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Miss L Balderstone  
Headteacher  
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Dear Mrs Balderstone

Special measures: monitoring inspection of West Cumbria Learning Centre

Following my visit to your centre on 11–12 March 2010, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the inspection findings.

The visit was the fourth monitoring inspection since the centre 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.

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 Management Committee and the Director of Children's Services for Cumbria.

Yours sincerely

Eric Craven  
Her Majesty's Inspector



Special measures: monitoring of West Cumbria Learning Centre

Report from the fourth monitoring inspection on 11–12 March 2010

## Evidence

The inspector observed the centre's work, including a visit to an external provider of vocational education, scrutinised documents and met with staff including senior managers, a group of students, representatives of the local authority and the Chair and Vice Chair of the Management Committee. A telephone call was made to the centre's School Improvement Partner.

## Context

The monitoring inspection planned for late autumn term 2009 did not take place due to severe flooding in Cumbria which resulted in the centre closing for a few days and significant and protracted transportation difficulties which still persist in the local area. A new and permanent headteacher took up post in September 2009 and the executive headteacher, who had been leading the school for over a year, reverted to her position as executive headteacher for all of the pupil referral units in the local authority. The deputy headteacher, who has been on long-term absence, has left the school and the local authority is soon to advertise this position. In the meantime, two members of the teaching staff have been given temporary positions as members of the senior leadership team. An appointment as head of assessment has been made with the post holder working primarily with other schools to manage the referral and reintegration processes. The school roll stands at 37 and 12 students have joined the centre since September 2009. Of these, eight are dually registered with their mainstream schools and have avoided permanent exclusion.

## Students' achievement and the extent to which they enjoy their learning

The progress students are making is increasing. This is because the conditions for learning at the centre have improved. Students' behaviour is better and disruptions to others' learning are less frequent. Students are finding lessons more interesting and they are concentrating and showing diligence and persistence with their work. More are enjoying their learning and the majority of students interviewed reported that they have seen tangible improvements at the centre over the past year or so and that lessons are more enjoyable than in the past. About half of the pupils in Key Stage 2 have made well above expected progress since September 2009 in English and mathematics even though their attainment remains below that expected of pupils of a similar age nationally. In Key Stage 3 the most rapid progress has been made in resistant materials and food technology with a few students making outstanding progress in a short period of time. At Key Stage 4 students are making most progress in art and English.



Standards are on the rise but remain well below average. In 2008 no GCSE grades were achieved. The results of the 2009 GCSE examinations show an improved picture with 15 GCSE awards being gained in mathematics, resistant materials, graphics and art. In art one student gained a grade B. All other GCSE grades achieved were below C. Various other awards were gained by students in 2009 including those in key skills, adult literacy and numeracy and at entry level. The centre's own tracking records show that more students are on course this year to achieve GCSE grades in more subjects, including English. It also shows that more grades above C are expected to be achieved in art, graphics, food technology and resistant materials.

Progress since the last visit on the areas for improvement:

- Improve older students' achievement – satisfactory.

#### Other relevant outcomes

Students' behaviour continues to improve from the last monitoring inspection although the behaviour of a minority remains on the edge at times. This improvement is due to students finding the curriculum more engaging and lessons more appealing. Opportunities are being taken to make the curriculum relevant to students' wants and needs. Relationships between staff and students are generally good. As one student said, 'Teachers treat us with respect and we treat them with respect.' The data held by the centre show that behaviour is improving. The numbers of postcards sent to students' homes to report good work and behaviour has increased. There are indications that the number of detentions is diminishing and the number of days lost to fixed-term exclusion has reduced.

The centre's efforts to improve the level of attendance have been bolstered by the appointment of an attendance officer and responsibility for attendance being delegated to a senior member of staff. The systems for following up absence show rigour and this has contributed to an improvement in the overall picture of attendance. The attendance of those students at off-site providers is more systematically checked. Absence is quickly tackled through contact with parents and carers, including immediate home visits. The overall level of attendance has improved from 71.1% at the last monitoring inspection to 74.5% to date this school year. However, it is likely that further improvement would have been apparent had the local area not been badly affected by floods in November 2009. The resultant transport problems saw some students experiencing significantly increased journey times to and from the centre; in at least one case this increased to a journey of two and a half hours. The reasons for poor attendance by a few students stretch beyond the realm of the centre and require multi-agency responses. The centre agrees that although coordinated responses are improving they need to be consistently more robust in order to deal with the wider challenges faced by students and their families.



Progress since the last visit on the areas for improvement:

- Raise the level of attendance and improve students' behaviour – satisfactory.

### The effectiveness of provision

The quality of teaching and learning continues to improve but overall it remains at a satisfactory level. Around 40% is good but there is little that is outstanding. In order to tackle a legacy of underachievement experienced by many students, the quality of teaching needs to be consistently good, as recognised by the centre's own target for the quality of teaching and learning. Teachers have benefited from coaching support from local authority consultants and professional development activities such as how to improve marking. They have also been helped by the feedback following lesson observations undertaken by the headteacher, other senior staff and local authority consultants. The notable strengths in the teaching and learning observed are a clear imperative to learn conveyed to students through lessons having a swift pace, through teachers' high expectations and through the use of computers, the internet and DVD material in lessons which enlivens learning for students. In the best lessons there are challenges to students to stretch their thinking and understanding.

