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Mrs Christine Fairless
Pathways Special School
Tennyson Avenue
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Middlesbrough
TS6 7NP

Dear Mrs Fairless

SPECIAL MEASURES: MONITORING INSPECTION OF PATHWAYS SPECIAL SCHOOL

Following my visit with John Farrow, Additional Inspector, to your school on 13–14 February 2008, 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 March 2007. The monitoring inspection report is attached and the main judgements are set out below.

Progress since being subject to special measures – satisfactory

Progress since previous monitoring inspection – satisfactory

Newly qualified teachers may not be appointed.

This letter and monitoring inspection report 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.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the chair of governors and the Interim Executive Director for Children, Families and Learning for Redcar and Cleveland LA.

Yours sincerely

Heather Richardson HMI
H M Inspector

SPECIAL MEASURES: MONITORING OF Pathways Special School

Report from the second monitoring inspection on 12 February 2008.

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the headteacher, members of the senior leadership team and other teachers, the chair of governors, and a representative from the local authority. Informal discussions were held with pupils.

Context

There have been no major changes to the senior leadership team since the previous monitoring inspection. Although staffing remains relatively stable, there have been some changes in responsibilities and personnel affecting the teaching of English and the provision for Key Stage 3 pupils on an alternative curriculum. The developments in vocational education have continued on schedule overall, with construction, horticulture and photography in place and hair and beauty about to be introduced.

Achievement and standards

Pupils' overall standards remain below average, and English at Key Stages 3 and 4 remains particularly weak. Pupils are not yet achieving enough by the time they leave school, mainly because too many pupils underachieve at Key Stages 3 and 4. For some pupils this is because their attendance is poor. A small group of Key Stage 3 students are making insufficient progress because their alternative curriculum lacks sufficient structure and clear planning.

There have been no external assessments since the previous monitoring visit, but the school has introduced its own tracking system. This shows that almost all pupils have progressed in reading, writing and mathematics as measured by National Curriculum sub-levels. The tracking system is in its early stage of development and the rate of progress identified for all pupils is the same; the school recognises this is not yet robust. It has plans to use its most recent assessment information to set better targets which reflect more closely the abilities and potential of individual students. The lessons observed and pupils' work shows that pupils continue to make satisfactory progress in Key Stages 1 and 2, and in some subjects and lessons at Key Stages 3 and 4. As before, progress is best where teachers provide engaging activities and manage behaviour effectively.

A long-term plan for literacy across the school has been developed to raise standards in English, but this is recent and has yet to make a significant difference to pupils' achievement. All pupils have now been set short-term literacy targets, but these are not well used by teachers when planning lessons and so their effectiveness is variable. The introduction of a guided reading session is promoting more positive attitudes towards literacy throughout the school, but overall provision for literacy at Key Stage 3 and 4 lacks sufficient coherence at present. As the school acknowledges, it has not yet been successful in raising standards in English at Key Stages 3 and 4. Staffing difficulties have also contributed to this.

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

- Raise standards in English in Key Stages 3 and 4– inadequate progress

Personal development and well-being

The personal development and well-being of pupils has continued to improve since the last visit. Behaviour in most lessons is usually satisfactory and poor behaviour is no longer the sole barrier to pupils' learning and progress. In most lessons pupils are willing to cooperate with staff and participate actively in activities. In the best lessons, where pupils can see some relevance to their own interests, they are more attentive and sustain concentration for longer. Pupils are also increasingly capable of listening to and encouraging each others' ideas and some seek to justify their opinions with confidence. Pupils usually enjoy relaxed and supportive relationships with staff and often show satisfaction or pleasure in their own achievements. Under careful supervision, pupils are learning to follow safe working practices in practical lessons and are developing attitudes which better equip them for further training when they leave school. As before, senior staff report they are spending less time dealing with major incidents but serious incidents of disruption and defiant misbehaviour do still occur regularly, especially when pupils become disinterested in their lessons or when their relationship with staff becomes too confrontational. When this happens learning comes to an abrupt halt and pupils do not make the progress they should. Several pupils lack basic self-managing skills and continue to demonstrate impetuous aggressive or disruptive behaviour that requires the involvement of senior staff to bring about a resolution.

The attendance of pupils has shown a slight improvement since the last monitoring inspection but the rate of improvement remains slow. Older pupils who do attend regularly are beginning to reap the benefits of the more practical vocational courses such as construction. However some groups of Key Stage 4 pupils have a very poor attendance record and are proving much more difficult to engage. This is continuing to have an adverse impact on their individual achievement as well as the school's overall attendance figures. The school's strategies to improve attendance are having some modest successes but a relentless focus on raising attendance further for these more vulnerable learners remains crucial.

