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Mr Scott Preston - Acting Principal
St Neots Community College
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Cambridgeshire
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Dear Mr Forrester and Mr Preston

Special measures: monitoring inspection of St Neots Community College

Following my visit with Kevin Corrigan and Michael Stanton, Additional Inspectors, to your college on the 24/ 25 February, 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 second monitoring inspection since the college 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
Progress since previous monitoring inspection – satisfactory

Newly Qualified Teachers may be appointed after the proposed federation arrangements are in place and following discussion with HMI on the provision of appropriate mentoring arrangements.

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



Special measures: monitoring of St Neots Community College

Report from the second monitoring inspection on 24/25 February 2010

Evidence

Inspectors observed the college's work, scrutinised documents and met with the whole staff, groups of students, governors and representatives from the local authority. HMI spoke with the Principal of the National Support College and the National Challenge Adviser.

Context

The extensive programme of support funded by The National Challenge and brokered from a National Support College has not had the intended impact. The National Challenge Adviser has taken the decision to bring most of this programme to an end and to redirect the funding to other forms of support.

The local authority has conducted a formal consultation on educational provision within the town and announced publicly that the college will become part of a federation with Longsands Community College, a neighbouring college, from September 2010. As part of this process, 'the County Council had previously committed to writing off St Neots Community College's deficit.' In order to facilitate the federation process, the principal has accepted a new role with the local authority from 1 March 2010; the vice principal will take over the acting leadership of the college on a temporary basis.

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

Students' performance over the last three years has been significantly below the national average against all criteria. The 2009 results show that only higher ability students made the expected progress from Key Stages 2 to 4. Those with special educational needs and/or disabilities made significantly less progress than that of similar students nationally. The small numbers of students from ethnic minority groups made similar and in some cases better progress than their white British peers. In a total 14 subjects, including English, mathematics and science, the results secured were significantly below the national average. The outcomes of the arts specialist subject area have yet to make a positive contribution to the college results. Significant factors in this widespread underperformance were low levels of attendance, the persistent absence of some students and the below average teaching time provided by the college to all year groups.

A scrutiny of the college's assessment evidence base reveals that results from early entry GCSE and vocational courses are marginally better than those secured by the previous Year 11 cohort at the same point in the 2008/09 academic year.



A recent review by the National Challenge Adviser of the college's use of assessment to inform learning expresses concern regarding the quality of the college's assessment data and notes that the college is unable to ensure that assessment data is robust.

In lessons, the quality of the students' learning and progress was satisfactory or better on most occasions. Progress was good when effective teaching engaged the students' attention and matched their learning needs. This quite recent improvement in students' progress has yet to translate into higher standards.

Progress since the last visit on the areas for improvement:

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

Other relevant pupil outcomes

As a result of significant efforts by the college, attendance has improved and is broadly average. The college has developed a robust weekly tracking system and monitors attendance effectively across groups. First day calling and parental letters/meetings are used effectively. However, the college has been forced to seek fixed penalty notices against a number of parents who consistently fail to ensure their child attends college. The attendance of Year 11 girls, a notable weakness in recent years, has become a particular focus.

Behaviour in lessons and around the college is generally satisfactory; however, where teaching fails to engage students' interests or does not stimulate and challenge, they become disengaged and occasionally disaffected. The most effective teachers use praise and positive comments to encourage class contributions and rarely have recourse to use disciplinary measures in class. External and internal exclusions have declined in the last two terms. Punctuality to college is not routinely and robustly monitored by senior staff and students are rarely taken to task when arriving late to lessons.

Progress since the last visit on the areas for improvement:

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

The effectiveness of provision

Over half of lessons visited during this inspection were good or better and a small number of outstanding lessons were seen; a notable improvement since the last visit.



