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Mrs Shelagh Bainbridge
Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Bainbridge

Special measures: monitoring inspection of West Cumbria Learning Centre

Following my visit with Tanya Harber Stuart HMI to your school on 24-25 March 2009, 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 June 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

Newly qualified teachers may not be appointed.

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.

Yours sincerely

Eric Craven
H M Inspector

Special measures: monitoring of West Cumbria Learning Centre

Report from the second monitoring inspection on 24-25 March 2009

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the executive headteacher, three teachers, a group of five pupils, the chair of the management committee, two representatives from the local authority (LA). A telephone conversation was held with the centre's school improvement partner. Visits were also made to two external providers of vocational education to see pupils at their placements.

Context

The LA advertised for a substantive headteacher for the centre but was unable to draw up a short-list from the applications received. However, they have subsequently appointed a secondary headteacher from within the LA to take on the headteacher's role from September 2009. Until then the executive headteacher will remain in post as acting headteacher. The deputy headteacher remains absent. Management and leadership support for the acting headteacher has been gained by the temporary part-time appointment of an experienced special educational needs co-ordinator. The post of co-ordinator for English is to be advertised for appointment from September 2009. The centre's roll has risen from 29 to 39 pupils since December 2008.

Achievement and standards

The centre is in a better position to promote pupils' learning because systems to manage behaviour are bearing fruit. As a consequence, poor behaviour is inhibiting learning much less than at the centre's last inspection in June 2008. More pupils want to learn.

Re-assessments of pupils, who were at the centre for the first round of assessments in the autumn term 2008, show that they are making sound progress. The number of pupils who have been entered for examinations is much increased and encouragingly 11 pupils have gained the Entry Level 1 qualification in literacy and numeracy and five have gained Entry Level 2 in these subjects this academic year.

The centre has established procedures to formally assess each pupil in English, mathematics, spelling and reading. Target grades for Entry Level English and mathematics and GCSE mathematics, art, graphics and resistant materials have been set for all pupils in Year 11. For the few pupils who previously had spelling assessments these show that they are making progress and for one pupil progress is excellent.

Observations undertaken by inspectors show that progress in lessons remains variable and closely mirrors the quality of teaching.

Progress since the last visit on the areas for improvement:

- Improve older pupils' achievement – satisfactory

Personal development and well-being

The behaviour of most of the pupils who attend regularly is improving because staff are becoming more consistent in the application of the centre's rewards and sanctions and because pupils are starting to value the improving education they are receiving. The number of serious misdemeanours is reducing. The centre's records show the number of fixed-term exclusions is falling. In the autumn term 2008 there were 30 incidents resulting in 55 days of fixed-term exclusion. However, in the spring term 2009 to date there have been 12 incidents and 15 days lost to exclusion. The number of serious incidents of challenging behaviour that have required the use of physical restraint are also reducing, from 87 in 2007/08 to 13 so far in 2008/09. However, the centre's other measures of changes in behaviour paint a more mixed picture with the number of pupil detentions each month since September 2008 fluctuating and not showing a downward trend. Equally, the number of times pupils have been required to work in isolation as a result of behaviour problems has also fluctuated month on month from September 2008.

The behaviour of a few pupils in some lessons remains fragile. Too easily they disregard the requests teachers make of them particularly when teachers do not rigorously and consistently apply the agreed systems for managing behaviour. Having said this, more pupils are learning to comply with the requests staff make of them and are able to control their behaviour. The school's helpful system of having behaviour targets for each pupil, and making these prominent in lessons, is making a positive contribution to the pupils' appreciation of what is expected and how they should behave.

The pupils interviewed were very positive about the centre and the changes they have seen. They feel that lessons are more interesting especially when they are made practical. They were all extremely clear about the centre's rules, sanctions and rewards and they appreciated the clarity of expectation that come with these. All five said they want to attend the centre.

The overall rate of attendance remains stubbornly positioned at about 70%. However, this masks a more complex profile of attendance. There are four pupils whose attendance is very poor and below 25% and in this small establishment this draws down the overall rate of attendance disproportionately. The centre is working earnestly to try and shift the rate of attendance of each of these pupils but mainly because of their intransigent, negative views of education this is proving difficult. The rate of attendance excluding these four pupils is 77%. Rightly, attendance

remains a high priority for the centre. The LA has authorised funding for an attendance officer to be based at the centre to give the acting headteacher further capacity in her efforts to improve attendance. There have been successes in improving the attendance of other pupils and notably five pupils who have been inducted into the centre since the last monitoring inspection have attendance rates to date of 100%. Examples like this are beginning to demonstrate that pupils value what is being provided for them and they want to attend.

Progress since the last visit on the areas for improvement:

- Raise the level of attendance and improve pupils' behaviour - satisfactory

Quality of provision

Lesson planning and the preparation of resources for lessons are now well established practices. Relationships between staff and pupils are good and most pupils are respectful and show they are willing to listen and learn for most of the time.

