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23 March 2010

Mr S O'Gara  
Pathways Special School  
Tennyson Avenue  
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Dear Mr O'Gara

Ofsted monitoring of schools with a notice to improve

Thank you for the help which you and your staff gave when I inspected your school on 23 March 2010 and for the information which you provided during my visit. Please pass on my thanks to the students and staff I talked to, and to the representative of the local authority, the School Improvement Partner and the Chair of Governors, who gave up time to meet with me or to speak on the telephone.

Since the previous inspection on 08–09 July 2009 there have been a number of changes of staff. The acting deputy headteacher left at the end of July 2009. The deputy headteacher remains on long-term absence. A new acting deputy headteacher was appointed in January 2010.

The acting headteacher left in February 2010. A new headteacher took up post in March 2010 and had been at the school for 16 days at the time of this inspection. In the short period between, the local authority ran the school directly.

Nine teachers (or teaching assistants) left as a result of staffing cuts at the beginning of the autumn term 2009.

As a result of the inspection on July 2009, the school was asked to do the following.

- Improve attendance by achieving the target agreed with the local authority for 2010.
- Improve the behaviour of students.
- Improve the quality of teaching and learning so that most of it is consistently good.
- Take more responsibility for the education of the students educated through the EOTAS service by monitoring and reviewing their provision and progress.
- Ensure that a modern foreign language is taught at Key Stage 3.

Having considered all the evidence I am of the opinion that at this time the school is making satisfactory progress in addressing the issues for improvement and in raising students' achievement.

Students continue to make at least satisfactory progress, as at the time of the inspection in July 2009. Some pupils are making good progress, especially in the primary section. This is enabling them to begin to catch up to where they should be. In nearly all the lessons observed, students were actively engaged in learning and so made good progress. Systems for tracking progress are robust and focus well on individual students. This enables teachers to identify gaps in students' previous learning and to note what needs to be incorporated into future lessons.

Good progress has been made on further improving the quality of teaching. Seven lessons were observed. Almost all the teaching was good. Teachers' planning is thorough and lessons proceed at a good pace. Teachers increasingly encourage students to take responsibility for their own behaviour and learning. Relationships between teachers and students are good, fostering positive attitudes to learning. Teachers have benefited from helpful training and from close guidance from senior managers on effective lesson planning. In one satisfactory lesson, time was not managed well so that some boredom crept in and there was some restless behaviour.

The school has made good progress in improving behaviour. As a result, effective learning takes place in lessons. Exclusions have fallen. Senior managers are monitoring behaviour more closely to identify patterns and are beginning to use this information to determine what further professional training might be appropriate. Staff have been fully involved in drawing up a new behaviour policy. This makes clear the system for rewards and sanctions. Students, in discussion, said that they felt the system operated fairly. They appreciated incentives, such as visits out of school, and the increasing recognition of when they were making good effort.

Students' voice is growing in decisions that affect them, heard for example through the school council. Students and staff ran a sponsored mile in March to raise funds for charity. In this way, recently, the atmosphere in school has improved. A more appropriate, personalised curriculum is providing better for students' individual interests and talents. This is helping to make attendance at school more attractive. The school is considering how to improve its support to individual students and their families to encourage better attendance.

Nevertheless, despite this clearly improving 'package' for students, progress in improving attendance has been inadequate. This is largely because the school has just emerged from a period of crisis, with several changes of leadership. Significant staff cuts in the autumn term led to an unsettled time, with uncertainty and low morale of staff. This had a negative impact on attendance, which is still far too low. Encouragingly, figures since January 2010 show attendance is rising once again. Persistent absence is being addressed in a more focused way.

The new headteacher brings considerable, relevant headship experience. He has reinvigorated the school and is providing fresh impetus to the drive for improvement. However, further time is needed to show whether the recent rise in attendance can be sustained.

Throughout this period the local authority has provided good support to the school: through a behaviour management specialist, staff training and, recently, an experienced consultant headteacher to mentor the new headteacher. This arrangement is providing good strategic direction.

The local authority's statement of action was judged by Ofsted to be satisfactory. It is proving to be good, in that it has correctly identified the next steps for the school. Impact thus far has been satisfactory. The school monitors the outcomes of actions carefully and regularly. An appropriate additional priority has been identified: to strengthen leadership and management. As the school has, it is hoped, entered a period of greater stability, the aim is that leaders at all levels, and governors, take responsibility for driving improvement forward at a faster pace. The local authority, school and other partners have formed a coalition group to help steer the school forward.

There has been satisfactory progress in monitoring the EOTAS group of students. An authority-wide review of how EOTAS is organised is currently underway that should further inform this process.

The school has not yet included a modern foreign language at Key Stage 3 but is exploring the options for introducing this from September 2010.

I hope that you have found the visit helpful in promoting improvement in your school. This letter will be posted on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Honoree Gordon  
Her Majesty's Inspector