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11 June 2010

Mr Scott Preston (Acting Principal)
St. Neots Community College
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Dear Mr Preston

Special measures: monitoring inspection of St. Neots Community College

Following my visit with Godfrey Bancroft, Additional Inspector, to your school on 9 June 2010, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the inspection findings.

The visit was the third monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures in March 2009. The monitoring inspection report is attached and the main judgements are set out below.

Progress since being subject to special measures – satisfactory.

Progress since previous monitoring inspection – satisfactory.

This letter and monitoring inspection report will be posted on the Ofsted website.

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 Cambridgeshire.

Yours sincerely

David Jones
Her Majesty's Inspector

Special measures: monitoring of St. Neots Community College

Report from the third monitoring inspection on the 9 June 2010.

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with local authority officers, the acting principal, other nominated staff, the chair of governors, the National Challenge adviser, and the principal of the partner college with whom the governing body are working to establish a local federation. Senior managers were invited to join inspectors in the joint evaluation of teaching and learning.

Context

The vice principal became acting principal on 1 March 2010. The principal of Longsands College, a Local Leader of Education, assumed the role of mentor to the acting principal. On 4 May 2010, the governing bodies of both schools unanimously agreed the following recommendations:

- establish a Federation between the Longsands College and St Neot's Community College to be operational from 1 September 2010; and
- change the status of St Neots Community College from a community to a foundation school with effect from 1 September 2010.

The final step in the statutory processes is now under way including publication of the notice for change of status of St Neots Community College from a community, to a foundation school. The governing body of the community college met on 10 June, the second day of this monitoring visit; no representations were received from parents or stakeholders and the governing body took the decision to proceed with the proposed changes.

A temporary governing body for the federation met for the first time on 14 June and ratified the appointment of the principal of Longsands College as executive principal from September 2010 and began the work of determining the admission arrangements for the two schools. An experienced local authority representative will join the temporary governing body.

Pupils' achievement and the extent to which they enjoy their learning

This visit took place as the 2010 public examinations began. Evidence from GCSE and vocational examinations completed earlier in the school year indicate that some outcomes are more positive than in previous years. Similarly, evidence from a scrutiny of students' work indicates that where students have had regular opportunities to experience good teaching, standards are beginning to rise. However, the inconsistencies still evident in provision mean that learning and achievement remain variable. For example, the college estimate that the

examination outcomes for those students in receipt of free school meals are unlikely to show significant improvement against the limited outcomes secured in 2009. The autumn term monitoring visit will include a detailed evaluation of the outcomes of the 2010 public examinations.

Progress since the last visit on the areas for improvement:

- Raise standards and achievement by ensuring realistic, but challenging targets are used effectively by all staff to secure rapid improvement. - inadequate

Other relevant pupil outcomes

Inspectors checked the single central record of the college and found that the safeguarding procedures meet current Government requirements.

The overall college rate of attendance continues to improve; however, the attendance of some groups; for example, those students who are entitled to free school meals, continues to be well below the college average. Punctuality between lessons remains problematic amongst certain groups of students in each year group. These individuals have a tendency to dawdle between lessons and congregate in open spaces. Some staff are proactive in moving these individuals on to their next lesson and some interventions witnessed by inspectors were brilliantly timed. However, not enough staff consistently engage with students in transit around the site or near their teaching base to address this punctuality issue appropriately.

Relationships between adults and students, the students' behaviour and their commitment to work in lessons are often good. Even so, there are still times when learning is disrupted by unacceptable behaviour and by students continuing to arrive late for lessons.

Some staff have expressed concerns to inspectors that behaviour management procedures remain overly complex, lacking clarity of expectation and outcomes. These views have a resonance in the returns from the staff survey discussed by the local authority with inspectors. Consistency of expectation as well as clarity of behaviour management procedures is required to secure the further improvements in attendance, punctuality and progress required.

Progress since the last visit on the areas for improvement:

- Improve overall attendance and reduce the level of persistent absence by targeting strategies particularly in Years 10 and 11 - satisfactory

The effectiveness of provision

During the previous monitoring visits inspectors observed a wide variety of staff teaching. On this occasion the inspection team observed only those teachers with college wide responsibilities who that will be on the staff in September 2010.

