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Mr Tarun Kapur CBE
Executive Headteacher and National Leader of Education
Parrs Wood High School
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Dear Mr Kapur

Special measures: monitoring inspection of Parrs Wood High School

Following my visit with Julie Price Grimshaw, Denise Shields, Ian Thompson, and Judith Tolley, Additional Inspectors, to your school on 3 and 4 June 2009, 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 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

The school has permission to appoint up to four newly qualified teachers with effect from 1 September 2009. One newly qualified teacher may be appointed in each of the departments of information and communication technology (ICT), mathematics, technology and psychology.

I am copying this letter and the monitoring inspection report to the Secretary of State, the chair of the interim executive board (IEB) and the Director of Children's Services for Manchester City Council.

Yours sincerely

Michael McIlroy
Her Majesty's Inspector

Special measures: monitoring inspection of Parris Wood High School

Report from the fourth monitoring inspection on 3 and 4 June 2009

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the executive headteacher, nominated staff, two groups of students, the chair of the IEB, a representative of the local authority and the parent champion. A telephone call was held with a senior officer of the local authority who is also a member of the IEB. Inspectors observed 40 lessons during the inspection and visited a number of tutorial sessions.

Context

Since the last monitoring visit, three teachers have left the school and two have joined it. A range of national examinations was being undertaken by older students during the monitoring visit and inspectors were, therefore, unable to observe teaching in Years 11, 12 and 13.

Achievement and standards

The drive to raise achievement and standards remains at the heart of all the school does. Data produced by rigorous analysis of students' performance enable staff to set targets for individual students and to identify potential underachievement at an early stage so that prompt remedial action can be taken. Accountability for performance is now clear at all levels of management so that it is possible to monitor performance in all subjects. Consequently, the school is able to demonstrate that the satisfactory improvement in standards, for example, in English, mathematics and science, identified at the time of the last monitoring visit, continues. Screenings and half termly reviews enable staff and students to assess progress. Nevertheless, although the majority of students know their overall targets in relation to national tests and examinations, many are still not sufficiently clear about the next specific steps they need to take to improve their work so that they may work at their full potential. The school's analysis shows that the great majority of students at all key stages are making satisfactory progress and working at or above its ambitious and aspirational targets and are continuing to catch up on past underachievement. Results in GCSE examinations are predicted to continue the trend of recent improvement, meeting targets and adding to the 64% of A* to C passes already attained in English for 2009.

Progress since the last visit on the area for improvement:

- raise standards and achievement, especially in Key Stage 3 and in English and mathematics – satisfactory

Personal development and well-being

Students' behaviour in and around the school building is satisfactory. Students state that behaviour is improving. There is a high level of staff presence at break and lunchtimes. In lessons observed, where teaching is stronger and students are fully engaged by their learning, behaviour is good. However, where behaviour deteriorates or there is low-level disruption it is usually because work is not matched accurately enough to students' needs or capabilities so that they are not sufficiently challenged or engaged by activities. The behaviour policy that enables incidents in lessons to be dealt with quickly is now applied more consistently. Students themselves say that this has decreased the amount of disruption in lessons significantly. As a result, incidents of poor behaviour and fixed-term exclusions for this academic year have decreased. Teachers use the reward system consistently and students respond positively to this. Attitudes towards learning are generally good. In most lessons, students settle quickly, listen carefully and usually remain on task. When they are given the opportunity to work collaboratively to explore ideas for themselves they usually do so sensibly and organise themselves well.

Students say that they are not always clear about the relevance of the activities that take place in tutorial sessions. The school recognises this and has begun to improve the content of the tutorial period to better contribute to students' personal development. This is at the very early stages of development and it is too early to see any impact.

Attendance is broadly in line with national figures and similar to the previous school year. It continues to be above target in Year 7, but remains weakest in Year 11. However, for most year groups, rates of attendance have improved slightly. As a result of the support the school provides for individual students and the links that have been established between home and school, the number of persistent non-attenders has decreased considerably and relationships between students and adults have improved. Procedures to improve students' punctuality are proving successful, but there remains a lack of urgency amongst some students in arriving at school on time or in moving from one lesson to the next. The school acknowledges that there is still work to do in this area. Students say that their views are not always taken into account and that they would like to play a fuller role in decision making in the school. The school has appropriate plans in place to strengthen the role of the Student Voice from the start of the new academic year.

Quality of provision

The proportion of good or better teaching is broadly the same as that observed during the previous monitoring visit. However, within this, the proportion of outstanding teaching has slightly improved. Although inadequate teaching was observed, the proportion of this has reduced since the previous visit. Nevertheless, teaching currently is not consistently strong enough throughout the school to ensure that all students reach their full potential.

