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Mrs J Thomas
The Headteacher
The Beacon School
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Dear Mrs Thomas

SPECIAL MEASURES: MONITORING INSPECTION OF THE BEACON SCHOOL

Following my visit with James Bowden, Additional Inspector, Peter Dacombe, Additional Inspector and Lynne Kauffman, Additional Inspector, to your school on 13 and 14 May 2008, 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 2007. The monitoring inspection report is attached and the main judgements are set out below.

Progress since being subject to special measures – satisfactory

Newly qualified teachers may be appointed except to the science and ICT departments.

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 and the monitoring inspection report to the Secretary of State, the chair of governors and the Executive Director for Children and Young People for Surrey.

Yours sincerely

Barry Jones
Additional Inspector

SPECIAL MEASURES: MONITORING OF THE BEACON SCHOOL

Report from the first monitoring inspection: 13 and 14 May 2008

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the headteacher, teachers, a group of students, the chair of the Interim Executive Board, the school improvement partner and a representative from the local authority (LA).

Context

The previous headteacher retired in December 2007 following the inspection that placed the school into special measures. An acting interim headteacher was appointed while a possible federation was considered. She was originally asked to serve for one term but this has now been extended to September 2009. She has previous experience of working with schools in challenging circumstances. One of the two deputy headteachers has left and the other is retiring at the end of the year. Two assistant headteachers have been appointed as acting deputy headteachers. An additional experienced deputy headteacher has been seconded from another school from September 2008 with a lead-in period this term. The governing body was dissolved on February 27 2008 and an Interim Executive Board with a shadow governing body has been created. Recruiting high quality staff continues to be difficult. The school predicts that it will reduce from 8 to 6 form entry in September 2008.

Achievement and standards

In many lessons, teachers identify the key vocabulary to be used and reinforce students' understanding subsequently. In subjects such as art and technology, students are given good opportunities to developing their speaking and listening skills. The school is a specialist school for media arts. The attainment in specialist subjects was not inspected on this visit. However, the English department has led the whole-school training on literacy. A review of literacy across the curriculum was conducted by consultants in April 2008. This confirmed that the training has had a positive impact on the teaching of literacy in those subjects which were visited. It identified that the quality of students' writing needed to be improved. Writing in different styles, including creative writing, and for different audiences was not a strong feature in lessons or work seen by the inspectors on this visit either. The school is at an early stage in evaluating the impact on students' skills through the use of its own assessment data.

The school is developing new procedures to monitor students' progress. The focus has rightly been on the current Year 11 and to a slightly lesser extent Year 9. The headteacher has given a very decisive lead in using the data to identify and then tackle underperformance. For example, students were behind in their coursework in art but intervention by senior managers helped to rectify matters and put students back on track. Performance data have also been used to identify some students who were not on course to reach their targets. Their performance has been improved

through a range of strategies such as mentoring, Saturday morning classes and Easter revision classes. The school predicts that attainment at GCSE level will be higher in 2008 than in 2007. Encouraging students to gain accreditation for their numeracy and literacy skills has also increased their motivation.

The school does not yet have a clear picture of whether students' progress has accelerated in Years 7 to 10 in different subjects. The procedures for tracking their progress are currently being extended to these year groups. Heads of department have just been given suggested end-of-key stage targets for each student in their subject. The intention is to use these to monitor students' progress. The school considers achievement over time to be still inadequate. Consequently, the targets are an appropriate stepping stone. If reached, students will have recovered ground lost previously and have made satisfactory progress in their time at the school.

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

- Rapidly improve the rate of progress made by students from Years 7 to 11 in a significant number of subjects. In particular, address issues of poor literacy skills in all subjects – satisfactory

Personal development and well-being

Current attendance, at 91.3%, is an improvement on that of 90.4% at the time of the last inspection. Attendance is continuing to slowly improve, particularly in Years 7 and 8. This is as a result of a range of systems and procedures recently introduced by the school. These include the installation of an automatic telephone system to enable first-day calling when a student is absent, reward packages for good attendance, and attendance panels for those who have particularly low attendance. The school has recently delegated responsibility for attendance issues to a deputy headteacher and a full-time attendance officer. The school did not have the support of an education welfare officer for an extended period but this has now been resolved.

Behaviour in lessons and around the school continues to be satisfactory and often good. Fixed term exclusions are falling rapidly. There is low-level disruption in a few lessons, especially where the work is not sufficiently well planned to meet the range of learning needs within the class. However, in an outstanding personal, social, health and citizenship lesson, students were thoroughly engaged by the topic – 'knife crime'. The teacher very skilfully led students to think hard about their views and those presented in the media.

