

Nord Anglia Inspections
Anglia House
Carrs Road
Cheadle
Stockport
SK8 2LA

T 08456 40 40 40
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.ofsted.gov.uk

Direct T 0161 491 4191
Direct F 0161 491 4409



14 June 2007

Miss Kay Kelly
Acting Headteacher
Alternative Centre for Education
McMullen House
Yarm Road
Darlington
County Durham
DL1 1ED

Dear Miss Kelly,

Special Measures: Monitoring Inspection of Alternative Centre for Education, Darlington

Introduction

Following my visit to your school with Alastair Younger, Additional Inspector, on 12 June 2007, 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 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 a range of lessons in both Key Stages 3 and 4 and observed students working at Darlington College and at the local leisure centre. Registration procedures were monitored, documents were scrutinised and interviews conducted with the acting headteacher, staff members, students and local authority (LA) representatives. Informal discussions took place with students and members of staff. Examples of students' work were examined during lessons.

Context

Significant developments have occurred since the previous monitoring visit. The substantive headteacher has retired and the LA has advertised for her replacement.

Two full-time permanent teachers have been appointed and new posts for a bursar and inclusion officer are about to be confirmed. Extended contracts have been awarded to the remaining temporary teaching staff. The acting headteacher remains responsible for day-to-day management of the centre and is now based at the Key Stage 4 site. An acting teacher in charge of Key Stage 3 has recently been appointed. The centre is now benefiting from direct support and guidance from an outstanding pupil referral unit (PRU) provider in Lincoln. The opening of the new centre at Rise Carr has been delayed until March 2007 although tenders have been agreed with contractors for work to start. A newly constituted management board, involving all seven secondary headteachers in the authority, will begin its work in July 2007.

Achievement and standards

Standards are still inadequate but there is evidence that most Key Stage 3 students are making better progress in lessons, mainly because teaching has improved. In addition, an enhanced curriculum at Key Stage 3 is also contributing to better progress and over an increasing range of subjects. Consequently, many more students are now being targeted for a return to mainstream education. Key Stage 4 students in alternative vocational provision continue to demonstrate improved achievement, positive attitudes and commitment towards their studies. Retention rates amongst this group are high. Most of these courses are now leading towards recognised qualifications or are planned to do so next year. However most Key Stage 4 students, taught exclusively at the centre, continue to make inadequate progress and the majority leave Year 11 with few qualifications and low standards, particularly in English and mathematics.

Recent improvements to assessment procedures are starting to provide teachers with evidence of students' progress. However, information is not yet sufficiently detailed to help teachers plan lessons and take account of the learning needs of all students. The more able students in particular are not sufficiently catered for and in some lessons they do not make the progress which they should.

Personal development and well-being

There is satisfactory improvement in students' personal development and well-being. Attendance figures have continued to improve and are now ten per cent higher than in the same period last year. Improvements in behaviour are reflected in the falling rate of exclusions at Key Stage 4 and in the alternative provision. There has been no change in the incidence of exclusions at Key Stage 3.

In most Key Stage 3 lessons the behaviour of the majority of students is satisfactory but some individuals still persistently misbehave and continue to use unacceptable, abusive language towards staff and other students. Less reliance on temporary staff and the increasing behaviour management skills of established teachers are leading

to fewer disruptions in lessons. Previously, when students were removed from class because of poor behaviour they were dealt with effectively by the acting headteacher and were successfully returned to their lessons. Since the acting headteacher's relocation to the Key Stage 4 site, a proportion of students have been returned to their classes before the causes of their misbehaviour have been properly addressed. This distracts other students from their work and interrupts the pace of lessons. At Key Stage 4 incidents of abusive language in lessons by students still occur but are less frequent. Some students will now apologise for using inappropriate language but a small minority of others still swear, particularly when their learning is disrupted or they are goaded by other students.

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 – satisfactory progress
- Take action to manage pupils' behaviour more effectively so that exclusions are reduced – satisfactory progress

Quality of provision

There has been satisfactory improvement in the quality of teaching and learning since the previous visit. The proportion of good teaching has remained the same but there is now less inadequate teaching. Overall, most remains satisfactory. The quality of teaching and learning in off-site provision remains consistently good.

