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Ms Helen Whitehead
Teacher-in-Charge
Ashdale Centre
Marton Road
Middlesborough
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Dear Ms Whitehead

SPECIAL MEASURES: MONITORING INSPECTION OF ASHDALE CENTRE

Introduction

Following my visit with Angela Headon HMI to your school on 25 and 26 April 2007, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector to confirm the inspection findings.

The visit was the third monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures in March 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

During the visit six part lessons and the breakfast club were observed. Inspectors scrutinised documents and met with the teacher-in-charge, the deputy teacher-in-charge, other school staff, students, parents and representatives of the local authority (LA).

Context

The substantive leadership team now manages the centre. A new appointment has been made to improve partnership with parents and tackle the persistent non-attendance of some students. Staffing is more stable than on previous visits.

Achievement and standards.

Standards are inadequate but achievement is satisfactory. Those students who attend regularly make at least satisfactory and sometimes better progress in lessons. Their basic literacy and numeracy skills are improving and they are beginning to explain their ideas and provide thoughtful answers to questions. However, some students in Year 11 do not attend regularly enough to benefit from the education provided by the centre. Year 10 students attend much more regularly and, as a result, are making better progress. They work hard in lessons and have a positive attitude towards their work. Staff are aware that they must sustain these positive attitudes.

Students are more willing to attend external provision and for many this is a real success story. Many students not only achieve well in their chosen courses but also benefit from increased self-confidence and self-esteem. All Year 11 students have a transition plan and this is tracked to ensure appointments are kept and decisions made. Many students are now able to decide upon the type of training they prefer and work towards nationally accredited qualifications. The portfolios of evidence they produce are of good quality because the staff who work with them expect a great deal of them. Invariably students live up to these high expectations. The teaching of wider key skills which previously took place in the centre has been adapted and staff now meet with students at college or in other settings in order to assess them in real-life situations. This is providing much useful evidence of achievement. The centre is well placed to respond to the secondary curriculum review.

The centre collects and analyses a great deal of data. Student tracking records have been introduced and, even at this early stage, it is possible to see where gains have been made in attendance, attitudes and behaviour. Although the teacher-in-charge is not certain that tracking data is as accurate as it might be, these sheets are providing useful information about value added. They also allow the leadership team to identify those students who are underachieving. Although some realistic but undemanding targets have been set for 2008, there are no targets for 2007.

A large proportion of students have learning difficulties and/or disabilities (LDD). While some do need to be placed in the centre it is doubtful that this is the case for all. The needs of all students with LDD are clearly identified and appropriate provision is made for them. Support for the more able students whose education has been disrupted and who have a long history of underachievement is not so well planned. Some continue to underachieve because the work they are given is not sufficiently well matched to their ability and because not all staff use day-to-day assessment sufficiently well to identify where extra support is required.

Personal development and well-being

The personal development and well-being of pupils have improved steadily over time. Students respond pleasantly to staff and visitors and most are courteous when spoken to. There is a greater proportion of good behaviour and, although there is still some poor behaviour, students are much more willing to accept the boundaries set for them by staff. Despite some small difficulties which occurred during the change of leadership, firm action by the new teacher-in-charge has ensured that students are clear as to what is acceptable. Students demonstrate a willingness to learn and much less desire to shock or to disrupt lessons when they find tasks difficult. The new leadership team operates an 'open door policy' and listens to the views of students. Students are learning that they can negotiate with staff but that it is not always possible to achieve everything which is asked for. The ability to accept difficult decisions is an important step forward for many students. A new system for rewards and incentives was introduced early in the spring term. This has proved to be more effective with Year 10 students than with those in Year 11. However, the leadership team has consulted students about the type of rewards they would like and, as a result, changes have been made.

There is a programme of health education and many students will discuss matters to do with personal health and safety very openly. However, although students have enough information to enable them to make healthy and safe lifestyle choices, not all choose to do so. Students receive very good care, support and guidance. As a result they gain in self-confidence and self-esteem. Many students who would previously have been unable or unwilling to attend provision outside the centre now do so because they know they will be well supported. One parent commented that her son had 'received the kind of opportunities which would improve his whole life, he had been encouraged to better himself and had grabbed the opportunity with both hands'. This is a student who has gained nationally recognised qualifications at college and who is to continue his education when he leaves the centre.

Many students are well prepared for their future economic well-being. They are encouraged to identify the skills that interest them and are placed upon appropriate training programmes. They are supported by centre staff to ensure that they make the most of these opportunities. A recently introduced programme on personal finance is helping students understand how to manage money. The substantive leadership team is also encouraging students to develop independent skills and to take personal responsibility. While this is at an early stage, students are becoming less reliant on the goodwill of staff and more aware of their own accountability.

Overall attendance has risen slightly, although there was a dip in the spring term. However, there are noticeable differences between the attendance of students in Year 10 and those in Year 11. The attendance of the younger year group is rising steadily, despite the poor attendance of two students, and is showing significant improvement. The attendance of older students is declining, although there has been some improvement since Easter. The attendance of both year groups is much

better for college-based lessons than for lessons in the centre. The centre has a number of strategies to improve attendance. Formal action is being taken against persistent non-attenders and a member of staff works with parents and the students who are most hard to reach. Exclusions have been significantly reduced and are now used for only the most serious incidents. All students returning from exclusion have a formal interview with the teacher-in-charge or her deputy and are given a behaviour plan.

