attitudes. Another feature of many lessons was the incorporation of 'challenge' activities for the most able and those who want to extend their knowledge, understanding or skills. Students commented that they like these. An increasing number of lessons are planned well to take into account the needs of students of different levels of abilities. These improvements are as a direct result of the good professional development opportunities provided by college leaders and external support. As a response to the findings of the last inspection, and the school's own evaluation of teaching, lessons now start more quickly and with a more prompt focus on learning. More teaching is now giving students systematic opportunities to develop as independent learners. An outstanding example of teaching in an information and communication technology (ICT) lesson enabled students to be very successful as resilient and independent learners, as well as developing good leadership skills. Students had a very clear understanding of what 'good' looked like as a result of the highly effective use of success criteria. For those who needed guidance, there were 'student champions' who had already achieved distinctions in certain aspects of the work. The combination of well-established and effective classroom routines and students' very positive attitudes to learning resulted in rapid progress in this lesson.

Although many aspects of teaching have improved, some of the weaknesses identified in previous monitoring visit letters remain. When teaching is not good or better, the planned activities to support students of different levels of ability do not transfer into what happens in the classroom. On other occasions, although students are actively involved in the lesson, teachers do not set the pace clearly or firmly enough, which results in slower learning and progress. There has been an improvement to how regularly students receive feedback about their progress, with strong practice observed in subjects such as business studies. College leaders acknowledge that this is not yet consistent.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

Increasingly, students work well together during paired or group activities and there was virtually no disruption of any kind observed during the inspection. Students continue to describe an improving picture of behaviour in lessons. They comment that they enjoy being more involved and appreciate how the improved teaching has helped them to improve their attitudes and behaviour. Occasionally, despite the teacher having planned lessons that were motivating and expected the involvement of all students, there is a lack of enthusiasm and will to be involved. This is, however, decreasing as students begin to experience an increasing number of lessons that are

good and better. The rewards system is used more frequently, with particularly effective examples in modern foreign language lessons of how this had an impact on retaining students' engagement and motivation throughout the lesson.

Students continue to say that they feel safer in school. At break, lunchtimes and in lessons, students of different abilities and ethnic groups mix well together, which is one example of their increasingly positive social and cultural development. Students' awareness of each other and of their environment continues to improve, although college leaders recognise that this remains an area for further attention. It is notable that the views of parents and carers on how safe their children feel continue to be sought, with action taken as a result.

College leaders have significantly improved their analysis of patterns of behaviour since the previous monitoring inspection. This is now sharply focused and very clearly presented. They have used this information very well to identify systematically which students need more or different support and to put this support in place. This, combined with a more consistent and positive approach to managing behaviour, has had a considerable impact on reducing the level of incidents, both minor and more major. The school's data indicate that the number of fixed-term exclusions has more than halved in comparison to the previous academic year and is now below the national average. Internal referrals, including those to the 'student success centre', continue to decline as the quality of teaching improves and students rise to the college's high expectations. The college's senior leaders understand very well the way in which the quality of teaching affects students' behaviour, and the team has developed a shared understanding of how to ensure that students' behaviour and attitudes to learning are consistently good. Pastoral leaders are also more precisely held to account for improving students' behaviour and, because they have better quality information about patterns of behaviour, have been able to become much more effective in their roles. Detailed and successful work with the parents and carers of students who exhibit the most challenging behaviour is also making a difference to their behaviour and, increasingly so, their levels of achievement. Attendance has risen and is above the national average, and the proportion of students persistently absent from school is below average.

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 – outstanding.

The quality of leadership in and management of the school

There have been a number of significant developments in the leadership of the college. The Principal now leads a substantive team with clearly defined roles. The improvements to the quality of teaching and the behaviour and safety of students are contributing factors to the college's increasing capacity to sustain improvement. Since the last visit, the quality of and systems for self-evaluation have developed well. The most recent monitoring of Year 10 students included detailed analysis of data, observations of learning, discussion with students and a selection of parents, and a scrutiny of students' work across the curriculum. This forensic approach has enabled leaders to draw together what has worked well and how that can be shared further, as well as identifying the critical next steps. A review of the provision for disabled students and those with special education needs has been completed. Although all aspects of the restructured approach have not yet been implemented, the planned actions are very well focused on raising students' achievement. Crucially, the roles and expectations of additional adult support in the classroom have been clarified, with a sharper focus on promoting students' independence and providing value for money.

Middle leaders are now much more involved in evaluating the progress of students and in reviewing the approaches to teaching and the quality of the curriculum in their subjects. A thorough review of each subject's schemes of learning has taken place and is being collated by college leaders. These reviews included an appropriate focus on the development of students' reading, writing, communication and mathematics skills. Links are developing well between curriculum and pastoral middle leaders to ensure that there is a combined focus on raising the achievement of all groups of students.

Importantly, the impact of the college staff's work to promote community cohesion is evident in students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. As well as the more harmonious atmosphere in and out of the classroom, it is also evident through the curriculum. For example, Year 10 students working towards a vocational qualification organised and hosted a social event for elderly residents in the local community.

The interim executive board is planning for the introduction of a shadow governing body from September 2012. Current board members have increased their level of scrutiny of students' achievement. They also ensure that progress against the priorities for development identified by Ofsted is robustly considered. The IEB has also ensured that college finances are secure and will be sustainable without the current additional funding.

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 – good
- 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 – good.

External support

The local authority continues to provide substantial financial support, including in commissioning the work of the NLE. A sharply focused review of progress was undertaken between college leaders and the partner support school. Leaders and teachers value highly the support from the local authority's science improvement officer who is now also working with mathematics teachers to develop their approaches to teaching. The local authority and NLE are planning an exit strategy to gradually reduce the level of support as the college is increasing its capacity for sustained improvement.