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

- Improve attendance to at least the national average – satisfactory

Quality of provision

Robust action has been taken to improve structures and procedures for setting and marking homework. This has made an immediate impact on improving students' progress. Quick action, together with a letter to parents from the acting headteacher,

explained changes, offered 'homework guidance' and a timetable to keep parents informed. This strategy has been well received and involves parents more closely with their child's homework. Senior leaders successfully identified good practice in the history homework policy. This has been used as a basis for the whole-school change and a very effective monitoring system is in place that collates responses from all staff. Subject leaders play a key role in discussions with their teams so there is regular feedback to teachers about homework; issues with homework are rapidly resolved. The monitoring of the use of homework diaries by students is less rigorous.

Marking has improved significantly. The headteacher gave a strong, immediate steer. Subject leaders and line managers ensure that the agreed policy is consistently implemented. Usefully, students have the guidelines in the front of their books or files. As a result, marking makes it clear to students how they can improve further. Students commented positively on the change.

Target-setting is being extended to all year groups as part of a whole-school initiative. Year 9 and 11 students know their targets and what they have to do to improve. This is not yet consistent across the school, however. Teachers are making more use of assessment data but they vary in their ability to do so effectively to plan their lessons. Some lessons that had good features were only satisfactory overall because all students were given the same work. This means that it was sometimes too hard for some or too easy for others. There are good examples of innovative assessment strategies and peer assessment in subjects such as history, art and technology that consolidate learning.

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

- Utilise student target-setting, marking and homework to help students understand more effectively how they can improve their work – good

Leadership and management

Progress has accelerated since the interim headteacher's tenure was confirmed for an extended period. Good progress has been made in building the capacity of leadership and management at senior level. Good appointments have been made at acting deputy headteacher level, and also for a seconded deputy headteacher. However, some of the changes made will only be fully implemented from September 2008 and it is therefore too early to evaluate the impact on improving the achievement of students. Procedures for monitoring students' progress are not yet sufficiently robust. Shortcomings in the arrangements for linking pastoral care and guidance of students have been identified and a revised structure will be in place for September. Year heads are being re-appointed and will have a key role in monitoring students' academic progress. Currently, the school has student managers who only have responsibility for pastoral matters. They are being re-assigned to other support roles.

The acting headteacher provides very good, dynamic leadership. She has moved quickly and very decisively to restore confidence in the school. Prompt action has led

to a very noticeable improvement in the quality of marking, and in the setting of homework. She has also made a robust start on improving the quality of teaching and learning. She has established a scheme for coaching and supporting teachers to improve. Staff are held to account where lessons are inadequate. Staff have worked hard and responded positively to her lead. Several have volunteered to support one another in a variety of ways.

Appropriate arrangements are now in place for the line management of subject leaders, with regular meetings which have a very clear focus on academic standards. An appointment as co-ordinator for the specialist subjects has been made recently, and arrangements made for some support from the specialist schools trust to help identify priorities for the future. A key appointment, to lead all aspects of ICT across the school, has yet to be made. There will be no head of science from September and the school is delaying an appointment while it reviews the position. There are plans to provide further training to heads of department, including making more effective use of data to inform their decision making and planning.

The chair of the newly appointed Interim Executive Board has a clear view of what needs to be done to move the school forward and the board as a whole is making an effective contribution to improving the school.

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

- Build capacity in the newly enlarged senior management team to ensure that robust measures are taken to improve the overall quality of teaching and learning – satisfactory

External support

The LA's statement of action plan is now satisfactory following revision during this visit. A breakdown in communications within the authority meant that there was a delay in amending the plan as requested by Ofsted. There is now sufficient detail on the timing of actions to be taken by the LA including how support will be scheduled across the period to December 2008, which is the target date identified by the LA for the school to no longer require special measures. In some instances, the success criteria against which the support of the LA can be evaluated need strengthening. The quantifiable measure for attendance is potentially a good example except that a different target is given in other documents. This anomaly needs resolving. Nevertheless, the LA has provided effective support to date. For instance, there has been good support for building capacity and for promoting literacy across the curriculum.

Priorities for further improvement

There are no additional priorities for improvement. However, the school should intensify efforts to evaluate the effectiveness of initiatives to accelerate students' achievement.