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4 April 2008

Mr C Sweeney
The Headteacher
The Priory School
Pickeridge Close
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TA2 7HW

Dear Mr Sweeney,

SPECIAL MEASURES: MONITORING INSPECTION OF THE PRIORY SCHOOL

Following my visit with Julia Coop, Additional Inspector, to your school on 18 March 2008, 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 December 2006. 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 Corporate Director of Children and Young People for Somerset.

Yours sincerely

Sarah Mascall
Additional Inspector

SPECIAL MEASURES: MONITORING OF THE PRIORY SCHOOL

Report from the third monitoring inspection: 18 March 2008

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents, and met with the headteacher, senior management team, staff, the chair of governors and a representative from the local authority. Discussions were held with a small group of pupils.

Context

A new deputy headteacher and a new information and communication technology (ICT) specialist took up post in January.

Achievement and standards

Pupils' attendance remains an area for concern and is having an impact on achievements. As a result, many pupils are not making the progress they should. Analysis of the school's data shows that for those pupils who attend regularly progress is beginning to improve. Pupils are now making satisfactory progress in English and pupils themselves comment on how their reading and writing is improving. In mathematics and science achievement is less secure and there are still too many pupils who are not making sufficient progress.

The school has worked hard to gather data based on teachers' assessments and, for the first time, now has information regarding pupils' progress. Teachers have clearer expectations of what pupils should achieve by the end of the academic year and generally set targets that are realistic. Targets are beginning to be used effectively to raise standards in English, but this is not yet consistent across all subjects. In a few subjects, teachers' expectations for what pupils can achieve are low, which further constrains pupils' progress. The school is developing systems that will enable teachers to moderate their assessments and develop portfolios of pupils' work as exemplars for each level. This should help teachers and pupils recognise the standards they should be aiming for. There are already good examples of displays in classes indicating to pupils what skills are required to enable them to make progress. However, pupils are not sure of their targets and few are clear about what they need to do next to improve. The marking of pupils' work is still inconsistent and there are too many examples of work which is not marked. The lack of up-to-date marking prevents teachers from being more accurate in their assessments of pupils' progress.

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 – satisfactory.

Personal development and well-being

In discussions, pupils say how much they like school and talk enthusiastically about some subjects and activities. They feel the school is getting 'a lot better'. Pupils show a good understanding of the school's behaviour systems and these are continuing to have an impact in helping them to improve their behaviour. The detention system has been used effectively and pupils are proud that their behaviour is improving. As one said, 'I can't remember the last time I got detention.'

The school has worked hard to encourage pupils to maintain the no smoking rule. Whilst recently there was a temporary increase in the number of exclusions linked to this, the number of pupils excluded from school is beginning to reduce. The school recognises, however, that there are still too many fixed-term exclusions and that there needs to be better attention given to finding alternative sanctions. The school has already started to look at ways of keeping pupils on site in order to enable them to continue with their education.

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 – satisfactory.

Quality of provision

The quality of teaching is still variable. However, it is improving and this is recognised by pupils. They are enthusiastic about subjects such as design and technology, information and communication technology, art and cookery because they recognise that they are developing new skills. These lessons are often well planned and ensure that pupils have a range of activities that keep them on task. A few teachers build upon pupils' basic skills. For example, in bricklaying, pupils are encouraged to develop their numeracy skills. This is not consistent in other subjects, though, and there is an insufficient focus on developing pupils' reading and writing skills other than in English lessons.

Many teachers are improving their management of pupils' behaviour. This is evident in subjects such as English where a firm approach at the start of lessons keeps pupils' attention. Relationships between teachers and staff are generally positive and support staff work hard to encourage pupils to concentrate on their work. Pupils comment however that work is often too hard or too easy and this leads to them becoming disruptive. Teachers do not yet use their knowledge of pupils to ensure that work is matched to pupils' abilities. In most lessons all pupils do the same task regardless of their ability. The lack of challenge in lessons is still evident. For example, in science, pupils were given the answers to questions which they copied from the board, and in history there was too much cutting out and colouring in.

Pupils' attendance remains unsatisfactory. However, it is improving, and this reflects improvements in the quality of provision for pupils. There have been improvements in the range of activities on offer such as Fire Break and outdoor education activities.

