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28 June 2013

Mr Ben Baxter
Interim headteacher
Bicester Community College
Queen's Avenue
Bicester
OX26 2NS

Dear Mr Baxter

Special measures monitoring inspection of Bicester Community College

Following my visit with Peter Clifton, additional inspector, and Raye Allison-Smith, additional inspector, to your school on 26 and 27 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 December 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:

The school is not making enough progress towards the removal of special measures.

Newly qualified teachers may not 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 Governing Body and the Director of Children's Services for Oxfordshire and the Education Funding Agency.

Yours sincerely

Lorna Brackstone
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

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

- Improve the quality of teaching to good in order to raise achievement by:
 - raising teachers' expectations of what students are capable of achieving
 - ensuring that teachers use information about students' progress to plan lessons which meet the needs of all students
 - making sure that work in lessons stretches, enthuses and absorbs students
 - making sure teachers use questioning more effectively in lessons to check students' understanding and so adapt lessons accordingly
 - providing students with clear, regular and helpful feedback so that they understand how to improve their work
 - ensuring that behaviour in classrooms is managed consistently well by all teachers and that school procedures are followed in full.

- Ensure all leaders drive improvements at a rapid pace by:
 - making careful checks on the progress being made by all students in all year groups, especially of the impact of teaching on learning and achievement, and take effective action when this is not good enough
 - making sure that teachers are held to account for the learning and progress of students in their classes
 - developing a systematic approach to the teaching of literacy and numeracy across the curriculum
 - making sure that systems for making regular checks on the work of the school are clearly linked to robust action plans where success can be clearly measured
 - making regular checks on attendance and taking swift action when necessary to improve it
 - improving the links with parents and carers so they have greater confidence in the quality of the education that the school is providing
 - conducting an external review of the effectiveness of governance.

Report on the second monitoring inspection on 26 and 27 June 2013

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and discussed a range of issues with you. We also met the two substantive deputy headteachers, groups of students, the Chair of the Interim Executive Board (IEB), one member of the IEB, a parent, and a representative from the local authority. Two inspectors also met with a large staff group.

Context

Since the first monitoring visit in March 2013 the substantive headteacher has resigned. You took up your post as interim headteacher on 15 April 2013 and a substantive assistant headteacher joined the college at the same time. A teacher for religious education was recently appointed and took up his post with immediate effect. The IEB met for the first time shortly after my visit in March.

Achievement of pupils at the school

Your decision on arrival at the college to give additional revision sessions to support Year 11 students was a sensible start to raising standards and improving rates of progress. Predicted results for the proportion of students attaining A* to C, including English and mathematics, are set to improve this year. There is currently no indication that the gap between nationally expected levels and those achieved by the students at the college is closing and standards remain low. In recent weeks students in Years 7 to 10 have been checked to see if they have specific problems with their literacy and numeracy skills. Those identified with issues are now receiving specialist help, designed to rapidly improve their levels of attainment in basic skills. This will enable them to access the full range of subjects available to them in college. Students who are disabled and those who have special educational needs have recently started to be identified with greater accuracy so that the relevant support can be provided.

The quality of teaching

You are fully aware that the weaknesses noted at the time of the inspection remain key areas for development. Too many lessons lack pace and do not challenge the students in their learning. Teachers do not have high enough expectations of the students and poor attitudes to learning are a feature of most lessons. Untidy and unfinished work in books is left unchallenged. The marking policy that has been introduced recently, while clear and helpful, has not yet been adopted by the vast majority of the teaching staff and this means that they are failing to provide the support and guidance students need to improve their work. Not enough teaching interests and motivates the students who frequently complain of being 'bored'. Poor

behaviours are not being challenged or remedied and disrupt the learning of other students. Teaching is better in those lessons which have been planned to meet the needs of all the students and have a clear focus for learning which is regularly checked by the teacher. For example, in a highly effective Year 8 English session based imaginatively around 'The Tempest', the teacher made very good use of questioning to ensure that students were kept 'on their toes'. Using both visual and text-based resources to support the students, the teacher pitched the work at an appropriate level and skilfully met students' differing needs. This enabled them to make effective progress during this lesson.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

