

05 May 2015

Mr Roger Burman
Executive Headteacher
Abbey Special School
Little Common Lane
Kimberworth
Rotherham
South Yorkshire
S61 2RA

Dear Mr Burman

Special measures monitoring inspection of Abbey Special School

Following my visit to your school on 28 and 29 April 2015, 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 September 2014. 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.

The local authority's statement of action is fit for purpose.

The school may not appoint newly qualified teachers before the next monitoring inspection.

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 (IEB) and the Strategic Director of Children's Services for Rotherham.

Yours sincerely

Diane Reynard

Associate Inspector

Appointed as an Associate Inspector under the powers relating to additional inspectors, in paragraph 11 of Part 2 of Schedule V2 to the Education and Inspections Act 2006.

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection which took place in September 2014

- As a matter of urgency, improve the safeguarding of pupils and students, by:
 - urgently improve the security and safety of the school site as well as ensuring that statutory requirements are met regarding the safe recruitment of staff
 - making sure new systems to record attendance are used daily and accurately, so that all pupils and students can be accounted for and any absences quickly tackled
 - ensuring that staff always complete detailed records about all serious incidents, including where restraint is used.

- Improve the quality of teaching, so that all pupils and students make good progress, and standards in reading, writing and mathematics rise by the end of Key Stages 2 and 4, so more students gain qualifications before they leave school, by:
 - eradicating inadequate teaching
 - using accurate assessments of pupils' and students' achievement to plan work that better meets their needs and interests, especially for the most able
 - raising expectations of teachers and support staff as to what pupils and students are capable of achieving in lessons and over time, particularly in writing
 - improving teachers' subject knowledge in mathematics, so they can quickly identify what next steps in learning can be introduced
 - teachers making sure all pupils and students are involved in their learning throughout the whole of the lesson and not being allowed to give up part way
 - ensuring that teachers and support staff have and implement, better strategies to manage pupils' and students' unacceptable behaviour effectively, in order to reduce the high use of the support rooms
 - improving the quality of marking and ongoing guidance throughout the lessons, so pupils and students know how to make their work better
 - ensuring that the gaps in what pupils and students, especially the disadvantaged, know and understand are quickly closed so that they achieve well.

- Improve the effectiveness of leadership at all levels, including governance, by:
 - ensuring that the management of staff performance is rigorous and that targets set for teachers are specific and effective in accelerating progress during lessons
 - making sure information and data collected are robust and accurate, so leaders can evaluate the effectiveness of improvements being made
 - reducing significantly staff absence and making sure all staff who cover lessons for absent staff are well trained, prepared and understand what is required for each lesson
 - supporting and challenging staff to put into daily practice their training on proportionate and safe use of restraint
 - using the additional funds the school has to help the disadvantaged pupils and students catch up quickly with the standards which they are capable of attaining
 - using the primary sport funding to support effectively only the pupils it is intended for in Key Stage 2
 - developing the skills of middle leaders so they play an effective role in improving achievement in reading, writing and mathematics across the school
 - improving the effectiveness of governors so they are able to robustly hold leaders to account for the school's improvement.

- Improve pupils' and students' behaviour and reduce the high levels of exclusion from school, by:
 - providing all pupils and students with full-time lesson timetables
 - ensuring that staff can recognise what triggers individual pupils' and students' poor behaviour and so act quickly to de-escalate tension when it arises, in order that pupils' and students' behaviour does not end in crisis, and hence so reduce the need for frequent restraint to be used
 - ensuring that behaviour management strategies are consistently implemented by all staff, so that pupils and students do not feel the need to run away from school
 - providing activities which capture the attention and imagination of all pupils and students so they want to stay in lessons
 - ensuring that a consistent approach is taken to managing pupils' and students' behaviour so learning is not disturbed in lessons
 - providing pupils and students with a good understanding of positive relationships, sexual health and how to keep themselves safe from, for example, the risk of sexual exploitation.

An external review of governance should be undertaken in order to assess how this aspect of leadership and management may be improved.

An external review of the school's use of the pupil premium should be undertaken in order to assess how this aspect of leadership and management may be improved.

Report on the second monitoring inspection on 28 to 29 April 2015.

