



**[Post-visit letter – special measures visits]**

19 January 2006

Mr A Traynor  
Headteacher  
Archbishop Beck Catholic High School Sports College  
Cedar Road  
Liverpool  
L9 9AF

Dear Mr Traynor

**Special Measures: Monitoring Inspection of Archbishop Beck Catholic High School Sports College**

**Introduction**

Following my visit with John Ashton, Judith Tolley, Stephen Wall, and Mark Wilson, Additional Inspectors, to your school on 17 and 18 January 2006, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector to confirm the inspection findings.

The visit was the first monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures in June 2005.

This letter will be posted on the Ofsted website. Please inform the Regional Inspection Service Provider of any factual inaccuracies within 24 hours of the receipt of this letter.

**Evidence**

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents, and met with the headteacher, nominated staff, groups of pupils and sixth-form students, the chair of governors, and representatives from the local authority (LA) and archdiocese. Informal discussions were held with other members of staff and with pupils, and samples of work were examined.

**Context**

Fourteen members of staff have joined the school since the inspection in June 2005, including the new headteacher, a deputy headteacher and seven newly qualified teachers. The Alt Valley sixth-form collaborative, which involves local secondary and special schools, was launched in September and provides students with a wider range of course options. Some students have chosen to study courses at the partner institutions.

## **Achievement and standards**

The results of the national Key Stage 3 tests in 2005 were significantly below average. The marked improvement in English captured most ground lost the previous year; mathematics and science remained steady. The school achieved its targets in English and mathematics at Level 5, the standard expected of 14-year-olds, but fell short in science. Overall, in relation to their results at primary school in 2002, most pupils made satisfactory progress.

At GCSE in 2005, standards were well below average and lower than in 2004. The proportion of pupils gaining at least five A\* - C grades fell slightly to 27% but included English and mathematics for most of those pupils, which was an improvement. The proportion attaining five A\* - G grades decreased by 6% to 83%. Too many pupils, particularly those of average ability, made insufficient progress from their starting points on joining the school.

In most lessons, pupils made at least satisfactory progress and in about a third they made good progress. Many are catching up from a legacy of weaker achievement. However, their achievement was often affected by their passive response and heavy dependence on their teachers. The school's concentration on improving the quality of teaching and learning has helped to raise the expectations of teachers and pupils. A culture of success has been emphasised: rewards assemblies take place regularly, with some departments using them to celebrate pupils' achievements.

Most pupils are aware of their estimated and target grades. In some departments, teachers' marking of pupils' work indicates what needs to be done to improve, but this practice is not consistent across the school. Systems to analyse data are now in place and a data manager has been appointed. Although teachers have more detailed assessment information, little use is made of it in planning lessons to meet pupils' individual learning needs and abilities. An assessment of pupils' current standards of work has been completed; initial analysis suggests that pupils are making better progress towards their targets. However, at this early stage, the data is not all equally reliable as teachers vary in their confidence in assessing pupils' performance accurately.

The deputy headteacher in charge of raising achievement has worked very hard and with much enthusiasm to establish a firm foundation for improvement. The school is on track with its action plan for this area but the full impact of recent developments has yet to be felt.

Progress on the area for improvement:

- raise achievement – satisfactory progress

## **Personal development and well-being**

Pupils behaved well in most lessons, even in those when teaching was dull and their attention wandered. Around school, and between lessons, movement was orderly and teachers tried hard to make sure the pupils moved quickly from lesson to lesson with the minimum of delay. The high profile of senior managers around the school at break times and during lessons assists in this process and is appreciated by the pupils. In many lessons, despite behaving well, pupils often showed little enthusiasm because teaching lacked sparkle or did not sufficiently involve or engage them in their learning.

In discussion with inspectors, pupils said that they generally enjoy coming to school and feel safe; they are confident in the school's ability to deal with bullying and would have no difficulty in approaching a member of staff for help. Although the school council meets regularly, pupils were uncertain about its effectiveness in acting as a channel for their voice. The school is encouraging healthy lifestyles through its sports' provision and by introducing a range of healthier food options at lunchtimes. Pupils support charities but they feel they could do more in terms of organised events to support a wider range of worthy causes.

The school has implemented its action plan with vigour to improve attendance and punctuality. The awareness of pupils, staff and parents of the importance of attendance and punctuality is being raised. Improved procedures for electronic registration provide a much more accurate picture of attendance than was previously the case. The impact of initiatives to raise attendance has yet to be reflected in the figures for this year. While the level of unauthorised absence has shown a small decrease, authorised absence in the autumn term 2005 remained similar to the same period in 2004. The school believes that the unreliability of previous data may be masking a significant improvement in attendance this year.

