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18 May 2007

Mr C Sweeney
The Headteacher
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Dear Chris

SPECIAL MEASURES: MONITORING INSPECTION OF THE PRIORY SCHOOL

Introduction

Following my visit with Frank Price, Additional Inspector, to your school on 8 and 9 May 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 school became subject to special measures in December 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 observed the school's work, scrutinised documents, and met with the headteacher, staff, the chair of governors and a representative from the local authority. Informal discussions were held with a small number of pupils. Parts of eight lessons were observed.

Context

Since the last inspection there have been a number of changes to staffing. Several staff have left or are on sick leave. As a result, there are currently only six qualified teachers working in the school. A number of subjects are taught by unqualified staff.

Achievement and standards

Pupils' attainment on starting at Priory is well below that expected. Many pupils have very low levels in reading, writing and numeracy because of their disrupted education. They do not, however, make the progress they should and achievement is unsatisfactory. This is particularly evident in English. The school's own assessments show that pupils' spelling and reading skills deteriorate. The reason for the unsatisfactory achievement in English and other subjects is the fact that the quality of teaching is still not high enough and the curriculum is insufficiently broad to hold pupils' interest. This results in pupils having negative attitudes to learning. Where pupils are engaged through interesting work, as in history and physical education (PE), they make satisfactory and occasionally good progress in lessons. However, pupils' frequent absences and exclusions prevent pupils from making better progress.

Nearly two thirds of the present Year 11 pupils are taking GCSEs in subjects such as mathematics, science and PE. Only half the pupils in Year 11 are taking English and a very small number are taking GCSE art. Roughly a quarter will not gain any form of external accreditation when they leave.

In all subjects, assessment of pupils' progress remains unsatisfactory. The setting of targets has started but these are not yet well focused on improving learning and so are not being used effectively by staff to help pupils develop their academic skills.

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

- improve the achievement of all pupils by setting challenging targets and regularly assessing each pupil's progress – inadequate.

Personal development and well-being

Pupils' personal development, including spiritual, moral, social and cultural development, remains unsatisfactory. Plans are in place to promote pupils' spiritual and cultural development through tutor groups, circle time and assemblies, but staff absences have limited the consistency and effectiveness of these approaches.

Work has been undertaken to set out clear rules of conduct and this is beginning to have some positive impact, with the number of serious incidents of inappropriate behaviour reducing sharply over the last six months. However, the procedures to promote pupils' positive behaviour are not always implemented consistently enough and pupils are not sufficiently well motivated to improve their behaviour or attitudes. There has been some improvement in pupils remaining in classes and in a few lessons behaviour is good. However, too many pupils participate in low level disruption in class, such as calling out and swearing, and around the school there is tension and friction between several pupils. Exclusions have, of late, been used more frequently in an effort to encourage pupils to manage their behaviour more effectively. As a result, the number of exclusions has increased since the previous

inspection. At present, the improvements in pupils' behaviour are too fragile to be secure.

The school has recognised the need to prioritise its action in addressing behaviour and strengthen the behaviour management systems by ensuring that they are implemented more consistently so that pupils are motivated to improve their behaviour.

Pupils' attendance has not shown marked improvement and this is an indication of a lack of enjoyment of lessons. Strategies to improve attendance have been implemented, such as using the tutor group system to promote the importance of attendance and use of parental support advisors to work with parents to encourage their children to attend school. However, it is too early to judge the impact of these initiatives.

Pupils are aware of the need to stay healthy and adopt a healthy lifestyle. Whilst they are developing healthier eating at lunchtime and in the residential facility, many still smoke. Their contribution to the wider community is satisfactory. Although a very small number of pupils have had success, such as in a local retail store, many are unable to continue to live up to the expectations of the working environment.

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

- improve the behaviour of pupils in all areas of the school by implementing the new behaviour management systems consistently so that pupils know what is expected of them – inadequate.