Inspectors saw 28 staff teach; nearly six out of ten lesson were judged to be good or better. Lesson planning is improving and usually identifies how the needs of the full range of abilities in each class will be met. However, practice in this respect is not yet consistent. There are still lessons in which students, despite their range of ability, all do the same work. Consequently, there are times when students are not suitably challenged. When this happens, the pace of progress slows, most often in the case of the most able students. However, in the best lessons work is matched precisely to students' learning needs; on these occasions progress is good. In an effective GCSE science revision lesson, clear questioning by the teacher and the classroom assistant, pertinent demonstrations and peer discussions gave students confidence and encouraged the higher level response. At such times, activities capture and retain students' interest and enthusiasm. This applies especially to students who benefit greatly from the excellent 'Opening Minds' programme.

The use of questions to explore what students know and to challenge their ability to think their way through a task is variable. In the best lessons, teachers use questioning to involve and challenge students effectively. Procedures to involve students in knowing how well they are achieving and what they need to do to improve are developing satisfactorily and are good in the 'Opening Minds' provision.

Marking remains inconsistent. At times it is informative, encouraging and helpful but in some instances it is non-existent. The best lessons consistently help students to know the levels they are attaining and to review their progress. However, some marking remains cursory and fails to provide guidance on how to improve. The college's assessment data base is improving, the data available is extensive and some staff/ departments make good use of this information.

Sometimes teaching is not as effective as it might be when teachers are delivering subjects for which they are not specifically trained. Lesson planning identifies what is expected in terms of students' personal development, the generic learning skills they are expected to acquire and learning related to the college's specialist status. However, these features are often not given sufficient attention during lessons. For example, in all those lessons where teaching was graded satisfactory, more positive outcomes would have been possible if greater attention had been given to developing subject based literacy.

Curriculum provision needs further refinement in order to provide the range of vocational courses needed to meet the students' learning needs. Such developments are vital if the college is to address the learning needs of the less motivated students who become disenchanted with learning in Years 10 and 11 and allow their attendance to decline.

Progress since the last visit on the areas for improvement:

- Improve the quality of teaching by ensuring teachers consistently:
 - use a range of activities which challenge and motivate and meet the needs of all students – satisfactory.
 - provide students with clear information on how well they are achieving and what they need to do to improve for example through the marking of books. - satisfactory.

Priorities for further improvement given at last monitoring visit

- Improve students' progress in all subjects by developing a robust assessment data base that will enable effective monitoring by senior staff – satisfactory progress.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

The mentoring arrangements negotiated by the governing body with the local authority for the acting principal and the senior management team are helping the college review all of its key procedures. Inspectors were able to observe these senior colleagues working together during the joint observation of teaching. The views they expressed concurred with the judgement given by the inspection team. Budget management procedures have been improved with substantial help from the local authority. The governing body has a clear view of the college's financial position and appropriate steps have been taken to reduce the deficit.

A well-considered partnership improvement plan is being prepared in draft form for consideration by the governing body. This document provides a plausible context for sustained improvement.

As yet the college's specialist status in the performing arts and communication technologies is not contributing consistently to the required improvements in provision and outcomes. Similarly, the monitoring and evaluation of curriculum provision need further refinement if the college is to secure the improvements needed in achievement and attendance.

Progress since the last visit on the areas for improvement:

- Improve the accuracy and effectiveness of the evaluation of the college's performance by managers at all levels by:
 - ensuring inadequacies are clearly identified and eliminated

-making effective use of clear success criteria for evaluating the impact of interventions on improving students' standards, achievement and well-being – satisfactory

External support

The support offered by the local authority throughout the move towards federation has been particularly positive. A wide range of colleagues, at many levels, have been involved and the governors of both colleges would not have been in a position to take these important steps without the real leadership demonstrated by the local authority. The work of the National Challenge advisor has helped to drive forward the school improvement agenda. Since the start of the summer term, the mentoring support provided by the principal of Longsands College has given strategic direction to the efforts of the senior management team.

Priorities for further improvement

- Refine the vocational provision available to help address the achievement and attendance issues that remain.
- Provide clear behaviour and punctuality expectations and protocols.