

Cambridge Education
Demeter House
Station Road
Cambridge
CB1 2RS

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

Direct T 01223 578500
Direct F 01223 578501
Risp.inspections@camb-ed.com



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Mr J Tippett
Executive Headteacher
The Thomas Lord Audley School and Language College
Monkwick Avenue
Colchester
Essex
CO2 8NJ

Dear Mr Tippett

Special Measures: Monitoring Inspection of The Thomas Lord Audley School and Language College

Introduction

Following my visit with Godfrey Bancroft, Mike Lafford and Ann Taylor, Additional Inspectors, to your school on 15 and 16 May 2007, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector to confirm the inspection findings.

The visit was the fourth monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures in November 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 executive headteacher, senior staff, subject and pastoral leaders, groups of pupils, the chair and two members of the governing body and a representative from the local authority.

Context

The executive headteacher, appointed a few days before the last visit, has assumed leadership of the school. Also, three members of staff have left.

Achievement and standards

Data provided by the school suggest that there has been some recent improvement in standards, for example in science and German in Year 10. Overall, the progress pupils make has improved since the last monitoring inspection. More pupils are making expected progress but too many are still not doing as well as they should. In the lessons seen, the improvement was notable in modern foreign languages. Recent strategies to raise standards and to improve the progress pupils make are starting to bear fruit because teachers are beginning to have increased expectations of what pupils can achieve. This is because they are better aware of the levels pupils are working at and what their potential is.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the inspection in November 2005:

- Improve achievement and raise standards of attainment through ensuring that teachers are able to accurately determine the level pupils are working at and have high expectations of future performance – inadequate progress. Progress since the last monitoring inspection in January 2007 – satisfactory.

Personal development and well-being

Further effective measures have been introduced to check on, and respond to, pupils' absence. As a result attendance is improving, although it is still inadequate. Pupils are also more punctual to school, and to lessons. Their behaviour in lessons and the management of unacceptable behaviour by teachers has improved further. At times behaviour during lessons is exemplary and many staff and pupils agree that behaviour has continued to improve. However, whilst the level of disruption caused by poor behaviour has reduced, there is still some way to go to make sure that attitudes to work are good enough. The level of exclusions remains too high, but procedures for 'internal exclusion' from lessons are working more effectively than in the past. These procedures are part of the reason why fewer lessons are disrupted by unacceptable behaviour.

Progress on the area for improvement identified by the inspection in November 2005:

- Improve attendance and pupils' attitudes to learning by incorporating tasks into lessons which challenge pupils and match their interests and abilities – inadequate progress. Progress since the last monitoring inspection in January 2007 – satisfactory.

Quality of provision

Work on improving the quality of teaching is slowly bringing about improvements. This is through a combination of focussed lesson observations, and sessions where teachers examine and review their own lessons with senior staff, as well as using evidence from short notice subject reviews. The shift towards better lessons is very gradual as there are a number of areas needing improvement. There is still too much teaching which is inadequate and dull. A large tranche is still only satisfactory and is therefore not good enough to compensate for pupils previous underachievement. Most lessons now finish on time but some still finish too early, so the best use is not being made of the opportunities for learning.

Despite the improved management of behaviour, many teachers are wary of triggering the poor behaviour they experienced from pupils in the past. As a result, they still shy away from activities which are more interactive and hence engaging, for fear that anything other than basic teaching will be a catalyst for further poor behaviour. Ironically, such lessons are often inadequate because they are pedestrian, time drags and pupils do not respond well. In contrast, where teachers work hard at making the work interesting, pupils are engaged and motivated. An example of this was seen in a lesson which involved exploring poetry techniques by looking at modern day song lyrics.

Marking is better; it is becoming more regular and most tells pupils how they can improve. Pupils' knowledge of their targets is better, but these are rarely referred to in lessons. Homework is set and marked more regularly; students confirm more attention is paid to ensuring it is completed on time. Inconsistencies in the quality of marking and homework remain, however.

Planning and delivering activities to meet the needs of all pupils, especially lower and higher attaining pupils, is still not strong enough; too often lessons are taught to the middle ability.

The support for pupils who have learning difficulties and disabilities is not consistent because their individual education plans are not precise enough. This means that teachers are not able to plan adequately for them.

Progress on the area for improvement identified by the inspection in November 2005:

- Strengthen the quality of teaching and learning by close monitoring which focuses on how much learning is taking place in lessons and whether pupils are making sufficient progress- inadequate progress. Progress since the last monitoring inspection in January 2007 – satisfactory.

Leadership and management

The executive headteacher has worked quickly to improve the school's work. Much is now in place to generate further improvement.

Leaders are held to account more. This has been achieved partly by the rationalisation of the roles of some of the school's leaders and their line management of others, for example the heads of student support. The continued use of the short notice reviews of subject departments has helped raise the accountability of subject leaders and to ensure that the school's policies are being carried out. There is insufficient follow up to these to check that the areas of weakness identified are being improved rapidly enough, especially since the effectiveness of subject leaders is still too variable. Governors are better involved in monitoring activities, such as scrutinising pupils' books and checking on matters such as the quality of work, marking and the setting of homework. Pupils' academic performance data is much better used to track their progress against their targets and to arrange various intervention strategies where they are falling behind. This is particularly the case for those in Years 9 and 11. An impressive initiative has been taken to make sure that pupils know what to do to improve their work. The guidance is specific to each subject and has the potential, if used well by pupils, teachers and parents, to be very helpful. However, not enough pupils have internalised the information, and so its impact is currently slight.

A tougher line is being taken on behaviour, and this has helped to make lessons more productive. The approach to the identification of weaker teaching has been refined somewhat. However, the approaches to developing more good teaching are too restricted to bring about rapid enough improvement in some parts of the school, such as mathematics and science.

The replacement of mixed-age 'community time' lessons by a programme of well-planned citizenship and personal education lessons is a success.

The specialist area of modern foreign languages has been slimmed down. It is now providing better teaching, but the previous underachievement of some aspects of its work will take some time to remedy. It is not yet in a position where it can make a significant contribution to improvements in other areas of the school. Nevertheless its outreach work with primary schools is well-received.

There is good governor involvement in planning the future direction of the school.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the inspection in November 2005

- Improve leadership and management by the effective use of reliable data to monitor and secure the achievement of challenging targets which raise standards – inadequate progress. Progress since the last monitoring inspection in January 2007 – satisfactory.

External support

The local authority has provided some good support. It has worked with the school to help to bring about some improvements to the school's work in literacy, numeracy, and modern foreign languages teaching. More needs to be done, including bringing about a more rapid improvement in teaching quality. It has played an important role in supporting the short notice reviews. Communication between the school and the local authority has improved.

Main Judgements

Progress since being subject to special measures – inadequate

Progress since the previous monitoring inspection – satisfactory.

Newly qualified teachers may not be appointed, except in some departments with the prior approval of HMI.

Priorities for further improvement

- Develop strategies to improve teaching more rapidly, for example the use of processes such as joint observations, joint planning, coaching and joint evaluation; the use of a wider range of Advanced Skills Teachers.
- Develop further the roles and accountability of subject leaders for improving their departments.
- Frequently monitor the progress made on issues raised in short notice reviews.
- Improve the quality of individual education plans so they are more specific and provide clear guidance for teachers when planning their lessons and work with individual pupils.

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

Yours sincerely

Alan Alder
Her Majesty's Inspector