Quality of provision

The quality of provision remains inadequate. There have been some improvements in the quality of teaching. Teachers are more aware of the need to be consistent in their management of behaviour and in preventing situations from getting out of hand. Training by the local authority has helped teachers focus on ensuring that lessons have an effective start that will hold pupils' attention. However, this is not yet consistent and the quality of teaching is still very variable and remains unsatisfactory overall. In subjects such as history, care is taken to ensure that the needs of the different age ranges in each class are met and questioning is used well to check what pupils know and have learnt. However, teachers are not always effective in ensuring that teaching captures pupils' interest and the range of strategies used, including the use of information and communication technology (ICT), are limited. Where ICT is used, such as in English, PowerPoint presentations at the start of lessons hold pupils' interest and enable them to have a clear understanding of what they are to learn. Learning support assistants play an important role in supporting behaviour but teachers do not plan effectively to enable them to help pupils in their learning. As a result of weaknesses in teaching, pupils have negative attitudes to learning and their attendance remains unsatisfactory. The

school has recognised the need to focus on improving teaching through making lessons more stimulating to capture and hold the interest of the pupils. This is particularly relevant for the start of lessons.

The curriculum is unsatisfactory. There are not enough qualified staff to enable the school to teach all subjects. This is particularly so for design and technology, geography and a modern foreign language. The curriculum for Years 10 and 11 lacks flexibility and there are insufficient opportunities for pupils to attend courses out of school to help prepare for the next stage of their education. Whilst appropriate plans have been established to improve the curriculum for Year 10 and 11 pupils, budgetary restrictions have prevented these from being developed. The school recognises that the accommodation is of poor quality and resources which would support teaching such as interactive whiteboards are not in place. Whilst plans have been established to improve accommodation, these have now been frozen by the local authority.

The care, support and guidance offered to the pupils are unsatisfactory. Staff absences have adversely affected the implementation of the pastoral arrangements. Assessments are carried out when pupils start school to measure their reading age, spelling age and mathematical age. However, this information is not used effectively to inform teaching and assessment and tracking procedures to measure pupils' progress are weak. More rigorous individual education plans have recently been introduced.

Procedures for protecting pupils and keeping them safe are robust, with a comprehensive single central record in place. There are satisfactory links with other support agencies, such as community police and social workers, but additional resources to meet the needs of pupils with emotional difficulties are weak.

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

- improve the quality of teaching and learning so that pupils enjoy lessons and come to school more regularly – inadequate.

Leadership and management

Leadership and management remain unsatisfactory. The school, together with the governing body, has a realistic view of its strengths and weaknesses. Whilst day-to-day management is effective, the school has not been able to make the improvements needed in addressing the issues from the previous inspection. This is because of a number of factors.

- The school has not clearly prioritised what needs to be done and this has resulted in senior staff lacking any clear direction of what needs to be achieved and how.
- The reduction in the availability of teaching staff has adversely affected the school's ability to move forward.

- The school has had to accept a constant flow of new pupils. Ten new pupils are expected by September this year. This has prevented the school from concentrating on addressing the issues raised in the last inspection and ensuring that its systems for behaviour and improving teaching are properly embedded.
- The school's budget has been reduced to enable it to address the large overspend it has had in the past but this is preventing the school from making improvements, particularly in improving the curriculum for pupils in Years 10 and 11.

At this stage the school does not have the capacity to improve without a more strategic overview of how it can move forward.

The headteacher has been effective in improving staff morale and there is a real commitment amongst the present staff to move the school forward. They are keen to develop and readily take advice. There has been regular monitoring of teaching but, although this has helped individual teachers to improve to some extent, there has been no whole school view of what makes, for example, a good lesson and how strategies can be adopted by all staff.

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

- improve the way the school is well led and managed by sharing responsibilities more widely and implementing clear systems for monitoring the school's work – inadequate.

External support

The local authority has provided a considerable amount of support in terms of monitoring the work of the school and has provided training for teachers in improving teaching methods. However, it has been ineffective in enabling the school to work strategically to address the key issues from the inspection. The local authority's action plan is unsatisfactory and does not provide a clear sequence of events that enable the school to prioritise. Because of this, the headteacher and senior staff have not been given sufficient support to enable them to recognise what to do, when and how.

Main Judgements

Progress since being subject to special measures – inadequate.

Newly qualified teachers may not be appointed.

Priorities for further improvement

- Provide pupils in Years 10 and 11 with a wider range of experiences which will enable them to gain accreditation in a range of courses, both academic and vocational.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the chair of governors and the Corporate Director Children and Young People for Somerset.

Yours sincerely

Sarah Mascal
Additional Inspector