



14 July 2006

Mrs Jacqui Faux
Priory School
Burr Hill Chase
Prittlewell
Southend-on-sea
Essex
SS2 6PE

Dear Mrs Faux,

SPECIAL MEASURES: MONITORING INSPECTION OF PRIORY SCHOOL

Introduction

Following my visit with Michael Madden, Additional Inspector, to your school on 28 and 29 June 2006, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector to confirm the inspection findings.

The visit was the first monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures in January 2006.

This letter will be posted on the Ofsted website.

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, including 14 lessons and tutorial periods, scrutinised documents and met with the headteacher, senior staff, the school council, the chair of governors and three representatives from the local authority (LA).

Context

Priory is a special school catering for pupils with severe emotional and behavioural difficulties. Most pupils enter the school with attainment which is below average and many have been permanently excluded from their previous mainstream schools. A significant minority of the pupils have a Youth Offending order. The school was inspected in January 2006 and placed in special measures. The school has continued to experience staffing difficulties. The acting headteacher at the time of the last inspection is now the substantive headteacher in the school. The senior management team has been strengthened with the addition of an inclusion manager, although they are

currently absent as a result of illness. The headteacher is also receiving temporary support from a recently appointed associate headteacher.

Achievement and standards

Pupils who attend the school regularly make satisfactory progress in their learning, which is confirmed by the school's own data. However a significant minority of pupils do not make enough progress because either they do not attend school or their attendance is low. A very small number of pupils do not make enough progress because they appear to be inappropriately placed as they are not responding well enough to the school's provision. Some pupils lack enthusiasm for learning, are easily distracted and their rate of progress is unsatisfactory. The progress pupils make is linked closely to the quality of teaching and support. Where teaching is good, expectations are clear, relationships are good, and activities are matched closely to individual needs; pupils make good progress. Where teaching is less than good, pupils' progress varies from satisfactory to inadequate. Pupils receiving individual specialist support for specific literacy difficulties make good progress, catching up with reading and spelling. Most pupils make satisfactory progress towards the targets on their individual education plans (IEPs). Overall, however, pupils throughout the school make inadequate progress.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the inspection in January 2006:

- To ensure consistency in pupils' progress across the school, particularly in maths and science - inadequate progress.

Personal development and well-being

The pupils' personal development varies considerably and remains, overall, unsatisfactory. Some of the pupils have good patterns of attendance and behave well. Many others behave acceptably and at times well in lessons and around the school. Attendance is increasing as a result of more rapid communication with parents, frequent meetings of the staff with an LA attendance officer and a focus on those pupils who are most frequently absent. However, though attendance is increasing it is still low overall.

In the main, the pupils are aware of factors affecting their health and understand the importance of the choices they make about diet and exercise, though their conversation suggests work may be needed to develop understanding further, for example about substance abuse.

Most of the pupils have a sound grasp of right and wrong behaviour. Recent discussion in the school has started to support many pupils to have positive relationships with their peers and with staff. There remain, however, a substantial number of the pupils who behave unpredictably. They find it hard to work cooperatively with others. Too many lessons are spoilt by disruptive

behaviour, some of which results in temporary removal from the class or in brief periods of exclusion. The incidence of exclusion, though still high, has reduced significantly. Records suggest that there have recently been fewer incidents of physical aggression, but some of the pupils still express concern about bullying.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the inspection in January 2006:

- To improve attendance and reduce exclusions - satisfactory progress.

Quality of provision

The quality of teaching is satisfactory overall. It was satisfactory or better in 12 lessons, including 7 where it was good. It was unsatisfactory in two lessons.

In good lessons, teachers use their subject knowledge and their knowledge of pupils to adapt tasks skilfully to the pupils' different learning styles and needs. In these lessons, the approach of teachers and support staff towards pupils is very good, resulting in a high level of rapport and mutual respect between pupils and adults. Well-organised interesting activities engage pupils in learning. Progress is reviewed effectively in plenary sessions, particularly where teachers involved pupils in active discussion about their learning.

Some satisfactory lessons are, weak in important aspects. A number of lessons do not create a climate for learning by making good enough use of resources to engage and motivate pupils. As a result pupils become easily distracted and disaffected. Sometimes teachers spend too much time talking to pupils, missing opportunities to encourage pupils to think for themselves. Some activities lack imagination. Inappropriate and/or challenging behaviour is not always managed well enough.

There has been satisfactory improvement in teachers' planning with a clearer structure to the delivery of lessons. Plenary sessions are now included and are a significant feature of the good lessons. However the use of assessment information to plan lessons is not yet developed. As a result, work is not always matched closely enough to pupils' aptitudes and abilities. In many of the satisfactory lessons, this was the cause of minor disruption.

Insufficient use is made of information and communication technology (ICT) and active approaches to engage the pupils' interest and support their learning. Senior managers have begun to monitor teaching and learning

through lesson observations. This is beginning to have a positive impact on improving the quality of teaching.

The school's curriculum now includes the required range of subjects. Recent changes have ensured specific timetabling of religious education for all pupils and have added music in Key Stage 3. Audits have been conducted and plans are being laid for more complete and coherent provision for ICT and for citizenship. Consideration is also being given to further work-related learning, starting in Year 9 and with a growing range of alternatives in Key Stage 4. Changes in the daily timetable have increased the amount of time devoted to teaching and learning. The school has retained the range of break and lunchtime clubs, sports, visits and other enrichment activities. A small number of subjects are successful in engaging pupils' interest, notably design and technology and physical education. The school uses visits to extend the range of pupils' experience of the arts, and it has appointed a teacher for a fuller programme of music next year.

