

## PROTECT - INSPECTION

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Mrs Shelagh Bainbridge  
Executive Headteacher  
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Dear Mrs Bainbridge

Special measures: monitoring inspection of West Cumbria Learning Centre

Following my visit with Frank Norris HMI to your school on 24 -25 June 2009, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector to confirm the inspection findings.

The visit was the third 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 June 2009

## Evidence

Inspectors observed the centre's work, scrutinised documents and met with the executive headteacher and acting headteacher, a small group of teachers, administrative staff, two groups of pupils, a group of six parents, the chair of the management committee, two representatives from the local authority and had a telephone conversation with the centre's school improvement partner. Visits were also made to three external providers of vocational education to see pupils at their placements.

## Context

At the last monitoring inspection the local authority had arranged for a secondary headteacher to take on the headteacher's role from September 2009. The person appointed subsequently decided not to take up this position. However, an independent education consultant has been contracted from 1 June 2009 as acting headteacher and will work with the executive headteacher until January 2010 when the local authority hopes to have appointed a substantive headteacher. An attendance officer has recently begun working at the centre for 16 hours a week. The deputy headteacher remains absent. The advertised post of coordinator for English attracted no applications. The post is being re-advertised and the job description revised in order to attract more interest. The centre's roll has risen to 41 pupils. On the first day of the monitoring inspection 10 pupils were off-site at a football tournament and four were on a trip to Blackpool as a reward from Connexions for their successful efforts in examinations.

## Achievement and standards

Increasingly more pupils are gaining external accreditation as they begin to value the awards they can achieve. More are willing and ready to sit examinations as they prove to themselves they can succeed. The executive headteacher reports that in 2007/08 no pupils sat examinations. This year eight pupils have taken GCSE mathematics, six have taken GCSE art and five have taken GCSE graphics and resistant materials respectively. The results of the examinations are as yet unknown; the centre has predicted that because of their troubled educational histories and underachievement pupils will achieve below the standards expected nationally although all should gain a GCSE award. For the first time pupils from Key Stage 2 have sat the national end of key stage tests in English and mathematics although, as with the GCSE examinations, predictions are that they will not attain the expected level 4 or above. The range of external accreditation available to pupils has expanded. In addition to GCSE entry level awards, ASDAN, the Duke of Edinburgh Award Scheme and the John Muir Award for environmental studies provide opportunities for pupils to gain accreditation.

The progress pupils are making is being tracked by regular National Curriculum level assessments in English and mathematics. These data show that in English about a third of the pupils in Key Stage 3 have made more than the nationally expected rate of progress over the last year. However, too many pupils are still not making sufficient progress. In mathematics not quite as many pupils are making the rapid progress they are in English but overall more pupils are making some progress. The reason for this difference is that in English pupils are generally working at levels below those being achieved in mathematics and as they begin to achieve they make quicker progress through these earlier levels. The small number of pupils seen when visits were made to alternative providers on this monitoring inspection were making at least satisfactory progress because they were enjoying the appropriate vocational courses they were following.

Progress since the last visit on the area for improvement:

- Improve older pupils' achievement – satisfactory

### Personal development and well-being

The behaviour of pupils is continuing to improve. The atmosphere around the centre is calm and most pupils show good respect for staff and for each other. The actions taken by the centre to enforce consistent approaches to behaviour are bearing fruit and pupils and staff report positively about the impact of these changes. During the visit the centre's football team played in an important competition and reports from accompanying adults and staff from other schools were that the pupils behaved very well and were a credit to the centre. Despite the improvements that have been made in behaviour, some pupils continue to disrupt the learning of others and demonstrate very challenging behaviour in lessons. Staff are responding to this behaviour in a more measured way and this is ensuring that fewer cases escalate into more serious incidents. The number of occasions when serious incidents have occurred has dropped dramatically from 87 in 2007/08 to 14 in 2008/09. The number of detentions given to pupils has fluctuated during the last year but it represents an actual fall in the proportion of detentions per pupil due to the increase in the number of pupils taught at the centre. Fixed-term exclusions are falling in number and in the actual school days lost. The use of a 'calming down' area for pupils who are agitated or poorly behaved is increasing. This appears to be enabling pupils to return to class more quickly and avoids matters escalating so that fixed-term exclusions are now being used less frequently.

Behaviour during lessons is on the whole satisfactory. Pupils respond particularly well when lessons are carefully planned to meet their individual needs and good attention is given to their learning from previous lessons. This ensures that work planned for them is relevant to their personal needs and develops clearly identified weaknesses in their understanding and knowledge. When teachers give too little regard to assessing carefully recent work from pupils, the planning of future lessons

doesn't engage their interest sufficiently and they respond by showing disapproval in terms of calling out, talking over teachers and being disruptive.

The rate of attendance has risen slightly since the previous monitoring visit and is currently 71.1%. This overall figure hides considerable differences in the attendance rates of individual pupils. Four pupils have maintained full attendance in the last year and this is significantly improving their rate of progress. Eleven pupils continue to have poor rates of attendance (below 56%) despite the efforts of the centre to support their parents and carers and in offering flexible learning programmes. The centre uses local external provision to provide work-based opportunities to excite and interest them. Pupils on these programmes who spoke to inspectors were appreciative of the chance to learn relevant skills and the more relaxed atmosphere they provided. Some of the pupils were unable to recall the last time a member of staff from the centre visited them to ensure the programme they were following was actually meeting their specific needs. The centre explained that illness to a key member of staff prevented regular visiting for monitoring and evaluation purposes in the spring but plans were in place to undertake more regular visits in the future. The recording of attendance and punctuality of pupils following external courses was generally good but the arrangements for recording the late arrival of pupils and reporting rates of absence do not always match those followed at the centre. This makes it difficult for an effective evaluation of each programme in terms of how it impacts on pupils' attendance and punctuality. The appointment of an attendance officer for the centre provides scope for tackling these inconsistencies and for effectively checking on whether specific programmes are actually resulting in all pupils receiving 25 hours tuition each week.