Students are benefiting from the increased number of permanent teaching staff employed by the centre. This is providing a more consistent approach to teaching and learning and is helping more students to make better progress. The greater familiarity and increasing confidence which most students have in teaching staff enable them to respond well to instructions and to the support they receive. In addition, expectations of what students should achieve are higher. There is a determination amongst staff to ensure that all students should attain improved standards. This is an increasingly important factor in the better progress being made by the majority of students in lessons.

Lesson plans now contain clear and appropriate objectives and are used by most teachers to ensure that students are aware of what they are required to learn. This leads to better student involvement and a sustained commitment to their tasks. In addition, a greater proportion of teaching staff use the opportunities afforded by very small classes to provide students with individual support to maintain their interest and help them overcome difficulties. New resources for information and communication technology (ICT) are being used well by most teachers in meeting students' learning needs. Where they are used well, such as in a Key Stage 3 English lesson, imaginative use of the internet motivated students to engage in writing tasks and helped to maintain their concentration in completing their work.

Behaviour in most lessons has improved because teachers have improved their skills in managing students. Most teachers use an appropriate balance of challenge and support to keep students engaged in their work. The best teachers are not deflected by minor interruptions and the pace of lessons is maintained. Students are given more opportunities to work together to solve problems and complete tasks. This is helping them to take part more successfully in shared activities and to demonstrate greater confidence in offering their views and opinions. Where this occurs successfully, it benefits students' learning. Many students however lack the necessary social skills to benefit fully from these opportunities, preferring to work alone. Disruption tends to occur when students lack sufficient interest in what is being taught, such as in lessons where tasks are predominantly worksheet based. When this occurs, they become more easily influenced by others and less inclined to complete their work.

Improvements have been made to the curriculum. At Key Stage 3 the curriculum now provides a suitable range of activities and is increasingly being planned with a view to helping students return successfully to mainstream schools. Alternative provision at a range of locations continues to develop well. Students are offered an increased choice of courses and most provide opportunities for students to gain qualifications. There are advanced plans to extend some of these courses to more students at Key Stage 4 next year. However, the existing curriculum for those Key Stage 4 students educated solely at the centre remains inadequate. Despite the efforts of staff and a number of modifications to course content, it still does not meet the individual needs of students well enough.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the inspection in October 2007:

- 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 for those students benefiting from alternative provision and for students at Key Stage 3 but inadequate for centre based students at Key Stage 4

Leadership and management

There has been satisfactory improvement to the centre's leadership and management. The impetus to improve areas of weakness has been maintained because the centre is managed by the acting headteacher with increasing efficiency. Direct LA intervention has reduced in response to the centre's improving capacity to manage its own affairs. The acting headteacher now takes a greater role in monitoring the quality of teaching and learning. There is a clear determination to design provision for students which improves their chances of returning to mainstream schools or accessing alternative provision elsewhere in the LA. A substantial increase in the number of students targeted for re-integration into mainstream schools is now evident.

The increased commitment to professional development and a willingness by staff to improve their practice, accept new ideas and methodologies are already apparent in lesson preparation and teaching. Performance management targets have been introduced and will be fully operational by September 2007. The health-and-safety matters highlighted at the previous monitoring visit have been satisfactorily addressed and new routines established. However, the move of the acting headteacher to the Key Stage 4 site has reduced the support for teachers at the Key Stage 3 site and, in particular, has resulted in less effective support to students who are temporarily withdrawn from lessons. The quality of accommodation at the Key Stage 3 centre remains severely limited.

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 students' achievements and the overall quality of education – satisfactory progress

External support

The LA has continued to act with due diligence in supporting the centre to address areas of weakness. Important health-and-safety matters have been effectively resolved. The centre now has much-improved ICT provision, including internet access. The LA's officers are pursuing the appointment of a new headteacher, inclusion officer and bursar, and the new management board will be in place by July 2007. Tenders have been issued for work to begin on the new centre site with completion due in March 2008. Effective training by the LA's secondary strategy personnel is under way and is already leading to improved teaching. Much remains to be achieved, however, particularly in relation to improving the curriculum offer to all students and in monitoring progress towards achieving their targets.

Main Judgements

Progress since being subject to special measures – satisfactory

Progress since previous monitoring inspection – satisfactory

Newly qualified teachers may not be appointed.

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

Yours sincerely

Tom Grieveson
H M Inspector