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3 October 2008

Mr Alan Smithies
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Smithies

Special measures: monitoring inspection of Parklands High School

Following my visit with Katrina Gueli HMI and Ronald Bulman, Additional Inspector, to your school on 1 and 2 October 2008, 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 April 2008. The monitoring inspection report is attached and the main judgements are set out below.

Progress since being subject to special measures – 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 Director of Children's Services for Liverpool City Council.

Yours sincerely

H M Inspector

Special measures: monitoring inspection of Parklands High School

Report from the first monitoring inspection on 1 and 2 October 2008

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the headteacher, groups of students, nominated members of staff, the chair of governors and representatives from the local authority (LA).

Context

Since the previous inspection, three members of staff have left the school.

Achievement and standards

The school has made satisfactory progress in improving standards in English and mathematics and at Key Stage 4 since the previous inspection. This has largely been due to the success of a number of intervention strategies that targeted students who were underachieving. Unvalidated examination results show that the proportion of students gaining five or more A*–C grades at GCSE level rose from 29% in 2007 to 43% in 2008. In 2007 only 1% of pupils gained five or more A*–C grades at GCSE level including English and mathematics. In 2008 this figure rose to 15%. Nevertheless, standards in both English and mathematics at Key Stage 4 remain significantly below national levels and reflect past underachievement. Provisional results for assessments held at the end of Key Stage 3 indicate that there has been a rise in standards in 2008. At least 31% of students attained Level 5 or higher in English. These results are currently subject to remarking and the school estimates that results will rise as a result. In mathematics, unvalidated results indicate a sharp rise in standards, with 50% of students attaining Level 5 or higher, which represents a significant move towards the school's target of 55%. In both English and mathematics few students attained Level 6 or higher and outcomes at this level fell well short of the school's targets. In lessons observed, standards were still predominantly lower than average. There is, as yet, insufficient emphasis on realising the potential of the most able students capable of attaining the highest levels and grades.

Contributing factors to these improvements have included an increase in the time students spend studying English at Key Stage 4 and additional classes in this subject for some groups of learners. Extra days for coursework have been held and a number of additional learning events have proved effective. Regular analyses of the progress being made by students in Year 11 take place and mentors are assigned to students falling behind in their work. A similar targeting and mentoring process exists for those students in Year 10 who are capable of gaining five or more A*–C grades at GCSE level including mathematics and English.

Subject leaders in mathematics and English have promoted new methods for assessing and tracking students' progress more frequently. This is helping teachers decide when students are ready for single level tests. Both departments have implemented a number of innovations. Changes of examination board, the adoption of modular specifications and the timing of examination entries are proving beneficial. These changes appeal to some students' preferences and motivate them by acknowledging success periodically and by spreading their workload into manageable units. Other effective strategies include displaying students' current and target levels on their books. These act as a constant and useful reminder of students' and their teachers' aspirations.

Progress since the last visit on the area for improvement:

- Improve achievement in English, mathematics and at Key Stage 4 – satisfactory.

Personal development and well-being

Students' attendance has improved. It rose from 87.3% in 2006–7 to 88.5% in the last academic year. School records indicate that attendance for the first month of the current academic year stood at 91.8%. Students' understanding of the benefits of better attendance on their education is growing. Most have responded positively to a combination of rewards and sanctions. A trophy is awarded weekly to the class in each year group with the best attendance and there are other rewards for those with annual attendance above 95%. Students who do not attend regularly have been required to sign attendance agreements. Fixed penalty notices have been introduced for parents of students who are persistently absent. Good links with the LA officers responsible for improving attendance and the school's police officer have enabled truancy hotspots in the locality to be more closely monitored. Attendance is better in Key Stage 3 than in Key Stage 4. While attendance has risen overall, the proportion of persistent absentees has increased. The school has made good efforts to encourage better punctuality. Procedures to record late arrivals have been strengthened and punctuality agreements have been introduced for those who frequently arrive late. There is some indication that these measures are having an impact. Nonetheless, on the second day of the inspection some 40 students arrived late for school. Punctuality to lessons is satisfactory.

Students' behaviour is satisfactory overall in and around the school. There is some boisterousness in corridors at break times. In the majority of lessons pupils listen satisfactorily to their teachers. However, in a few classes there is still some low-level disruptive behaviour caused by a minority of students, which slows the progress made by others. Not all disruption is dealt with consistently by teachers. Students' attitudes to learning vary from them being eager and enthusiastic to being easily distracted from their studies. Contributing to this is the fact that students are too

often allowed to be passive in lessons and not encouraged to play an active part in their learning.

Progress since the last visit on the area for improvement:

- Improve attendance – satisfactory.

Quality of provision

During the inspection 22 lessons were observed. Seven were good, 12 were satisfactory and three were inadequate. Consequently, far too large a proportion of teaching remains satisfactory or weaker and insufficient impact has been made on improving learning and the progress made by students.

