



20 November 2006

Ms L Roberts-Egan
Strategic Manager
Culver Education Centre (pupil support)
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Dear Ms Roberts-Egan

SERIOUS WEAKNESSES: MONITORING INSPECTION OF THE CULVER EDUCATION CENTRE

Introduction

Following my visit with Mr M Phillips HMI to your school on 1 and 2 November 2006, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector to confirm the inspection findings.

The visit was the second monitoring inspection since the school was found to have serious weaknesses in March 2005.

This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the strategic manager, the chair of the management committee, nominated staff and two representatives from the local authority (LA).

Context

Since the first monitoring inspection in September 2005 there have been significant changes in staffing and provision. Around half of the teachers have joined the centre; four senior managers have left; and the teacher-in-charge has returned after a prolonged absence. Staff recruitment remains a significant challenge. The centre was unable to appoint a permanent strategic manager and has been led and managed by the headteacher from the adjacent Shaw Primary School. Plans to relocate the secondary-age pupils to the authority's other pupil referral unit have been shelved and numbers at the centre have consequently increased. There are currently 61 pupils on roll.

Achievement and standards

Standards of attainment are low. Although some pupils did well, staff recognise that too many of the pupils underachieved in the most recent national tests and public examinations in 2006. This was largely due to the disrupted provision for Year 11 pupils and partly because of weaknesses in teaching and assessment. The work of most pupils in most subjects is below age-related expectations; weaknesses in literacy, in particular, impact on the progress that pupils can make in many areas of their learning. Nonetheless, given their starting points, the pupils make satisfactory and often good progress in lessons and over time. The primary-age pupils achieve well, although the progress of older pupils is uneven across different subjects.

New appointments in English, mathematics and science have strengthened curriculum planning, teaching and assessment in these areas. Procedures for tracking the pupils' progress have been strengthened, and are more soundly based on accurate initial assessments. Regular assessment provides a clearer overview of pupil progress and a sound basis for planning work at the right level.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the inspection in March 2005:

- Raise achievement in science throughout the centre and in mathematics in Years 7 to 9 – satisfactory progress.

Personal development and well-being

Warm relationships and some lively teaching enable the pupils to enjoy their learning, particularly in Key Stage 1 and 2 lessons where pupils' behaviour is very good. All staff take care to model good relationships and behaviours and their strong spirit of teamwork impacts positively on pupils' personal development. At lunchtime, all Key Stage 1 and 2 pupils and their teachers sit together to enjoy healthy food, lively conversation, and each other's company. This practice does much to promote pupils' moral and social development. The behaviour of most of the older pupils in lessons is good because of the effective classroom management by teachers and teaching assistants. Challenging behaviour is well managed by staff. However, the recalcitrant attitude of some older pupils often encumbers learning; more could be done to develop pupils' independent learning skills because teaching is sometimes overly-structured and too directive. Teachers work hard to overcome some inherently inappropriate attitudes that students bring to the

school, particularly with racism. The school has a clear policy for dealing with and recording such incidents, and works hard to counter prejudice.

Staff work hard to ensure that pupils work and play in a safe environment, and pupils are developing responsible attitudes to their own well-being, for example, by adopting hygienic practices when preparing food. Pupils now have access to spaces and facilities where they can play and exercise safely during lesson and break times. Their physical development and enjoyment is enhanced by the centre's good use of external teaching expertise, the provision of a new outdoor play area, and the use of other local facilities such as the Grangewaters activity centre. The pupils' involvement in decision-making has developed well, particularly for primary-age pupils who have elected representatives on the Shaw Primary School council. Older pupils are enthusiastic members of a burgeoning school council that is starting to discuss practical issues, such as the provision of cooled drinking water.

There are now rigorous strategies in place to monitor levels of authorised and unauthorised absence, enabling the management committee to evaluate and challenge levels of absence more effectively and allowing the centre to act quickly when a pupil does not attend school. Attendance has improved in Key Stages 1 and 2, exceeding targets set, and is good. However, attendance in Key Stages 3 and 4 did not meet its targets in 2005-2006.

The reintegration of pupils into mainstream schools has improved significantly, particularly for primary-age pupils, 27 of whom fully or partially reintegrated in 2005-2006. Although only 20% of the secondary-age pupils were successfully reintegrated during 2005-2006, there were some notable successes with pupils returning to full-time education or finding stable employment. The strong partnership between the local authority, the centre and Shaw Primary School has been fundamental to this improved reintegration and links with other mainstream schools are developing well.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the inspection in March 2005:

- Improving the re-integration and placement of pupils into mainstream schools – good progress.

