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Mr Ian Smith
Millom School; A DCSF Technology and Arts College
Salthouse Road
Millom
Cumbria
LA18 5AB

Dear Mr Smith

Special measures: monitoring inspection of Millom School; A DCSF
Technology and Arts College

Following my visit with Jim Bennetts AI and Bernard Campbell HMI to your school on 25 and 26 September 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 November 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 be appointed only with the agreement of the lead inspector, in advance.

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 Director of Children's Services for Cumbria LA.

Yours sincerely

Pat Kime
Her Majesty's Inspector

Special measures: monitoring of Millom School; A DCSF Technology and Arts College

Report from the second monitoring inspection on 25-26 September 2008

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work; scrutinised documents; and met with the headteacher, groups of staff, including those with leadership responsibilities, groups of pupils, the chair of the governing body, and representatives of the local authority (LA).

Context

There have been several changes of staff since the previous monitoring inspection and the school has a new school improvement partner. New heads of department have been appointed for English and science and an additional assistant headteacher has been appointed to lead on literacy for learning. Nine teachers have left the school and eight new ones, including two part-timers, joined at the start of the school year. These changes have strengthened the staffing in English and science. Two vacancies remain, in English and mathematics, and these are currently covered by temporary staff.

Achievement and standards

Students' rate of progress has accelerated in Key Stage 4 but the school's records show widespread underachievement in Key Stage 3, most marked in English. In both these key stages, staff identified 'borderline' students whose achievement was slipping and who were, therefore, at risk of not reaching the standard expected for their age. This slippage has been tackled with a good degree of success, by well focused intervention. Achievement in the sixth form is broadly average.

The results obtained by last year's leavers in their GCSE examinations show that students' progress in Key Stage 4 has improved. These students retrieved much of the ground they had lost in Key Stage 3. Consequently, the proportion who obtained five good passes, including English and mathematics was 38%, which broadly met what would have been expected from the students' starting point in Year 7. However, on other measures of achievement at this key stage the picture is less positive. When all students' results, across all the subjects, are taken into account, standards at Year 11 were lower than they should be and did not meet the school's targets. Some students followed a work-based curriculum which did not lead to qualifications. This was a limiting factor in the overall standards reached.

The school is making satisfactory headway in tackling some of the causes of underachievement, by improved teaching and more precise tracking of students'

progress. There are strengths. In science, the GCSE results improved and in Year 9 an increased proportion of students reached the level expected for their age. In some of the specialist subjects, mathematics, science and technology, the pass rate at GCSE was higher than the school's average. Nonetheless, senior staff and governors are aware that a considerable legacy of underachievement remains and there is still much to do to raise standards across key stages and subjects and ensure that all students reach the standards of which they are capable. The school's thorough analysis of standards has identified where most improvement is needed, for example standards in English at Key Stage 3, especially for boys, and standards and progress in information and communication technology at Key Stage 4.

Progress since the last visit on the areas for improvement:

- Raise standards and achievement, especially in English and science – satisfactory

Personal development and well-being

In most of the lessons observed the majority of students had positive attitudes and relationships were good. Students behaved well and took some pride in their work. Inspectors' observations confirmed what students say is the norm. They told inspectors that attitudes to learning have improved. Occasionally low level disruption slows the pace of learning. However, this is not widespread and the 'poor behaviour' noted in November 2007 is no longer apparent. Students comply with instructions and, for the most part, apply themselves to the work in hand but only in a few of the lessons seen were they eager to answer questions and to push their own learning on rapidly. In some lessons, including lessons with upper sets and in the sixth form, students did not take as much initiative as might have been expected nor were they encouraged to do so.

Quality of provision

The overall quality of teaching has improved. The proportion of inadequate teaching has been further reduced and more of the teaching is of a securely good quality. There are a number of in-house models of very effective teaching and these are being used more extensively to support staff development. Senior staff have continued to observe a good number of lessons and have used their findings to tailor bespoke packages of support and coaching for individual teachers. These have proved successful in several cases. In general, teachers' planning for lessons has a sound focus on what students are to learn. Lessons usually move along at a suitable pace but sometimes time is not used well even though lessons have been properly planned. In some lessons assessment is used well to promote learning; teachers check students' learning frequently and ensure that the work is challenging for them all. However, in a number of lessons, the work set for students is not closely matched to their different standards and abilities. Students are not often challenged to develop as independent learners.

In English, weaknesses in the curriculum have hindered students' progress in Key Stage 3. Planning has not been sufficient to provide a coherent and progressive programme of work or consistency of coverage between classes in the same school year. The recently appointed head of the department has recognised the shortcomings and has sound plans to tackle them, with support from the new assistant headteacher.

In science, the standard students have reached is assessed at the end of each module of work but less attention is paid to judging the level of their work across the subject at regular intervals. Consequently, the outcomes of assessments are erratic and not as useful as they might be to students, teachers and senior staff.

Progress since the last visit on the areas for improvement:

- Increase the pace and challenge in lessons and ensure that poor behaviour does not disrupt the learning – satisfactory

Leadership and management

Well focused, rigorous and systematic monitoring of teaching has continued and has proved effective. Teachers have received helpful, specific feedback on strengths and areas for development which has been a significant factor in helping several of them to improve. Heads of departments or subjects are more involved in developing the quality of teaching, for example by identifying good practice for their colleagues to observe.

The quality of subject leadership is improving as middle managers become more aware of their responsibilities and several benefit from coaching by members of the senior team. Some subject leaders have a good grasp of how well all groups of students are doing, and why, and have well considered plans for raising standards and achievement further. However, the effectiveness of action planning at subject level varies and it is not always sufficiently clear how progress will be judged. The links between members of the senior leadership team and subject leaders are a positive feature. Their monthly meetings now have clear agenda. Subject leaders confirm that they are more focused and coherent and contribute to a growing understanding of how the work of each department fits in with the whole-school improvement agenda. Newly appointed leaders in English and science are aware of what needs to be tackled in their subjects so the potential exists for a step up in the pace of improvement in these subjects.

The use of assessment data at whole-school level has improved. Test and exam results have been carefully analysed to identify aspects of subjects where students have done less well and to identify particular groups of students who are underachieving. This information is contributing to setting the agenda for improvement, particularly in Key Stage 3 where it raises many issues. Senior staff now have data to compare the rate of students' progress in different subjects and classes. They are beginning to use this to set targets against which to judge students' achievement.

Governors have a good understanding of the issues the school faces and are closely involved in the drive for improvement.

The school's specialist status continues to make the contribution to school life and students' standards and achievement that was noted at the last monitoring visit.

Progress since the last visit on the areas for improvement:

- Ensure the rigorous and consistent implementation of new policies and systems to raise achievement – satisfactory
- Improve the rigour and effectiveness with which leaders and managers at all levels monitor the school's work – satisfactory

External support

The LA continues to provide sound support to the school, not least with dedicated time from its consultants to support the improvement of teaching and learning.

Priorities for further improvement

- Improve curricular planning and assessment in English in order to ensure coherent provision and to accelerate students' progress.
- Strengthen the arrangements to hold teachers to account for the progress made by pupils in their classes.