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31 March 2009

Mr John O'Donnell
Headteacher
The Radcliffe School
Aylesbury Street West
Wolverton
Milton Keynes
MK12 5BT

Dear Mr O'Donnell

Special measures: monitoring inspection of The Radcliffe School

Following my visit to your school on 24 and 25 March 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 January 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 – good

This letter and monitoring inspection report will be posted on the Ofsted website.

I am copying this letter and the monitoring inspection report to the Secretary of State, the chair of the Interim Executive Board and the Group Director for School Improvement and Planning for Milton Keynes.

Yours sincerely

Peter Limm
Her Majesty's Inspector

Special measures: monitoring of The Radcliffe School

Report from the third monitoring inspection on 24 and 25 March 2009

Evidence

I observed the school's work; scrutinised documents; and met with the headteacher, key members of the senior leadership team, heads of house and middle managers, groups of students, the chair of the Interim Executive Board (IEB), a representative from the local authority and the school's national challenge adviser.

Context

Since the second monitoring visit, the school's leadership team and IEB have formally expressed interest in becoming an academy. Negotiations about this development are continuing. The school's decision to encourage its strongest teachers to work in the mathematics department to support the subject specialist has improved provision within the subject. This is a short-term plan and still leaves the school with the issue of longer-term sustainability of the improvements made so far, as well as remedying the temporarily reduced capacity of the senior leadership team. The school is applying capability procedures to address persistent inadequate teaching. The School Improvement Partner has been replaced by a national challenge adviser.

Achievement and standards

Actions taken by the school to address the underachievement evident at the time of the last inspection and previous monitoring visit are continuing to have a positive impact on improvement in standards and especially the rate of progress that students are making across the school. The school's calculations indicate that overall progress of students from Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 4 is improving at a faster rate compared to this time last year. The attainment of students on entry to the school remains below average but by the end of Key Stage 3 standards are broadly average and are rising quickly. The school's enhanced data about student performance demonstrate that standards attained by the current Year 11 are markedly better than those attained by Year 11 this time last year. The school's predictions, endorsed by the national challenge adviser, indicate that a higher proportion of students are expected to attain five A* to C grades in 2009 than was attained by Year 11 students in 2008. This is also the case for the proportion of students expected to attain five A* to C grades, including mathematics and English. The school has identified 68 students who are currently predicted to achieve a grade D in either English or mathematics and is working hard with them to enable as many as possible to attain a grade C. All groups of students are making better progress than in 2008, although Black African students are doing less well than other groups of students in the school. There is also a rise in the number of students predicted to attain five A* to G grades at GCSE. School predictions for Year 13 students continue to indicate further improvement for 2009 compared to results in 2008.

Progress since the last visit on areas for improvement:

- increase the rate of progress made by students in their work – good

Personal development and well-being

Although not a focus on this visit, personal development and well-being continue to be good. A large number of students were away from school on various school activities, for example the whole of Year 10 were away on work experience. Nevertheless, visits to each classroom indicated that relationships remain good and that the atmosphere in the school is very positive. Behaviour in lessons was good and students demonstrated good attitudes to learning. When interviewed, students said that they had noticed how teachers were even more determined to check on student progress and encourage students to attain or exceed their individual targets than at the last inspection. They all said that they enjoyed attending school, and felt that the majority of teachers taught them well and had continued to improve their marking. Students said they felt safe and that the few incidents of bullying were dealt with quickly and well by the school. Some students had appeared on television recently to be rewarded for their work on an anti-bullying campaign. The number of exclusions has continued to fall. Attendance, including that in the sixth form, has improved slightly since the last visit.

Quality of provision

The quality of teaching has improved since the previous monitoring visit. Two joint lesson observations were undertaken with senior leaders which confirmed that the school's own evaluation and monitoring of teaching is accurate and extensive. The school's self-evaluation, supported by observations made by the national challenge adviser and local authority consultants, indicates that there is more good teaching in the school than previously and no inadequate lessons. No sixth form lessons were observed on this visit. Lesson planning has been further refined to identify individuals who require extra support and brief notes about what that support should be. There is a growing focus on the needs of gifted and talented students and the school is developing a good programme for supporting them. The tracking of students' progress has been undertaken more effectively by more teachers than at the time of the previous visit. Middle managers are more rigorous in analysing data to identify possible weaknesses in provision and in planning better support for both teachers and students where needed. As a consequence of all these improvements, student achievement across the school is rising more quickly.

The curriculum changes mentioned at the previous visit continue to be embedded and the greater range of options means that more students are achieving their targets and attaining better standards. The changes made to the sixth form curriculum, especially those negotiated with other local schools, are still being developed. A growing number of students remained in the sixth form than in previous years.

Progress since the last visit on the areas for improvement:

- improve the quality of teaching to eliminate inadequate lessons and increase the proportion of good lessons – good
- ensure that the sixth form curriculum and support meet the needs of students and enable them to achieve well – satisfactory

Leadership and management

School leaders continue to work in a determined and increasingly confident way with the IEB, the local authority and the national challenge adviser to address the weaknesses identified by the inspection in January 2008. The improved self-evaluation process, now evident at departmental level, has meant that school leaders are now more effectively focused on tracking student progress, monitoring the quality of teaching and improving student attainment and achievement. This increased focus has brought about clear improvements in student achievement. The gap between school and national averages has been closed at Key Stage 3 and is well on the way to being closed at Key Stage 4. The restructuring of the leadership team to address the problem of lack of leadership in the mathematics department has been successful and students speak positively about their growing confidence in the quality of mathematics teaching and the progress they are making in the subject. Similar improvements have yet to be demonstrated in science. New leaders, appointed from within the school, have demonstrated their effectiveness in driving forward important school improvement priorities, and the heads of house are having a good impact on securing consistency of monitoring and tracking so that their students attain better standards and make good progress. These improvements have been welcomed by the IEB, but both the school and the board agree that more time is required to embed these initiatives further before the school can be taken out of special measures. The work of consultants continues to bring about improvements in weak subject areas.

Progress since the last visit on the areas for improvement:

- improve the quality of leadership and management at all levels by ensuring robust and accurate self-evaluation leading to actions that improve outcomes for students – good

External support

The school continues to work well with its key partners to improve outcomes and the quality of teaching. The work with local schools to identify better practices and share good ideas is having a positive impact on the quality of teaching and the use of assessment data. The national challenge adviser has worked effectively to help school leaders focus better, and with deeper understanding, on the key aspects that most require improvement. The local authority continues to be committed to working with the school to bring about required improvements and consultants work more productively with their subject departments.