



12 May 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 Derek Aitken, Denise Shields, Ian Thompson, and Jon Lovgreen, Additional Inspectors, to your school on 10 and 11 May 2006, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector to confirm the inspection findings.

The visit was the second 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 a representative from the local authority (LA). Informal discussions were held with other members of staff and with pupils, and samples of work were examined. Year 10 pupils were on work experience during the week of the inspection.

Context

There have been no significant contextual changes since the previous monitoring visit in January 2006.

Achievement and standards

The school is reaping the benefits of the strategies and systems introduced over the last two terms. Their coherence gives confidence to the improvements indicated by analysis of assessment data held on each cohort of pupils and increasingly reflected in their day-to-day progress in lessons.

The school's targets at Key Stage 3 are ambitious. Analysis of data shows the Year 7 and 8 cohorts to be on track and Year 9 to be achieving at least as well as pupils in similar schools. The general certificate of secondary education (GCSE) targets are realistic given the school's history of weaknesses in provision. The most recent data suggests the school is on track to achieve or exceed them. However, there remains considerable variability in performance between different subjects; science is still a serious concern. Mathematics is growing in strength at both key stages.

The school is taking advantage of various curricular and assessment options; for example, modular GCSE courses and early entry in a few subjects. It has also identified a group of Year 11 pupils whose performance was likely to be close to but below the key measure of five 'A* to C' grades. These pupils have been entered for adult literacy and numeracy qualifications at the GCSE equivalent of level 2; this is proving a successful strategy. An important consequence has been the positive impact on pupils' self-esteem and the knock-on effect on their determination to succeed in their other subjects too.

The school has been successful in raising the expectations of pupils, their parents and teachers. Almost all of the Year 9 pupils, 98.5%, attended school during the week of the Key Stage 3 national tests, which is notably higher than in previous years. Attendance at the academic review day, where parents discussed their child's progress with form tutors, exceeded 90%. There is much greater awareness among pupils, and their parents, about how well they are doing. While the quality of feedback to pupils, such as through marking, is improving, it is not consistently of good enough quality and not always followed through into subsequent work.

Actions to raise the quality of teaching at whole-school and individual levels are contributing to better achievement. Pupils made good progress in about half of the lessons observed during this visit and at least satisfactory progress in the majority. There remains more to be done to increase pupils' independence as learners and embed teachers' use of assessment as an integral part of teaching and learning.

Progress on the area for improvement:

- raise achievement – good progress

Personal development and well-being

Pupils behaved well in the vast majority of lessons although there was some chatter and wandering of attention when teaching was not interesting. Some oral question-and-answer routines were too brief to develop pupils' self-confidence and independence. Around school and in social areas, pupils behaved sensibly and considerately, as shown, for example, in their response to the fire alarm and evacuation.

Pupils were quick to point out to inspectors that the climate for learning had improved considerably because clearer boundaries and higher expectations for behaviour were being set. They were also appreciative of the greater range of rewards for effort and good performance; pupils said that teachers were now just as likely to seek them out to praise them as to punish them. The school has

recently set up some avenues to listen to pupils' views such as the school council; these need further development. Other initiatives that contribute to pupils' personal growth, such as peer and buddy systems, might usefully be considered.

The school is implementing an increasing range of strategies to improve attendance and punctuality. In contrast to the decrease commonly found locally, there was a small rise in attendance in the spring term, which gives the school a fighting chance of meeting its end-of-year target. Systems are being improved but inconsistencies have not yet been fully resolved and analysis of data needs further refinement to be fully effective. Written guidance for staff on authorised absence would be useful.

There has been a slight decrease in the number of late-comers to school since the last monitoring visit but also a greater incidence of re-offenders. Teachers routinely identify pupils' late arrival at lessons as a significant barrier to learning; this was borne out frequently during the visit. Although the site is dispersed, many pupils showed little sense of urgency in moving between lessons. Too little progress has been made in improving punctuality.