Some aspects of teaching have improved. For example, all teachers now use a common format for planning lessons and learning objectives are now regularly shared with students. However, satisfactory and weaker lessons were typified by too much talk by teachers which resulted in students being too passive in their learning and on occasions becoming bored. In some lessons, poor behaviour was not effectively managed. Planning showed little evidence of work being matched to the differing abilities of students and this was also evident in lessons. Support from additional adults had only a limited impact on students' progress. Weak lesson endings provided little opportunity for teachers to assess progress or for students to reflect on their work or consolidate what they had learned. When asked to work independently, students often failed to rise to this challenge as too many lacked the skills and confidence to take ownership of their own learning. Strengths of better teaching included good teacher subject knowledge, positive relationships between adults and students and the effective use of praise to build students' confidence and self-esteem. Activities were stimulating, well paced and engaged students' interest. Good support for students' individual learning needs was provided by teachers and learning support assistants. Relevant questioning was used effectively to extend students' knowledge, check how well they had learned and to keep their attention from wandering.

The use of day-to-day assessment procedures in lessons is improving and the school recognises that this remains an area for development. The quality of marking is very variable. At its best, it indicates clearly to students how well they have achieved and also identifies the next steps they should take in order to improve. Most students know what their academic targets for the end of each key stage are but many are not clear what they need to do to reach them or how well they are doing at present.

Progress since the last visit on the area for improvement:

- Improve the quality of teaching and learning so that a higher proportion of lessons are good or better –inadequate.

Leadership and management

The headteacher and the leadership team have worked hard to maintain staff morale and to initiate a number of improvement measures. Staff have industriously supported initiatives aimed at raising students' achievement, such as the more focused approach to improving attendance. A number of weaknesses in teaching have been tackled. Systems for the regular monitoring of teaching and learning have been introduced. Following training from the LA, the core leadership team has observed most teachers more than once and given feedback on the quality of their lessons. Staff judged to be underperforming are given support to improve, although the quality of planning required from these teachers lacks detail. However, the school's view of the overall quality of teaching and learning, and of the improvements it has made in this area, is too generous and has given it an inaccurate picture of the strength of teaching and learning. Too much teaching is considered good when it is satisfactory because systems for assuring the accuracy of lesson observations on teaching are not rigorous enough. In part, this over generous assessment is because the school lacks a clear enough understanding of what constitutes good teaching. A further factor is that lesson observations focus chiefly on teaching and not sufficiently on the progress made by students. The lack of robust monitoring has meant that the school has not begun to tackle with sufficient urgency all the satisfactory or weaker teaching that it needs to address if recent academic improvements are to be sustained and built upon. There is also no formal policy for monitoring the school's work or an up-to-date teaching and learning policy where expectations of good and outstanding teaching are clearly set out for staff. Some training has taken place on the features of good teaching but the impact of this has been limited. A number of opportunities have been provided for staff to observe existing good practice in the school but few have been able to observe good teaching and learning in other settings. There is also a lack of clarity about how results of monitoring are collated and interpreted. Consequently, the school does not have a sufficiently precise or reliable picture of the overall strength of teaching and learning to inform training for staff.

Planning is monitored by senior leaders and the findings of a scrutiny of students' work have been shared with staff. However, the outcomes of monitoring are not used formally by the school to assess the effectiveness of each department. The school's action plan is regularly evaluated. Some key evaluations, such as that of the quality of teaching and learning, are over generous. The action plan identifies members of staff responsible for specific areas of improvement. However, there are few milestones by which improvements can be easily measured.

The senior leadership team has been greatly enlarged. To tackle various school issues, 12 working groups made up of senior and middle leaders have been created. The school recognises that the number of these groups is causing some confusion and repetition of work. It has also diverted the school's attention from the urgent need to improve teaching and learning. Constructive steps have been taken to involve middle leaders in monitoring the work of their departments, such as checking

teachers' planning and students' books. Some are involved in monitoring the quality of teaching and learning in lessons and some have drawn up useful evaluations of their departments' work. As a result, the awareness of some middle managers of where weaknesses in teaching and learning lie is growing and they are beginning to provide support for colleagues. Governors are becoming more informed about the school's work. Subject managers are invited to governors' meetings to present overviews of their subject and work. Some governors visit the school but do not yet report back formally to the governing body about the school's work.

Progress since the last visit on the area for improvement:

- Develop more robust quality assurance systems to enable the effective monitoring, evaluation and development of teaching and learning – inadequate.

External support

The LA's statement of action was judged to be satisfactory. While it has contributed to improvements in some of the areas identified for improvement, it has been less effective in others. Nonetheless, the LA has provided satisfactory support for the school. It has recruited extra governors to the school and LA consultants for numeracy and literacy have advised members of staff and provided training on monitoring and on assessment. The LA has led several recent reviews of the school's work, including one which accurately assessed the school's progress in improving the quality of teaching. An associate headteacher has been working alongside the headteacher for one day a week and other consultants have advised staff. The school improvement partner is a regular visitor to the school.

Priorities for further improvement

- Increase opportunities for all staff and managers to develop a clearer understanding of what constitutes good teaching.
- Increase opportunities for students to be more actively involved in lessons.