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13 November 2009

Miss Maureen Strudwick
Principal
The Thomas Clarkson Community College
Corporation road
Wisbech
Cambridgeshire
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Dear Miss Strudwick

Fresh Start: monitoring inspection of The Thomas Clarkson Community College

Introduction

Following my visit with Heather Housden, Sue Lewis, Declan McCarthy and Roger Whittaker, additional inspectors, to your school on 11 and 12 November 2009, 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 fourth monitoring inspection since the school opened in September 2007.

This letter will be published on the Ofsted website. Please inform the Inspection Service provider of any factual inaccuracies within 24 hours of the receipt of this letter.

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the principal, members of the school's teaching staff, the chair of the governing body and a representative from the local authority.

Context

Since the previous visit, a vice principal has left the school. A new vice principal has joined and an associate principal has been seconded from another school. The

school has recruited a number of newly qualified teachers, but there are some difficulties in recruiting to the English department.

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

The unconfirmed results from the 2009 examinations show an improvement in the proportion of students achieving grades A*-C in English at GCSE and in mathematics. There has also been an increase in the proportion achieving five or more A*-C grades. However, the proportion achieving five or more A*-C grades including both English and mathematics has improved only slightly and is still low. Taking the results of all students' best eight subjects into account, the improvement has also been slight. The progress made by students has shown little improvement. That of boys has improved less than that of girls. Students with special educational needs and/or disabilities have made satisfactory progress. Lesson observations carried out by inspectors show that students make at least satisfactory progress in 86% of lessons. However, this includes 10% in which it is barely satisfactory. In 14% of lessons progress is inadequate.

Other relevant pupil outcomes

Students' behaviour has continued to improve, both in lessons and in moving around the school. Good systems for behaviour management are now in place and they are being made better use of in lessons. Staff are on hand to address any issues which arise around the school. The school's data, supported by evidence from students, demonstrates a reduction in the number of incidents of bullying and of racist behaviour. Students say that staff deal effectively with these issues when they arise and that they feel safe around the school. Although they are still far too high, the number of exclusions has reduced sharply. The school has a system for recognising the good behaviour of students and it has improved well. A range of strategies encourage students to attend school, though attendance is still broadly in line with where it was at the time of the previous visit and remains below average. Punctuality to school is monitored and the data shows an improvement on the figures for 2008.

The school's safeguarding procedures have been improved and are, in general, very thorough.

Progress since the last visit on the area for improvement:

- Take actions to reduce the incidence of poor behaviour, including that which is racist – satisfactory progress.

The effectiveness of provision

Inspectors visited thirty six lessons. Of these, 8% were outstanding, 37% were good, 39% were satisfactory, including 10% which were barely satisfactory, and 14% were inadequate. The presence of outstanding teaching in the school is becoming a consistent feature, but there is still far too much which is inadequate or barely satisfactory. In good or outstanding lessons, the teachers demonstrate good subject knowledge and plan interesting activities which relate well to students' interests and lives. The pace is good and there is a variety of tasks so that students of differing abilities are all well catered for. The progress that students make in their learning is monitored effectively through well targeted questioning and the teaching is adapted as necessary. In these lessons, students' attitudes to learning are very positive. In the lessons which are barely satisfactory or inadequate, it is sometimes not sufficiently clear what knowledge or skills students are meant to be developing. This makes the assessment of their progress during, or at the end of, the lesson impossible. In some lessons, while the purpose of the learning is better defined, it is not challenging enough. Difficulties in the management of behaviour is a contributory factor in the inadequacy of some lessons, in others students' attitudes to their work decline as a consequence of inadequate teaching. In one science lesson, insufficient regard was paid to the wearing of goggles by students whilst they were engaged in practical work.

The school has developed a number of initiatives since the last monitoring visit to further improve the care, guidance and support of students. These include the development of social and emotional literacy and of phonics programmes to improve reading spelling and writing skills. Teaching assistants have received further training and guidance since the last visit to develop their support role and there is a more systematic method of deploying them, so they provide more effective support for students' learning.

Students with English as an additional language now receive more effective support from bi-lingual support staff, who now carry out thorough assessments of language and mathematical development when the students join the school. They are now set realistic and challenging targets for learning. The ethnic minority achievement co-ordinator distributes a profile of their learning needs to heads of department who then advise teachers. However the targets teachers then set are less challenging than they should be, which limits the expectations of what students should be achieving. In order to rectify this, the co-ordinator has begun working with departments to raise awareness of how to meet the needs the students. Various community forums, neighbourhood groups, and parent inclusion meetings organised by the school are having a positive impact on the students' personal development.

Progress since the last visit on the areas for improvement:

- Improve the quality of teaching and learning to raise standards and increase students' progress – inadequate progress

- Ensure that students who arrive at the school from overseas are assessed and given targets for their external examination results and provided with the necessary support so that they achieve them – satisfactory progress

The effectiveness of leadership and management

The school's leaders have developed highly detailed and sophisticated systems for monitoring its work. This includes monitoring students' behaviour, attendance and punctuality, the quality of teaching and the progress made by all groups of students. This is used well to bring about improvement in most areas. The use of measurable data to identify progress at regular intervals, for example in the attainment of students against their targets, enables those with responsibilities to identify where further support is required. Heads of department are now involved in monitoring the work of their department, including that of teaching and learning quality, and drawing up plans for improvement. This is an important step, however the emphasis given to teaching and learning is too inconsistent. The focus on improving its quality, while high priority for some areas of the school is not so throughout. There is not sufficient understanding of issues related to teaching quality by some heads of department. The school's senior leaders do have a good understanding of the issues and their monitoring is accurate. While much of the analysis by heads of department, particularly with respect to the standards reached by students, is frank and accurate there is some lack of detail. For example, there is sometimes not enough information about what aspects of subjects students find difficult, or analysis of how their understanding of these areas can be enhanced. This means that improvement work too often lacks a clear focus.

The school's leaders' work in promoting equality of opportunity is developing well as is their engagement with parents, including those of students who are at an early stage in their acquisition of English. This is beginning to have an impact on the attendance of the students concerned.

The governing body is well informed. It provides strong support and increasingly strong challenge. For example, it has placed a good emphasis on investigating why the school's GCSE results in 2009 were not higher. Appropriate changes have been made to the deployment of the senior leadership team in order to improve the school's value for money.

Progress since the last visit on the areas for improvement:

- Review the value for money of the school's educational provision – satisfactory progress.

External support

The local authority has continued to provide good support, in a variety of ways. However, the impact of its recent work in improving teaching and learning is not leading to sufficiently rapid progress where teaching is inadequate or barely satisfactory. The National Challenge advisor is providing good support.

Main judgements

The school's overall progress – satisfactory

Priorities for further improvement

- Ensure that all subject leaders contribute fully to the improvement of the quality of teaching and learning.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the chair of governors and the Director for Children's Services, Cambridgeshire.

Yours sincerely,

Alan Alder

Her Majesty's Inspector.