Progress on the area for improvement:

- increase attendance and improve punctuality – just satisfactory overall

Quality of provision

The quality of teaching continues to improve. It was good or better in about half of the lessons observed and at least satisfactory in almost all. There has been a particular focus on assessment in lesson planning and during the lesson. In the best lessons, teachers used assessment information well to plan a variety of challenging activities that captured pupils' interest and met their diverse needs. Good links were made to earlier lessons to reinforce learning and to promote progress. Teachers made pupils think for themselves through skilful questioning that helped to identify gaps in knowledge or understanding. Building on pupils' answers, teachers challenged them to develop their ideas further and promoted understanding. Lessons moved along at a good pace. Pupils worked purposefully, enjoying their learning and behaving well. Effective planning enabled classroom assistants to provide good support for pupils with additional learning needs.

Weaknesses in teaching, including in some otherwise satisfactory lessons, arose when lesson planning was less secure and assessment information was not used effectively. Learning slowed when activities did not motivate or hold pupils' interest. Sometimes pupils struggled with their work because teachers did not check they understood tasks or how well they were learning. Classroom assistants were not used to best advantage particularly during whole-class teaching.

Across the school, homework is not used well enough either to pave the way for future lessons or to extend learning. It is not set consistently in accordance with the published timetable and sometimes none is set. Consequently, too many pupils lack opportunities for independent learning. The quality of marking varies within and between departments. At best, it provides pupils with clear information about

how well they have done and what they need to do to improve. Such attention to detail helps promote pupils' progress. However, marking too often simply consists of perfunctory, though usually supportive, comments that do not give pupils the guidance they need. The school rightly recognises these as matters for further development.

Progress on the area for improvement:

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

Leadership and management

The headteacher is providing exceptional leadership; his vision for the school's future is clear and unwavering. He has been vigorous in tackling underperformance and bringing about improvement, managing change very well through an honest and open approach. The whole school community holds him in high regard; staff morale continues to be buoyant. One member of staff commented, 'new life has been breathed into our school'. The deputy headteachers fulfil their high profile roles effectively and provide good support for colleagues. Their strong partnership with the headteacher is a driving force in the school; there is good capacity for further improvement.

Roles and responsibilities have been clearly defined for members of the wider senior leadership group. Job descriptions for teaching and support staff, however, are generic. Teachers' performance management has been re-established and a programme for other staff is being developed. Across the school, staff benefit from a range of training and support; this is well targeted to suit individual and whole-school needs.

The effectiveness of the assistant headteachers has improved. Although their levels of experience vary, they are making a valuable contribution to improving teaching and learning throughout the school by the sharing of good practice. They provide the headteacher with reports on their areas of responsibility which are generally more evaluative than at the time of the last monitoring visit. The quality of leadership and management by the heads of department continues to improve but remains uneven. Reports produced by them are generally of better quality although not all focus clearly enough on the impact of actions taken. A collaborative approach to supporting some subject leaders, known as 'departmental champions', has been introduced very recently. It has been well received but it is too early to measure the impact of this new initiative.

A new action plan was drawn up following the last monitoring visit. Although spanning only two terms, it contains clear success criteria. In the main, priorities are being addressed successfully. The school, together with the LA and archdiocese, have endeavoured to resolve the issue of leadership in science, but this remains a major priority.

The governors continue to support the school well. The chair of governors is astute and very well informed about all aspects of the school. The revised committee structure is working effectively and enables governors to be more involved in

strategic management and in monitoring the quality of provision and progress made against each of the key issues for action.

The school has recently received the financial auditor's report. The lack of systems and procedures to plan, manage and monitor the school's finances is of particular concern. The headteacher and chair of governors are working closely with the LA to resolve the most immediate issues. Currently the school is not well placed to meet in 2007 the requirement for external assessment of the school's financial management standards because it does not have robust financial controls and structures at all levels.

Progress on the area for improvement:

- improve leadership and management – good progress

The sixth form

The previous monitoring visit raised significant concerns about the slow rate of improvement of the sixth form. The school has subsequently written an action plan that addresses the four areas for improvement in common with the whole-school action plan. The plan is satisfactory: actions and success criteria are suitably well defined and persons responsible identified. It is overseen by an assistant headteacher, who works in conjunction with other senior staff and the head of sixth form, who has also received valuable support from an experienced deputy headteacher from a local school. Despite clearer definition of managerial roles and structures, however, there remains a lack of coherence to the leadership of the sixth form and this is leading to piecemeal development. While improvement in the sixth form is satisfactory, it is less rapid than in the rest of the school.