Generally, there is a helpful recognition by teachers that many students have had poor experiences of traditional learning and that presenting materials that encourage active and enthusiastic learning captures students' attention. Teaching assistants are effective in their work with students and are helped by teachers' planning which identifies students' prominent behaviour needs. There has been an improvement in the use of assessment to plan work for students. For example, lesson plans generally include identification of the level at which students are working. Nevertheless, there is still much scope to include more specific learning targets for individuals and groups of students in lesson plans so that work is more specifically matched to individuals' needs and all students are challenged to the full. Behaviour targets for individual students are being incorporated into teachers' lesson plans, which give teachers an immediate insight into students' behaviour needs. These are referred to when students need correction, but opportunities are missed to use them more proactively to remind students when they are achieving their targets. Not all of the targets are specific enough, which dilutes their usefulness. When challenging behaviour does occur the centre's systems for dealing with this are effective. Staff are generally consistent in applying the agreed approaches. If students do have to be removed from lessons they are returned quickly following discussions with staff on call.

The curriculum is being reviewed and adjusted to ensure that it meets students' needs. More students are likely to be spending much shorter periods of time at the centre than in the past before returning to their own or another mainstream school. The centre is keen to ensure that the curriculum reflects these changes and marries with the curriculum in other schools where necessary, so that it affords opportunities for students to gain external accreditation for the work they do in the time they are



at the centre. There is due recognition being paid to the need to provide for students' personal and social needs. A therapeutic room is being developed where students' emotional development can be helped through circle-time discussions, counselling and anger management. Evaluations of the effectiveness of this provision are underway but it is too early to be definitive about the impact of this recent development.

There are five students at the centre who have a statement of special educational needs. Two others have recently had their statement reviewed and these have been found to be no longer necessary. The centre has improved its focus on students with a statement to ensure that provision for them is matched as closely as possible to that specified in their statement. A teaching assistant has been given responsibility for managing the systems related to special educational needs and/or disabilities and she has received helpful support from a local authority consultant.

Progress since the last visit on the areas for improvement:

- Ensure that students with a statement of special educational needs have access to their statutory entitlements – satisfactory.
- Improve the quality of teaching and learning – satisfactory.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

The new headteacher shows drive and determination and has quickly built on the effective start made by the executive headteacher while she was at the helm of the centre. Staff have rallied behind her and are pushing in the same direction. They are aware of the centre's priorities and they know they have their part to play. The headteacher's recent experience as a senior manager in mainstream education is being used very well to develop the centre's influence and involvement with other schools. It is much better positioned now to influence the pattern of referrals so that increasingly students are coming to the centre for shorter periods of time, while remaining on the roll of their host school. A system for tracking the academic progress made by students has been implemented. This is making it possible for the staff to see the progress students are making and to be able to intervene where this is not good enough. There is room to improve this tracking further so that it includes other data, such as data on attendance and behaviour to enable staff to see the impact each of these aspects has. A new centre development plan has been compiled with the involvement of staff and this is a helpful document which sets out the centre's ambitions for the next year and a half. There are some useful outcome targets, such as the proportion of teaching and learning that the centre expects to be judged good or better, but there is room for targets to be included which use the progress and attainment of students as a measure of success. The monitoring of teaching and learning is systematic and increasingly being undertaken by senior staff in the school and less by local authority consultants, which is a good sign of the centre beginning to stand on its own two feet. This is also the case in terms of the support from the local authority's School Improvement Partner, who is becoming



less involved. The centre is beginning to evaluate its impact and effectiveness and data are being well marshalled to aid this process. The views of students, and parents and carers, are beginning to be systematically sought to help the centre check on its effectiveness. The headteacher has developed a distributed leadership model and has set out her expectations for senior staff, teachers and teaching assistants to take control of the strategic direction of their areas of responsibility. Performance management is in place for all staff and is playing its part in setting the direction of travel and in holding staff to account for their contributions. The management committee has a wide range of suitably experienced members. Despite the centre's efforts, there is a difficulty in getting one of the parents or carers to join the committee as a representative for this group. The committee is playing its part in the centre's development and the experience of various members is being used to good effect both to support the centre and hold it to account. The centre has made in-roads into the priorities for further improvement identified at the last monitoring inspection. It has made good progress in monitoring external providers and has increased the rigour with which attendance issues are being tackled. There has been some progress in assessment but further work is needed to ensure that curriculum targets are closely matched to individual students' needs.

Progress since the last visit on the areas for improvement:

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

#### External support

The local authority is orchestrating support for the centre effectively. There are helpful plans established by the consultants and these are reviewed to ensure that the local authority is making a positive difference. Support is being focused on the quality of teaching and learning and the management of subjects in the main. Records show that the school-specific monitoring group has an accurate view of the progress being made by the centre as does the centre's School Improvement Partner.