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

- Improve pupils' attitudes and behaviour – satisfactory progress
- Improve attendance – satisfactory progress

Quality of provision

Teaching continues to be satisfactory overall. As noted above, this is not leading to satisfactory learning for all pupils because of weaknesses in the curriculum provided for some pupils, and continuing issues with attendance. Teachers and support staff generally plan their work carefully so that it matches pupils' needs and interests, thus

enabling pupils to enjoy learning and experience success. This means that in most lessons behaviour is at least satisfactory and pupils enjoy new challenges. In the best lessons teachers use a variety of engaging approaches to encourage pupils to evaluate their own ideas through the use of spoken as well as written language. Some teachers are beginning to raise their expectations of the standards their pupils can achieve. This is evident, for example, in their improved use of questioning; this often focuses on developing pupils' knowledge and understanding of the vocabulary needed to extend their learning. However, because the whole school approach to the development of literacy skills is still in its infancy, the links between speaking and listening, thinking skills and opportunities for extended writing remain ad hoc. As noted above, teachers are not yet making sufficient use of assessment information and pupils' targets when planning lessons. Although all lessons now have objectives, some are still expressed in terms of what the pupils will do, rather than what they will learn. In some lessons pupils are too reliant on immediate and frequent support from their teacher or teaching assistant. This leads to dependency that slows the pace of pupils' learning. A small minority of lessons are inadequate. These occur where planning is weak or when pupils fail to see any relevance; they result in little learning and poor behaviour.

The length of the taught day was increased following the first inspection and is now in line with the national minimum recommendation. However many lessons are very short, around 35 minutes, and these do not always allow teachers and pupils sufficient time to develop and consolidate learning opportunities fully. This is restricting opportunities for pupils to complete the extended writing they need to master to achieve the external accreditation of which they are capable.

Recent developments in alternative and vocational courses at Key Stage 3 and 4 have continued to improve the quality and match of the curriculum to the needs of the pupils, and much of the new specialist accommodation is of good quality and enhances significantly the facilities for pupils' learning. However, the lack of a specialist science room is a real weakness, limiting pupils' opportunities to engage in practical investigations in this important core subject. As noted above, the alternative curriculum for some Key Stage 3 pupils is not sufficiently structured to enable them to make appropriate progress.

Pupils receive good standards of care and support which underpin the generally good relationships that permeate the school. This has led to an improved sense of community, evident for example when staff and pupils sit down together to enjoy their mid-day meal in a calm and orderly manner. Academic guidance remains relatively weak, partly because the new tracking system is in its infancy. Some teachers provide good feedback to pupils but, as the school's scrutiny of work showed, there is notable variation in the quality of marking. The school's procedures for safeguarding learners meet current requirements despite minor anomalies between staff lists and the single central record.

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

- Create more and better opportunities for Key Stage 4 pupils to achieve success – satisfactory progress
- Increase the time given to pupils' education and ensure that the statutory requirements for the curriculum are met – satisfactory progress

Leadership and management

The school's leaders, supported by the local authority, have begun to tackle the priorities identified at the time of the last monitoring visit. Hence there has been training to support aspects of literacy and the use of data; these have resulted in the initial improvements noted above. Some steps have been taken to monitor the work of the school through lesson observations and scrutinies of pupils' work. The school's improvement plan has also been modified.

These steps are just sufficient to warrant the judgement that progress on the area for improvement is satisfactory, but this does not mean that leadership and management are yet secure overall. The basic systems for monitoring, which were previously lacking, are now in place; they have yet to be applied rigorously and systematically to bring about significant and more rapid improvement. Hence, for example, only the headteacher has undertaken lesson observations to date, despite the training provided by the local authority for all leaders. Some aspects of monitoring remain underdeveloped, notably the monitoring of planning; this is a contributory factor in the weak alternative curriculum for a group of Key Stage 3 pupils. There is, as yet, no established link between any monitoring undertaken, subsequent evaluation and priorities for action. Despite revisions to the improvement plan, the timescales for action remain too imprecise for it to be an effective tool by which to monitor progress. Although better, the school's plan and that of the local authority are not yet fully aligned. Evaluations, including the headteacher's assessments prepared for the monitoring visit, are too general and insufficiently focused on measurable outcomes for pupils. There is however, evidence that the strengthened governing body is increasingly holding the school to account.

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

- Monitor performance thoroughly to provide information for more accurate self-evaluation – satisfactory progress

External support

The local authority's support has been satisfactory overall and, as indicated above, the support provided has enabled the school to move forward in its curriculum, assessment and monitoring. Similarly, support for governance is proving beneficial. The local authority's plan has been sharpened to focus on the key priorities. There is evidence that the authority is providing clear challenge as well as support to the school. Action points are shared in meetings and there is evidence that the school has taken action in response to recommendations, for example, in improving pupils' progress records. However, the formal written records of visit are not always sent promptly to the school.

Priorities for further improvement

- Increase the rigour of monitoring and evaluation and ensure the outcomes are used to inform the school's priorities.
- Ensure developments in tracking and target setting inform teachers' planning and meet the needs of individual pupils more carefully.
- Improve the rate of progress of pupils in Key Stages 3 and 4, particularly in literacy.

For the local authority

- Ensure that notes of visit are shared promptly with the school, including the governors.