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8 July 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 30 June and 1 July 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 January 2008. The monitoring inspection report is attached and the main judgements are set out below.

Progress since being subject to special measures – good

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 fourth monitoring inspection on 30 June and 1 July 2009

Evidence

I observed the school's work; scrutinised documents; and met with the headteacher, members of the senior leadership team, core subject leaders and middle managers and a group of students. In addition, I had telephone conversations with the chair of the interim executive board (IEB), a representative from the local authority and the school's National Challenge Adviser.

Context

Since the third monitoring visit, a decision has been made to enable the school to open as an academy from September 2010. The collapse of proposals to sell part of the school land has led to protracted negotiations and left the school with a large budget deficit. This is being managed as well as can be expected. The decision to reorganise the leadership and management of the mathematics department has been a qualified success. Students feel more confident about their learning in mathematics but the issue of longer-term sustainability of the improvements made so far remains, especially in terms of the temporary reduction in capacity of the senior leadership team. Competency proceedings in relation to two teachers continue. The impact of the National Challenge Adviser has been immediate and positive in helping the school to improve further.

Achievement and standards

Underachievement was evident at the time of the last inspection and during previous monitoring visits. Actions taken by the school are continuing to improve standards and the rate of progress that students are making. The school's calculations relating to current attainment indicate that just over 70% of Year 11 students are on course to attain five or more A* to C grades. Based on early-entry GCSE results and externally verified Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC) results, 36% of students have already attained this standard and so the final percentage is likely to be higher than the challenging targets set. According to the school's analysis of assessment information, 38% of students are on target to attain five or more A* to C grades, including English and mathematics. However, 68 Year 11 students have been identified as currently attaining a grade D in either English or mathematics and, consequently, good support has been put in place to raise their attainment. In Year 10, 30% of students are currently expected to gain five or more A* to C grades, including English and mathematics. These percentages remain below national averages, but represent an improvement on Year 10 predictions at this time last year, and the target of 40% of students gaining five or more A* to C grades is achievable and realistic. Overall, the progress of students from Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 4 continues to improve at a faster rate than at this time last year and at the time of the previous monitoring visit. The attainment of students on entry to the

school remains below average but, by the end of Key Stage 3, standards continue to be broadly average and are rising. The quality of learning for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is at least as good as that for other groups of students. For instance, in year 11, 39% of students on School Action Plus are on target to achieve five or more A* to C grades, including English and mathematics. In Year 10, school calculations indicate that School Action students are exceeding estimates for five or more A* to C grades, including English and mathematics, capped and uncapped average point scores. In the sixth form, the school's analysis of internal examination results indicates that overall progress is satisfactory, with good progress being demonstrated in English literature and sports science. The results for the January 2009 re-sits indicate that performance has improved by a grade or more in 38 of the 66 modules taken. All students sitting BTEC sports science attained either grade A or B.

Progress since the last visit on the areas for improvement:

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

Personal development and well-being

This aspect was not a focus for this visit. Nevertheless, it is clear from the learning walk, observations of students at break-time and lunchtime, and discussions with students during the visit that personal development and well-being continue to be good. Behaviour in lessons was good and students continue to show good attitudes to learning. Students said they felt safe at school and were well cared for by staff. Attendance, including that in the sixth form, has improved

Quality of provision

The quality of teaching has continued to improve since the last inspection and previous visit. Two joint lesson observations were undertaken with senior leaders and these confirmed that the school's own evaluation and monitoring of teaching is rigorous and accurate. Regular classroom visits by local authority consultants and the National Challenge Adviser support the school's evaluation that there is more good teaching and no inadequate lessons. However, the competency procedures being undertaken in relation to two teachers are taking some time to resolve and this is slowing the pace of improvement in teaching in the curriculum area concerned. No sixth form lessons were observed on this visit. Assessment information is being used better by teachers to plan their lessons and to target those students who need extra support. The quality of lesson plans in terms of differentiating tasks to meet the needs of individuals and groups, although improving, is not consistently good across the school. Tracking students' progress has been embedded in the school and is being used confidently by the majority of teachers to target students who are underachieving and to improve their rate of progress. Middle managers are more confident in using assessment data to identify areas of strength and weakness and departmental self-evaluation has been strengthened.

The curriculum changes continue to enable students to follow courses that meet their needs better than at the time of the last inspection. This has led to improvements in the rate of progress students are making and enabled the school to set more challenging targets for different groups. The changes made to the sixth form curriculum, especially in the context of strengthening route ways from Key Stage 4 and provision of more suitable courses, have had a positive effect on student attainment and progress in key areas. Links with other schools to provide courses off-site have also been strengthened for the benefit of students. The viability of the sixth form is now better grounded in appropriate group sizes and more cost-effective courses.

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 – good

Leadership and management

School leaders continue to work well with the IEB, the local authority and the National Challenge Adviser to address the key issues raised by the previous inspection. School leaders have further developed their understanding of self-evaluation and student tracking and this has led to better attainment and a faster rate of student progress during the last term. The school's own calculations, based on better data analysis, indicate that the gap between school and national averages has been closed at both Key Stages 3 and 4. New leaders appointed since the last inspection are beginning to grow into their roles. These developments continue to be welcomed by the IEB as indications of the growing capacity of the school to sustain long-term improvement. The work of the consultants continues to be valued by the school in supporting this self-sustaining growth in confidence and effectiveness.

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 main partners to improve outcomes and address the key issues raised by the previous inspection. The school has developed stronger links with local schools to bolster its sixth form curriculum provision. It has continued to build on the good practice demonstrated by these schools to strengthen its own practice, especially in improving teaching and learning and curriculum developments. The National Challenge Adviser has made a big impact on the school's drive to bring about required improvements. The local authority continues to support the school well, especially in relation to attaining academy status.