

Ofsted
Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 4234
www.gov.uk/ofsted



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Mr Mark Stenton
Principal
Rushden Community College
Hayway
Rushden
NN10 6AG

Dear Mr Stenton

Special measures monitoring inspection of Rushden Community College

Following my visit to your school on 9–10 May 2017, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the inspection findings. Thank you for the help you gave during the inspection and for the time you made available to discuss the actions that have been taken since the school's recent section 5 inspection.

The inspection was the first monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures following the inspection that took place in July 2016.

Having considered all the evidence I am of the opinion that at this time:

Leaders and managers are taking effective action towards the removal of special measures.

The school's statement of action is fit for purpose.

The school's action plan is fit for purpose.

Having considered all the evidence I am of the opinion that the school may appoint newly qualified teachers.

I am copying this letter to the executive board, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Northamptonshire. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Deborah Mosley
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection that took place in July 2016.

- Urgently improve the quality of teaching, learning and assessment and reduce the inconsistencies in teaching by:
 - reducing the number of supply teachers in the school
 - improving the support for the least able pupils, so that their progress accelerates
 - ensuring that all teachers provide feedback in line with the school's policy
 - ensuring that teaching in mathematics enables all pupils to develop skills of mastery and reasoning, so that they are better prepared for the next stage of their mathematics education
 - increasing opportunities for pupils to develop their numeracy skills in different subjects.
- Improve pupils' personal development, behaviour and welfare by:
 - working with pupils to develop improved systems to address and reduce bullying in the school
 - working with leaders from the trust to improve pupils' attendance at school and reduce persistent absence
 - making sure that all teachers use the new behaviour system consistently across the school so that low-level disruption is eradicated and that all instances of disrespectful language and behaviour are consistently challenged
 - ensuring that all teachers insist on high standards of presentation of pupils' work.
- Improve leadership and management by:
 - ensuring that the new assessment system is consistently applied in all subjects
 - ensuring that the new arrangements for pupils on part-time and alternative provision are effective in improving their attendance and progress
 - increasing opportunities for teachers to develop their practice by learning from expertise in the school, the trust and elsewhere.
- Improve the sixth form by:
 - increasing opportunities for all students to take part in work-related learning.

Report on the first monitoring inspection on 9– 10 May 2017

Evidence

The inspector met with the head of the school, members of the senior leadership team, middle leaders and a group of staff. The inspector also met with a representative from the trust and with the chair of the governing body. The inspector spoke by telephone to the chair of the trust. She met with a group of pupils and also spoke to pupils informally at breaktime and lunchtimes. The inspector visited 11 lessons, jointly with leaders, across different subjects and year groups. During these visits to lessons, the inspector looked at pupils' work and spoke to them to evaluate the quality of their learning. She also examined the work in a sample of pupils' books. The inspector scrutinised a variety of documents in relation to behaviour and attendance, the quality of teaching, learning and assessment, pupils' outcomes and staff performance. The inspector also evaluated improvement plans. The inspector assessed the impact of leaders' actions taken since the last inspection, with particular focus on the areas for improvement relating to leadership and management, personal development, behaviour and welfare, and the quality of teaching, learning and assessment.

Context

In September 2016, the regional schools commissioner wrote to the members and trustees of the school's sponsor, The Education Fellowship Trust (TEFT), with a termination warning notice concerning Rushden Community College due to its poor performance. In March 2017, the Department for Education agreed to a request from the trust to terminate their funding agreement for all 12 of their schools. As a result, all of them, including Rushden Community College, will be rebrokered by the regional schools commissioner. At the time of the monitoring visit, the new sponsor had not been confirmed and, therefore, TEFT remains in place as the sponsor until that matter is resolved.

Since the last inspection, there have been considerable changes to staffing, particularly in relation to leadership. The previous principal and two vice-principals have left the school. A new principal was appointed from September 2016, who also appointed an existing senior leader as vice-principal and a further vice-principal from September 2016. In addition, an assistant headteacher left and two new assistant headteachers were appointed, initially to oversee English and mathematics. A member of staff who had been temporarily seconded to the school has been permanently appointed as an assistant headteacher. Furthermore, the senior leadership team has been extended to create additional capacity for leadership.

In addition to the above, 10 members of staff have left the school and seven new members of staff have joined the school.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

The principal has a clear vision for improvement and extremely high aspirations for pupils in the school. Following his appointment in September 2016, he immediately communicated his high expectations of staff and pupils. He took swift action to identify initial priorities and was clear about what needed to be done. Much of the work that the principal has driven has been facilitated by his creation of the 'Team Rushden' seven demands which outline clear expectations of all. This concept of Team Rushden was initially shared across the whole school through meetings and assemblies. High expectations were also shared with parents in a series of meetings. Furthermore, the principal has made it clear that staff and pupils should also have high expectations of the senior leadership team. The team is highly visible and extremely proactive in supporting staff and pupils. Leaders are completely involved in all aspects of the school's work. This supports the team ethos that is critical to further improvement.