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work at Abbey School and one other site used for alternative provision, Rotherham College. They visited lessons, in some cases with the school's senior leaders, and looked at pupils' and students' work. They also observed routines at the beginning and end of the school day. Meetings were held with the executive headteacher and deputy headteacher, the substantive deputy headteacher, middle leaders, staff, pupils, students and a group of parents. A range of documentation, including some relating to safeguarding pupils and students, was examined.

Context

Since the previous monitoring inspection the local authority has withdrawn the proposal to close the school and has confirmed that Abbey school is part of the special school provision for the foreseeable future.

The executive headteacher and deputy headteacher from Winterhill School continue to support the school. However, since the last inspection, the substantive headteacher has been seconded to another provision and the deputy headteacher acted up to the position of headteacher. An additional associate senior leader has joined the school for the summer term with a particular focus on behaviour and safety. At the time of the first monitoring inspection, the school had one permanent teacher. This has now increased to four, with a more consistent group of supply staff. The school has been persistent in addressing staffing issues which have resulted in a number of staff leaving the school. Following the first monitoring inspection, all pupils and students are now receiving full-time education and pupils and students who were inappropriately placed have been moved to alternative placements where they are thriving.

Achievement of pupils at the school

The school's progress data clearly show a sudden surge in progress. This is a consequence of improvements in teaching, greater engagement of pupils and students in learning and a workforce that is more focused on securing achievement in lessons.

Teachers are beginning to use their knowledge of pupils' and students' attainment to plan lessons. Through effective professional development they are becoming more confident about judging progress. Their assessments have been moderated internally and externally, both by the local authority and a regional special school group which confirms the accuracy of judgements being made.

The headteacher and two leaders of learning have introduced regular pupil and student progress meetings where teachers are held to account for pupils' and students' individual achievement. Where appropriate, intervention strategies are put in place to address underperformance. It is clear that this system is in its infancy and, while the rigour with which it has been introduced is commendable, it is not yet possible to comment on its impact.

Self-assessment is starting to be used by pupils and students and where this is most effective, both are able to say where their strengths and weaknesses are, but not always what they need to do to improve their work.

The current leadership team has very high aspirations for pupils and students. Examples of this noted in practice include:

- the achievement of eight students in Year 11 has been improved through their full-time attendance at Rotherham College, where they are not only on track to gain qualifications in English and mathematics at GCSE level and Entry Level 3 in ICT, but almost all of them have firm transition plans in place for their next steps after the end of Year 11
- targets on the front of pupils' and students' workbooks promote aspirational attainment. Some pupils and students had grasped the purpose of these and were proud to share what they had achieved and what they were hoping to achieve next
- the planned introduction of a 'progress wall' where individual pupil and students flight paths will be displayed, shared and interventions identified and monitored in order to secure pupil and student achievement.

The quality of teaching

The quality of teaching is improving rapidly. The school's recent observations and those carried out by the local authority show a much-needed improvement, with no inadequate teaching being reported for some time. Leaders of learning can demonstrate a direct correlation between quality teaching and pupils' and students' achievement. The decision to rehearse what learning should look like has brought about a culture of reflective learning, with teachers benefiting from a range of strategies as well as a greater understanding of the use of assessment to promote learning, co-teaching and regular coaching.

The introduction of the new 'Cornerstones' curriculum is providing a good structure which is being used imaginatively to provide a much enriched range of learning experiences on offer. Both pupils, students and staff spoke very positively about this. As one pupil said, 'We like coming to school now because learning is fun.' An inclusion support worker described it as, 'Amazing' 'Hands on' 'Tailored to our kids'.

Where learning was good, resources were well prepared, purposeful and appropriately deployed. For instance in a very engaging Key Stage 3 lesson about mini-beasts, technical language, such as thorax, was used, encouraged and praised.

Inclusion support workers make a positive contribution to pupils' and students' engagement and learning in lessons. Some say they have gained confidence and skill both helping pupils and students in class and in challenging behaviour. They welcome the opportunity to attend weekly professional development sessions alongside teachers and feel acknowledged by the current leadership team for the contribution they make in supporting learning. The support provided by the inclusion support workers was most effective when they focused on extending pupils' and students' knowledge, skills or understanding, rather than simply on task completion.

In the main, teachers use marking effectively to show where success has been achieved and, where it is good, to give additional challenge. For example, some annotations show where pupils and students have found work difficult and where more practice is needed.