Relationships with parents and carers are much improved. Parents are welcomed into the centre and staff maintain regular contact, passing on good news as well as less positive information. Parents who talked to the inspection team were very positive about the benefits their children had gained from their attendance at Ashdale. The centre is beginning to raise its profile in the community. The recent iMedia exhibition was very successful in showcasing the work of individuals and in giving a positive impression of the centre. Risk assessments and matters to do with health and safety have been made more rigorous and arrangements to keep students safe are in place.

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

- Improve the attendance and behaviour of pupils – satisfactory progress

Quality of provision

Teaching remains broadly satisfactory although some good teaching was seen. Staff have benefited from the training they have received and all lessons now have clear learning objectives. Planning is improving but day-to day assessment is not yet detailed enough, in some lessons, to ensure that the work set accurately matches the needs and abilities of students. There are more opportunities for students to work in groups and some students complete tasks independently with minimal support from staff. Classrooms are well organised and promote learning. Displays celebrate the work of individuals and give guidance on how to improve. The leadership team has recently introduced a system of team teaching to support teachers new to a subject or improve existing skills. The teacher-in-charge also plans to provide opportunities for staff to observe teachers in a nearby special school and mainstream secondary school. However, although a number of effective but informal observations of teaching and learning have taken place, there is not a well-established school-based system of monitoring and evaluation. Core subjects are taught by specialist teachers, but this is not always the case in the foundation subjects.

Support staff provide increasingly effective help in lessons and at other times of the day. Students are beginning to assess their own learning and contribute to plenary sessions. Behaviour has improved so fewer lessons are disrupted and, as a result, the pace of learning has increased. Students respond more positively to questioning. A greater proportion are more willing to answer questions and to explain their ideas.

A few students will persevere with tasks when they experience difficulty and there is much less disruption when work is challenging. Students who attend regularly are making progress in the core subjects. More work is completed and there is evidence of sustained improvement in both the quality and quantity of work. Marking now gives guidance on what has been achieved and also tells the student how to improve. The best marking makes clear that teachers have high expectations for individual performance.

There are systems to ensure that information about individuals is shared between the staff who teach them. However, some students stay in the centre or in alternative education for too long. With support, some students are capable of returning to mainstream education, but there has been no reintegration during the time the centre has been in special measures. Students do not see the centre as a temporary provision and a return to mainstream is not part of transition planning. As a result some students are over reliant on the centre and become anxious when it is time to leave; others become increasingly disaffected.

The centre provides a good range of vocational training and work-based learning and improvements are being made to the core curriculum. There are plans to extend the range of GCSE options available to students by using the skills developed through the iMedia work and through improved access to specialist teaching.

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

- Provide greater challenge through more rigorous target setting, higher expectations for pupils' learning and improved subject expertise – satisfactory progress
- Strengthen the centre's procedures to ensure that the safety and well-being of pupils are secured – good progress
- Develop a more motivating and enriched curriculum with a balance between the core subjects and accredited vocational opportunities – good progress

Leadership and management

The recently appointed teacher-in charge has, in a short time, gained a secure understanding of this complex provision. She identified a number of small but important areas which required improvement and has tackled them effectively. Staff are very positive about the actions which have been taken in recent months. They are praised when things go well and receive guidance when matters require improvement. As a result they have accepted the changes which have been made. There is a programme of staff development and individuals are given support so they can take on more interesting and useful work. However, there are some uncertainties about staffing levels for the next academic year. The deputy teacher-in charge understands the needs of the centre and shares the high expectations of the

teacher-in-charge. Her leadership skills are developing rapidly and she too has a clear view of strengths and weaknesses.

A great deal of data is collected and the subsequent evaluations are acted upon. The substantive leadership team evaluates the impact of changes which are made in order to identify any additional support which might be needed. This type of evaluation is providing an effective base from which to plan future improvements. However, this system is not well established or well structured and arrangements to monitor the work of the centre are not regular enough. Nevertheless the informal arrangements which are in place provide secure information from which to plan future actions and, as a result, the centre now has the capacity to improve.

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

- Provide a strong leadership team to facilitate improvements in leadership and management at all levels, and to boost pupils' achievement and personal development – good progress

External support

The LA has provided a good quantity and quality of support to the centre. This is carefully planned and detailed records are kept of the outcomes of visits; these are evaluated against the main areas for improvement and any additional areas which have been identified. An operational group meets twice a month to evaluate the improvements which have been made and the outcomes of such meetings are shared by senior officers of the LA. The link inspector monitors the work of the centre and supports the leadership team. The LA has monitored the work of the teacher-in-charge during the transition period and has a clear view of her effectiveness. The school improvement partner has provided very good support and useful ideas and information. The new teacher-in-charge has also been provided with a mentor. The interim leadership team has ended its day-to-day involvement in the centre and has resumed its line-management role. The LA is beginning to decrease the support it gives to the centre in line with the increasing capacity of the leadership team. This action is well judged.

Main Judgements

Progress since being subject to special measures – good

Progress since previous monitoring inspection – good

Priorities for further improvement

- Establish a cycle of school self-evaluation and planning for improvement.

- Improve the engagement and involvement of the most disaffected students.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the chair of the management committee and the Corporate Director of Education and Leisure for Middlesbrough.

Yours sincerely

Christine Graham
H M Inspector