The school has continued to expend much effort on sharing the best practice in teaching and on encouraging teachers' professional development. The vast majority of staff readily accepts these opportunities to extend their professional skills. Many speak highly about the positive impact this has had on their classroom practice, for example, in ways to involve students in assessing the progress they have made in lessons. Training programmes to aid staff to reflect on their practice and gain a clear understanding of the features of good teaching are ongoing. However, these initiatives do not include a strong enough focus on the features of good learning and the progress that students make. Since the previous monitoring visit the school has improved the quality of marking. There is now a clear whole-school marking policy that most teachers follow. In the best examples, lucid points and guidance to help students to improve their work are consistent features. The measures the school introduced at the time of the previous visit to tackle low-level disruption in some lessons have generally been successful. Most students have positive attitudes to their learning, remain focused on their work and cooperate well with their teachers. However, there are still instances where this is not the case, particularly when teaching is weaker and fails to establish securely, a firm basis of classroom expectations. For instance, low-level and idle chatter, calling out and the chewing of sweets and gum were observed in several lessons. This off-task behaviour holds back the pace of learning.

Good or better lessons contain many strengths. Expectations of students' achievement and behaviour are very clear. Relationships are harmonious and humour is often used well. Praise and encouragement give students the confidence to tackle new tasks and to ask for help if they should need it. Lessons are challenging, the pace is lively and work is generally well matched to the needs and abilities of students. Teachers' questioning skilfully deepens and extends students' knowledge and understanding, and a good range of activities, including working in pairs and groups is used. As a consequence, students make good and sometimes more rapid progress. However, not all teaching is at this level. Too often it is not made clear to students what they are to learn, tasks are not sufficiently well explained and teachers do not check that students have fully understood key concepts. The skills of support staff are not always fully exploited to bring about, for example, prompt starts to lessons. As a result, the pace of learning slows. Lessons are mostly well planned and a consistent format for daily planning is now used by all staff. However, work is often not precisely tailored to meet the full range of students' needs and abilities. For example, there is scope to challenge and extend further the skills and knowledge of more capable students so that when they complete a task early, they do not have to wait until their classmates catch up. The less-able students and those with learning difficulties/and or disabilities are generally well supported by adults. However, work is often at a similar level to the rest of the class and frequently too hard for these students to tackle. As a consequence, they lose interest, drift off task and their progress slows. In inadequate lessons, expectations of what students can achieve are low, tasks are undemanding, not

clearly explained and guidance is not effective. In these instances, students achieve very little.

The school continues to make good progress in improving the quality of the curriculum. Senior staff have worked effectively to develop and extend recent initiatives. For example, there are now firm arrangements in place to enable Year 9 students to follow a number of BTEC courses from September 2009. All Year 9 students will undertake the e-media course, and some will be guided to follow programmes in performing arts and sports, depending on their individual strengths and needs. The Certificate of Personal Effectiveness course has been introduced for students in the 6th form and is being delivered through the tutorial programme. The school is extending curricular provision for gifted and talented students; this includes, for example, work with local primary schools, where 'masterclasses' are being provided for the most able pupils, enabling the school to begin tailoring provision for such individuals at an early stage. Although there has been a recent focus on extending the use of information and communication technology (ICT) across the curriculum, senior staff have rightly identified this as a priority for future development as its use in lessons is often limited. While the school is working hard to implement all of these initiatives, it is too early to judge their full impact. The school is developing its systems for providing academic guidance to students. There is evidence that the use of data, particularly at senior management level, is becoming increasingly effective. The school has produced detailed and helpful guidance for Year 9 students to support them in preparing for statutory tests in English, mathematics and science. Although target setting for individuals is becoming more widespread, many students are not yet aware of the next, small steps they need to take in their learning in order to improve.

Progress since the last visit on the areas for improvement:

- ensure that teaching and learning are good across the whole school – satisfactory
- provide a curriculum that fully meets the needs of all students, particularly at Key Stage 3 – good

Leadership and management

The inspiring, energetic and determined leadership of the executive headteacher has ensured that the school continues to make satisfactory progress overall. Having assembled an enthusiastic and dynamic senior leadership team, he is now finalising carefully the middle tier of management. A number of new managers have been appointed for the new academic year and some have already taken up their role. The high expectations of the executive headteacher and senior leaders, and their determination not to accept second best, are reflected in the rigour with which middle managers and other new staff have been recruited. A new teaching structure has been put in place and most of these posts have been filled. The robust process for appointing staff to these positions, coupled with appropriately revised job

descriptions, has streamlined line management, clarified the responsibilities of staff and increased teachers' accountability. This rationalisation of roles has also accrued useful savings to the school budget. The morale of staff has remained high during this period of change.