The school's data suggests standards are rising in the sixth form. Most students who re-sat AS level examinations in January improved their AS level grades; the pass rate was 82%. Students' results were analysed against their target grades and those whose performance was a cause for concern were interviewed and ways forward considered. These systems are useful and appropriate. However, data had not been interrogated to establish overall pass rates or to examine the performance of different subjects so that a strategic approach could be adopted to securing improvement; for instance, asking probing questions where students were unsuccessful in certain units, and tackling any issues. Routine monitoring of students' progress has improved. Half-termly assessments allow sixth-form staff to keep a watchful eye on students' academic development.

Teaching was satisfactory or better in the few lessons observed. In the best, students were encouraged to participate fully and take responsibility for their learning. Elsewhere, many students were passive and dependent on their teachers. Nevertheless, students spoke positively of their experiences in the sixth form and were appreciative of teachers' support and commitment to them. An important positive feature is the increase in students' confidence and self-esteem, manifested in raised aspirations for their futures, whether studying at university or seeking employment. Students said guidance had improved. They are pleased with the new computer suite but think the library facilities and common room could be improved.

Most were happy about travelling to partner schools in the collaborative, although practical problems remain about travel arrangements and occasional teacher absence in the host school. Year 11 pupils spoke warmly of the information they had received about post-16 choices. However, the current sixth-form prospectus, common across the collaborative, is dull and does not provide equivalent information for each subject, for example on subject-specific pre-requisites. Pupils were unaware of the school's requirement of a GCSE grade B for mathematics and science. Nonetheless, despite being in its early stages, the collaborative has increased opportunities for students in the neighbourhood.

Students' attendance remains a concern. In particular, few students sign out as required when leaving the site: this is a health and safety issue that needs urgent attention. Moreover, the accuracy of attendance data is jeopardised by the lack of afternoon registration. Students stated that attendance at morning registration and lessons 3 and 4 gave them a full day's attendance. Even so, attendance figures for Year 12 have fallen this term to 85.5% and have risen to 76.5% in Year 13. Both rates are unsatisfactory.

- Progress on improving the sixth form – satisfactory

The school's specialist status

The school is making good progress in using its specialist status to stimulate better progress across subject areas and aspects of school life. Development plans ensure good links between specialist-school development and whole-school improvement. The very good model set by the physical education (PE) department is respected and appreciated by all staff. Teachers are increasingly aware of the levels of organisation, teaching skill, and expectations of pupils that can be achieved in their own lessons. Various initiatives to support and encourage more lively, relevant and challenging lessons draw heavily on the expertise of the PE department.

Close monitoring suggests that standards are rising at both key stages in PE and information and communication technology (ICT). There has been considerable expansion of ICT resources and training in their use, but ICT is not yet an integral part of teachers' thinking and planning and so opportunities are missed. A good feature is the expanding curriculum offered in PE through the addition of BTEC courses and in ICT where all Year 10 pupils now study to GCSE level. There needs, however, to be greater clarity as to how these evolving ICT skills can be utilised in learning, and how other subject areas can contribute to them.

Provision is strong in PE and improving satisfactorily in ICT. Teachers are now more used to being coached and observed, and they are becoming more self-critical and ambitious. This is, in part, a result of the use of specialist status initiatives, which are also having a positive impact on pupils' confidence and motivation. The lack of enrichment through PE for all sixth-form students is a missed opportunity which is at odds with the school's specialist status philosophy.

External support

The LA is working effectively in partnership with the school to provide well-targeted support across the breadth of its work, drawing on a range of the LA's services including consultancy support through the Secondary National Strategy and financial advice. The recently introduced programme to develop potential middle-level leaders offers promise. However, the school's difficulties regarding the leadership of science remain unresolved despite the efforts of the LA and archdiocese, although the department continues to receive consultancy support from the LA and internal support from a deputy headteacher.

The LA's review of the school's progress was thorough, gauging improvement and identifying next steps. In addition, the LA has given explicit consideration to how it measures the impact of its support: this is welcome practice.

Main Judgements

Progress since previous monitoring inspection – good

Progress since being subject to special measures – good

Priorities for further improvement:

- improve the quality of homework tasks and teachers' feedback to pupils
- encourage pupils to play a more active part in lessons and in school life more widely
- raise the profile of punctuality to lessons
- bring greater coherence to leadership the sixth form.

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