The principal and vice-principals wrote the school's statement of action. They have put in place an appropriate and achievable action plan, detailing clear and specific targets to address all areas identified as in need of improvement at the time of the last inspection. This is regularly reviewed and leaders have the confidence to amend plans and strategies in accordance with their evaluation.

Greater leadership capacity has been created through the extended leadership team, enabling middle leaders to take greater responsibility and be able to hold staff to greater account. All aspects of this team's work focuses on the impact of their responsibilities on pupils' progress. For example, pastoral leaders focus on how behaviour affects pupils' performance in different subject areas. There is very much the sense of a 'joined-up' approach, with leaders liaising and collaborating effectively.

In September, 2016, the principal, ably supported by the two vice-principals, took immediate action to improve pupils' attendance and behaviour, particularly that in the classroom. A zero-tolerance approach to bullying was immediately established. Pupils have responded well to these attitudes, and a culture of equality and respect is developing across the school.

At the time of the last inspection, there were high numbers of supply staff which had an impact on the quality of education provided by the school. The principal has been creative in addressing this concern, for example by temporarily creating 'masterclasses' led by experienced staff. He has also appointed permanent cover staff in order that high expectations can be maintained in the case of staff absence. The principal has ensured that coaching and training support staff to develop their skills and practice. He has established a 'grow your own' approach to develop staff from within the school. This has ensured that the school is now fully and appropriately staffed.

Communication has been key to the improvements in the school. All staff are now clear about their roles and responsibilities, and the Team Rushden approach means that staff and pupils work together to drive improvements. The principal writes a weekly journal to staff, commenting on progress against the plans, celebrating achievements and reminding staff of the agreed aims. This ensures that the drive for improvement is continual, and that all staff remain clear about expectations and understand their roles in all that the school does.

Leaders have ensured that there is greater rigour in monitoring activities. They have introduced a programme of departmental reviews, undertaken by a team of senior leaders, working in liaison with middle leaders. For example, heads of subjects plan the departmental reviews with senior leaders who then feed back the findings to staff. These reviews inform staff performance targets, and progress against these is evaluated in follow-up reviews.

Leaders in the sixth form have taken action to ensure that there are increased opportunities for students to participate in work-related learning. All Year 12 students are due to undertake work experience this term. Students following vocational courses have taken part in work-related activities such as conferences and listening to external speakers. Leaders are keen to improve this further by ensuring that all work experience placements match students' interests and aspirations.

Governors have a clear understanding of the school's areas in need of urgent improvement. They offer appropriate levels of challenge but do not hold responsibility for improvements in pupils' outcomes because this sits with the trust.

Clear and tangible improvements are evident. There is still much work to be done to improve the quality of education in the school, but leaders understand their next priorities and are taking appropriate action to bring about further improvement.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Leaders have introduced the programme of departmental reviews since the last inspection. These evaluate the quality of teaching, learning and assessment across the school and help to inform staff training. Senior leaders share their findings with staff who then receive appropriate support and challenge. Follow-up reviews evaluate the impact of this work and determine the next stages in staff development, for example moving towards a formal support package or the setting of next steps targets. Leaders evaluate that the quality of teaching, learning and assessment has improved since the last inspection. Their monitoring information supports this view. Inadequate teaching has not yet been completely eradicated but clear processes are in place to support and challenge underperforming staff.

Leaders have introduced 'teacher files' to support teachers to improve the quality of teaching, learning and assessment. There are shared expectations of what teachers should consider when planning lessons, supported by a lesson checklist. Staff report that they now have a clearer understanding of the expectations of their teaching. Leaders have placed greater emphasis on using information about what pupils can already do, in planning to challenge pupils appropriately. The teacher files contain data sheets, detailing pupils' abilities and needs. This means that teachers are now more aware of the need to plan activities which meet the needs of pupils in their lessons. When the inspector visited lessons, teachers had these files available and those scrutinised indicated that they were being used by teachers to consider the needs of individual pupils in their lessons. However, work in pupils' books indicates that many groups work on the same activities, regardless of their ability. The most able pupils are not fully challenged and the least able pupils are not consistently supported effectively. Leaders are aware of the need for further improvements in ensuring that teachers consistently match work to pupils' abilities.

Following the last inspection, leaders recognised that the school's assessment systems and feedback policy were not having the required impact on progress. These have now been simplified and clear, straightforward expectations shared with staff. Work in pupils' books indicates that the policy is being applied effectively in some areas. However, inconsistencies remain. 'Target time', a dedicated reflection activity, has been introduced and where teaching is stronger, it is beginning to help pupils' progress. Pupils report that they find feedback helpful in many areas but not all teachers are as helpful as others. This remains an area of priority for the school.