Previously identified weaknesses in teaching are being vigorously tackled. A number of local and national initiatives have been accessed to improve the quality of teaching. One has focused on developing teachers' understanding of assessment procedures and the initial benefits of this can be seen in how some students' work is marked. Recently, the school has designed and launched its own specifically tailored training programme that aims to improve the impact of individual teachers on the progress made by students. A policy for this has been drawn up and has been distributed to heads of faculties. It is, however, too early to judge the full impact of these programmes on the overall quality of teaching. The executive headteacher rightly ensures that a good balance is struck between staff participation in these programmes and the need to maintain continuity of learning for students.

The school has made satisfactory progress in improving the effectiveness of tutorial times, which was an additional priority identified at the last monitoring visit. Following training, staff have worked hard to improve successfully the management of students' behaviour during these sessions. Teachers' effectiveness in this regard is monitored regularly by the heads of learning. Teachers plan themes for these sessions together and new materials have been introduced for them. There is scope to review the quality and relevance of these materials. Suitable plans exist for this part of the students' day to be further refined in order to make more effective use of the time available for learning.

Appropriate training has been undertaken for senior staff about school self-evaluation. The school's current evaluation of its effectiveness is realistic, although overgenerous in some areas, such as the quality of teaching. The school's growing wealth of data is increasingly well used by key stage managers to plan the greater number of revision classes that are now being held. Greater use is now being made of nationally available data by subject leaders to analyse the comparative performance of their departments. Responsibility for the monitoring of teaching and learning has been extended to the directors of faculty and heads of departments. As well as monitoring planning and students' work, they have started to check the effectiveness of lessons, often with the support of senior managers. This is leading to a greater level of professional dialogue between middle and senior managers about teaching and where it needs to be improved. However, this process is not yet fully embedded or robust enough. Monitoring has largely focused on teaching rather than the progress which students make. Consequently, some assessments of the effectiveness of lessons are overgenerous. In other cases, not enough attention has been paid to ensuring that some key aspects of teaching, such as the application of school rules to help students make good progress, are consistently applied. A whole-school review by external consultants of the effectiveness of teaching and learning, where these issues can be followed up, is usefully planned for the near future.

A number of effective steps have been taken to improve behaviour, which are much appreciated by students. The number of referral rooms in which students whose behaviour falls below teachers' expectations can be separately taught in, has been increased. This has contributed to a decline in detentions. Year groups, in which behaviour is a cause for concern, are closely monitored by senior staff. Teachers released from their normal timetabled commitments because of national examinations have been usefully deployed to provide extra support in a number of these classes. Staff briefings now include a weekly theme, where teachers are reminded to focus on particular aspects of behaviour management and teaching. There is scope for the school to monitor more closely how well and how consistently these foci are being fully implemented.

The school has developed a number of new approaches to promote its main specialism of technology across the curriculum. A series of 'immersion days' are planned to support students in exploring aspects of subjects through themed work. The first of these days, due to take place next term, will be led by the technology faculty, with the aim of promoting development of technological, creative and design skills across a range of subjects. Staff are being supported in this initiative through appropriate training. However, the impact of this specialism on raising standards across the school remains limited. The school's second specialism in the expressive and performing arts continues to work closely with local primary schools.

The IEB has developed further its role as a critical friend to the school. Its members, along with the parent champion, have made a number of visits to observe the school's work. Their findings have been discussed with the headteacher. The IEB oversees the senior leadership team, more of whom are now invited to attend and contribute to meetings of the IEB. Its members have participated in the appointment of staff and in the school's behaviour and attendance panel. The parent champion has carried out valuable liaison work; she hosts a termly meeting for parents where concerns can be raised and has represented parents' views in meetings with senior managers and the IEB. Over the past year, there has been a significant reduction in parents' concerns as reported to the parent champion, and there is evidence of increasing confidence in the school amongst the local community.

Progress since the last visit on the area for improvement:

- improve leadership and management at all levels to ensure that provision is at least good in all areas – satisfactory

External support

The local authority continues to provide good support for the school. The school has drawn extensively on its personnel and legal services. Training has been provided by local authority consultants on assessment and on materials that can be used to extend pupils' personal and social development. Assistance has been provided in the drawing up of the new policy aimed at improving learning and a consultant has provided advice to the ICT department. A senior officer of the local authority visits

regularly to monitor and discuss the school's progress. The school improvement partner visits the school each term and provides detailed reports on the school's progress. The school continues to work well with its two partner schools, using them to develop teachers' pedagogical and coaching skills. There are apt plans to involve senior leaders of both schools in the planned review of the school's work. Good use is being made of an external consultant to develop senior leaders' understanding of the school self-evaluation process. The school has also accessed considerable funds from the Greater Manchester Challenge initiative which have been used to facilitate training provided by consultants.

Priorities for further improvement

- Ensure that monitoring focuses more sharply on the progress made by students in lessons.
- Ensure that work is more effectively matched to students' different needs and abilities.