In lessons where the teaching is inadequate, the attitudes of the students to learning are weak because they are dissatisfied and disengaged. One group of students maturely explained to an inspector that there is a determination at the college 'to move forwards' and there has been a marked improvement in the behaviour of students in and around school. This is in response to the new behaviour policy you and the new assistant headteacher recently introduced. Nevertheless, students report that teachers do not use this policy consistently. The rate of exclusions, however, continues to drop and when compared to the same time last year, has reduced considerably. The recent introduction of rigorous measures to improve attendance rates has had a positive impact on the students' understanding of the need to attend college on a regular basis. Students report that they feel safe and confirm that there is always someone to talk to if they have a problem. They are confident that any instances of bullying are dealt with promptly.

The quality of leadership in and management of the school

Although you have been the interim headteacher for only two months, you have taken firm control of the school and have started to steer it in the right direction. As one member of staff reported 'things were in a right muddle before you came'. You have quickly produced an action plan that is fit for purpose. It identifies clear steps that need to be taken within a measureable timescale and there is now a sense of urgency for improvement. It is clear that raising staff and student expectations are top priorities for you and this is reflected in the training opportunities and professional dialogue you have organised for the teachers. By introducing systems which identify the progress that students make, you have started to ensure that teachers understand that they are accountable for the achievement that individuals in each class make. The way in which you have checked the quality of teaching of those members of staff who have subject responsibilities has given you a secure understanding of the strengths and areas which require improvement. Modifications made to subject choices made in Years 10 and 11 have been refined to ensure quality of provision. The work of the newly appointed assistant headteacher to urgently improve attendance and exclusion rates is impressive and has gained him respect among his colleagues.

You have a determined and rigorous approach to college improvement but there is clear evidence that not all substantive senior leaders are capable of providing you with the support you need. A significant proportion of staff do not have confidence in these substantive senior leaders to model best practice to other staff members. Many of the teaching staff expressed pleasure in their work and enjoy teaching the students. However, they have not fully grasped their responsibility in aiding school improvement. You have rightly identified that there is an urgent need for a change in the 'culture' of the school for both students and staff. Since your arrival in April, the high level of staff absenteeism has declined and morale has improved in some ways. A significant proportion of staff spoken to would appreciate closer lines of communication with the IEB.

In conjunction with the IEB, you have already started to gain the confidence of parents but fully understand you still have some way to go with this. Your efforts to improve the quality of communication between home and school have been positively received by parents with a recent meeting held between the IEB and over 100 parents. This marked a considerable change in relationships between home and school. However, a proposed forming of a group of parents to champion college improvement is yet to be set up.

External support

The high level of support provided by The Cooper School has been well received by the college. Not only has this school provided an interim headteacher who has vision and direction, but colleagues from this school have given advice on collecting and using information on students' progress, timetabling and improvements to the subjects available to the students. Teachers from this support school have taught Year 11 revision sessions and discussed the sharing of resources, including post-16 provision. The local authority took some time to work with the Department of Education to appoint an IEB. However, members of this IEB are competent, experienced and have started to influence improvement in the two months that they have been in place. They have rapidly secured a budget and made strategic plans for the future. The local authority has secured a strong support link with The Cooper School and is fully aware that additional funding and consultancy support is essential to ensure that improvements are made at a faster pace.

The local authority's statement of action, judged not fit for purpose at the first visit, has been amended. It is now fit for purpose.

- Given the significant issues that this school faces, it urgently needs a headteacher who can be permanently based at the school and is supported at a strategic level by the headteacher of the supporting school.
- The local authority needs to provide urgent support for the school to help it in its journey of rapid improvement so it no longer requires special measures.