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Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 4234
www.gov.uk/ofsted



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Mrs Alison Jobling
Acting Headteacher
Durham Community Business College
Bracken Court
Ushaw Moor
Durham
DH7 7NG

Dear Mrs Jobling

Special measures monitoring inspection of Durham Community Business College

Following my visit with Nigel Drew, Ofsted Inspector, to your college on 19 and 20 April 2016, 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 that have been taken since the college's previous monitoring inspection.

The inspection was the fourth monitoring inspection since the college became subject to special measures following the inspection that took place in September 2014. The full list of the areas for improvement that 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:

Leaders and managers are taking effective action towards the removal of special measures.

The college may appoint newly qualified teachers before the next monitoring inspection.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the executive board, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Durham County Council. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

David Brown
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

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

- Urgently improve the quality of teaching so that it is at least good in order to raise achievement, especially in mathematics, science and the sixth form, by ensuring that:
 - the progress made by different groups of students is accurately and regularly checked
 - students' work is accurately assessed and new work enables all groups of students to make rapid progress
 - teachers demand consistently high standards of work from their students
 - all marking and feedback give helpful guidance by showing students precisely what they must do to improve their work and ensuring they act upon this advice quickly.

- Urgently improve the effectiveness of leadership and management, including governance, so that improvement is driven forward rapidly by:
 - ensuring that senior leaders are capable of delivering improvement priorities
 - establishing robust systems to check and evaluate the college's work accurately and ensuring that the outcomes are used consistently by all senior and middle leaders and managers to make rapid improvements
 - ensuring that leaders' judgements about the quality of teaching give high regard to the standards of students' work over time and published performance data on progress and attainment
 - checking that students who are supported by the government's pupil premium funding receive high calibre support that accelerates their progress
 - ensuring that the governing body holds the senior leaders and managers to account for all aspects of the college's performance.

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 college's use of pupil premium funding should be undertaken in order to assess how this aspect of leadership and management may be improved.

Report on the fourth monitoring inspection on 19 and 20 April 2016

Evidence

During this inspection, meetings were held with the acting headteacher and deputy headteachers, senior and middle leaders, three members of the interim executive board of governors (IEB), a representative of the local authority, and a representative of Bright Tribe, the potential academy sponsor. Inspectors spoke with pupils in lessons and at other times during both days of the inspection about the quality of their educational experience and the standard of behaviour in the college. Inspectors visited 13 lessons in a range of subjects across the full age-range of the college to observe teaching and learning and to look at the work pupils were doing in lessons and over time in their books. They observed the college's work and scrutinised a range of documentation, including the college's view of its own performance, monitoring records, information about pupils' progress, improvement planning, records of behaviour and attendance, and records relating to safeguarding and child protection.

Context

Durham Community Business College is part of a federation with a local secondary college. A major restructuring of the senior leadership team of the two colleges in the federation took effect in September 2015. The local authority has appointed a new acting headteacher to support leadership within the college and the previous acting headteacher has returned to his substantive deputy headteacher position. A second deputy headteacher, responsible for teaching and learning, took up post in January 2016.

The governing body has been replaced by an IEB. Plans for the college to become an academy remain under consideration.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

The IEB and the local authority have recognised that the pace of improvement since the inspection in September 2014 was too slow and that additional leadership capacity was required in the college. An experienced full-time acting headteacher, along with a permanent second deputy headteacher, is now in post and providing highly effective support and challenge both to other members of the senior leadership team and to middle leaders. The acting headteacher and two deputy headteachers have developed a strong partnership and, as a result, there is a developing sense of collective commitment among staff to improving the outcomes for pupils.

All pupils in the college are now set challenging targets and pupil progress is assessed each half term. A new information analysis system has been adopted which rapidly identifies concerns with the progress of both individuals and groups of pupils. The college has worked with a number of external partners from the local authority and from local schools to moderate and monitor the accuracy of this assessment information. Senior and middle leaders hold regular raising achievement meetings

where the progress of pupils is discussed and support arranged for those who may be in danger of falling behind. This work is having a significant impact on the achievement of pupils.