Overall, the centre has had more success in tackling pupils' behaviour than it has in improving their attendance.

Progress since the last visit on the area for improvement:

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

### Quality of provision

Senior leaders have concentrated on ensuring that lesson planning is to an agreed format and the management of pupils' behaviour is consistent. Lessons observed were planned in accordance with requirements and pupils can see the common approaches teachers have, for example, in sharing lesson objectives and outcomes with pupils. Teachers have worked with the local authority's consultants and helpfully individual coaching plans are giving teachers a focus on those areas of their work that need development.

The executive headteacher reports that lesson observations undertaken by the local authority's consultants judge the quality of teaching and learning to be good overall. The judgment of the inspectors is that although the quality of teaching and learning

is improving it is not consistently at this standard. The centre's records show that lesson observations place too much emphasis on the quality of teaching rather than on the quality of pupil's learning. One of the reasons why the quality of teaching and learning is not yet consistently good is that teachers are yet to ensure that assessment consistently plays a full part in shaping lessons to individual pupil's needs. Assessment of the levels at which pupils are working, teachers' evaluations of pupils' responses to previous lessons and their responses to teachers' questioning are not being used sufficiently by all teachers to plan lessons that incorporate objectives that are matched closely enough to individual pupils' needs. Training for teachers on assessing pupils' progress is imminent.

The curriculum in Key Stage 2 and in Key Stage 3 is primarily geared toward pupils returning to secondary schools and to a large degree matches that found in mainstream schools. At Key Stage 3 it is enhanced by the introduction of key skills and the John Muir Trust Award which enables pupils to gain meaningful accreditation in environmental studies at three levels. A helpful move forward has been a review of information and communication technology (ICT) with help from the local authority's consultant for ICT. At Key Stage 4 the centre is planning to expand the scope for each pupil to have an individually compiled curriculum package that responds primarily to their needs and wishes whilst ensuring that functional English and mathematics are provided. These packages will draw upon centre-based programmes, part-time placements at college and placements at alternative vocational education providers.

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 – This was not a focus for this inspection. However, it will be considered at the next monitoring inspection.
- Improve the quality of teaching and learning – satisfactory

## Leadership and management

The appointment of a temporary headteacher has given more capacity to senior leadership and management of the centre as he and the executive headteacher are currently working together at the centre. The acting headteacher has made a good start in the short time he has been in post. He has a good grasp of the issues and is beginning to have an impact, for example, in providing opportunities for middle managers to contribute to whole centre developments. The executive headteacher continues to lead the centre with gusto, determination and a clear focus despite, until recently, having to operate as a lone senior leader. The recently published staff handbook epitomises how the centre's systems and structures have been reviewed and clarified to ensure the centre runs smoothly on a day to day basis.

Lesson observations have generally been undertaken by local authority consultants but, now that management capacity has been increased the acting headteacher will

take on the responsibility for monitoring teaching and learning, including assessment. There are already indications that the very recently appointed attendance officer is fully appraised of the issues contributing to the poor attendance of many students and the centre's procedures for recording and tackling absence. The centre's improvement plan has been revised and is a helpful map for the next year or so. The management committee is now in a better position to move forward in fulfilling its strategic role.

The influence of subject coordinators on their colleagues is uneven with the most influence being exercised in mathematics. However, the formation of teams of staff in each subject gives promise to the development of subject co-ordination.

The pupils interviewed were complimentary about the development of the centre. They cite the range of on-site and off-site activities and the improved choices they have as particularly noteworthy developments. The students are aware they have behaviour targets but say these are imposed rather than negotiated and as a consequence some had difficulty recalling them. The views of parents interviewed were very positive about the changes at the centre over the last six months or so. They were particularly impressed by improved communication and recognition of their value and feel more like partners in their children's education.

As the executive headteacher is to revert to her appointed role in September there is a danger that the acting headteacher will be a lone leader at the centre and there will be insufficient capacity to take the necessary next steps with the pace required. The local authority has recognised this danger and is working to ensure that the acting headteacher has management support.

Progress since the last visit on the areas for improvement:

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

### External support

The local authority's school improvement officer for the centre has an accurate view of the centre's development and needs. She has regular contact with the executive headteacher and with other local authority personnel who are working with staff. She is providing good support to the executive headteacher and valuable information to the school specific monitoring group which is checking on the centre's journey through special measures. Faced with a dilemma, when the headteacher appointed to take the reins at the centre from September 2009 withdrew, the local authority acted decisively to appoint an educational consultant with relevant experience so that management capacity could be increased quickly. The work of consultants for English, mathematics, science and ICT, led by the local authority's consultant for behaviour and attendance, has been effective and valued by staff. The executive headteacher has clarified the ambiguity surrounding two of the recommendations in an earlier report from the centre's school improvement partner.

## Priorities for further improvement

- Use assessment of pupil's progress consistently in lesson planning to set work and curriculum targets for pupils that are closely matched to their individual needs.
- Improve the monitoring of external providers.
- Apply more rigour to the plans to increase attendance, particularly for those pupils whose attendance is below 56%.