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14 November 2008

Mr John O'Donnell
The Headteacher
The Radcliffe School
Aylesbury Street West
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Milton Keynes
MK12 5BT

Dear Mr O'Donnell

Special measures: monitoring inspection of The Radcliffe School

Following my visit with Alan Brewerton and Isobel Randall, Additional Inspectors, to your school on 4 and 5 November 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 January 2008. 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

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 the Interim Executive Board and the Group Director for School Improvement and Planning for Milton Keynes.

Yours sincerely

Peter Limm
H M Inspector

Special measures: monitoring of The Radcliffe School

Report from the second monitoring inspection on 4 and 5 November 2008

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the headteacher, key members of the senior leadership team and middle managers, groups of students, the chair of the Interim Executive Board (IEB), a representative from the local authority and the school improvement partner (SIP).

Context

Since the first monitoring visit, the school has undertaken a significant restructuring of the teaching staff leading to a reduction of 13 teaching posts. Further changes to the management structure have been made from September 2008 with senior staff roles being more tightly defined. The school has not succeeded in recruiting a suitably qualified and experienced teacher to lead the mathematics department. This has led to a restructuring of the leadership of the senior team to enable the school to address, temporarily, this situation. In response to the initial inspection in January 2008, and subsequently being identified as a school on the national challenge list, there has been greater emphasis by new senior and middle leaders on the setting of rigorous targets for students and all staff, and a tighter focus on improving quality assurance procedures, including better tracking of students' progress and monitoring of the quality of teaching. Key changes have been monitored carefully by the new IEB.

Achievement and standards

Actions taken by the school to tackle the underachievement evident at the time of the last inspection and first monitoring visit are beginning to have a positive effect. Unvalidated 2008 results at Key Stage 3 show that, although standards remain below the national average, results for mathematics at Level 5+ improved slightly whilst those for science fell only slightly. The results for English are subject to a remark. Work observed in lessons, and sampled in the work survey, indicates progress is satisfactory and standards are improving. The proportion of students attaining 5 A*-C grades at GCSE in 2008 was around 14 percentage points higher than in 2007. Nevertheless, the capped average point score was still low and the proportion of students attaining 5 A*-C grades including English and mathematics, remains very low. Performance in mathematics remains very weak. Initial provisional calculations of contextual value added by the school, however, indicate that the overall progress of students from Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 4 has improved and is broadly satisfactory. Progress observed in lessons showed some improvement and, apart from the least effective lessons, was satisfactory overall. In the sixth form, the pass rate at AS level improved slightly in 2008 as did the A level points score. The school

predictions for Year 13 students indicate a further improvement for 2009 and teacher assessments are historically accurate.

Progress since the last visit on the areas for improvement:

- Increase the rate of progress made by students in their work – satisfactory

Personal development and well-being

Although not a focus for this visit, inspectors judged personal development and well-being to be good. Relationships remain good and the atmosphere in the school is very positive. During the inspection there was a fire alarm due to work being undertaken by technicians, and the consequent fire procedures demonstrated clearly that students are calm and sensible in such situations. Behaviour in lessons was good and students demonstrated good attitudes to learning. When interviewed, students said that they enjoyed attending school, and felt that the majority of teachers taught them well and that they had improved their monitoring of academic progress and their marking. Students said they felt safe and that the few incidents of bullying were dealt with quickly and well by the school. Students feel they are listened to by the school and think they are making a better contribution to the local community than last year. Three students from the school have been taking part in an anti-bullying forum organised by the local authority and each one has been awarded a Princess Diana Award for good deeds in the community. The number of exclusions has continued to fall. Attendance, including that in the sixth form, has improved since the last visit.

Quality of provision

The quality of teaching across the school has improved since the first monitoring visit although two unsatisfactory lessons were seen in science. There were three outstanding lessons in English, French and design and technology. The proportion of just satisfactory lessons was less than last time. Some elements of lessons observed in the sixth form were outstanding but the small numbers of students in the groups militated against students making outstanding progress. This overall pattern in the quality of teaching observed aligns well with the school's own self-evaluation and monitoring judgements. The refined lesson planning noted last time has been embedded more securely across subjects but there is still too much inconsistency in the way teachers attempt to match lesson activities to individual students' needs. Tracking students' progress is now more effectively undertaken in all departments but there are still too many instances where resultant data is not used rigorously enough to improve achievement, especially in the sixth form. However, improved pastoral support for sixth formers has meant that these students achieve satisfactorily, given their attainment on entry to Year 12. Students' attendance in the sixth form has improved since the last visit. The use of information and communication technology (ICT) has improved and students say there are more opportunities in lessons to be actively engaged in creating presentations and solving problems using ICT. Marking, although improved strongly in some areas such as

English and humanities, remains variable and too cursory in some subjects, such as mathematics.

The curriculum changes noted last time have been embedded effectively and students, including those in the sixth form, now have a much better range of options and courses to study. More students entered Year 12 than in previous years, and a higher number of students remained in the sixth form in Year 13 to complete their studies. Attempts to broaden sixth form experience further through collaborating in joint sixth form provision with other schools have not met with much success.

Progress since the last visit on the areas for improvement:

- Improve the quality of teaching to eliminate inadequate lessons and increase the proportion of good lessons – satisfactory
- Ensure that the sixth-form curriculum and support meets the needs of students and enables them to achieve well – satisfactory

Leadership and management

School leaders continue to work in a determined and increasingly confident way with the IEB, the local authority and the SIP to address the weaknesses identified by the inspection in January 2008. The improved self-evaluation process, now evident at departmental level, is enabling school leaders to focus much more rigorously on tracking students' progress, monitoring the quality of teaching and improving attainment and achievement. This increased focus is only slowly improving achievement. Much still needs to be done to ensure that national challenge targets are met and the gap between school and national averages is closed in all key stages. However, the need to restructure the leadership team to address the problem of lack of leadership in the mathematics department, at least in the short term, was undertaken quickly and with imagination, and already appears to have had a positive impact on the quality of mathematics teaching. New leaders, appointed from within the school, have not had time to demonstrate their effectiveness, but there are a number of positive early indications that their work will bring about improvements, such as improving the quality of teaching, not just in mathematics but also science. Nevertheless, the senior team and the IEB, are acutely aware that recent initiatives have not yet increased the rate of student progress sufficiently for the school to be taken out of special measures. Without further interim support and successful recruitment of suitable staff to address the problems in mathematics, the school currently lacks sufficient leadership capacity to sustain its drive for improvement in the long term. The work of consultants continues to bring about improvements in weak subject areas.

Progress since the last visit on the areas for improvement:

- Improve the quality of leadership and management at all levels by ensuring robust and accurate self-evaluation leading to actions that improve outcomes for students – satisfactory

External support

The school continues to work productively with its key partners to improve outcomes and the quality of teaching. The work with local schools to identify better practices and share good ideas is gradually having a positive impact on the quality of teaching and use of assessment data. The SIP has worked effectively to help school leaders begin to focus more tightly on those key areas that require most improvement. Both he and the headteacher lament the fact that his link with the school will soon end. The local authority is committed to working with the school to bring about required improvements and is actively seeking ways to address the short-fall in capacity at leadership level to ensure current initiatives are sustainable in the long-run.

Priorities for further improvement

- Improve further the consistency of tracking students' achievement across the school, including the sixth form, so that their rate of progress can be evaluated, and acted upon, more effectively.