

Tribal Group
1-4 Portland
Square
Bristol
BS2 8RR
T 0845 123 6001
F 0845 123 6002

T 08456 40 40 40
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.ofsted.gov.uk



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

Dear Mr Sweeney

Special measures: monitoring inspection of The Priory School

Following my visit with Charles Hackett, Additional Inspector, to your school on 15 and 16 December 2008, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector to confirm the inspection findings.

The visit was the fifth 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 – inadequate.

Progress since previous monitoring inspection – inadequate.

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 the Children and Young People's Directorate.

Yours sincerely

Sarah Mascall
Additional Inspector

Special measures: monitoring of The Priory School

Report from the fifth monitoring inspection on 15 and 16 December 2008

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents, and met with the headteacher, senior management team, staff and the chair of governors. A telephone discussion was held with the Director of Education and there were meetings with a representative from the local authority. Discussions were held with a small group of pupils. During the week of the inspection pupils were off timetable and there were no lessons in school. Activities within school were observed and pupils' work scrutinised.

Context

There has been considerable disruption to staffing due to illness throughout the autumn term and this has had a major impact on the school's ability to build on the good progress from the previous monitoring inspection.

A mathematics teacher has been appointed on a temporary basis until the end of July 2009.

Achievement and standards

There has been a deterioration in attendance for a number of pupils this term, both to school and in lessons. This, added to the high number of fixed term exclusions throughout the autumn term, has prevented pupils from making the progress they should. As a result, the overall achievement and progress of pupils are no longer secure.

For those pupils who attend school and lessons regularly, progress is satisfactory and in some subjects it is good. The best progress is evident in English, information and communication technology (ICT), art, food technology and physical education (PE). However, in mathematics pupils' progress is inadequate because there have been considerable changes to staffing over the last year. The recent temporary appointment of a specialist mathematics teacher is beginning to have a positive impact on pupils' progress in lessons but it is too early to judge its long term impact. In science, poor quality assessments in the past have made it difficult to judge pupils' progress. Good quality support from the local authority is beginning to have a positive impact on teaching strategies and the assessment of pupils' progress, but at this stage it is too early to assess the long term outcomes of this intervention.

In other subjects teachers' assessment of pupils' work has improved and this means teachers are far better at recording the progress being made. This has led to a better understanding of the levels pupils are working at, but teachers are not yet using this information to set challenging targets for pupils. Good practice exists, such

as in mathematics where targets are linked to specific skills, for example in improving their multiplication and division skills. However, even these targets are too broad and are not easily measured to check on pupils' success in meeting the targets.

Progress since the last visit on the areas for improvement:

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

Personal development and well-being

Behaviour has deteriorated since the last monitoring inspection and, as a result, staff and pupils are often put in vulnerable situations. The new behaviour systems established last term, which were valued by the pupils at that time, have not been robust enough to support new pupils in improving their behaviour. Staff have been inconsistent in their use of the behaviour strategies and poor behaviour has not been adequately dealt with. There has been a high number of violent and aggressive incidents across the school which has led, in part, to the high number of fixed term exclusions. There is insufficient monitoring of incidents to enable the school to take effective action to help pupils improve. The school has not analysed sufficiently the incidents of behaviour or considered whether the actions it has taken are appropriate. In discussions pupils say they like school, but this is not reflected in their attendance. Over half the pupils attend less than 80% and this, together with the high number of exclusions, is preventing pupils from making progress in their learning.

Pupils say they feel safe in school but staff are aware that there is an issue with bullying and evidence during the inspection and the school's own records show that this is still a problem. Pupils are aware of the newly established incident 'resolution' system and, in some cases, have responded to this, for example in apologising where they have been involved in intimidating a younger pupil. The school though has not followed through these incidents to ensure that the situation has been resolved on a long term basis.

Progress since the last visit on the areas for improvement:

- 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 – inadequate.

Quality of provision

Teaching has improved since the inspection in December 2006. There is a better understanding of pupils' levels of attainment and what needs to be done to enable pupils to make progress. In some subjects, such as art and ICT, teachers use their subject knowledge well to make activities interesting and encourage pupils to develop their skills in a systematic way. Relationships with pupils in some subjects are very good and this is particularly evident in design and technology and food

technology. There are high expectations of pupils in these subjects both in terms of their behaviour and what they are expected to achieve. In food technology in particular, staff work well in promoting pupils' literacy skills. Evidence in pupils' work shows that literacy across the curriculum is developing in a number of subjects. For example, in science there are improved expectations that pupils will write in detail about the experiments they have completed.

Whilst there are examples of high expectations across the school these are not consistent and too many pupils are refusing to work in lessons. Teachers are not managing behaviour sufficiently well or ensuring their lessons are planned well enough to hold pupils' interest and so enable them to learn. Where activities during the inspection were organised and pupils had an understanding of what they would achieve, such as in food technology and art, behaviour was good and pupils achieved the tasks set. In other activities where the class was not organised beforehand or the outcomes were not made clear, pupils reacted negatively and behaviour was poor.