Since the last monitoring inspection there have been significant improvements to the learning environment, promoting a more stimulating learning approach. This is evident both inside the classroom and in the wider school environment. It includes a mixture of displaying pupils' and students' work and celebrating their attitudes to learning, 'I am proud' cards and 100% attendance certificates.

It is noteworthy that educational visits and external agencies have been re-engaged and are providing enrichment and deeper meaning to the curriculum. This undoubtedly demonstrates the school's increased confidence in both its staff and the pupils' and students' behaviour.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

Since the first monitoring inspection the school and local authority have worked collaboratively to ensure that the pupil and student population is appropriate and stable.

Systems to manage pupils' and students' behaviour have improved radically. Not only has there been a reduction in the number of incidents, but the severity of these has also dramatically reduced. The site was calm throughout the two-day inspection and the infrequent, minor incidents observed either in class or at break times were appropriately managed by all staff: pupils and students returned to their lesson promptly to ensure minimum disruption to learning. This is a noteworthy improvement and recognises the appropriate steps taken by the current leaders to secure staff confidence.

There is little doubt that the greater stability of staffing and consistent implementation of the school's procedures have also had a positive impact on behaviour across school. Trends in behaviour are reviewed weekly and interventions applied. These can include anything from whole school assemblies to bespoke programmes like 'Theraplay'.

Attendance has improved considerably because pupils and students now have access to full-time education. It is now in line with the national average and appropriate procedures are in place to follow up absences. When required, the school's lead inclusion support worker makes home visits and brings pupils and students to school. The school actively celebrates good attendance through end-of-term achievement assemblies or 100% attendance certificates, which are then displayed in the school's entrance.

Continued improvements have been made to the school site in line with the local authority's health and safety review of October 2014, which found the site to be safe. Following a local authority safeguarding audit January 2015, the school has addressed all concerns and, as a result, the school is no longer causing concern to the local safeguarding children board. The senior leadership team is clearly mindful of the need to foster and further develop a culture where safeguarding pupils and students is everyone's prime concern.

The IEB has played a fundamental role in ensuring that all behaviour and safety concerns identified in the inspection report have been addressed and it has been rigorous in supporting leaders to address these issues.

The quality of leadership in and management of the school

It is a credit to the leadership team that staff morale is remarkably improved since the first monitoring inspection, with some staff going out of their way to explain how they enjoy coming to work and appreciate the leadership and direction provided by the current team. Senior leaders clearly know the school's strengths and areas for improvement. They are displaying a sense of urgency in tackling these areas and have successfully engaged staff in supporting their drive. A recent visioning exercise attended by all staff provides an example of how leaders are totally committed to empowering staff at all levels to be effective drivers of change and create positive learning opportunities for the pupils and students.

Senior leaders, assisted by the leaders of learning, have implemented good systems to support assessment, lesson-planning and behaviour management. They acknowledge that many of the strategies are new and, while there are signs of improvement, the impact is limited and still fragile. New systems for tracking pupils' and students' attainment, setting targets and monitoring progress have also been developed and are routinely monitored by senior leaders. While this is an appropriate starting point, leaders recognise that the monitoring and evaluation cycle is embryonic, because information gathered is not yet being used effectively enough to identify next steps.

The executive leadership team members continue to be very effective change agents and are pivotal in regard to securing the school's renewed success; the IEB sees the continuation of their presence as key in securing the school's renewed success. Members of the IEB continue to support the senior leaders and have an accurate view of the journey the school has travelled and what it needs to do next to continue improving. They remain clear about their role and individual members actively hold senior leaders to account. The IEB and executive headteacher, supported by the local authority's senior adviser, have acted decisively to secure the school's future and are now looking forward to continuing their drive to ensure that the school is removed from special measures. They are also conscious of the need to liaise with the local authority regarding the role the school will play in the authority's future provision of special education.

External support

Following the judgement at the first monitoring inspection, the local authority has taken appropriate steps to ensure that the statement of action is fit for purpose.

The local authority's designated senior adviser continues to play a fundamental role in supporting the school and is recognised by the IEB as helping to bring about rapid change. Regular visits to the school and hands-on support, such as lesson observations, work scrutiny, moderation and professional development, have ensured that a sustained and trusting relationship has evolved where honest dialogue promotes a two-way challenge.