



2 March 2007

Mrs Kay Kelly
Acting Headteacher
Alternative Centre for Education
McMullen House
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Dear Mrs Kelly

SPECIAL MEASURES: MONITORING INSPECTION OF ALTERNATIVE CENTRE FOR EDUCATION

Introduction

Following my visit with John Farrow AI to your centre on 28 February and 1 March 2007, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector to confirm the inspection findings.

The visit was the first monitoring inspection since the centre became subject to special measures in October 2006.

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 visited 11 part lessons and observed students working at the local further education college and with an alternative provider in Middlesbrough. In addition inspectors observed morning registration, scrutinised documents and conducted interviews with the acting headteacher, staff members, groups of pupils and local authority (LA) representatives. Informal discussions took place with students and members of staff. Examples of students' work were examined during lessons.

Context

The centre's headteacher was not present at the time of the October 2006 inspection and continues to be absent from work. The teacher in charge of Key Stage 3 is currently acting headteacher and she is now line managed by the LA's new assistant director for children's services. An ex-headteacher of a pupil referral unit in another authority has been recruited temporarily to be teacher in charge of Key Stage 4. The centre continues to rely on temporary teaching staff, with half being employed on a supply basis and one seconded from a local special school. Decisions are shortly to be made regarding the future governance, location and purpose of the centre. This will include a move to a new site in January 2008.

Achievement and standards

Achievement and standards are still inadequate. Students admitted to the centre usually arrive with a history of underachievement and below average attainment in English and mathematics. Those taught exclusively at the centre continue to make insufficient progress and do not achieve as well as they should. This is because the curriculum does not meet their needs well enough and resources are poor. Teachers are however making better use of assessment information to set relevant individual student targets. They are gradually increasing students' level of engagement in their learning and providing them with a clearer set of expectations about what they should achieve. However, this is not yet making an impact on their achievement.

Those Key Stage 4 students accessing alternative vocational provision are beginning to show signs of improved achievement and progress in their learning. They demonstrate greater interest, motivation and commitment to their studies and are more positive and enthusiastic when talking about their work. Students following alternative pathway courses, for example in catering at the college and in hairdressing at an alternative provider in Middlesbrough, are on course to achieve nationally accredited qualifications. In addition, students in these locations demonstrate a satisfactory and sometimes good understanding of work-related skills and safe working practices. They are continuing to improve their basic skills in literacy and numeracy and show an increasing maturity and sense of personal responsibility by facing up to their long-established difficulties in these areas.

Personal development and well-being

The personal development and well-being of students' show satisfactory improvement, particularly for those attending alternative provision. The majority of students at the centre usually behave satisfactorily in their lessons but their behaviour can deteriorate quickly if they become bored. The frequency of aggressive verbal abuse directed towards staff or other students has reduced but remains unacceptable and has a negative impact in those lessons where it occurs. Established staff recognise and manage confrontational behaviour effectively and students generally respond quickly to their guidance. This good care and support are vital because many students are unable to manage their own learning and behaviour. They are easily unsettled by changes in routine, the presence of unknown supply staff or unfamiliar visitors.

Students following alternative pathways demonstrate increased confidence and self-esteem and improved behaviour. They assume greater personal responsibility for their attendance and future learning. However, the majority of students continue to demonstrate a poor commitment to leading a healthy lifestyle and reflect casual and ill-informed attitudes towards the risks of smoking, taking drugs and alcohol abuse.

Satisfactory progress has been achieved in raising centre-based attendance levels by over ten per cent compared to the corresponding period last year. Good progress has been made in raising attendance levels for those Key Stage 4 students attending alternative programmes. Attendance amongst this group of students is now 20 per cent higher than previously. During the current term satisfactory progress has also been made in reducing the number of fixed-term exclusions and in the number of days lost by individuals as a result of these exclusions.

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

- Take action to improve attendance so that pupils can take advantage of the learning opportunities available – good for students attending alternative placements and satisfactory for those exclusively attending the centre
- Take action to manage pupils' behaviour more effectively so that exclusions are reduced– satisfactory progress

Quality of provision

The quality of teaching and learning has shown satisfactory improvement since the inspection, but remains inconsistent. It is better at Key Stage 3 than at Key Stage 4, and good for those students experiencing off-site alternative provision. A small proportion of centre-based teaching is now also good but an equal amount is inadequate. Overall, too much is satisfactory – rather than good - at the centre and this limits the progress of which many students are capable.

All teachers and support staff work hard, and show diligence and a keen commitment to help students improve. Established staff have higher expectations of what students should achieve. In lessons where work is well planned and captures the interest of students, most cooperate and take part in discussion with teachers and support staff. All receive individual targeted help to complete their work. When this is done well, the majority make satisfactory progress. In these lessons, behaviour is mostly satisfactory and any low-level disruption is handled well by staff, often with the support of an assistant, and has little impact on the pace of learning. On occasions this involves students being withdrawn from lessons temporarily to receive effective counselling and individual support to manage their behaviour.