Nevertheless, the curriculum remains inadequate as it does not yet sufficiently meet the needs and interests of the pupils. Basic skills are promoted but are not developed consistently across the school. Links with other institutions are opening further possibilities for work-related learning and qualifications, but these have yet to be turned into clear pathways for pupils to follow from Key Stage 3. The development of ICT to support teaching and to promote more independent learning requires improvements in the quality of equipment. It may also require a reappraisal and adjustment of the deployment of computers; current arrangements too often entail uncomfortable workstations and a crowding of staff and pupils that is incompatible with the school's new emphasis on respecting personal space. Provision to promote citizenship is not complemented sufficiently by the school's fuller range of approaches to pupils' personal development. Staff are seeking ways to use more time for teaching within the current school day, but the amount of taught time each week still falls, at about 23.5 hours, short of the recommended minimum.

Care, guidance and support are satisfactory with a particular strength in pastoral care. The staff know their pupils well and are watchful over matters of safety, health, relationships and well-being. In the main, the staff provide sound general support for the pupils through sensitive and understanding daily supervision, often backed up by well-informed advice. Not all, however, project the enthusiasm, optimism and clarity of high expectations that characterise the school's better practices. As a result, the day-to-day leadership experienced by pupils in lessons and tutorial periods varies widely and is in some instances much too weak.

Relevant policies are being revised to develop an inclusive approach.. Scrutiny of individual attendance has led to a fruitful focus on pupils with the most frequent absence, a focus that could be usefully extended to a larger group. The school has also rightly identified the need to record and analyse data of prior attendance patterns so that a whole school view of improvements in attendance can be evaluated. Behaviour is improving through a more consistent use of a simple code of conduct. A school counsellor is beginning to promote helpful restorative practices among pupils where relationships have been poor.

With support from the LA, closer liaison is growing between the school and other relevant services. The school is finding strong support from the Youth Offending Team and staff have successfully established a school and family liaison group, with a productive focus on parenting issues. Support is also being provided by other LA services, although it is not always sufficient to cater for the diverse needs of all the pupils.

The school's policies are still in draft and new practices are not yet consistently applied. Senior staff still have, therefore, to monitor the school closely and to respond quickly and effectively to instances of misbehaviour.

The new assessment co-ordinator has made a good start in gathering data to track pupils' progress and analysing this to establish priorities for improvement. Useful data arrangements for National Curriculum assessment are being strengthened but are not yet used by everyone to complement the school's other sound assessment practices. Data is not yet used sufficiently to inform the teachers' planning of lessons, and further arrangements are needed to ensure assessment and tracking of pupils accomplishments in ICT and in the National Curriculum Foundation Subjects.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the inspection in January 2006:

- To improve the quality of teaching and learning by making lessons more exciting, being clear what it is the pupils are to learn and ensuring that the work challenges pupils and matches their abilities - satisfactory progress.
- To improve the curriculum, especially with regard to broadening the vocational choices available. Increase the amount of time for lessons, offering music and enhancing provision for citizenship, religious education in Year 11 and ICTAC - satisfactory progress.

Leadership and management

The headteacher is providing satisfactory leadership and direction to the school with the support of a strengthened senior management team. She has a clear view of the school's strengths and weaknesses and she has established a vision for the school which is shared by senior managers and most of the staff. This has led to a satisfactory school development plan to address the issues for improvement and is beginning to show a positive impact on provision and pupil outcomes in the school. For example, since the last inspection there are now more lessons where teaching is good, and there are measurable improvements in attendance rates with fewer exclusions.

The school improvement plan contains appropriate actions to raise achievement and improve the quality of provision. However the targets set for improving the quality of teaching are not challenging enough and some targets do not have success criteria which are clear enough to measure the progress made.

The senior management team fully support the headteacher in moving the school forward. For example, they have begun to monitor the quality of teaching through lesson observations, are developing systems to track pupils' progress and they are ensuring there is appropriate support for existing newly qualified teachers. The capacity of the leadership team to secure improvement is satisfactory. The new associate headteacher has recently begun to strengthen the senior management team further, rightly identifying the need to strengthen performance management arrangements and the curriculum.

Governors support the work of the school and meet regularly to review the school's progress. The new chair of governors has a clear vision for developing the strategic skills of the governing body and visits the school regularly. However, governors are not providing enough strategic oversight, through for example focused visits to scrutinise and evaluate the school's progress in specific areas for improvement.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the inspection in January 2006:

- To ensure that the leadership and management of the school have a clear view about how the school should move forward, monitor and evaluate its work effectively and use all available information to identify the areas that need further improvement - satisfactory progress.

External support

The LA has provided the school with satisfactory support. It has carefully considered the closure of the school and arrived at the conclusion that this is not in the best interests of pupils and their parents within the local authority. It has produced a clear statement of action that specifies what it will do to support and challenge the school to remove it from special measures. However, targets for improving teaching are not yet challenging enough and teamwork with different agencies needs strengthening to help the school improve attendance. The LA has provided the school with appropriate specialist support for managers, and teachers, through for example the recently appointed associate headteacher. There are effective working relationships between the LA and the school. The staff appreciate this support. The LA has set clear targets for improvement and meets frequently with the school to review progress.

Main Judgements

Progress since being subject to special measures - satisfactory progress.

Quality of LA's statement of action - satisfactory.

Newly qualified teachers may not be appointed at this stage.

Priorities for further improvement

- To significantly increase the proportion of good teaching and eliminate unsatisfactory teaching.
- Consistent implementation of the Code of Conduct across the school.
- Ensure that teachers use the school's assessment information in planning sequences of lessons.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the chair of governors and the Director of Children and Learning for Southend-on-Sea LA.

Yours sincerely

Declan McCarthy
Additional Inspector