The school now takes punctuality seriously. The presence of senior staff and the attendance officer at the school gates at the start of the day is helping to improve punctuality. One pupil put it nicely by saying; "You used to arrive whenever you liked and no one said much, but now they don't let you get away with it!" Last year's average of nearly 150 pupils late to registration each day at just one of the school's gates has fallen to a daily average of 95 for both gates during the autumn term 2005.

Progress on the area for improvement:

- increase attendance and improve punctuality – satisfactory progress

### **Quality of provision**

This school has given a high priority to improving teaching and learning with work in this area being well led by the headteacher. Improving resources and the environment for learning were important first steps where good progress has been made, although there is still much to do, especially in the further provision and effective use of information and communication technology (ICT).

Establishing a uniform system of lesson planning was next, with the focus shifting more to what pupils will learn rather than what teachers intend to teach. There are notable areas of better practice, design and technology for instance, where the well structured schemes of work make the planning of individual lessons relatively straight forward. However, the overall quality of planning is still too variable and in some cases, it is minimal. The contribution that teaching assistants should make to pupils' learning is not routinely included; the school is aware that the deployment of teaching assistants is a weakness and intends to link them with departments as a way of increasing their effectiveness.

The headteacher has clarified the basic classroom expectations of teachers and shared useful self-evaluation checklists with them to good effect. There is now a more systematic and rigorous system of monitoring the quality of teaching. A structured programme of lesson observations is giving the school an accurate view of the quality of teaching and learning. Candid feedback is given to teachers who have responded well. Senior staff are concentrating their efforts on where the need for improvement is greatest.

The quality of teaching was satisfactory in half of the lessons and good in over a third. This represents an improvement since the inspection in June 2005. Relationships between staff and pupils were a general strength. In the better lessons, teachers shared clear learning objectives with the pupils. Starter activities were relevant and not too long or overcomplicated. Interesting activities, and appropriate resources including good use of digital projectors, held the pupils' attention. The teachers gave clear explanations and managed the learning so that pupils had opportunities to exercise initiative. They used effective methods, such as mini whiteboards, to assess pupils' understanding.

Weaknesses remain in the teaching, including some teaching judged to be satisfactory overall, and particularly in science. Many teachers talked for too long so that pupils had limited opportunities to work collaboratively or independently. Some teachers did not expect enough from pupils in terms of challenge and pace of learning; there were occasional instances of time-filling activities. Although marking has improved, some comments praised pupils' work for its appearance rather than the understanding shown. Most teachers did not use assessment information to plan lessons or to comment on pupils' work in a way that told them how to improve.

Progress on the area for improvement:

- continue to improve the quality of teaching and learning – satisfactory progress

## **Leadership and management**

The headteacher is providing very good leadership. He brought valuable previous experience to the post and was quick to define his expectations of staff and pupils. These are reflected in the school's new mission statement: "only the best will do". The headteacher is well supported by the two deputy headteachers. He has won

the support and commitment of staff, pupils and governors, and has united the school. Many staff and pupils spoke warmly of the positive impact he has had: morale is buoyant. Staff are engaging positively with the need for improvement. The marked change in the school's ethos has been crucial in setting the tone for its work. Important foundations for further change and development have been laid and there are now rigorously defined mechanisms to hold individuals to account for their performance; this is bringing a new professional culture to the school. The capacity for improvement is good.

The senior leadership group comprises the headteacher, two deputy and five assistant headteachers, and the finance officer. Roles and responsibilities have generally been defined in a coherent way, and include whole-school dimensions and arrangements for line management, although job descriptions are currently generic. Performance management faltered under the previous leadership and a programme for all staff has yet to be re-established. Targets have, however, been set for senior staff who provide the headteacher with regular reports on their areas of responsibility. Nevertheless, these reports vary in quality and there could be more clarity on how points for action are followed up. The quality of leadership and management by the heads of department is improving but remains variable. Appropriate line-management structures are in place to support the development of their roles, and they are showing a willingness to improve. While some are benefiting from middle-management training, no such programme has been designed specifically to develop the leadership skills of the assistant headteachers, whose effectiveness and levels of experience vary.

Across the school, staff have benefited from a range of training and support, much of it bespoke to individual teachers' needs. Alongside this, the school might consider adopting a systematic approach to the professional development of all staff in their teaching and management roles, as was the approach to training on 'assessment for learning'.

The headteacher rapidly established an accurate view of the school's strengths and weaknesses. This is informing his skilful management of the wide range of changes and developments needed in the school. The short-term action plan has been implemented successfully in the main, although a few actions are behind schedule; the intention to review it is timely. Although the plan covered all the key issues, it gave insufficient emphasis to improving the sixth form. The next stage of improvement planning might usefully couple the need to embed actions already taken with further development in each area. It would benefit from increased use of quantitative targets and interim milestones.