The curriculum is being developed and planning for Years 10 and 11 is better focused on the needs of each individual pupil. The improved opportunities for pupils to attend college and to be involved in work experience are enabling them to develop a better understanding of life at college. Although they are requiring considerable support, many pupils are beginning to adapt to the expectations of the college. Regular attendance at college has only been in place this term and it is too early to be sure of its impact on students' learning and behaviour. The curriculum for those pupils in Years 7, 8 and 9 is still an area for development and this is recognised by the school. Planning is not yet sufficiently focused on the needs of the individual pupils. Although at a very early stage, staff are beginning to work together to develop a more themed approach to their teaching. For example the art, ICT and music teachers are looking at working on a project together. Equally, the food technology and design and technology staff are looking to combine their skills to provide a BTEC course for pupils. Pupils are now having planned lessons in personal, social and health education which is aimed at supporting their personal development in a range of skills. It is too early to be secure of its impact on learning. A new intervention programme to support pupils' literacy skills is to be established next term. This has been planned well and involves senior staff working with individuals two mornings a week.

There are a number of appropriate systems in place to support pupils' health and safety. They are not having a positive impact because senior staff responsible for behaviour and attendance are not monitoring them sufficiently well or taking effective action to bring about improvements. This term the recording of incidents of challenging behaviour and the use of physical restraints are not always being completed properly and this is a cause for considerable concern. The lack of monitoring means that incidents have not been followed through or analysed to see how they can be avoided next time. Equally, staff and pupils do not receive sufficient opportunities for counselling and support after being involved in such incidents.

The school does not have individual behaviour programmes for pupils causing concern. This prevents staff from having a clear understanding of the strategies that need to be used to support them effectively or how to measure the progress pupils are making in their behaviour. Individual education plans are being reviewed with the aim of being better focused on each individual and to ensure targets within them are smarter and more easily measured.

The use of exclusions this term has not brought about improvements in behaviour and records show that it is often the same pupils who are excluded. There is a lack of clarity concerning when exclusion should be used. The reasons recorded for the exclusions that have been given often lack detail. In addition, the agreed systems to support pupils' return to school after exclusion are not always followed through.

There are links with other agencies and meetings to support pupils and families where attendance to school is an issue. In a few cases this has supported pupils in improving their attendance. The local authority carried out an audit of attendance recently and this raised a number of concerns. Evidence during the inspection confirms these concerns. Insufficient information is recorded to show where pupils are throughout the day, including whether they attend lessons or not. The completing of registers and the monitoring of pupils both on and off the site is poor.

Systems for child protection are in place. A programme for staff training has been established, but it is of concern that not all staff have been trained on a regular basis and some staff have not had updated training for over four years. All staff have been trained in an approved approach for physically restraining pupils, although the school does not have an accurate record of who has completed training and when training needs to be updated next.

The flaws in the systems to improve and support pupils' behaviour are putting both pupils and staff at risk. This has been raised with the school and the local authority.

Progress since the last visit on the areas for improvement:

- improve the quality of teaching and learning so that pupils enjoy lessons and come to school more regularly – inadequate.

Leadership and management

Leadership and management have not been effective in maintaining the good progress identified in the last monitoring inspection. The impact of a high number of staff absences during the term has had a negative impact on the school's ability to move forward. This is recognised by senior staff who have had to cover staff absence. Good team work still exists and in some aspects of the school, such as the drive to improve the curriculum and developed college links, management has been effective. Subject managers are more confident in their roles and have a better understanding about the use of the data they are gathering and the need to tackle progress more effectively.

Senior staff have not been effective in ensuring that the systems in place to manage the school are rigorous and robust enough to ensure staff and pupils' safety. Leaders have not been proactive enough in analysing why systems are not working, for example those for the management of behaviour, in order to make effective adaptations and bring about positive changes. The monitoring of incidents, and taking effective action to reduce their occurrence, has not been given sufficient attention.

Despite the local authority's support of leadership and management, the strategic leadership of the school is still an area of weakness. Self-evaluation processes are inadequate and are not enabling leaders to have a clear picture of the school's strengths and weaknesses. Systems to monitor aspects of the school's provision, such as teaching and achievement, have enabled the school to have a good range of data. However, leadership has not analysed this effectively to enable it to bring about improvements. As a result, the key issues as highlighted in the inspection in 2006 have not been adequately addressed.

Progress since the last visit on the areas for improvement:

- improve the way the school is led and managed by sharing responsibilities more widely and implementing clear systems for monitoring the school's work – inadequate.

External support

The local authority continues to provide a very good level of support, particularly in the areas of science, mathematics and assessment. It has listened closely to the school's concerns. For example, having reduced the number of referrals last year, the authority agreed to stagger the number of new pupils starting at the school. It has acted quickly where there are concerns, such as by carrying out an attendance audit that rightly highlighted a number of concerns.

Staff and governors have not been given a clear view of the school's future within the local authority. This is obviously a cause for concern for staff and led to insecurity about their future.

Priorities for further improvement

- As a matter of urgency take effective measures to ensure the safety of all staff and pupils by improving the recording and monitoring of incidents and the action taken to reduce such incidents.
- Ensure that all staff are trained in child protection procedures as soon as possible and maintain staff training records to ensure that essential training is carried out on a regular basis.