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5 July 2013

Mr Tony Armstrong
Headteacher
St John's Wood Community School
Longridge
Knutsford
Cheshire
WA16 8PA

Dear Mr Armstrong

Special measures monitoring inspection of St John's Wood Community School

Following my visit with Jo Morgan, Senior Her Majesty's Inspector, to your school on 4 July 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 third monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures following the inspection which took place in September 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 making reasonable progress towards the removal of special measures.

Up to one 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 Governing Body and the Director of Children's Services for Cheshire East.

Yours sincerely

Brian Padgett
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

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

- Eradicate inadequate teaching and improve the achievement of all students, particularly in mathematics and science, at both key stages by:
 - undertaking clear baseline assessments and identifying ambitious targets for individuals which are monitored on a regular basis
 - more rigorously assessing students' progress and analysing data so that any necessary interventions can be put in place at an early stage
 - improving the curriculum to broaden access to a range of curriculum pathways and increased opportunities to achieve awards
 - raising staff's expectations of the standard and amount of work individual students should produce
 - ensuring lessons are planned to take account of the different abilities and incorporate teaching strategies that make learning more lively and engaging for students involving students more in understanding what they need to do to improve their work.
- Improve the school's leadership and management and hence its capacity to sustain improvement by:
 - finalising and fully implementing the local authority's plans to strengthen school leadership by the end of October 2012
 - acting on the improvements identified in the school's recent more robust self-evaluation by drawing up an action plan which sets clear measurable targets
 - rigorously monitoring teaching and setting performance management targets which are linked to improved outcomes for students
 - sharing best practice in assessment through moderation with other providers.
- Improve governance by:
 - raising the awareness of members of the governing body of the importance of their role in holding the school's leaders to account
 - increasing governors' knowledge and understanding of their roles so that they can carry them out effectively.
- Secure improvements in behaviour and reduce the number of exclusions both from school and lessons by:
 - implementing a whole-school approach to the management of behaviour which is consistently applied
 - developing a more individualised approach to planning for the management of behaviour which improves students' capacity to manage their own behaviour and successfully promotes their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development
 - improving the curriculum to better meet students' interests so that they are motivated to participate in lessons and to attend school, particularly in Year 11.

Report on the third monitoring inspection on 4 July 2013

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the headteacher, the executive headteacher, senior staff, governors and a representative from the local authority.

Context

One teacher was absent from school and her duties were being covered by a supply teacher.

Achievement of pupils at the school

The impact of improved leadership, management and teaching continues to be seen in students' better progress and higher achievement. They are best seen with Year 7 students, whose experience of the school has largely been since the new leadership arrangements were put in place. Nevertheless, Year 11 students leaving in 2013 will leave with attainment levels exceeding those of previous years with all leavers in employment, education or training.

The day of the monitoring inspection, July 4, was untypical in that all lessons were based on the theme of America and Independence Day. Teachers planned special activities for the day, each related to their subject. Because the activities were interesting, students enjoyed them. They responded well to the challenge within lessons, with all students making reasonable progress in skills, knowledge and understanding. For example, Year 9 students discussed emotional aspects of a poem based on the 9/11 attack on the Twin Towers in New York. This was a difficult text but one which captured the interest of students. Moreover, they then wrote their own poems and shared their work with others in the class. The lesson required much of students and they responded well to the high expectations.

Records of students' progress in each subject are now kept routinely alongside teachers' lesson plans. They show that most students are making better progress and more often meeting challenging targets.

There have been improvements in students' basic skills in reading and spelling, a consequence of the intervention provided by support staff under the guidance of the school's special educational needs coordinator. For some students, years' worth of improvement has been accomplished within months.

The quality of teaching

Improvement in the quality and consistency of teaching continues to be an important focus for the school. Much has been achieved, although teachers are the first to acknowledge further improvement is required and high quality embedded. Lessons are now well planned to a consistent structure, with clear objectives for learning – these positive features were evident even in the one-off lessons planned to celebrate American Independence Day. Learning is much more tailored to individual students' needs. This is very important since students have widely different abilities and a range of complex learning difficulties. There was clear evidence that many students have particular strengths and abilities. Teachers and support staff more consistently recognise these and encourage them through raised expectations.

All lessons provided students with opportunities to work practically. For example, in science, students studied fair testing outside the classroom, simulating fireworks by producing soda fountains. In mathematics, students used compasses and protractors to make geometrically accurate five-pointed stars, such as are seen in the American flag. Students enjoyed their hands-on work.

The best teaching used open questioning to encourage students to explain their thinking. Some of this good practice came from support staff, some of whom are in training to become higher level teaching assistants. In art, English and mathematics, teaching support staff played a full part in teaching. Learning was less effective when teachers did too much for students, telling them things rather than encouraging students to explain what they thought.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

The school is calmer and more relaxed. Opening up the school to students, particularly in adopting an 'open door' approach for students to access the headteacher and senior staff and softening the communal areas with carpets, has altered the ethos of the school positively, physically and psychologically. The building is looking better, with improved dining arrangements and quality displays of work that are undamaged. Good relationships between staff and students, for long a strength of the school, continue to be evident in lessons and in less formal situations. There is humour and good-natured banter in all lessons. Students get on better together. They are responding well to being given more responsibility, including managing their behaviour. Staff are more accepting that behaviour management is part of their role and should not be left to senior managers. In this respect, form tutors are much more involved than in the past.

Work continues on improving attendance, which now stands at 85%. Short-term exclusions are dramatically reduced from their previous levels. However, the school should continue to devise ways of reducing exclusions further still.

The quality of leadership in and management of the school

Leadership and management continue to improve at all levels, including in governance. The highly effective partnership between the headteacher and the executive headteacher is driving forward improvements at all levels. The momentum for improvement is well embedded. Change is being managed well with all staff involved. Within the school, a broader senior leadership team is working hard and effectively to ensure that key aspects improve and are monitored and evaluated with greater rigour. Data management, teaching quality, individual needs and interventions, attendance and behaviour management are each covered by a post holder. Professional training opportunities are enabling staff to update their skills and expertise and to share models of good practice. The curriculum is being developed extensively to ensure it meets the needs of individual students across the age range. Programmes to support the students' mental health, personal development and life skills are being developed and implemented. The school is more outward-looking. It has benefited substantially from its federation with an outstanding BESD (behavioural, emotional and social difficulties) special school within the local authority. Enhanced partnership working with other schools, colleges and professionals in other agencies are beginning to enable it to provide a better service to students and their families.

Governance is also improving and in ways that mirror the work of senior leaders. It is also more open and questioning, and there are more training opportunities, better organisation and more delegation of responsibilities within the governing body. It is better informed. Each governor has a link with a specific aspect of development. It is, therefore, in a stronger position to support the school and to hold it to account.

External support

The local authority was instrumental in challenging the school's performance before the section 5 inspection and in creating the right conditions for the school to begin the process of improvement. It continues to support the federation, the governing body, the executive headteacher and the headteacher as they prepare for multi-academy trust status. The local authority holds a clear sense of direction for the improving school within a family of schools providing for pupils with BES learning difficulties and its contribution to pupils with similar learning difficulties in mainstream schools.