In the lessons that are least effective teachers take insufficient account of the wide ability range of students in their classes. Teaching is pitched at one level and as a result the more able students are insufficiently challenged and those who find learning difficult struggle to make satisfactory progress. In teachers' planning, the provision for different groups is identified but not consistently delivered. The more confident teachers are prepared to adapt lesson plans and tailor lessons to meet emerging student needs. The 'Opening Minds' lessons are proving successful because students are gaining in confidence and they feel more settled in their learning. HMI will focus on the progress of this group during the next monitoring visit.

Tracking data for Key Stage 4 students is available to all teachers and in the best lessons there is growing use of this information to structure learning for different groups. Although the system now enables any underachievement to be identified, the subject data available remains of variable quality. The day-to-day assessment and marking of students' work is improving but there still remains some inconsistency. In the best lessons, work is marked regularly and provides students with good guidance on how to improve their work further. There are increasing opportunities for students to assess their own and each other's work, which in turn is encouraging independent learning and helping increase students' self-confidence.

In the best lessons, teachers' subject knowledge is strong and the basis of enthusiastic and interactive teaching which encourages students to engage in lessons and make good progress. Learning support assistants are a valuable resource and play a vital role in the quality of students' learning; in the majority of lessons, they are well briefed. Staffing difficulties still persist and students are reluctant to engage with temporary staff.

The monitoring of the quality of teaching and learning by senior staff is accurate although the college's lesson observations need to develop a greater focus on the impact of teaching on learning outcomes.

Progress since the last visit on the areas for improvement:

- 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

At the last monitoring visit, HMI identified three priority areas for further improvement and the college has made considerable progress in each area. The



college introduced a revised timetable on 1 February 2010 that provides the 25 hours per week tuition expected in secondary colleges. However, the delay in introducing an appropriate teaching week since the last visit resulted in a loss of over 26 hours tuition per student. Saturday morning lessons are now offered in mathematics and English to address in part this situation. The health and safety issues in science identified at the last inspection have been addressed. Appropriate budget controls are now in place and a recovery plan aims to produce a balanced budget at the end of 2010/11. The college improvement plan has been affected by variations in the support available which was noted earlier in this letter; this matter will be reviewed by HMI when the new federation plans are implemented.

The loss of the intervention and support work designed to enhance learning and raise standards, which should have taken place between October 2009 and February 2010, has constrained the college improvement programme at a critical time. However, on a positive note student attendance has improved and teaching is more stable as a result of the action of senior and middle leaders and the support available from local authority advanced skills teachers.

Senior staff were invited to work alongside inspectors in the joint observation of learning and teaching. During a detailed scrutiny of the outcomes of this exercise, the views they expressed accurately matched the judgements given by HMI.

The governing body has taken a positive view of the local authority brokered federation arrangements. There are legal requirements regarding the introduction of new governance arrangements that will require the current governing bodies of both the St Neots College and its new federation partner, Longsands Community College, to work collaboratively to establish a shadow governing body able to oversee the development of the federation. HMI will wish to meet representatives of the shadow governing body as part of the summer term monitoring visit in order to assess the progress made with the federation arrangements.

Progress since the last visit on the areas for improvement:

- 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 – satisfactory

External support

Local authority officers have worked hard, and to good effect, to lead and manage a public consultation on the future of education in St Neots and secure the agreement of all parties to the establishment of a federation between the two community colleges in the town from September 2010. The county council has published its



agreement to this solution and committed significant financial reserves to eliminate the deficit currently accruing at St Neots. Local authority officers have done all that was possible in these two key areas. The local authority has committed itself to provide additional advanced skills teachers' support via the new federation arrangements.

Local authority consultants and advanced skills teachers have proved effective in some subject areas, helping bring about the improvements in teaching and learning. It is unfortunate that the other programme of external support did not develop as intended and time has been lost. HMI will look to see the impact of the new federation arrangements on the quality of provision.

Priorities for further improvement

- Improve students' progress in all subjects by developing a robust assessment data base that will enable effective monitoring by senior staff.

