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Ms L Soussi
The Acting Headteacher
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Dear Ms Soussi

Special measures: monitoring inspection of The Priory School

Following my visit to your school on 16–17 September 2009, 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 first monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures in March 2009. The monitoring inspection report is attached and the main judgements are set out below.

Progress since being subject to special measures – satisfactory.

Newly Qualified Teachers may not be appointed.

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 governors and the Director of Children's Services for Somerset.

Yours sincerely

Steffi Penny

Her Majesty's Inspector

Special measures: monitoring of The Priory School

Report from the first monitoring inspection on 16–17 September 2009

Evidence

The inspector observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with staff, the headteacher, groups of pupils, representatives from the governing body, and the local authority. Boarding was not inspected as part of this visit but discussions were held with boarding staff and the transition at the end of the school day in the boarding house was observed.

Context

Since the last inspection the deputy headteacher has been appointed as the acting headteacher from April 2009. At the same time the assistant headteacher was appointed as the acting deputy headteacher. As part of its reorganisation of special education needs provision across the county, Somerset local authority is in the process of appointing a strategic project leader and a headteacher to lead the school for the period of January 2010 – August 2015.

Pupils' achievement and the extent to which they enjoy their learning

Since the last inspection pupils' progress continues to vary considerably between subjects. Pupils' progress is directly linked to the amount of time they have attended school and stayed in the classroom during lessons. Progress in the lessons observed was generally satisfactory because staff had clear boundaries and shared aspirations with pupils on behaviour, achievement and standards. Where this was not the case de-escalation strategies were not implemented effectively and pupils misbehaved by leaving the classroom and disrupted the learning of others.

The support and guidance to raise achievement and progress in pupils' literacy is inadequate, particularly for those pupils in Year 11. This has a severe impact on the pupils' ability to understand examination questions, and hinders their attainment. For example, pupils who are capable mathematicians can perform the appropriate mathematical operations expected for their age but they cannot interpret problems that are set in a text format. Consequently pupils are underachieving in relation to their capability in all areas where literacy skills are required. Insufficient emphasis has been given to accelerate and support the literacy levels attained by pupils across most areas of the curriculum throughout the school.

Progress since the last inspection:

- Analyse data about pupils' academic progress and their personal development in order that appropriate individual support and guidance measures can be put into place – inadequate progress.

Other relevant pupil outcomes

The numbers of serious incidents, exclusions and use of restraints have reduced since the last inspection. During the monitoring visit there were incidents of unacceptable behaviour, which were appropriately dealt with by staff on duty. Pupils who are new to the school or who have recently returned after a long period of absence have found it difficult to adjust to the behaviour management strategies that were successfully introduced last term. On occasions this is because they are still receiving mixed messages from staff about where boundaries are in terms of behaviour, punctuality, language, attitude and the relationship they should have with staff.

In cookery classes and at breakfast club the pupils behave sensibly, adopt safe practices and make good progress in developing their social skills. Social skills are also being enhanced through the new personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) education programme and where staff utilise the set nurturing programme at tutor time.

The school is working with other partners to ensure that attendance continues to improve. Nevertheless, a small number of pupils continue to refuse to attend school. The school and the local authority need to ensure that pupils are placed appropriately and that all pupils on the school roll are getting the education to which they are entitled.

Pupils' cookery record books demonstrate the wide variety of nutritious dishes that they have made from fresh and basic ingredients. Those who attend school regularly develop good skills in cooking to sustain healthy and economic well-being. Pupils' interest in sport and other physical activities also increasingly promotes healthy lifestyles.

Progress since the last inspection:

- Establish and implement consistent strategies for managing pupils' behaviour – satisfactory progress.

The effectiveness of provision

There is an overall strategy now in place to collate and use assessment data to target pupils who are underachieving. Baseline data are shared with staff and used to plan lessons at the correct level based on pupils' prior attainment, providing a better match of learning activity with pupils' needs. Staff are using a common lesson planning format and during the monitoring visit the objectives for lessons were appropriate and consistently shared with pupils. The pupils have individual learning targets but these are not referred to in class frequently or consistently enough. Staff

are not sufficiently aware of pupils' individual learning targets outside of their own subject or learning area.

