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Mr C Sweeney
The Headteacher
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Dear Mr Sweeney

SPECIAL MEASURES: MONITORING INSPECTION OF THE PRIORY SCHOOL

Following my visit to your school on 1 and 2 July 2008, 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 December 2006. The monitoring inspection report is attached and the main judgements are set out below.

Progress since being subject to special measures – good.

Progress since previous monitoring inspection – good.

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 for Children and Young People for Somerset.

Yours sincerely

Sarah Mascal
Additional Inspector

SPECIAL MEASURES: MONITORING OF THE PRIORY SCHOOL

Report from the fourth monitoring inspection: 1 and 2 July 2008

Evidence

The inspector 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

Whilst the offices for the satellite class remain on site, the facility is no longer used as a teaching base.

Achievement and standards

Pupils' attendance is improving and this is having a noticeable impact on their achievements. There are still too many pupils who do not attend regularly enough. However, for those who do attend, progress is satisfactory and in some cases good. The school now has sufficient data about pupils' achievements to be able to draw conclusions from this information about how well pupils are doing. The best progress is in English, physical education (PE), information and communication technology (ICT) and food technology. In these subjects, almost half the pupils who attend regularly are making good progress. The data for art and design and technology is less accurate and does not reflect the good teaching in these subjects and the progress pupils are making. The school rightly has concerns about the progress of pupils in science and history where, although pupils make some progress, it is not at a sufficiently rapid pace to enable them to achieve as well as they should. Progress in mathematics is unsatisfactory and the school has already taken action to address this.

Teachers are clearer about the progress pupils make because they have more confidence in assessing how well pupils are doing. They have a better understanding of where they want pupils to be by the end of the academic year, but are not making best use of this information to set targets that will enable pupils to achieve these goals. As a result, the progress pupils make in some subjects, such as science and history, is slower than it should be.

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

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

Personal development and well-being

The enthusiasm and enjoyment of the pupils attending school is a credit to staff. In discussion with three boys, when asked what they thought could be improved in the school, they paused and then one said, 'Nothing. It's really good here.' Their positive attitude is reflected in the fact that there has been a marked improvement in attendance over the last term. Whilst it is still lower than it should be, it has improved by 10% this term and is now 75%. Pupils like the increased opportunities to be involved in practical activities and speak very positively about the recent changes to the curriculum and to the classrooms. The increased tutor time in the mornings is greatly valued as pupils feel it gives them better opportunities to talk about their problems and get things sorted out before they start lessons.

Pupils consider behaviour is good and although staff have had concerns about bullying, the pupils did not feel this was an issue. Whilst there are incidents of inappropriate behaviour because of the nature of pupils' special needs, these are reducing as pupils respond to the school's systems. There are fewer absences from lessons and pupils consider that they are safe in school. The improved behaviour is reflected in a reduction in the number of exclusions. These have dropped by nearly a half over the last term. Pupils know and understand the school's reward systems well and value the opportunities to gain points and participate in the activities that are made available to them.

There are many examples of pupils having a good understanding of staying healthy. For example, in one lesson, the teacher was lectured by a pupil in ensuring that she drank lots of water. There is a great enthusiasm for sport, particularly the recent introduction of a course on fishing. The growing confidence of staff in pupils and in the improved attitudes of the boys is reflected in the fact that they are given far more responsibilities. This was shown in two Year 10 boys being asked to support the Year 9 pupils when they went out fishing.

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 – good.

Quality of provision

The quality of teaching has improved and is now solidly satisfactory. Teachers' subject knowledge is used very well and enables staff to explain things in a way that is easily understood by pupils. This is evident in many subjects, particularly art, English, PE and food technology. Explanations, for example, about pop art or how to rub in when making pastry, are listened to attentively by pupils and enable them to put their new knowledge to good use in their work. The recent installation of interactive whiteboards in all classes has had a positive impact on teaching. Staff have made good use of this technology to involve pupils in learning. Pupils clearly enjoy the opportunities to record their answers, such as in mathematics, on the whiteboards and treat the equipment with respect.

The management of behaviour is generally good and although a few staff are still reticent about challenging pupils, most use their relationships with pupils to encourage them to stay on task. Classroom assistants contribute greatly to pupils' learning. They are playing a far more proactive role in lessons and work well with individuals and groups. Their commitment to pupils and consistent approach in dealing with difficult behaviours are very evident throughout the school. Whilst most teachers are clear about the role of the classroom assistants in their lessons, few involve assistants in planning so that they are better prepared before the lesson.

