

Mr Ian Greenley and Mr Steve Peacey
Mark Rutherford Upper School and Community College
Wentworth Drive
Bedford
Bedfordshire
MK41 8PX

4 September 2006

Dear Mr Greenley and Mr Peacey,

**SPECIAL MEASURES: MONITORING INSPECTION OF MARK
RUTHERFORD UPPER SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY COLLEGE**

Introduction

Following my visit with Gillian Smith, Lynne Kauffman, Rod Passant and Tony Beaver, Additional Inspectors, to your school on 12 and 13 July 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 February 2006.

This letter will be posted on the Ofsted website.

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the headteacher, nominated staff, groups of students, the chair of governors and a representative from the local authority (LA).

Context

Following the inspection, the school faced a period of considerable delay before the publication of the final report in May 2006. Seventeen members of staff are leaving at the end of term. The school has managed to fill all of these posts, but some of the replacements are overseas-trained teachers or on temporary contracts. The school's senior management team is being restructured for September, following the resignation of the headteacher, one deputy headteacher, and the retirement of an assistant headteacher. Two headteachers from local schools have agreed to lead the school for a minimum of two terms until a new permanent headteacher can be found.

During the monitoring visit inspectors' observations were restricted to Years 9 and 12, since Years 11 and 13 had left, and Year 10 students were on work experience.

Achievement and standards

Students' achievement and standards continue to be inadequate in the main school. Standards were significantly below average in the Year 9 national tests in 2005, and had been in decline since 2003. In too many Year 9 lessons seen on this monitoring visit, the standard of students' work was too low. Although there has been little time since the last inspection for the school to show it is reaching higher standards, provisional results in the 2006 national tests show improvement in mathematics and science, compared with the previous year. Targets were exceeded in mathematics.

In 2004 and 2005, GCSE examination results were significantly below average overall and the school failed to meet its targets. Boys' attainment was well below that of girls. Although, 2006 GCSE examination results are not yet available, provisional results in vocational GCSE courses in business and in leisure and tourism show some improvement.

In the sixth form, examination results of students on advanced level courses, and standards of their work in lessons are average. The students' progress in lessons was good because most teaching was challenging and effective in helping students to learn

Judgement

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the inspection in February 2006:

- Increase the students' achievement and raise standards by improving the quality of education provided - inadequate progress.

Personal development and well-being

The last report judged the pupils' adoption of safe practices and healthy lifestyles to be good, and their involvement in the community and development of skills for their economic well being as satisfactory. A key feature which ensured these outcomes was the well-planned PSHE programme which has been subject to ongoing refinement and development.

The school's behaviour unit and the alternative curriculum pathways provided in Years 10 and 11 have led to a reduction in the number of days lost to exclusion. The school works successfully with those pupils who are at risk of permanent exclusion.

Sixth form students have positive attitudes towards the school. Their personal development is good. Many contribute well to the main school community, and give a lead to younger students in how to behave responsibly and maturely.

In Year 9, students' attitudes and behaviour are satisfactory overall. Many students in this year group enjoy school and are keen to work. However, in too many classes even good teachers have to work against a groundswell of relatively minor but persistent disruption. There are two main features which cause this weak learning ethos. Firstly, there is a lack of consistency in both behaviour management and the expectations of teachers. Secondly, there is too much discontinuity in learning caused by timetabling factors and, in some cases, staffing turbulence.

The major cause of discontinuity remains however pupils' poor attendance. Overall average attendance for the year is just under 90 per cent, the equivalent of a pupil missing a morning session a week. A small minority of students have erratic attendance and require closer supervision to enable them to achieve the standards they should. The post-Ofsted action plan has clear staged targets and identifies how these targets are to be met. The school has identified pupils whose attendance is a cause of concern and there is a close working relationship with the education welfare officer (EWO). Half of the EWO's school caseload is complex cases involving vulnerable children or child protection issues. The school is now evaluating attendance data, and has made attendance a whole-school issue. It is now in a much stronger position to improve attendance, although the nature of the summer term with its associated study leave for various year groups makes assessing the impact of this work difficult.

