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22 November 2013

Mr T Rushworth
Interim Headteacher
Bicester Community College
Queen's Avenue
Bicester
OX26 2NS

Dear Mr Rushworth

Special measures monitoring inspection of Bicester Community College

Following my visit with Charlotte Evers, Additional Inspector and Karen Roche, Additional Inspector to your school on the 20 and 21 November 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 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 making reasonable progress towards the removal of special measures.

At my discretion, newly qualified teachers may be appointed to specific subjects.

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.

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 taking 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 third monitoring inspection on 20 and 21 November 2013

Evidence

Inspectors observed the college's work, scrutinised documents and met with the interim headteacher, the headteacher from The Cooper School, the Chair of the Interim Executive Board, an officer from the local authority, the Parent Champion, a group of students and members of the teaching staff.

Context

Since the last monitoring visit in June 2013 the number on roll has decreased from 947 to 889 students. Five members of staff who left the college have been replaced and there have been significant changes to the leadership team. The deputy headteacher of The Cooper School has become the interim headteacher of the college and is being professionally mentored by his headteacher.

Achievement of students at the school

Student achievement in the most recent examination results published in August 2013 was very much as expected. Although they met the government's minimum expectation for attainment and progress, there was not a significant upturn in student performance. This was because these examination results reflected a legacy of poor teaching, ineffectual systems to check progress, a lack of appropriate time allocated to key subjects, inadequate student behaviour towards learning and a negative working environment. Current student achievement is accelerating at a fast pace because teaching has improved and students are eager to work hard. Rigorous systems now check that all students are making consistent progress. 'Catch-up' sessions or specialist intervention groups ensure that everyone is receiving the best possible chance to achieve as well as they can. Predicted results for 2014 are challenging but the college is confident they are achievable given the commitment that both teaching staff and students now demonstrate towards improvement.

The quality of teaching

Since the time of the last monitoring visit in June 2013 the quality of teaching has improved considerably. Relationships between teaching staff and students are much more positive and the learning environment is purposeful and focused. In the best lessons the pace is brisk, students are kept on task because they are engaged and all are fully included in the learning activities. Those teachers who demonstrate passion and commitment within their area of expertise are inspirational in their approach and students are totally immersed in these subjects. Notable examples of this inspirational teaching and learning were observed in English, mathematics,

modern foreign languages, health and beauty, art and physical education. Most teachers display strong subject knowledge and provide clear explanations of what they have planned for the students to learn. Teachers deepen the students' knowledge by asking questions that require thought and precision. For example, some teachers use lolly sticks to select specific students to answer a particular question. Students report that this 'keeps them on their toes'. Although the marking of students' books is now more regular and consistent, expectations of presentation are not as good as they could be. In English and science students' work is regularly checked and the progress they have made is carefully evaluated against the targets that have been set for them. However, this is not a consistent feature in other subjects. Students in receipt of additional government funding, because they are known to be entitled to free school meals, are in care or come from service families, get high quality support on an individual basis. The funding is also used to provide additional learning resources such as laptops.

Behaviour and safety of students

In the majority of lessons seen by inspectors students were engaged well in their learning and displayed a strong interest in the activities they were involved in. The number of Year 11 students who are taking up the option of attending college on Saturday morning is increasing over time and they speak positively about this opportunity for catching up with their work. They explain that behaviour in and around the college has much improved. They demonstrate a very clear understanding of the rewards and sanctions agreed under the new behaviour policy. Inspectors agree that the students' behaviour is respectful and mature and were most impressed by their conduct during an assembly. Attendance rates show an impressive increase and students have a clearer understanding of the need to arrive in good time for the start of the school day and get to lessons without delay. There has been a dramatic decline in the number of students who are excluded from school for unacceptable behaviour. Students appreciate the investment that senior leaders have made in the refurbishment of the toilets and comment positively on the much improved learning environments. They feel safe, free from bullying and are satisfied that there is always someone available who they can talk to about problems or concerns. Students say they are now proud to say that they attend Bicester Community College and happily recommend their school to visitors. As one student explained, since The Cooper School became involved in the leadership and management of the college, it has been as if 'a weight has been lifted off the teachers' shoulders'.

The quality of leadership in and management of the school

The pace of improvement and change since the last monitoring visit is testament to the high level of commitment of both senior leaders and the interim executive board. The reorganisation of the leadership team at both senior and middle levels has been instrumental in the accelerated improvement. Coupled with the appointment of a

number of key staff, leaders and managers feel reinvigorated and demonstrate a high level of ambition and drive. By making leaders responsible for specific subjects, there is now a greater focus on specialisms where expertise is shared in a more manageable way. This has also enabled the checking and tracking of teaching to be more specific and provide greater detail of quality and accountability. Evaluations of teaching are accurate and used well to support further development. Internal coaching and development are having a strong impact on the improving teaching profile. Staff morale has improved considerably and they talk positively about the way in which the new senior leaders conduct themselves. The view of one member of staff very much echoed how other staff felt when she explained that 'I enjoy coming to school now'.

By organising the time allocated to each subject and introducing vocational courses for those students who are more suited to developing practical skills, there is an improved balance to provision. Sixth formers report that the options available to them have increased and the new post-16 courses planned for September 2014 are proving to be popular choices for the current Year 11 students. Senior leaders have improved the communication with parents and carers who appreciate an immediate response to their enquiries and concerns. The Parent Champion has made herself available and proactively found ways to engage with parents and carers.

The headteacher of The Cooper School and the local authority officer assigned to the school have joined the interim executive board to provide additional support and expertise. Coupled with the skills of the other members, they are steering the college purposefully, objectively and sensitively. Their vision and that of the senior leaders for the future of the college fully meets the needs of the students and the local community.

External support

The substantive headteacher of The Cooper School has 'kick-started' the college on its journey of improvement. By restructuring the leadership team, and addressing the high level of inadequate teaching between April and July 2013, he has enabled the college to swiftly engage in improvement since the start of the new academic year. The release of the deputy headteacher from The Cooper School to the role of interim headteacher at Bicester, coupled with the professional guidance he has received from the headteacher from The Cooper School, has facilitated the accelerated progress in all areas identified as needing significant improvement. The interim headteacher has a relentless focus on driving improvement and is extremely well respected by staff and students. The local authority has provided a specialist secondary officer to support and challenge college leadership. By guiding the college in the rewriting of the school improvement plan, this officer has demonstrated attention to detail and the importance of accountability. Nevertheless, there is an agreement that this plan is too lengthy and now needs refining. The local authority has provided a substantial amount of funding to finance additional staffing roles,

expertise on the interim executive board and the extensive decoration and remodelling of certain parts of the college facilities.