There is a better focus on extending pupils' basic skills throughout the school and pupils comment that they seem to do nothing but reading and writing, 'We even have to record our findings in science now!' There are higher expectations of staff in terms of pupils learning spellings, such as in food technology, and improving their numeracy skills, for example in science. Teachers make clear the outcomes for each lesson but are not using these well to check what pupils have learnt by the end of the lesson. Displays in each class indicate how pupils can improve, but opportunities are missed to use these effectively to ensure pupils understand what they need to do next to improve. Although there is an improving challenge in lessons and in a few subjects, such as history and English work is adapted well to pupils' needs, this is not consistent across the school.

The changes to the curriculum in the last six months have been impressive and have enabled the school to offer a far more relevant curriculum that is appreciated by the pupils. Improvements have been made to ensure there is a far more vocational and practical approach to learning. The school continues to increase the range of courses at local colleges and work experience placements and the range of accreditation has improved. The opportunities, for example, to attend an accredited fishing course are much valued by pupils.

The increased focus on addressing pupils' emotional needs through personal, social and health education (PSHE) is at an early stage. The school recognises that staff need more training and support to enable this to be fully effective. The hard work in planning these sessions and ensuring staff have a programme of work is a credit to the coordinator. There are good plans in place to support pupils in moving from Year 9 to Year 10 so that they are better prepared when they start in September. The school is also looking at improving the transition for new pupils into the school so that there is a quicker start to full-time attendance.

Improvements to the school environment are very obvious. Pupils comment on the fact that classrooms are better and they like the change to the different learning areas within each room. They are proud of having their own class and this is reflected in the reduction in vandalism in the school. Classrooms are bright and colourful and the displays of pupils' artwork around the school do much to celebrate the impressive skills pupils are gaining in the subject. Good use is being made of the outside area to establish a workshop and horticulture area and pupils are keen to be involved in developing them.

Procedures for the care, guidance and support of pupils remain secure. Systems for recording incidents of restraint and accidents are rigorous. The school is in the process of reviewing the recording of other incidents to ensure that this is as

effective. There have been good improvements to the school's assessment arrangements. Although there is recognition that much has been achieved, staff realise that the systems need to be refined and made better use of, in order to establish effective targets for pupils. The review of pupils' individual education plans is appropriate and is enabling the school to have a clearer picture of pupils' academic levels and where pupils should be by the end of each year.

The role of the nurture group remains unclear. The change of focus within the main school to a more personalised learning approach brings into question the need for such a group and the school is considering whether better use can be made of this resource.

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 – good.

Leadership and management

The senior leadership team has developed into a strong group that works well together and has a range of skills that complement each other well. The changes to the curriculum have been immense but have been achieved successfully through the determination of the leadership team to bring about improvements. Whilst a few staff have been resistant to change, the impact of the changes are evident in terms of the pupils and this, for many, has been the turning point in not only accepting the changes, but contributing to their development.

Systems to support the day-to-day running of the school are better organised. This is reflected in the presentation and availability of documentation for this monitoring visit which was well organised and well presented. The reorganisation of the administrative team is still under way but will provide more effective support for the leadership team.

The monitoring of teaching and learning by senior leaders is improving. Senior staff have carried out a series of checks and are becoming less dependent on the local authority in having an overview of provision within the school. The collation of data and its presentation in an easily accessible form provides senior leaders with a clear picture of the strengths and areas for improvement in pupils' progress. Analysis of this data is still at an early stage and staff are aware that they need to be more refined in the use of all the information they have in order to ensure that it reflects a true picture of provision. The school is now in a good position to review its self-evaluation and incorporate the information it has gathered to provide secure judgments about provision. The governing body is developing its role and now has a more formal approach to monitoring and checking on the progress of the school.

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 – good.

External support

The local authority continues to provide a high level of training and support for staff. Good steps have been taken in enabling senior staff to take on more responsibility for monitoring provision whilst maintaining a close overview of the progress the school is making. The local authority has not established an exit strategy for the school as it heads towards coming out of special measures.

Whilst the school is no longer in a fragile position, its systems and procedures are not fully established or robust enough to enable it to take a large increase in pupil numbers. Plans by the local authority for the school to take twelve new pupils in September, four of whom will be in Year 10, could seriously undermine much of the good work that has been done of late. Consideration needs to be given to a more phased induction to enable small numbers of pupils to be gradually inducted and settled into the school through the term.

Priorities for further improvement

- Establish a clear admissions policy that will enable the school to take new pupils but at a rate and number that will not destabilise its present vulnerable position.