In the one outstanding lesson seen, good planning meant that the activities set for the pupils were appropriately challenging, imaginative and stimulating. There was a swift pace to the lesson which contributed to the pupils appreciating they were experiencing something vibrant. The teacher helped them understand exactly what it was they were going to learn and her high expectations resulted in pupils learning rapidly and producing an impressive amount of written work. The vigilance of the teacher meant any emerging behaviour problems were extinguished immediately with just a look or an appropriate word. Few lessons are of this high quality yet but encouragingly it is also rare that a lesson is inadequate. The judgment made by the LA at its recent monitoring visit was that the quality of teaching overall is satisfactory. This is also the view of inspectors. The improved quality of teaching and learning observed at the last monitoring inspection has been consolidated and is being successfully built upon. The management of behaviour in lessons has become more consistent with references to rewards and sanctions being judiciously made during lessons to keep pupils on track. As a result, teachers have been able to concentrate on the quality of their teaching and pupils' learning. Nevertheless, there remains a lack of forthrightness in dealing with troublesome pupils in some lessons. Objectives are invariably used at the outset of lessons but there is more scope for teachers to include individual curriculum targets for pupils given that the numbers of pupils in lessons are often low. The scene is being helpfully set for these developments through training staff are receiving on the assessment of pupils in lessons and now that all pupils have termly English and mathematics' targets in their individual education plans. On occasion when there is only one pupil in a lesson, both the teacher and the teaching assistant work together with the pupil. This can sometimes restrict the encouragement of independence and can disturb the flow and

pace of the lesson. Plans should be put in place to prepare for these occurrences so that staff have clarity on what their roles are when this happens.

There is an increased range of qualifications that pupils can achieve and they are all now able to leave the centre with external awards. Although there is no overall curriculum coordinator, staff are working together to introduce projects that are meaningful for the pupils and also facilitate the teaching of different subjects and accreditation. Gardening projects, for example, are being used to teach aspects of the science curriculum and outdoor education is being used as a vehicle to cover aspects of the physical education and personal, social and health education programme. The centre's 'enrichment' programme, which is primarily designed to contribute to personal and social development, is valued by the pupils. It too makes a contribution to the external awards pupils can achieve particularly in key skills such as communication.

The centre's pastoral support arrangements have been advanced through the introduction of 'contact staff', who are key workers for pupils. These staff take a lead in communications with parents and other professionals. Pupils' individual education plans have been helpfully revised to include targets for English, mathematics, behaviour and attendance. However, they are yet to be reviewed so their impact is still unknown. Following training from the LA all staff are clear about the application of special educational needs procedures. There is a register for pupils with additional needs and reviews for all pupils with special educational needs are set for the year ahead. There are good induction arrangements for new pupils who are helped to settle at the centre well.

Progress since the last visit on the areas for improvement:

- Ensure that pupils with statements of special educational need have access to their statutory entitlements – satisfactory
- Improve the quality of teaching and learning – satisfactory

Leadership and management

Three of the four priorities for further improvement identified at the last monitoring inspection have been tackled well. A single central record of recruitment and vetting checks has been compiled in accordance with requirements. The mislaid book that records incidents requiring restraint has been found and is being used effectively. The centre's improvement plan has been improved and includes a series of milestone targets, many of which are helpful measures of outcomes for pupils. Some work has been done to prepare plans to increase the attendance of those pupils who do not currently access full-time education. However, these need to be more rigorously maintained so that they can show how these pupils are being re-engaged with education.

The acting headteacher has the support of staff who value the lead and direction she has given. Staff are working as a team and share the aspirations the acting headteacher has for the centre. Morale is much improved and they are seeing the positive difference they can make for pupils. Data are being gathered and some evaluations of these are undertaken to gauge the success of actions and initiatives. LA staff have taken the lead in monitoring the quality of teaching and learning and are now embarking on a training programme for staff so that responsibility for this work can be moved to the acting headteacher and other staff. Some of the training for teachers has usefully emanated from the results of lesson observations and there are early signs that this is improving teachers' practice. For example, the starts of lessons and the use of targets have been improved.

There is effective and frequent communication between the centre and alternative education providers and the acting headteacher is using a variety of means to check on the suitability of these placements for pupils. Teachers are rising to the challenge of taking responsibility for subjects and they are benefiting from the links some of them have with the LA's subject consultants. The acting headteacher has made good in-roads into building relationships with pupils' families. She has personally met with 32 of the 39 pupils' parents and carers. Communication has been enhanced significantly with the introduction of student reports. These cover each subject the pupils study and an include overview of progress from the pupils' 'contact teacher'. Postcards are sent home to inform a pupils' family of particularly good work or behaviour. 159 of these have been sent since October 2008. In addition the centre has introduced a regular newsletter. As a consequence of these positive changes, parents and carers are much better informed.

The management committee membership has been extended further with a representative from Connexions. The chair of the management committee reports that attendance and engagement at meetings has improved and that the relevant experiences of members are being used well to help the committee develop its knowledge base. The chair meets with the acting headteacher prior to committee meetings and this briefing is useful in aiding the efficient running of meetings. The committee has begun to explore how members might be linked with subject co-ordinators to be further informed about progress being made.

Progress since the last visit on the areas for improvement:

- Improve the effectiveness of leadership and management at all levels – satisfactory

External support

The wide ranging support from the LA is well received by the centre and greatly valued by the acting headteacher. The LA's subject consultants together have a co-ordinated plan of action that is promoting improvements to the quality of teaching and learning. The LA is well informed about the progress being made and areas

needing particular attention through its regular 'school specific monitoring group meetings'. These result in action points and the engagement of other appropriate officers from the LA to support the centre with particular issues such as personnel matters. The acting headteacher is receiving valuable support from the centre's school improvement officer. The LA's statement of support for the centre has recently been reviewed to ensure that the planned actions are making a positive difference. The centre's school improvement partner (SIP) has made a recent visit to the centre. However, the acting headteacher is very unclear about two of the priorities for attention from the visit. She and the LA are to clarify this situation.