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13 June 2008

Mrs Christine Fairless
Headteacher
Pathways Special School
Tennyson Avenue
Grangetown
Middlesbrough
TS6 7NP

Dear Mrs Fairless

SPECIAL MEASURES: MONITORING INSPECTION OF PATHWAYS SPECIAL SCHOOL

Following my visit with Dave Smith Additional Inspector to your school on 11 and 12 June 2008, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector to confirm the inspection findings.

The visit was the third monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures in March 2007. 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 – inadequate

Newly qualified teachers may not be appointed.

This letter and monitoring inspection report will be posted on the Ofsted website. Please inform the Regional Inspection Service Provider of any factual inaccuracies within 24 hours of the receipt of this letter.

I am copying this letter and the monitoring inspection report to the Secretary of State, the chair of governors and the Interim Executive Director for Children, Families and Learning for Redcar and Cleveland LA.

Yours sincerely

Heather Richardson HMI
H M Inspector

SPECIAL MEASURES: MONITORING OF PATHWAYS SPECIAL SCHOOL

Report from the third monitoring inspection on 11 and 12 June 2008

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the headteacher, members of the school's leadership team and other teachers, the chair of governors, and a representative from the local authority (LA). Informal discussions were held with pupils.

Context

There have been no major changes to the senior leadership team since the previous inspection. Staffing remains relatively stable, but there have again been changes to the curriculum and staffing for English, including the appointment of a new subject leader for September. There have been additional changes to the staffing and planning for Key Stage 3 pupils on an alternative curriculum. Provision for vocational courses in health and beauty has recently become available to Key Stage 4 pupils, alongside the provision developed earlier this academic year for construction, horticulture and photography.

Achievement and standards

The school's records and inspection evidence indicate that a significant proportion of pupils still underachieve and standards remain too low overall. This is illustrated in the school's analysis of pupils' progress, based on its new tracking system. It shows that over a half of pupils made no significant progress in writing between one term and the next; the proportion making insufficient progress in reading was over a quarter and in mathematics, it was a quarter of pupils. A few pupils regressed. Recent restructuring of the provision for English at Key Stages 3 and 4, undertaken with considerable support from the LA, is showing early signs of benefit for some pupils. However, this is too recent and too fragile to have made a significant difference to the standards reached by pupils. The development of literacy across the curriculum has faltered; the request for staff to identify opportunities for extended writing is an inadequate response to the scale of the challenge to improve writing. As noted at the time of the previous monitoring inspection, overall provision for literacy lacks sufficient coherence. Reading intervention activities are in place, but there are no similar arrangements for pupils who need additional support to improve their writing or mathematics. Pupils' achievement is hampered by limitations in the overall quality of provision and ongoing issues with behaviour and attitudes. However, there are some areas where pupils' achievement is more encouraging, most notably art. Some pupils on vocational courses are gaining skills and self-esteem through their achievements, for example in bricklaying, but this is not the case for all pupils on these courses.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the inspection in March 2007:

- Raise standards in English in Key Stages 3 and 4 – inadequate

Personal development and well-being

Although there is some improvement in the attitudes of some learners in some lessons, progress in improving pupils' attitudes and behaviour has stalled since the previous monitoring inspection. As before, pupils' attitudes and behaviour are best when lessons capture their interest and provide an appropriate level of challenge. However, because there is too much inconsistency in the quality of lessons and in teachers' responses to inappropriate behaviour, pupils can and do push the boundaries of what is acceptable. Hence there is often either an uneasy calm or too much volatile behaviour. There is too little progress in pupils taking responsibility for its own actions.

Overall attendance figures have improved since the inspection. The monitoring of attendance is more rigorous and good attendance is celebrated well. However, problems persist; the attendance of older pupils and, for some of these pupils, their poor punctuality to lessons contributes to their inadequate achievement. Lateness to lessons is usually linked with pupils' disenchantment with what is provided. Despite some pockets of better practice, teaching and learning and the curriculum are not sufficiently engaging to boost attendance.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the inspection in March 2007:

- Improve pupils' attitudes and behaviour – inadequate
- Improve attendance – satisfactory

Quality of provision

There is some good teaching, for example in art and in the teaching of literacy in some primary groups. However, although it is satisfactory overall, not enough teaching is of a sufficiently high quality to enable pupils to make the necessary progress and reduce their underachievement. The best teaching engages pupils' enthusiasm and promotes effective learning, whereas weaker lessons at best occupy pupils and at worst antagonise them. There is, as yet, limited evidence that all teachers are planning work which matches pupils' needs and is informed by their assessment of what pupils have achieved. As before, links between speaking and listening, thinking skills and writing are ad hoc. This is reflected in both lessons and curriculum plans. There is insufficient coherence or consideration for pupils' progress throughout the school in either the plans for the curriculum or its delivery. The school has revised and improved its alternative provision for a group of Key Stage 3 pupils. Some further opportunities for accreditation for Key Stage 4 pupils are being sort and adopted, but students are still achieving results well below the average for similar schools. As noted above, the well-resourced vocational provision is promoting success for some pupils in some aspects. However, the picture is mixed across the vocational courses and is adversely affected by the attendance of some pupils.

Adults in school generally show good pastoral care and support for pupils, and most promote good relationships effectively. This is seen in the increasing range of additional activities provided and is reflected, for example, in the confidence shown by the Year 11 pupils still in school. However, the systems for registering pupils' attendance are not sufficiently robust. The late registration of pupils in the afternoon session is not acceptable as it puts their safety at risk.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the inspection in March 2007:

- Create more and better opportunities for Key Stage 4 pupils to achieve success – inadequate
- Increase the time given to pupils' education and ensure that the statutory requirements for the curriculum are met – This was not a focus on this visit.

Leadership and management

There are some emerging signs of improvement in the work of the school, such as the recent developments in provision for English at Key Stages 3 and 4 and aspects of the provision for vocational education. However, these signs of improvement are often fragile. Judged over the time since the school's initial inspection, as well as since the previous monitoring inspection, the amount of improvement achieved is too little and the pace of change is too slow. The impact of the actions of the school's most senior leaders on outcomes for pupils remains limited.

Some monitoring has been undertaken by members of the senior leadership team, using a variety of appropriate strategies. However, monitoring is not yet sufficiently robust or coherent. Despite summaries of areas to develop as a consequence of monitoring activities, there is limited evidence of this information feeding through into clear priorities. Although there is a lot of well-intentioned activity, some of which is beneficial, there is insufficient clear strategic leadership and effective oversight to bring about the necessary improvement. However, governance is stronger as a result of training, improved attendance at meetings and increasing engagement with and challenge to the school; as governors acknowledge, this has further to develop.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the inspection in March 2007:

- Monitor performance thoroughly to provide information for more accurate self-evaluation – inadequate

External support

The LA has provided good support overall, through both its support for staff in school and its reviews of progress. The amount of support for English has been substantial. The school and LA staff have worked together well and the school has valued the extent and quality of this support. Relationships between the LA and the school have improved, as have communications. Timely notes of visit are now sent to both the school and chair of governors.

Priorities for further improvement

- Improve the pace and impact of improvement through more effective leadership and management.
- Improve the consistency of provision, in both lessons and the management of pupils' behaviour.
- Take robust and coherent action to improve literacy, especially at Key Stages 3 and 4.