Judgement

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the inspection in February 2006:

- Improve the students' rate of attendance – satisfactory progress

Quality of provision

The quality of teaching has improved and is satisfactory, although it has not improved fast enough to have the required impact on standards. Observations of lessons are now more rigorous and give an accurate view of the strengths and weaknesses. Information from observations has triggered a more structured continuing professional development programme that targets improvement and has raised the overall quality of teaching.

The school has pinpointed significant weakness in six percent of lessons. Effective action is being taken to remedy this situation. In a third of lessons seen teaching was good, but there are too many lessons that are just satisfactory. Behaviour management is the root of problems in many lessons. In the best lessons teachers create an inclusive atmosphere where all students are engaged, enjoy learning and want to succeed. There are too few opportunities to share this good practice across departments.

Computerised systems for monitoring and tracking pupils' progress are making pupil data more accessible. However, there is a considerable distance to go before all teachers are confident to use this information routinely as part of their tool kit for planning. Although the school has introduced 'Assessment for Learning' and more teachers are using self-assessment and peer assessment, target setting and assessment remain inconsistent. Students' work is not always marked regularly with the result that students do not know how to improve.

There have been no substantial changes to the curriculum since the last visit and it continues to be satisfactory. The range of subjects and courses is gradually being widened and there are plans to introduce advanced level dance and double award leisure and tourism at the start of the next academic year.

Provision for students with additional learning difficulties and disabilities is satisfactory. They receive sound support during lessons and their overall progress is similar to others at the school. Students joining the school with low reading ages are withdrawn from foreign language lessons in order to receive additional literacy support. This helps them to improve and to learn more effectively in their other subjects. There are, however, too many split classes and this discontinuity has an adverse impact on learning.

Students are cared for adequately and systems for keeping them safe continue to be effective. Child protection procedures are in place and good pastoral support is provided for students who are facing challenging circumstances. Students say they have no concerns about bullying, although they do say that teachers vary in their expectations of behaviour during lessons. The behaviour management policy was reviewed three years ago, but it does not define unsatisfactory behaviour, and the criteria for moving between levels on the escalating system of sanctions are not stated.

Sixth form students consider they are helpfully guided to select suitable careers and courses in higher education. Students often gain competitive places in higher education.

Judgement

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the inspection in February 2006:

- Raise the quality and consistency of teaching to ensure all students are engaged in learning - satisfactory progress

Leadership and management

The school's leadership has strengthened since the last inspection, but because of the short time scale involved it remains inadequate overall. The roles of middle managers have been clarified. They have undergone a range of professional development activities to build their capacity to lead and evaluate the performance of their departments. A model for systematically auditing departments has been planned and will be implemented in September.

The deputy headteacher has led well the drive to raise standards by focusing on improving the quality of teaching. There is now a system of lesson observation in place and staff have responded positively to the programme of support and the more rigorous monitoring. However, common procedures regarding behaviour management, marking books and target setting for pupils are still not being used consistently and this has a significant negative impact on standards.

The role of the governing body has been strengthened by the local authority's appointment of two additional governors. A governors' school improvement group has been set up and a governors' action plan written, but the governing body still struggles to hold the school to account and communication between the group and the full governing body is weak.

The school plan for 2005-8 has been left in abeyance since the last inspection. A post-Ofsted action plan has been written which addresses the key issues appropriately and outlines strategies for improvement, but arrangements for measuring and monitoring progress remain unconvincing.

Judgement

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the inspection in February 2006:

- Increase the rigour of leadership and management by more timely and focused improvement planning, and more effective quality assurance monitoring and evaluation of departments – inadequate progress

External support

The LA's statement of action sets out an appropriate programme of support for the school. Since the last inspection the school has made good use of consultants from the LA. This advice and support has been generally well-received by the school. However, there is a danger that the school may be overwhelmed by a variety of new initiatives before fundamental issues such as classroom discipline and regular marking of books are consistently in place.

Main Judgements

Progress since being subject to special measures – satisfactory

Quality of LA's statement of action - good

Priorities for further improvement

- Ensure teachers consistently apply the agreed behaviour management policy
- Focus more sharply on setting students achievable targets and explaining to them clearly what they need to do to improve their work.
- Develop the strategic leadership of middle managers and subject co-ordinators.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the chair of governors and the Director of Education for Bedfordshire.

Yours sincerely



Margaret Jones
H M Inspector