The pupils enjoy and make better progress in the lessons that involve practical activities and where learning is purposeful by being directly related to the world around them or reflecting their future ambitions in the world of work. For example, in cookery classes work involves practical activities supported by written observations and evaluations produced by the pupils. Although pupils do not enjoy the writing activities they understand why they need to write and are rightly proud of the record books they produce. Because the school does not share literacy targets this written work is not utilised to support learning as effectively as it could be.

Good links have been established between the school and local tertiary colleges, with taster days firmly established. There is some accreditation but not enough at the appropriate or higher levels. The school is aware of this and the lack of accreditation sometimes reflects the current availability of courses locally.

Progress since the last inspection:

- Assess pupils' achievements regularly and accurately and use this information when planning learning activities – satisfactory progress.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

The acting leadership team has set a clear strategic direction for the school. They have a good understanding of the school's strengths and weaknesses as demonstrated by the areas focused on in the school improvement plan. There are sound management systems to evaluate the impact of most aspects of the school's work. These would benefit from having progress checks that are flagged up between milestones so that the school is aware in advance of potentially missed targets.

Too often the senior leaders are needed to be on duty to ensure the safety of pupils who have chosen to remove themselves from classrooms. This restricts the amount of time during which senior staff can support learning and drive improvement by being in classrooms, especially as the acting headteacher is also the special educational needs coordinator. The very recent employment of two youth workers partially alleviates this need and is a good, if embryonic, development.

Accurate baseline data have been collated across all subjects, which staff are now using to set appropriately challenging lessons. The school can see improvements in the emotional and personal development for those pupils who attend regularly, particularly for those who are boarders. This is shown through reviews and individual education plans. There are missed opportunities to compare these data with records of lesson attendance to determine patterns of achievement.

Several important policy documents are not fully in place and this restricts some aspects of the schools' self-evaluation and the ability of the governing body to effectively challenge and support the acting leadership team. For example, the lack of a community cohesion audit does not help the school celebrate the good partnership it has with the National Trust. The lack of other policies means the school cannot demonstrate clearly how it promotes equalities. The school continues to fulfil its child protection and risk assessment obligations appropriately. The school also carries out the necessary criminal record checks but the way in which this information is collated as a single central record does not meet current requirements.

Although not inspected in detail, discussions and school documentation demonstrate that satisfactory progress has been made in meeting the National Minimum Standards, an issue raised through the last inspection of the boarding provision.

Progress since the last inspection:

- Use the outcomes of school self-evaluation to determine a clear strategic direction for the school and implement the rigorous management systems needed to evaluate the impact of all aspects of the school's work. National Minimum Standards (NMS) to be met to improve social care – satisfactory progress.
- Ensure that first aid boxes contain a list of their contents (NMS 14) – satisfactory progress.
- Make sure that the statement of purpose and prospectus for young people and parents show their most recent review date (NMS 1.8) – satisfactory progress.
- Proceed with the planned complete refurbishment and upgrade of the boarding provision (NMS 23) – satisfactory progress.
- Ensure that at least 80% of care staff have the appropriate qualification in child care and that the head of care becomes suitably qualified (NMS 31) – satisfactory progress.
- Construct a dated list of training undertaken by staff on their individual personnel files (NMS19) – satisfactory progress.
- Ensure that the single central record for staff is completed fully (NMS 27) – satisfactory progress.
- Complete the single central staff record fully in order to comply with current safeguarding requirements – inadequate progress.

External support

External support has helped the acting leadership team to implement appropriate performance management systems. It has helped the school establish an accurate baseline of academic attainment and to structure suitable monitoring systems for assessment and academic progress.

The amended action plan provided by the local authority continues to lack some specific milestones to be reached, for example, ongoing timelines. It is also still difficult to see how challenging some of the success criteria and outcomes are, and how the impact of some actions will be met, for example around the 14–19 curriculum. Consequently it is not clear how the core group constructed by the authority will effectively monitor progress against all areas of the action plan and to be able to spot in advance where milestones might potentially be missed.

Priorities for further improvement

- Rapidly accelerate pupils' literacy levels, particularly those in Year 11.
- Continue to work with the local authority to ensure that all pupils are placed appropriately and that all pupils on the school roll receive the education to which they are entitled.