Significant disruption occurs in about one fifth of lessons, when teachers do not engage or interest students enough in their learning. In these lessons, tasks are mainly worksheet based and students quickly become bored; those with poor writing skills in particular are reluctant to attempt the work. Students react with abusive or threatening language and this frequently leads to them being withdrawn while others in the class make determined efforts to interrupt the flow of the lesson. Students make inadequate progress in these lessons.

All centre-based classes are small, but few teachers take enough account of the wide range of students' abilities when planning work. Although improving, teachers make insufficient use of assessment information about students' prior learning as the basis for preparing lessons; too often the students' learning needs are not met. The more able students based at the centre are particularly disadvantaged and make least progress in relation to their capabilities.

Curricular provision overall remains inadequate. For students who remain at the centre for a long period, the curriculum is still unsuitable. For a significant minority of students the curriculum fails to meet their individual needs or

promote their academic or personal development as well as it should. For these students, the curriculum is not equipping them with the knowledge, skills and self-control they need to be successfully reintegrated into a mainstream school or alternative placement. These weaknesses are compounded by poor quality accommodation and inadequate resources.

A more relevant and appropriate curriculum is now in place for the majority of Key Stage 4 students at Darlington College and other alternative sites. Individually designed timetables and courses are establishing a more motivating balance between vocational skills, the key skills of literacy and numeracy, and personal, and social and health education. As a consequence higher outcomes are being achieved by students following these pathways. Much of this alternative provision is still in the early stages of development but already students say they are enjoying the programmes. They show enthusiasm and care with their studies and are starting to think and talk about preparing themselves for the move to the world of work.

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

- Eliminate weaknesses in teaching, by introducing an accurate assessment system and raising teachers' low expectations of pupils' achievement – satisfactory progress
- Develop an appropriate curriculum–
 - satisfactory progress with respect to those students benefiting from alternative provision
 - Inadequate progress those students who are substantially based at the centre

Leadership and management

The management of the centre has improved since the inspection and is now satisfactory, but leadership capacity remains inadequate. Management is now satisfactory because most of the day-to day-responsibilities afforded to the acting headteacher and senior staff are being fulfilled successfully. In particular, support given to staff and students in managing challenging behaviour and improving attitudes to learning has improved. This has resulted in fewer disruptions to lessons and a reduced number of exclusions. Furthermore, the coordination of multi-agency support to students is better and more comprehensive in meeting their needs. These factors have combined to improve staff morale and have engendered a greater team commitment to meeting the needs of all students. However, the significant health and safety matters brought to the attention of the acting headteacher and LA officers require urgent attention and remedy.

Leadership remains inadequate because specific weaknesses have not received sufficient attention. On-going staffing instability and the frequency of staffing changes have not been adequately addressed and there are no immediate signs that this will improve. Only one student has been successfully reintegrated into a mainstream school this year. Too many students remain at the centre long term and, except for those attending alternative placements, their needs are not being met well enough. These factors are compounded by inadequate accommodation and resources. The centre is overly dependent upon LA staff to monitor and evaluate the quality of teaching and learning. This support is effective but it masks the centre's lack of capacity to undertake this work independently. Whilst progress has been made towards establishing an effective performance management system, this has not yet been introduced.

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

- Ensure that the centre has the effective leadership and management to make the improvements necessary to raise pupils' achievements and the overall quality of education - satisfactory improvement in management but inadequate progress in leadership

External support

The LA is providing satisfactory support to help the centre in addressing most of the issues identified in the inspection report. However, much of this is recent and, while there are clear signs of urgency and priority in the LA's work, substantial further progress is still required. The LA, to its credit, has recognised the need to improve its statement of action to reflect more accurately the immediate and long-term issues faced by the centre and to sharpen the criteria by which it will evaluate its effectiveness. For example, it is beginning to tackle diligently the longer-term strategic issues concerned with the centre's governance, future location and purpose within the secondary provision for students in the authority. Senior LA officers are providing effective support to the acting headteacher to improve the day-to-day management of the centre. However, the LA has not addressed the centre's leadership needs sufficiently; this remains a substantial matter to be resolved.

Main Judgements

Progress since being subject to special measures – inadequate

Newly qualified teachers may not be appointed.

Priorities for further improvement

- Take urgent steps to improve the inadequate curriculum at Key Stages 3 and 4 to ensure that it meets the needs of all centre-based learners to enable them to make progress in line with their capabilities.
- Take urgent steps to secure the centre's capacity to tackle weaknesses in leadership.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the chair of governors and the Director of Children's Services for Darlington.

Yours sincerely

Tom Grieveson
Her Majesty's Inspector