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Mrs Pauline Baines
Priory School
Burr Hill Chase
Prittlewell
Southend-on-Sea
SS2 6PE

Dear Mrs Baines

Special measures monitoring inspection of Priory School

Following my visit to your school on 26 June 2013, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the inspection findings. Thank you for the help you gave during the inspection and for the time you made available to discuss the actions which have been taken since the school's previous monitoring inspection.

The inspection was the second monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures following the inspection which took place in June 2012. 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.

Having considered all the evidence I am of the opinion that at this time that the school is making reasonable progress towards the removal of special measures.

A newly qualified teacher may be appointed.

This letter and monitoring inspection report will be published 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 Southend.

Yours sincerely

Charlie Henry
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection which took place in June 2012

- Raise achievement and attainment in English, mathematics and science by ensuring the school has robust attainment-on-entry data against which to set challenging targets and plan students' learning.
- Raise the quality of teaching so that it is at least good by:
 - developing the expertise of the teaching staff
 - ensuring that lessons take full account of students' prior learning and what they need to do next
 - identifying sharp and precise objectives for learning in every lesson
 - making greater reference to students' targets in lessons and ensuring staff are able to mark work effectively so that students know how to improve
 - planning activities that are challenging, stimulating and relevant to students' needs
 - giving students more opportunities to make decisions about their learning and to use their initiative
 - ensuring that students complete independent work that this is of a high standard and reducing an over-reliance on worksheets
 - ensuring that teachers and support staff have consistently high expectations of what students should achieve in lessons.
- Strengthen leadership, management and governance by:
 - pursuing a clear strategic direction for the school and ensuring that all staff agree and implement actions wholeheartedly
 - ensuring the creation of a suitably skilled and qualified middle leadership team, and providing mentoring and training so that they make a more significant contribution to monitoring provision and outcomes
 - holding teachers more robustly to account for their students' progress supporting senior capacity in the longer term
 - ensuring all adults have a clear understanding of students' social and behavioural needs.

Report on the second monitoring inspection on 26 June 2013

Evidence

The inspector observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the interim headteacher, senior and middle leaders, three members of the teaching and support staff, the interim executive board and three representatives from the local authority. Most of the time was spent observing students in their lessons and around the school to check the quality of teaching and learning and the students' behaviour and safety. The inspector also met with three students.

Context

The school continues to be led by the interim headteacher who took up post prior to the inspection in June 2012. This temporary arrangement is pending the implementation of the re-organisation of the local authority's provision for students who have behavioural, emotional and social difficulties as a hard federation, to be termed a college. This development will take place in September 2013. The Executive Principal of the college and the headteacher of the school have been appointed. There have been no changes to the teaching staff since the first monitoring inspection.

Achievement of pupils at the school

Progress in the lessons observed during the inspection has improved as a result of the improvements made to teaching, especially the planning for individualised learning objectives.

The next round of teacher assessment information was due shortly after the inspection visit. It is therefore not possible to comment on the effectiveness of the improvements made to the quality of teaching and in behaviour on students' progress over the last term.

There has been joint work with another school to moderate teachers' assessments of students' attainments to ensure their accuracy. Furthermore, the school has considered how to address the discrepancies between teacher assessments and those provided by an on-line assessment of students' attainments. This development requires careful monitoring. Accuracy regarding students' attainments is important when setting their targets, ensuring work is planned at the appropriate level of challenge and for monitoring their progress and the effectiveness of teaching.

The quality of teaching

A number of factors have contributed to an improvement in the quality of teaching since the first monitoring inspection.

Improvements in lesson planning have led to individual objectives being set for each student. This development has supported more effective questioning by teachers and teaching assistants, so that they establish more precisely what the students know and how to help them to learn more. In addition, the school has introduced a systematic way of promoting the very good code of conduct that has been drawn up by the students. Teachers now involve the students in reviewing their behaviour and how hard they have been working in each lesson. Where they fall short of the highest expectation, the students are encouraged to identify how they could do better.

Teachers and teaching assistants are working well together to enable students to learn more effectively. The teaching assistants understand how they can support the work of the teacher while expecting students to be as independent as possible. Any small incidents of inappropriate behaviour, for example, swearing, are tackled promptly and effectively.

Students commented that they felt they were getting the help they needed to make progress. They have increasing confidence to work independently and to ask for help when it is needed. They understand that teachers and teaching assistants will help them learn more effectively and, as a result, they are less likely to become frustrated. This increased self-confidence also means that they are more able to work well with other students.

All of these improvements are mutually supportive. Students are being helped to learn more effectively and they feel more positive about the help they receive. As a consequence, their self-esteem had improved and so has their behaviour. In turn, teachers and teaching assistants have become increasingly confident in their skills and have increased their expectations that students will learn effectively, make good progress and behave well. Staff are spending less time responding to poor behaviour and are therefore able to spend more time making lessons interesting and enjoyable.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

Many students behave well and tried hard in their lessons. The introduction of a more systematic approach of self-evaluation at the end of each lesson enables students to review more their behaviour and work. They have gained confidence from their improvements.

There has been a successful initiative to improve behaviour in lessons that follow immediately after break and lunch time. Careful analysis identified these as times when students were less likely to settle quickly to their work and more likely to

cause disruption to learning. Staff have therefore introduced some structured activities at these otherwise unstructured times in the school day. As a result, there is significantly less need for supervised time-out when students are allowed to leave a lesson for a short period of time.

The school is working very closely with the local authority to tackle the low attendance of a significant minority of the older students. This includes the appointment of a member of staff who will have a specific role regarding improving attendance. It is too soon to see the impact of these developments given that a significant number of the poorly attending students are in Year 11 and therefore are due to leave the school at the end of this term.

The quality of leadership in and management of the school

The improvements made since the inspection in June 2012 have been the result of the joint work of all staff, led very effectively by the interim headteacher and supported very well by the interim executive board. Staff rightly share the successes achieved so far and are committed to further improvement. As one member of staff explained, 'We're moving forwards', while another added, 'It's all about the children.'

The improvement in teaching has been very effectively led by the interim headteacher. There has been a very strong commitment to a weekly session of professional development for all staff. The content of this training has been informed by a clear understanding of good practice that is already present in the school, and of those areas requiring improvement that have been identified during the observation of lessons by senior leaders and their local authority support colleagues, and during inspection visits. The interim headteacher is very aware that the next step is to ensure these gains are consolidated by consistency in every lesson. The interim executive board has made a very effective contribution to helping this school improve. It is highly knowledgeable about the school and the needs of its students. The board supports the interim headteacher and staff by providing a thorough and insightful challenge to plans for improvement and monitors closely their impact.

External support

The local authority has maintained a high level of commitment to support the school in its improvements. It has continued to provide high levels of expertise and senior officer involvement with the school. The contribution of support to the programme to improve the quality of teaching has been particularly effective. The local authority has worked closely with the school to plan for improving students' attendance where this is unsatisfactory, although it is too early to see the effectiveness of this work. It has also considered very carefully the needs of the students in its development of a borough-wide college of provision for those who have behavioural, emotional and social difficulties that will commence in September 2013.