Pupils' attendance to these is nearly 100%. Links with the local college have been developed well and pupils can attend college for activities and courses. Pupils value these opportunities and their successes are recognised through a joint certificate with the college. Work experience opportunities are well planned, and pupils work one day a week throughout the year in their placement. They clearly enjoy this opportunity and most attend well.

The school has rightly identified the need to improve the curriculum so that it is more relevant to pupils and will encourage them to attend more regularly. Since January there has been a closer scrutiny on improving the curriculum further and groups of staff have worked effectively together to review provision and look at alternatives. As a result, the school is looking to put in place a new Key Stage 4 curriculum by June that will enable Year 9 and 10 pupils to sample the range of activities before starting in September.

Pupils say they feel safe in school and know who to see if they have concerns. Good attention to safety has ensured that pupils behave well and act sensibly in practical subjects such as bricklaying and cooking. The tutor system is not used as well as it could be to prepare pupils for the day. There is not a consistent approach, for example in checking that pupils know their targets, and pupils comment that they do not do anything in tutorial sessions. The school is in the process of improving further its provision for pupils' personal and social development through developing pupils' skills in emotional literacy.

There is not a clear remit for the nurture group and the provision is still in the process of being developed. The mix of ages and abilities makes it difficult to plan work that is appropriate and the rationale for its use is not clear. Systems are being developed to improve pupils' self esteem and there is evidence pupils are more motivated to learn. However, the school recognises the need to improve further the concept of a more nurturing, therapeutic approach through the introduction of a wider range of strategies to support pupils.

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 – satisfactory.

Leadership and management

The senior management team is now fully established. The school has looked closely at the roles for senior staff and there is a good understanding of their responsibilities. Regular formal staff meetings are ensuring that staff are clearer about what is happening in school and what is expected of them. The establishment of working groups to address issues to do with the curriculum and emotional literacy has empowered staff to take on more responsibility and improved team work. Subject managers are developing their roles and are taking a lead in improving provision. Initiatives by senior managers, such as improving links with the local colleges and the involvement of pupils in displaying their bricklaying skills at parents' evenings, have been successful in broadening provision and celebrating success.

Senior staff recognise that, of late, there has been an over-reliance on the support of the local authority in monitoring the work of staff. They plan to be more active in order to take more effective action in supporting and developing staff. There is a clear understanding of the strengths and weaknesses in teaching, but senior staff have not taken effective action in prompting staff to improve their strategies, for example in matching work to the abilities of pupils or in marking. A great deal has been achieved in gathering information about pupils' progress but, as yet, the limited analysis of this has prevented the school from taking action to bring about improvements. Where analysis has taken place, for example when looking at attendance and noting that this is worst on a Monday and Friday, no plans have been drawn up to consider how this could be addressed. The school has therefore taken important steps in gathering better information on its performance, but needs to make better use of this data in order to develop its capacity to improve further.

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 – satisfactory.

External support

The local authority continues to provide a high level of support that is much appreciated by staff. The work in supporting staff to better understand the process of assessment has been invaluable. Advisors recognise that there is now a need to empower senior staff to take more control of monitoring and begin to use data more effectively to support the self-evaluation process.

The remit for the satellite class is unclear. The school is funded to run the provision but the line of responsibility for its management has not been formally clarified and there do not appear to be clear admissions criteria concerning the nature and needs of the pupils. At present the satellite supports young people from all key stages who have been, or are, at risk of being excluded from their school. There are three pupils attending from Priory School as well as others from mainstream schools.

The provision benefits from being well organised by the lead support assistant and pupils gain from the good links that staff have established with their parents and multi agency groups. Pupils work in a variety of different settings which, although not always ideal, enable staff to support pupils' learning and pastoral needs. Pupils' attendance improves and this is having a positive impact on progress. Although there is no teacher involvement in the satellite class, staff work well with the pupils' schools and obtain relevant work that enables pupils to continue with their studies. However, it is difficult for staff to assess how well pupils are doing and this prevents those responsible from judging the true success of this provision. It is inappropriate that one pupil has been in this setting for over two years.

Priorities for further improvement

- Establish a clear remit for the satellite class so that all those involved are clear about its purpose.