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Mr J Snape
Acting Headteacher
John Smeaton Community College
Smeaton Approach
Barwick Road
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Dear Mr Snape

Special measures monitoring inspection of John Smeaton Community College

Following my visit with Peter McKay, additional inspector, to your school on 3 and 4 July 2013, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the inspection findings. Thank you for the help you gave during the inspection and for the time you made available to discuss the actions which have been taken since the school's previous monitoring inspection.

The inspection was the third monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures following the inspection which took place in May 2012. The full list of the areas for improvement which were identified during that inspection is set out in the annex to this letter. The monitoring inspection report is attached.

Having considered all the evidence I am of the opinion that at this time the school is making reasonable progress towards the removal of special measures.

Up to six newly qualified teachers may be appointed if required. There is no restriction on key stage or subject department.

This letter and monitoring inspection report will be published on the Ofsted website. I am copying this letter and the monitoring inspection report to the Secretary of State, the Chair of the Governing Body and the Director of Children's Services for Leeds.

Yours sincerely

John Rutherford

Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection which took place in May 2012

- Increase the amount of good or better teaching and learning throughout the school and in the sixth form in order to accelerate progress and raise attainment for all groups of students, especially in English and mathematics, by:
 - making sure that tasks are consistently and precisely matched to students' abilities
 - ensuring that every opportunity is taken to develop students' skills in numeracy and literacy across the school
 - ensuring that there are opportunities in lessons for students to take responsibility for their own learning and to develop skills to work independently and collaboratively
 - ensuring that the feedback provided to students is of a consistently high quality
 - making sure that behaviour in lessons is consistently good.

- Improve the quality of leadership and management at all levels by:
 - ensuring that lesson observations focus sharply on the progress of different groups of students
 - strengthening procedures used to check on the quality and impact of the school's work so that improvements are brought about swiftly and securely
 - ensuring that leaders and governors undertake frequent and thorough monitoring and evaluation of the impact that staff training and school policies are having on the outcomes for different groups of students
 - using the outcomes of monitoring and evaluation to challenge, where necessary, aspects of the school's performance.

Report on the third monitoring inspection on 3–4 July 2013

Evidence

Inspectors observed lessons and scrutinised management documents including those relating to school evaluation, improvement planning and students' progress. They met with the acting headteacher and a range of school leaders, groups of students, the Chair of the Governing Body and a representative from the local authority. Inspectors considered 49 inspection questionnaires completed by staff on their own initiative.

Context

At the time of the inspection, the headteacher was on a short leave of absence. Due to work experience for students and a range of other activities, it was possible to observe lessons in Years 7, 8 and 9 only. Teachers have begun to work with the timetable for the next academic year; therefore, they have only taught their classes during the last two weeks. The school is scheduled to become an academy by September 2013, sponsored by United Learning. In preparation for transition, United Learning has recently seconded an additional senior leader to the school on a temporary full-time basis.

Achievement of pupils at the school

Lesson observations, school records and work in exercise books show that students' achievement is improving rapidly. Teachers' assessments indicate that standards in public examinations at the end of Key Stage 4 and the sixth form have improved since last year. In younger age groups, the proportion of students making progress at a better than expected rate has increased significantly enabling the school to set targets for much better results in future public examinations. Recent disruptions to leadership and teaching have not been allowed to cause any dip in the rate at which achievement is improving.

Additional pupil premium funding is used effectively to help students in local authority care, those known to be eligible for free school meals and those whose parents are serving in the armed forces to improve their progress at the same rate as most other students in the school. Their starting point, however, is generally lower than that of other students and they are not accelerating their progress sufficiently to catch up. This is because teachers are not all equally skilled in adapting their lessons to meet the needs of underachieving groups.

Better additional support for disabled students and those with special educational needs ensures that their achievement is improving at the same rate as other students. Their progress is particularly rapid when teachers include different ways of working for them in lessons to help them overcome their barriers to learning, for example using computers to record their work. Such effective methods as these are not well established in all lesson plans. Sixth form students who are taught in the complex learning difficulties unit have achieved very well this year and all 10 of them have gained employment or a college place.

More-able students are identified and their progress is monitored closely to ensure that they do not 'coast'. When they do, additional challenge is quickly provided to help them get back on track. Their progress, overall, is improving rapidly but a small number still do not achieve as much as they can because they are required to do the same work in lessons as other students before they get on to suitably stretching tasks.

Teachers are working hard to improve students' literacy and numeracy skills in all subjects and there are examples of effective practice, for example in science, when students consolidate their understanding of the harmful effects of smoking by writing to persuade others not to do it. Such approaches are not fully established in the work of all subject departments.

The quality of teaching

The quality of teaching has improved since the previous visit. More of it is good or better and there has been a considerable reduction in inadequate practice. This reflects the commitment of all teachers to improve their skills by learning from colleagues and leaders. There is a very strong climate of sharing best practice to ensure everybody can do their best, as demonstrated by the fact that classroom doors are always open during lessons.

