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26 January 2009

Ms Angela Wells
Headteacher
Buckingham School
London Road
Buckingham
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Dear Ms Wells

Special measures: monitoring inspection of Buckingham School

Following my visit with Michael Lafford, David Williams and Dr Norma Ball, Additional Inspectors, to your school on 14 and 15 January 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 March 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 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 and the monitoring inspection report to the Secretary of State, the chair of the Interim Executive Board (IEB) and the Divisional Manager, School Improvement for Buckinghamshire.

Yours sincerely

Ann Berger
Additional Inspector

Special measures: monitoring of Buckingham School

Report from the second monitoring inspection on 14 and 15 January 2009

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work; scrutinised documents; and met with the acting headteacher, associate headteacher, the chair of the IEB, representatives from the local authority, the school's National Challenge adviser, teachers, students and members of the senior leadership team.

Context

The school continues to experience considerable changes in the senior leadership team. Two interim deputy headteachers have recently taken up their posts and governance has transferred to an IEB. The first meeting of this group has just been held.

Achievement and standards

The proportion of students projected to achieve five A*–C grades including English and mathematics in summer 2009 is expected to show an increase on the results for 2008. Mock examinations and internal assessments for Year 11 provide further evidence to suggest that standards are rising. The school has additional information based on teachers' assessments that suggests a similar improvement in Year 10. The rise in standards is due in part to much higher levels of ambition which are evident in the targets set for pupils, alongside well-focused interventions for individuals, including mentoring and extra tuition. Students requiring additional support are accurately identified and overall the tracking and analysis of achievement is becoming more effective. This also allows teachers to set more appropriately challenging targets for improving students' work. Nevertheless, comparative information about the progress of the students across the whole range of subjects is less well analysed and therefore cannot be fully used to hold each department accountable for its work.

Adaptations to the curriculum in Years 10 and 11 have resulted in a significant increase in the number of students following vocational courses. This is also having a positive impact on the overall standards as students find the emphasis on the world of work motivating.

Progress since the last visit on the areas for improvement:

- raise standards and achievement for all students, especially in Years 10 and 11 – satisfactory
- make sure that all students get the support and advice they need to reach challenging targets – good

Personal development and well-being

Students have been more effectively engaged in helping the school to improve and good progress has been made since the last inspection in this area. Students commented very positively on this. They feel that their views are given greater value. One said, 'We now feel it's everyone's school.' Many are showing a greater pride in their school. In lessons the majority were engaged and positive in their attitudes, especially when given the chance to explain their views and discuss ideas.

Students conduct themselves well around the school and say that behaviour is better than a year ago. A few commented that in some lessons teachers were providing more interesting and challenging activities and that this helped them to concentrate.

Better use has been made of assemblies and tutor time to focus on improvement and to involve students in decisions about the future. The school council meetings have been strengthened by a recent 'student voice' conference. Students have responded enthusiastically to these opportunities. One said, 'We were proud that teachers took our ideas seriously.' The resulting action plans show insight and clarity about what else can be done to solve problems and improve the school community.

Quality of provision

Most teaching is at least satisfactory, though there is still a relatively small amount of inadequate teaching. The school is working well to increase the proportion of good or outstanding teaching. There is a greater focus on assessment and feedback to students alongside close support for staff to improve their practice. This has resulted in a higher proportion of interesting lessons that have clear, sharply focused learning objectives and suitable activities.

Senior leaders have driven with rigour and determination the revision of targets to increase the challenge for students. As a result, teachers are expecting more of their students in class. Students spoke very positively to inspectors about this. One commented, 'Staff go the extra mile for you. We know our targets and what we need to do in our work now to get better grades.'

The provision for students with special educational needs remains variable. The school makes good use of outside agencies to support students who may be vulnerable or in danger of exclusion. Managers have focused on improving the quality of support given and have refined procedures for monitoring its effectiveness. They have also made a start in strengthening the ability of staff to address the particular needs of students. However, there remains a lack of specialist teachers and focused intervention to ensure these pupils make the best progress possible. A comprehensive review of special needs provision is suitably scheduled to take place in the early part of this term.

Progress since the last visit on the areas for improvement:

- improve teaching and learning by ensuring that all teachers assess students' work more precisely and show them how to improve – satisfactory

Leadership and management

The leadership of the acting headteacher has had a significant impact since the previous monitoring visit. Staff morale is much improved and she has also gained the confidence of students. Her close working relationship with the associate headteacher has been very productive. Roles are carefully delineated and both have worked very hard to secure a stronger focus on raising standards through improving teaching. Together they set very high expectations and bring to the school a healthy combination of energy, drive and experience. The pace of change has been rapid and the capacity to continue to improve is good. Effective staff have been recruited and newly qualified teachers have been very well supported. The restructuring of the timetable has ensured that staff are well deployed and their strengths utilised more fully. A reasonable start has been made to agree an improved senior management structure for the school. However, the school has not yet focused sufficiently on developing a distinctive and unique vision that properly reflects the needs of its community. Nor has work begun on identifying the right leadership structure to ensure that the new senior team drives forward a new vision effectively. Good work has begun to review the curriculum and to organise teaching staff requirements for the next academic year but the full potential of this work cannot be realised without a clear view of the longer-term development of the school.

Curriculum leaders are increasingly more effective in many subjects. Particularly impressive has been their work to drive up the quality of teaching and learning through the leadership and management support group. This has been developed through a good external partnership. However, partnerships with other schools remain underdeveloped overall. Too much has to be created from scratch rather than through learning from how other schools have resolved similar issues.

The sports specialism continues to develop adequately. The head of physical education shows drive and enthusiasm and staff in that department have been used to showcase teaching strategies in morning briefings, which has helped other teachers to improve. The specialist staff have been involved in trying to improve the school's ethos through a personal challenge week for students planned for the near future. Evaluation of this event is not fully embedded in the planning.

Progress since the last visit on the areas for improvement:

- improve leadership and management so that plans for improvement are implemented quickly and effectively and evaluated more rigorously – satisfactory
- make further efforts to recruit and retain more teachers – good

External support

The local authority has ensured it has an up-to-date view of the school that is largely accurate and that support has been satisfactory. The local authority has established an IEB which has just begun to take up the reins. Work is about to start to agree on a vision and longer-term direction for the school. Local authority consultants have had a useful impact. Other external support to improve the quality of middle leadership on teaching and learning has made a significant impact, particularly on departments' approaches to assessment for learning. Other external consultants have been suitably deployed and are also making a difference to the teaching and learning in lessons.