

Serco Inspections
20 Colmore Circus Queensway
Birmingham
B4 6AT

T 0300 123 1231
Text Phone: 0161 6188524
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.ofsted.gov.uk

Direct T: 0121 679 9153
Direct email: naik.sandhu@serco.com



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Adrian Ball
Principal
The Thetford Academy
Croxton Road
Thetford
IP24 1LH

Dear Mr Ball

Special measures monitoring inspection of The Thetford Academy

Following my visit with Keith Wheeldon and Brenda Watson, Additional Inspectors, to your academy on 15–16 October 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 academy's previous monitoring inspection.

The inspection was the second monitoring inspection since the academy became subject to special measures following the inspection which took place in February 2013. 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 academy is making reasonable progress towards the removal of special measures.

The sponsor's statement of action is fit for purpose.

The academy may appoint newly qualified teachers after consultation with HMI and subject to plans for the support the academy's sponsors will provide for these teachers being submitted to HMI before the appointments are made.

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 Norfolk.

Yours sincerely

Elaine Taylor
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection which took place in February 2013

- Improve the quality of teaching by:
 - taking decisive action to eradicate teaching that is regularly less than good
 - setting basic rules about what is expected of students in all lessons and gaining the commitment of every teacher that these agreed rules will be applied consistently
 - gaining greater consistency in how teachers use assessment data to plan lessons that meet the needs and interests of all students and make all learning stimulating, interesting and enjoyable
 - deploying classroom assistants effectively in lessons to accelerate the progress made by all students in need of additional help
 - stabilising the teaching staff to reduce the reliance upon temporary supply teachers
 - using the best teachers in the academy to illustrate highly effective practice and show how this contributes to raising students' achievement.

- Raise the achievement of all students, in all key stages and subjects by:
 - adding greater urgency to ensuring that all students engage fully in learning in lessons and revision classes, particularly those taking examinations later this year
 - using assessment data more rigorously in lessons to check that all students make accelerated progress, especially students supported through additional funding, disabled students and those who have special educational needs
 - getting a much higher proportion of students attending the academy and remaining in lessons regularly to improve their progress
 - increasing the number and rigour of the checks of students' progress and welfare in the sixth form.

- Improve students' behaviour and reduce the numbers excluded from learning by:
 - ensuring that every teacher and classroom assistant takes full responsibility for managing students' behaviour effectively in all lessons
 - seeking the views of students about what else needs to be done to help them manage their own behaviour and meet the academy's expectations of them
 - providing different, stimulating activities and regular breaks to retain students' interest and attention during longer lessons
 - ensuring that all pupils feel safe and free from bullying, and have confidence in staff that issues they raise will be fully resolved.

- Improve leadership and management by:
 - providing additional external support to resolve long-standing staffing issues and give the principal more time to focus on raising achievement across the academy
 - ensuring that the efforts of senior leaders in securing improvements are clearly illustrated by much better teaching, rapid improvements to behaviour and attendance and higher standards achieved by all students
 - clarifying the roles and responsibilities of middle leaders and managers, and ensuring that they are held fully to account for raising achievement in their subject areas and across all key stages
 - convincing all stakeholders of the opportunity presented by the new academy to transform the educational opportunities for all young people so that they are well prepared for the next stage of their training, employment or further education
 - providing a clear, strategic direction for the sixth form and using the planned opening of new facilities to re-launch it as a centre for academic and vocational learning
 - arranging external training for the governing board on using performance data so they can hold senior leaders to account for the achievement, behaviour and attendance of all students.

- An external review of governance should be undertaken in order to assess how this aspect of leadership and governance may be improved.

- Inspectors strongly recommend that the academy should not seek to appoint newly qualified teachers.

Report on the second monitoring inspection on 15–16 October 2013

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents, met with the Principal, groups of students, parents, the Chair of the Governing Body and other governors and held a telephone conversation with a representative of the sponsors.

Context

Since the last inspection in May 2013, significant changes have taken place. On 1 September 2013, the Inspiration Trust became the sponsor of the academy and appointed a new Principal, whose post commenced on that date when the previous Principal stepped down. A new governing body has been established, with a combination of existing and new members.

Achievement of pupils at the school

Standards are slowly rising. More students gained five or more GCSE passes including mathematics and English at grade C or above in 2013. However, this increase masks some slow progress in English, despite increased progress in mathematics. The gaps between the progress of boys and girls, between students eligible for additional government funding through the pupil premium and for disabled students and those who have special educational needs did not reduce and are still too wide. Students for whom English is an additional language make much less progress than similar students do nationally. Their achievement and support will be a focus for the next monitoring visit.