The proportion of lessons has increased in which learning activities are adapted to enable all groups of students to work at a suitably challenging level. This is helped by the detailed information that every teacher now has about each student's targets and the progress they have made so far towards them. There is still, however, a minority of lessons where teachers use student progress data to set different outcomes for groups, but then give them all the same work with the result that some struggle and some find it too easy.

Most lesson plans have a sharply focused objective for the new skills that students are intended to learn. This results in lessons with a strong pace of learning because there is no unnecessary explanation and plenty of time for interesting problem-solving and research activities. Such effective practice is not yet fully established across the school and there is still a minority of lessons in which students are busy but not learning anything new because the objective is to complete a task rather than acquire a skill.

Leaders have used the recent introduction of next year's timetables as an opportunity to reinforce the need for constructive feedback on stickers when marking students' work. In the first fortnight this has resulted in teachers being much more consistent in challenging students to improve their work and giving them time to do so. The next step is to ensure that all feedback is constructive as there is still a small amount which is more to do with finishing work than with extending skills.

In general, teachers show considerable enthusiasm for their work and they present their lessons in a stimulating and interesting way, which motivates the students to work hard for them. Students are nearly always keen to answer questions and offer constructive comments on what they are learning.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

Students' behaviour has improved enormously during this year and this has made a significant contribution to their better achievement. Within a fortnight of being given new teachers, and at the end of a very busy year, most have quickly settled down to hard work. They stay on-task when carrying out activities without direct teacher supervision; they collaborate well with partners and they show considerable responsibility when asked to take a leading role in lessons, for example organising a warm-up in physical education. As a result, there is a much better climate for learning in most lessons.

These improvements are the result of teachers consistently and confidently applying a new policy for responding to misbehaviour in a way that minimises disruption to lessons. The very large majority of staff who completed a questionnaire agree with the inspection evidence that students' behaviour and the school's approach to behaviour management are much improved. A sizeable minority feel that further improvement is still necessary; however, this applies only to a small number of students.

The quality of leadership in and management of the school

The leadership team has maintained the strong pace of improvement in teaching and students' achievement despite being temporarily without the headteacher. They also make sure that students' education is enhanced by a broad and enjoyable range of experiences. For example, many students are talking very enthusiastically about being involved in the school's successful production of Alice and in the mini-Olympics tournament. Although a considerable amount of hard work has been required of staff this year, their questionnaires show that morale is high and the overwhelming majority are still very supportive of the direction in which the school is moving.

The staff's greatest area of concern, although still only voiced by a minority, is that the school does not make sufficient provision for their professional development. This does not match the inspection evidence that a systematic and intensive programme of teacher development is central to the school's improvement. This includes training before and after lessons as well as many scheduled opportunities for teachers to learn from their colleagues by working alongside them. Teachers are generally responding very positively to this work.

School leaders have an accurate and detailed awareness of strengths and weaknesses in teaching from their frequent monitoring of lessons. Their evaluation of school performance is becoming more precise because they have developed an excellent system for tracking and analysing students' progress. This enables them to identify underachieving students and plan support to help them catch up very quickly. The progress information is not yet being used sufficiently to evaluate the impact of teachers and subject departments on students' outcomes over time. This is largely because the data are new, but it is also because arrangements for systematically reviewing the performance of leaders and teachers in order to set them annual targets for improvement are at an early stage of development.

Since the previous monitoring inspection, senior leaders have introduced significant improvements to sixth form provision. A new sixth form leader has been appointed and the range of courses has been increased with a better balance of academic and vocational subjects. The immediate result of this is that the sixth form intake for September 2013 has doubled compared to previous years.

The governing body and senior leaders correctly recognise that the school is entering a new phase; therefore, they are beginning to move from just tackling the causes of special measures to more planning for the longer-term future. As a result, plans are in place to enlarge and restructure the leadership teams in order to increase their capacity to build on recent improvements and develop an outstanding school. The governing body has shifted its emphasis from support during the crisis period to greater challenge, reflecting their ambition for the best possible student outcomes. They are gathering much more information about the school's performance and analysing it carefully so they can ask searching questions about how the school is tackling any areas of underperformance and how they can show evidence for improvement in these areas. The school meets requirements for safeguarding students.

External support

United Learning and the local authority are working effectively in partnership to secure a smooth transition to academy status for the school. United Learning has allocated an additional senior leader at a time when the leadership team is working without a full complement of members. This enables it to maintain the rapid pace of improvement in students' achievement. Local authority advisers monitor the school's progress closely and provide very useful recommendations. These are helping recently appointed leaders, in particular, to improve their contribution to raising standards. The local authority has reduced significantly its intensive support for improving teaching, recognising the school's growing capacity to manage this independently.