Work has begun to improve teaching to support pupils' development of mastery and reasoning in mathematics and other subjects. In discussions and questions, teachers reference cognitive skills and leaders consider this to be providing greater challenge. Targeted Year 11 pupils are undertaking a GCSE in further mathematics to provide greater challenge and the opportunities to develop mastery skills. Leaders are aware of the need to develop this aspect of the school's work further across all key stages. It has taken some time to develop opportunities for pupils to develop their numeracy skills across the curriculum but, more recently, appropriate evaluation and training have taken place. Although it is too early to assess the impact of this work, leaders are confident that this will begin to reap benefits for pupils. This rightly remains a key area of the improvement plans.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

From the outset in September, leaders took immediate action to improve pupils' behaviour. A clear set of expectations were shared and leaders have ensured that all pupils fully understand rules, routines and values. Pupils are clear about the Team Rushden values and explain how the 'non-negotiables' that leaders introduced in September help them to meet expectations. Leaders are clear that the initial responsibility for managing pupils' behaviour remains with class teachers but they have developed strategies and a sequence of consequences to support staff in

dealing with challenging behaviour. For example, they have introduced an electronic logging system which leaders say has reduced the opportunity for conflict. There is a clear and logical sequence of consequences. Pupils fully understand this system. Staff and pupils report that behaviour has improved considerably since the last inspection, and pupils report that their lessons are better as a result. However, pupils say that not all staff follow the systems consistently and some feel that some staff have 'favourites' who do not appear to be subject to whole-school expectations. Leaders recognise that further work is needed to ensure that all staff feel supported to consistently follow the behaviour management policy.

In September 2016, one of the vice-principals worked with pupils to create an 'anti-bullying charter', a set of agreed values and principles that all pupils accepted and, literally, signed up to. All have maintained a zero-tolerance approach. Pupils report that bullying is now rare. Pupils know what to do if they have concerns and are confident that staff would deal with any incidents of bullying, swiftly and effectively, should they occur.

Leaders have also taken action to improve pupils' attendance. They have given clear guidance to tutors to ensure that they take greater responsibility for improving pupils' attendance. Tutors regularly discuss attendance with their pupils and leaders highlight its importance through assemblies and rewards. Considerable work is undertaken by the pastoral team and the attendance officer. Overall attendance is improving, albeit slowly. Disadvantaged pupils' attendance is improving at a similar rate. The proportion of pupils who are regularly absent from the school has reduced considerably although remains above the national average. The attendance of pupils who attend off-site provision is now tracked carefully and leaders monitor the use of such provision to ensure that it remains appropriate to individuals' needs.

Raised expectations of pupils' behaviour resulted in an increase in fixed-term exclusions at the beginning of the academic year. Leaders explain that this has had an impact on attendance figures which do not fully reflect the extent of the work that has been undertaken to improve attendance. Nevertheless, improving pupils' attendance rightly remains a key priority.

The last inspection identified the need to ensure that all teachers insist on high standards of presentation of pupils' work. Leaders have introduced a clear set of presentation expectations in the form of a contract with pupils. Work in pupils' books indicates considerable improvement in the presentation of work. However, not all pupils consistently meet these expectations, particularly the least able and those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities. These pupils need additional support to help them to follow basic expectations.

The Team Rushden ethos permeates all aspects of school life. Pupils are currently preparing for their drama production and the inspector observed part of the rehearsal of a musical number. Pupils of all ages and abilities engaged with enormous enthusiasm and enjoyment. The high standard of their performance reflected their dedication, hard work and collaborative team spirit.

Outcomes for pupils

Pupils' progress has been negatively affected by consistently poor teaching in recent years. In 2016, pupils' outcomes were in the lowest 10% of all schools nationally for all pupils, and for disadvantaged pupils in most areas. Following the last inspection, leaders took immediate action to improve the quality of teaching across the school. However, pupils are still affected by previous poor teaching and have not yet caught up. Considerable work is being undertaken to support pupils currently in Year 11 in the lead-up to their examinations. Leaders evaluate the progress of current pupils to have improved but do not expect significant improvements in pupils' outcomes in 2017.

Higher expectations and improvements in pupils' behaviour and the quality of teaching mean that current pupils are beginning to make greater progress than in recent years. The school's internal tracking indicates an improvement in outcomes for pupils who are currently in Year 10 and below.

External support

The current sponsor, TEFT, has appointed the principal who has taken effective action to bring about improvements since the last inspection.

In addition, the trust has used some of the money it collects from the school to provide support to administrative functions such as managing the school's payroll. It has also carried out reviews of aspects of the school's work relating to safeguarding and special educational needs and/or disabilities. However, there is little evidence of impact of this work.

A representative from the trust has begun a project to support the coaching of teaching staff to improve the effectiveness of teachers' classroom practice. However, this is a very recent development and it is too early to evaluate its impact. Inexperienced staff in the English department have been supported to develop their practice, and a representative from the trust has worked with leaders in this area to develop their leadership capacity. He has also been providing cover for an absent member of staff in this department. In these few activities, the trust has been effective. However, there has been little support offered beyond these elements of work.

TEFT describes its approach as enabling improvements to be driven from within the leadership team. There is little to suggest that the improvements that have been made to the quality of education provided in the school are due to anything other than the hard work and determination of staff and school leaders, and the trust cannot take credit for these improvements. The trust therefore cannot be considered to have provided acceptable value for money.