Examination results in the sixth form were similar to the previous year, although the proportion completing Year 13 increased. Students were successful in some subjects; for example, English literature, mathematics and media studies. More students took up places at university. However, overall, too few students made the progress they should.

In lessons, students are making better progress this year. Intervention programmes are having some significant successes. For example, in mathematics, these have resulted in a sharp improvement in calculation skills. Students are engaging with their learning in lessons much more regularly and respond well to better teaching.

Systems to assess and monitor how well students are progressing have been radically overhauled and now provide reliable data that are being used very well to identify what individual students need in order to ensure their success. A careful analysis of students close to achieving grade C or above in both mathematics and

English suggests that the academy's target of 60% gaining five or more passes at this grade or above, including these two subjects, is not unrealistic for 2014.

The quality of teaching

The quality of teaching observed during the inspection ranged from inadequate to outstanding. Good teaching was seen in a range of lessons in different year groups and subjects.

Teachers are paying more attention to the information they have from assessment in order to plan their lessons. This means more students have work that has the right level of challenge. Not all teachers use questioning to allow them to adjust their teaching during the lesson.

Lessons now proceed at a steady pace because teachers are using the new behaviour policy more consistently in the majority of lessons and in tutor time. Teachers use seating plans for students in order to provide support or additional challenge. Group work is well organised and has a positive impact on students' progress and on their social development.

Additional adults are effective in supporting teachers because they are placed in subject areas where they already have expertise or are being given training so they understand how best to support in less familiar subjects. Teachers have to request support from learning support assistants and provide information on how they propose to use the support and what they expect the impact to be.

The support for students who are in the early stages of learning English is not sufficiently well planned to ensure that they can gain access to all subjects in the curriculum quickly and then make good progress. They sit together in classrooms in order to support each other, and teachers give them translation aids to help them understand their instructions or the key vocabulary. However, the assessment of their ability and prior attainment does not ensure that their targets have the right level of challenge. Insufficient use is made of modern language courses to develop their literacy and language learning skills.

A marking policy is now in place. It is monitored and teachers are increasingly applying the guidance and requirements. Its application is still inconsistent, however. In particular, too little value is placed on well-written and neatly presented work with accurate spelling and grammar.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

Students who spoke to inspectors all agreed that the academy is a different place to last year. Behaviour is the most improved aspect. Exclusions have fallen significantly, as have the numbers removed from lessons. This was confirmed by parents, staff

and from observations made by inspectors, both in and out of lessons. Students in Year 7 have settled well and say that they feel safe. Concerns about bullying are being successfully addressed.

Students have positive attitudes to learning in the majority of lessons, and especially in the sixth form. Learning is rarely disturbed this year. Lessons are shorter and, within those lessons, teachers plan a series of activities to ensure that students can maintain their concentration.

Attendance has improved and is now much closer to the national average. Some persistent absence remains, especially for girls and students for whom English is an additional language. Sixth form attendance has improved significantly because of clear and higher expectations.

The quality of leadership in and management of the school

The new Principal, ably supported by the senior leaders and governors, has rapidly created a positive ethos in the academy, where aspirations for all students are high. Parents have responded positively to changes, and responses on Parent View indicate that there is now a significant majority who would recommend the academy. This is the converse of last year. Positive links with parents are developing securely.

New leadership structures and systems for holding people to account have been rapidly established and are understood and welcomed by staff. Staff morale is high and all are rising to the challenges they are being given. Inadequate teaching has almost disappeared. A greater proportion of teaching is good. This is the result of stronger performance management and clearer accountability. Good practice is being shared effectively. Teachers are benefiting from training and professional development matched to their individual needs.

The governing body has been restructured and new members appointed. Governors hold the Principal to account rigorously and are actively involved in gathering first-hand evidence of the impact of actions taken on outcomes for students. Governors are knowledgeable and ambitious for the academy. The Chair is in the academy every week and is taking charge of some aspects of leadership work, allowing the Principal to focus on core tasks involved with teaching and learning.

External support

The academy's sponsor is providing very strong support through shared leadership and opportunities to learn from other schools within the Trust. Among other initiatives, they commissioned a whole-academy review in July and were instrumental in the recruitment and appointment of the new Principal. Following the judgement at the first monitoring inspection that the improvement plan was not fit

for purpose, the sponsor and the leaders of the academy have completely rewritten the plan. It now contains measurable success criteria that enable progress to be checked and monitored. Timescales have an appropriate level of challenge and reflect the urgency now needed, following a slow start to improvement work immediately following the inspection.