The governors continue to give committed support to the school. The committee structure has been reviewed appropriately, and a new committee established to monitor the school's progress against its action plan. The approach of linking governors to each key issue is sensible. While the reports written by senior staff for the governors usefully outline the actions taken, they are not always evaluative. Nonetheless, the headteacher reports that governors are increasingly asking appropriately challenging questions in their monitoring role.

Progress on the areas for improvement:

- improve leadership and management – good progress

### **The sixth form**

Students enter the sixth form with GCSE results that are well below average overall. The results of the 2005 AS and A-level examinations showed some improvement but standards remain much lower than average for all sixth forms. Too many students did not achieve as well as they should. Their performance varied widely from subject to subject; it was best in English literature, drama and physical education (PE). The overall pass rates were 86% at A level and 63% at AS level, which are very low. In part, this was because many students entered the sixth form without a secure foundation in the subjects they chose to study; the guidance they received prior to embarking on advanced-level courses was inadequate. Current students in Year 12 have been given better guidance, but there is still work to do in this area. The monitoring of students' progress has been tightened up since September; there are examples of good practice in the involvement of students in setting targets and checking process which is having a positive impact upon their attitudes.

The attendance rate for Year 13 students, 67% in the autumn term, is a serious concern. The figure for Year 12 students is better at 88.5% but still below average. The school is monitoring attendance closely.

Progress in developing teaching and learning styles in the sixth form has been slower than in the rest of the school. The approach has lacked structure; the provision of a list of strategies that represent good practice in sixth-form teaching and learning has had little impact. Although most of the teaching was at least satisfactory, opportunities for students to work collaboratively or independently were missed. Their responses to questions were often very brief. Many were dependent upon their teachers; this does not equip them well for the next stage in education. However, when given the opportunity to contribute substantially to lessons, students did so enthusiastically, resulting in lively debate.

Although roles and responsibilities for directing the work of the sixth form are clearer than at the time of the last inspection, there remains some confusion about what to do to improve provision and by whom. The action plan gives insufficient attention to the sixth form, and mechanisms to evaluate progress are inadequate. Moreover, insufficient consideration has been given to the wider curriculum and the part students play in the life of the whole school. In addition, there are no sixth-form facilities for private study or independent learning. The head of sixth form is aware of strengths and weaknesses, but actions taken to date to address underachievement and spread good practice have had limited impact.

## **The school's specialist status**

The action plan sensibly includes the role of the specialist subjects, PE and more recently ICT, in bringing wider improvements to the school's work and raising achievement. Best practice in terms of lesson planning, teaching and monitoring are being shared across the whole school. PE staff are working on a range of initiatives to raise achievement, including supporting teaching and learning in other subjects.

The quality of provision in PE is strong. In 2005, GCSE results were in line with national figures and targets in Year 9 were exceeded. However, while Year 9 targets were met in ICT, this was not the case at GCSE. The school has started to address weaknesses in ICT provision. Targets set for 2006 are being closely monitored.

The school has recently installed two new computer suites, the second of which will be for sixth-form use. Along with the provision of interactive whiteboards and lap-top computers for some departments, this has increased access to and use of ICT. In a drive to raise achievement and improve ICT skills, all Year 10 pupils are studying an accredited course in ICT. An initial audit of cross-curricular ICT has identified areas for development; a teacher has been appointed to lead this work.

## **External support**

The LA's statement of action follows DfES guidance: the target date for removal of special measures was clarified as September 2006, which is appropriately ambitious. The statement identifies in broad terms how the LA will support each area of the school's action plan; for example, through additional support from the school improvement officer, and consultants working with departments, but it does not specify how it intends to gauge the effectiveness of the support. The LA, with the archdiocese, helped the school draw up the action plan, and has established a project group to monitor progress. At the request of the headteacher, it carried out a financial audit in November; the school awaits the written report. The work of the consultants is valued by teachers, as is the support of the education welfare service in improving attendance. There is an urgent need to help the school to find experienced leadership for science in the absence of the head of department.

## **Main Judgements**

Progress since being subject to special measures – satisfactory

Quality of LA's statement of action – satisfactory

Newly qualified teachers may be appointed except in science.

**Priorities for further improvement:**

- improve teachers' use of assessment in their day-to-day work;
- increase the opportunities for pupils to be involved actively in their learning;
- design and implement an improvement plan for the sixth form;
- work with the LA and archdiocese to resolve the urgent issue of leadership in science.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the chair of governors, the Executive Director for Education and Lifelong Learning Services for Liverpool, and the Archdiocese of Liverpool.

Yours sincerely

**Jane Jones**  
**H M Inspector**