Middle leaders are now linked with a member of the recently restructured senior leadership team and each has produced a detailed analysis of outcomes in their subject area and used this to update their department development plan. More rigorous departmental self-evaluation has created a greater awareness of weaknesses in both the curriculum and in teaching, and has increased the focus on rapid and targeted improvements.

Members of the IEB continue to support and challenge college leaders. The federation scrutiny group continues to focus on strategies to improve the quality of teaching and to address areas of underachievement. Self-evaluation is more accurate and based on a thorough analysis of all relevant information. It correctly identifies the priorities for the next stage of the college's development.

Plans for the college to become an academy are still under consideration, but a continued lack of progress updates from the potential academy sponsor is a major cause of concern. However, the local authority, college leaders and members of the IEB are clear that the work involved in this area must not distract from the critical tasks of improving teaching and raising standards within the college.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

The appointment of a new deputy headteacher with responsibility for teaching and learning in January has led to a rapid improvement in teaching throughout the college. A newly established teaching and learning group meets weekly and has developed a simplified lesson planning scheme and updated the college marking policy.

Teachers are now supported through an individual development programme and, when weaknesses are observed, targeted support and challenge are rapidly put in place. Lesson observations and scrutiny of pupils' work confirm that standards are rising as teachers' expectations of what pupils are capable of achieving increase.

The accuracy of teacher assessment has improved and middle leaders and teachers are now more aware of data relating to pupils' progress and better understand the needs of the different groups of pupils in their classes. Marking of pupils' work follows the college policy and is effective in ensuring that pupils understand what they have learned and what they need to do to improve. Work in books shows that pupils are making better progress across all year groups and the majority of subjects and that most now take more pride in the presentation of their work.

The college is aware that more needs to be done to secure these improvements and ensure that best practice in teaching continues to spread across the college. The quality of teaching remains correctly the major focus for improvement. There are clear signs that the college now has the capacity to improve teaching further.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

The work of the attendance officer, together with a more systematic approach to monitoring pupil absence throughout the college, has led to continued improvements in attendance. Persistent absence, and in particular that of disadvantaged pupils, is declining rapidly. Attendance for this academic year is close to the national average for secondary schools.

Support for pupils within the Apex inclusion suite is now closely aligned to the college curriculum. Effective support, together with more consistent use of the college's rewards and consequences policy and better teaching, has dramatically reduced the number of fixed-term exclusions from the college. As pupils learn the consequences of poor behaviour, the number of pupils who spend time in the inclusion suite is falling.

College records confirm that the number of serious behaviour incidents has decreased significantly since the previous inspection. Pupils are taught about different forms of bullying, including homophobic and racist bullying, and know what to do if they witness or experience it. They report that incidents of bullying are now low.

Pupils have a clear understanding of what makes an unsafe situation and, for example, are able to talk knowledgeably about online safety and the potential dangers of using social media. The college promotes tolerance of others and safety through an effective programme of citizenship lessons and regular assemblies.

Outcomes for pupils

In 2015, the proportion of pupils achieving five GCSE qualifications at grades A* to C, including English and mathematics, declined for a third consecutive year. In mathematics only 39% of pupils made the progress expected of them, and the proportion of pupils making more than expected progress was very low. Outcomes in English were much stronger and in line with the national average; 70% of pupils made expected progress, with 32% making more than expected progress.

Observations of teaching, evidence from pupils' books and discussions with pupils confirm that they are making better progress in all areas of the curriculum, including in mathematics and science. Outcomes for pupils in all year groups are rising. The college's most recent analysis of assessment information, moderated by representatives of the local authority and teachers in other schools, indicates that the achievement of all pupils, including those supported by the pupil premium, will rise significantly this year.

External support

The local authority has provided further support for the leadership of the federation through the appointment of a full-time acting headteacher. Local authority officers have continued to work with middle leaders to develop their leadership skills. The federation scrutiny group meets regularly to support and challenge senior leaders.