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Monday 5th October 2009

Mr E C Forrester
Principal
St Neots Community College
Barford Road
Eynesbury
St Neots
Cambridgeshire
PE19 2SH

Dear Mr Forrester

Special measures: monitoring inspection of St Neots Community College

Following my visit with Peter Clifton and Paul Edwards, Additional Inspectors, to your college on 23 and 24 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 – inadequate.

Newly Qualified Teachers may not be appointed without further consideration by HMI. 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 Cambridgeshire.

Yours sincerely

David Jones

Her Majesty's Inspector



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

Special measures: monitoring of St Neots Community College

Report from the first monitoring inspection on 23/24 September 2009.

Evidence

Inspectors observed the college's work, scrutinised documents and met with the principal for the college, nominated staff, a representative of the governing body, the principal of the partner college, and senior representatives from the local authority.

Context

The Principal of Comberton Village College who is a National Leader of Education (NLE), has been appointed to lead the aspects of the support for St Neots College. The local authority has appointed a new National Challenge Adviser, a consultant inspector and a school improvement partner.

Since the college was judged to require special measures, a deputy principal has been promoted to vice principal, two deputy principals and an assistant director post 16 have been appointed. In addition, a new subject leader for mathematics, an assistant subject leader for science, a college sports coordinator, two science teachers, and one additional teacher in each of mathematics, English and food technology have taken up post.

The college had appointed three newly qualified teachers just prior to the designation of special measures; however, it also appointed one newly qualified teacher after the inspection without Ofsted's permission and against DCSF regulations.

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

The preliminary data available for the 2009 GCSE and vocational examinations shows some limited improvement in standards and achievement. The proportion of students obtaining five A* to C grades including English and mathematics, the national benchmark for secondary schools, rose by nearly 6% to 30.75%. In addition, the proportion of higher grades at GCSE secured in English improved by 12% to 50% and results in mathematics also rose by 12 % to 43%. However, the average points scored by students in these two subjects remains at similar levels to the two previous years. The initial data available at post 16 indicates that individual progress was limited at AS level and below average at advanced level.

This visit took place early in the autumn term when the range of current attainment data was limited. HMI will conduct a detailed scrutiny of the 2009 results when



national evaluations are available at the time of the next visit; the judgment given below may be revised at this point.

Progress since the last inspection:

- Raise standards and achievement by ensuring realistic, but challenging targets are used effectively by all staff to secure rapid improvement – satisfactory.

Other relevant pupil outcomes

Student attendance 2008-2009 declined from 91.7% to 91.1%. The greatest concern remains in Years 10 and 11 where the attendance rate in both year groups remains too low at 90.7% and 88.8% respectively. While the overall persistent absentee rate has improved, it remains well above the national average. Of particular concern is the increase in the rate of persistent absence amongst Year 10 girls. Procedures for monitoring attendance have been streamlined and the college has a range of strategies, including electronic registrations, early telephone contact with parents and carers, correspondence home and a system of rewards, which it believes will have a positive impact on the attendance rates. However, while attendance for the current term has improved slightly, it is too early to determine the longer-term impact of these strategies.

Students' attitudes towards lessons vary according to the quality of teaching. However, even where teaching is only satisfactory, students rarely disrupt lessons and are often keen to undertake tasks. Whilst boisterous and noisy at lunchtimes both in the dining areas and outside, student behaviour was generally positive during this visit; this was a positive feature considering there were few activities to engage their interest over the long lunch period. The number of exclusions has declined overall and fewer students are being sent to the 'isolation inclusion room'.

The college meets its statutory duty in the safe recruitment, vetting and checking of the college workforce. Staff training in child protection is up to date and there is a secure understanding of the child protection policy. A number of health and safety issues were identified during the visit, including the use of safety goggles in chemistry and the poor state of a chemical store cupboard.

Work with external agencies is effective in caring for vulnerable students and those with medical, behavioural or social difficulties. There are effective procedures for ensuring those students with special educational needs and/or difficulties are provided with clear individual education plans that are reviewed regularly and systematically; these plans are referred to by most teachers in their lesson plans.

Progress since the last inspection:



- Improve overall attendance and reduce the level of persistent absence by targeting strategies particularly in Years 10 and 11 - inadequate

The effectiveness of provision

During the inspection, 28 part lessons were visited by inspectors, including seven joint observations conducted with the senior staff of the college. Approximately 40% were graded as good or better. Some 14% were judged inadequate and the remainder were broadly satisfactory.

Many of the lessons could have been more effective if the focus on learning outcomes had been more precise. There is still too much teaching that is inadequate or barely satisfactory to ensure appropriate progress. The evaluation of teaching by senior staff has improved and sound procedures have been developed. The senior staff who engaged in the joint observation of teaching with inspectors were generally accurate in their evaluations; however, a review of the monitoring and evaluation documents completed by the college during the summer term revealed inconsistencies in the quality of the analysis completed and the feedback provided to staff.

As reported in the previous inspection, good or better teaching and learning is exemplified by high expectations and carefully chosen tasks that engage students in their learning and provide appropriate challenge. However, on too many occasions, students are unable to display their knowledge and understanding because the teachers talk for too long or time is not managed effectively. In some lessons, insufficient opportunity is given to focused peer group discussion where students can clarify their thinking and become more active participants in lessons.

The use of learning objectives that can be understood by the students has improved since the last inspection and in the better lessons, they take a more active part in their learning. On some occasions, learning objectives were effectively discussed with the class and directly linked to expected outcomes. However, this is not a consistent picture and on occasions, objectives were not sufficiently sharp to be helpful to the students, or referred to frequently enough to remind them of what they were trying to achieve.