Quality of provision

The quality of teaching has improved significantly, although the quality of learning in lessons remains variable. The most significant weaknesses in teaching have been eradicated and teaching is satisfactory overall. Many lessons are good and some are outstanding, particularly in the primary phase where specialist staff have a confident grasp of the curriculum and use assessment information effectively to guide the pupils' next steps in learning. The curriculum is much improved, particularly in the primary phase. Schemes of work in English, mathematics and science have improved and the wider range of options for older pupils ensures that their learning needs are better met. This improved provision has been crucial in achieving more successful reintegration.

The quality of short-term planning has improved. Lesson plans are more detailed with clear objectives that are suitably shared and reviewed with the pupils. In general, activities are well devised to meet the needs and the interests of the pupils, although assessment information is not used by all teachers to set suitably challenging work for different pupils. Work is carefully structured and well directed. In the best lessons the pupils really enjoyed their learning because the work was varied, well paced, challenging and interesting. The most significant improvements have been in Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2 where the rooms have been transformed. Specialist primary classrooms provide a stimulating environment for the pupils: displays support learning well and reflect the good progress that pupils make over time. In addition, the improvements to specialist accommodation for science and art, and in the fabric and resources for learning, as well as the hard play area, have strengthened considerably the centre's provision.

Teaching assistants provide good and often excellent support for individual pupils. On occasions their expertise is used very effectively to optimise the pupils' learning. They are particularly skilled in diffusing difficult situations and managing challenging behaviour. Nonetheless, their learning support role is insufficiently planned and often underdeveloped in lessons.

Systematic monitoring of lessons has helped to improve teaching, although the centre recognises that some weaknesses remain. Staff have better access to assessment information, but its use is underdeveloped in terms of planning work and setting short-term targets. The centre also acknowledges that more could be done to foster pupils' independent learning skills by presenting them with a wider range of activities in lessons and encouraging them to take more responsibility for the quality of their work.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the inspection in March 2005:

- Work in partnership with the local authority to improve the quantity and quality of the accommodation for science, physical education, art and design throughout the centre and an outdoor play and a quiet area in the primary department – good progress.

Leadership and management

The appointment of the strategic manager has been fundamental to the transformation of the centre over the last year and its rapid improvement across several areas of provision. She has provided a strong professional lead and has been robust in identifying areas for improvement and decisive in addressing weaknesses. Her determination to embed good professional practice, particularly in establishing clear roles and responsibilities and proper accountability, has strengthened management at all levels. Strong links with the primary school, and new appointments have also strengthened senior leadership and curriculum management. The interim senior management team is strong, cohesive and effective.

The centre has maintained its settled and positive ethos, but has focused more sharply and successfully on improving the quality of its provision. Furthermore, it has worked closely with the LA and local schools in the strategic development of the pupil support service. The leadership has quickly and effectively addressed the issues raised at the last visit and has made remarkable progress over the last year. The necessary improvements have been made in implementing procedures for performance management, workforce reform, budget allocation and in monitoring and self evaluation. The introduction of new systems ensures that these improvements can be sustained. School self-evaluation has improved and is sound. The monitoring of teaching and pupil progress has led to demonstrable improvement. Evaluation is accurate and is beginning to be used effectively to inform development planning, although the analysis of data is not sufficiently rigorous. Despite the fact that some of the post-holders are temporary, the centre demonstrates capacity for further improvement.

The management committee has been strengthened by new appointments and is good. Improvements in the quality of information and lines of accountability ensure that it is well informed and is in a strong position to hold the centre to account.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the inspection in March 2005:

- Improving the leadership and management of the primary department - outstanding progress.
- Improve leadership and management and governance - good progress.

External support

Since the last visit the LA has continued to work closely with the centre to support its changing needs and to develop local provision that better meets the needs of its pupils and the local schools. This support has been good; it has balanced well the need to support and challenge the centre. Good collaborative partnerships are at the heart of the best improvements, particularly with primary schools.

Main Judgements

The school has made good progress in removing the causes of its serious weaknesses.

Priorities for further improvement

- strengthen provision in the secondary phase by further developing suitable pathways for individual learners and improving the quality of teaching
- develop the use of assessment for lesson planning and in setting short-term targets

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the chair of governors and the Director of Education for Children Education and Families Essex.

Yours sincerely

Paul Brooker
Her Majesty's Inspector