The previous inspection report identified weaknesses in the selection of activities to challenge the more able students and this remains an issue. Although planning formats require the teachers to identify how individuals or groups will be challenged, these are often not completed appropriately. On some occasions, for example in mathematics, all students were required to complete the basic tasks before moving onto the more challenging calculations; this placed limitations on the progress of average or higher achieving students. The quality of questioning remains variable. At its best, questioning challenges the students to think more deeply and explain their



ideas; however, when more generic or superficial, questioning elicits a limited response.

Sound basic assessment systems are now in place although their use varies between subject areas. The use of success criteria in lessons is helping the students to gain an insight into how well they are achieving, although some marking remains inconsistent.

The college provides 4 hours 40 minutes teaching per day, leaving students 1 hour 40 minutes short of the 25 hours taught time expected of secondary schools by the DCSF. When considered over the teaching time available in Years 10 and 11, this deficit amounts to four weeks and places the quality of provision and the standards achieved in this college at a significant disadvantage against the national picture. This curriculum shortfall when considered in conjunction with the significantly below average levels of attendance place a notable constraint on standards and achievement.

Progress since the last inspection

Improve the quality of teaching by ensuring teachers consistently:

- use a range of activities which challenge and motivate and meet the needs of all students - satisfactory
- provide students with clear information on how well they are achieving and what they need to do to improve, for example through the marking of books - satisfactory

The effectiveness of leadership and management

The college has developed a satisfactory improvement plan and made some progress in the monitoring of teaching and the use of assessment to improve learning. However, the scale of the budget deficit that has developed in the last nine months has become overwhelming.

The college began the 2008/09 financial year with a positive budget surplus and developed a significant budget deficit by the end of March 2009. Senior managers agree with the very recent draft local authority audit report that they did not adequately identify the extent of the emerging financial problem. The college has stated, and the draft auditors' report confirms, that the deficit is likely to be close to £1million by 31 March 2010. The draft audit report reasonably concludes that 'it is difficult to determine how and when the college will be able to repay the deficit.' The report is understandably critical of the financial management arrangements at the college and doubts that they are 'sufficiently robust to prevent future significant overspends or to manage the current deficit effectively'. The college has not yet agreed a deficit recovery plan with the local authority. The auditors 'do not consider



the college meets the requirements of the Financial Management Standard in Schools (FMSiS)'.

The audit report makes plain that 'the objectives set out in the College Improvement Plan and the Ofsted Action Plan are put at risk'; HMI concurs with the very serious concerns expressed in the draft report. This dire financial situation clearly places the recovery of the college from special measures at risk.

Although the governors' finance sub-committee reports in the later months of 2008 indicate that the budget deficit was known to governors, there is no evidence in the full governing body minutes of governors taking action to address the issue from January to July 2009. During this period, the governing body made a number of additional appointments to the senior management team. HMI will focus part of the next visit on the effectiveness of the governing body and would wish to meet as many members of the governing body as possible.

It took some time during the inspection to identify that newly qualified teachers had been previously appointed to the school and it was not possible to fully evaluate the nature of the support that had been provided in the summer term 2009. However, the monitoring and evaluation of teaching in general was inconsistent during this period. HMI will review the support provided for newly qualified staff at the next monitoring inspection.

The specialist schools and academies trust have evaluated the college's development plan and noted weaknesses in: the specialist programme for improving whole college performance and against the specialist subjects targets; however, the 2009 examination data was not available to the trust at the time of writing. These results do show some improvement in performance in most specialist areas; HMI will provide a detailed evaluation of this aspect of the college's performance when final examination outcomes become available at the time of the next monitoring visit. Other areas that the specialist colleges and academies trust viewed as requiring further development, such as, working with the community and the leadership and management of the specialist subjects must be placed in jeopardy by the significant budget crisis.

Progress since the last inspection:

- Improve the accuracy and effectiveness of the evaluation of the college's performance by managers at all levels by: ensuring inadequacies are clearly identified and eliminated making effective use of clear success criteria for evaluating the impact of interventions on improving students' standards, achievement and well-being – inadequate

External support



The local authority has put in place an appropriate improvement partnership with a national leader of education and his national support school to assist with the school improvement issues raised in the last report. However, there are three education professionals involved in this support package and the potential for the college to be overwhelmed by the support available will need to be monitored carefully as part of subsequent visits. Some intensive support for teaching was put in place in the summer term 2009 and limited evidence of its impact is beginning to emerge; this will need to be reviewed further.

Although the college had a service level agreement with the local authority on financial support, a significant crisis has emerged and the audit report commissioned by the local authority in the summer term 2009 has very recently revealed the magnitude of the issue.

The local authority statement of action was evaluated by HMI in the Schools Causing Concern Team as part of Ofsted quality assurance process and found to require additional detail on success criteria and the milestones for implementation. Although the revised document is appropriate, the local authority, in agreement with the principal of the supporting college, the governors and the senior staff at St Neots Community College, should review the time scales and actions it is committed to in the current financial situation. Overall, external support has been barely satisfactory, as the college position has regressed significantly.

Priorities for further improvement

- As a matter of urgency, ensure that the college meets the DCSF expectations on teaching time.
- Address the health and safety issues in science that do not meet current best practice.
- As a matter of urgency: agree a budget recovery plan with the local authority, and re-evaluate the college improvement plan and the local authority statement of action in line with the current financial situation.

Yours sincerely

David Jones
Her Majesty's Inspector

