

## Abbey Special School, January 2015

### Context

Abbey Special School provides education for pupils and students within Rotherham who have a wide range of special educational needs, including those who have moderate and severe learning difficulties as well as those who have behavioural and emotional difficulties. A growing number are also on the autistic spectrum. The school was placed into "Special Measures" by Ofsted in September 2014, and at the beginning of January had its first HMI monitoring visit.

Since 2005 the school has been inspected by Ofsted 4 times:-

2005 graded Good,  
2008 graded Outstanding  
2011 graded Good  
2014 graded Special Measures.

The most recent HMI report states,

***"The school's self-evaluation is an honest reflection of its position. It clearly acknowledges that while there has been some improvement, there is insufficient evidence to suggest that progress made on each area for improvement is anything other than inadequate."***

In January 2013 the school also underwent a LA supported review which graded Abbey's overall effectiveness as inadequate. (Achievement - Inadequate, Teaching and Learning - Inadequate, Behaviour and Safety - Requires Improvement, Leadership and management Inadequate). The LA then brokered support with Winterhill a National Support School and Abbey's geographical neighbour. This support began in April/May 2013.

The school role has dropped to 47. Currently the school has a number of long-term absence cases and is spending between £9 000 and £13 000 on supply staff a week. Abbey also has a reducing number of permanent staff, as they seek employment elsewhere.

### Brief

As an Executive Head of two Outstanding Special schools, sponsor of a large mainstream Primary, a National Leader of Education and a current Additional Inspector for Ofsted, I have been asked to use my professional experience and knowledge to:-

1. Review the staffing restructure at Abbey School and the rationale behind the process.

2. Evaluate the SEND review of provision within Rotherham, the decision to close Abbey School and any impact the restructure at Abbey had on that decision.

## Methodology

To achieve the brief I have reviewed a significant amount of documentation, including:-

- Ofsted reports
- SIP reports(2009-2011)
- The LA supported self review(Jan 2013)
- SEND review Aug 2013
- Health and Safety review(Oct 2014)
- Minority Report
- Finance report
- Schools SDP/Action plans
- Pupil progress data
- anonymised overview of staff performance

I have held face to face or telephone interviews with:-

- R. Burnham (Executive Head Winterhill/Abbey)
- J. Cater-Whitham(Deputy Executive Head Winterhill/Abbey)
- K. Halford (Head Abbey)
- P. Marshall (Chair of IEB)
- D. Smith RMBC (ex. Director of Schools and life long learning)
- K. Borthwick RMBC (Head of School Effectiveness)
- V Njergic RMBC (Finance)
- four parents of present and past students
- 10 present, past and newly appointed staff following restructure (Including Teaching, SLT, TA's and Admin staff)
- P. Fitz Patrick RMBC (HR)
- M. Smith RMBC (HR)
- A. Sanderson (Head Teacher The Willows)
- N. Whittaker (Head Teacher Kelford/Hilltop Special Schools)
- F. Sprague (NUT Representative)
- M. Badger (Unison Representative)
- P Rodmell (AMIE/ATL Representative)
- Two meetings with staff groups, at their request.

Two days of the interviews were conducted at Abbey school, allowing me to put a number of the conversations into context.

Finally, I have considered the views of six ex staff members, four current staff members and two parents who have contacted me by email.

## **Detailed report of Findings:**

**Leadership:** Abbey school is a school that has had significant changes in leadership since 2005. During this period it has had: three Head Teachers, one interim Head, an Executive Head, an Interim Executive Head and a Head of school/Head Teacher. This is also matched against a staff, that up until the restructure had remained mainly unchanged, with significant levels of service at the school.

**Shift in external expectations and standards:** The changes in leadership, have also coincided with a major shift in the expectations of outcomes for SEND students within special schools. The commitment and rigour required to achieve these new standards/expectations set by Ofsted, do not appear to have been addressed in a coherent and robust way, over an extended period of time, up until May 2013.

The school's previous successes and lack of consistent direction from a changing leadership has allowed staff to become very insular and entrenched in their approach to SEN education. The last SIP report (March 2011) indicates the school had developed an over inflated view of the quality of the teaching and learning available to students. The curriculum did not provide sufficient depth, to challenge the more able, thereby not providing them with the skills to move effectively on to the next stages of education or work. Although the school was graded as Good by Ofsted in 2011, it is my strong belief that some of the areas highlighted for improvement, under the Ofsted Sept.2012 and current framework would, at best, have placed the school in the category of Requires Improvement. This is especially true in relation to "What the school need to do to improve further?" from the 2011 Ofsted report, detailing the need to accelerate progress in English and Mathematics throughout the curriculum. Also during this significant period of change for SEN education the LA's formal monitoring of Special schools, through the School Improvement Partners ceased in 2011 and wasn't replaced with a system of checks that hold Heads accountable outside the Ofsted cycle of inspection.

**Lack of rigour in management information and processes:** In April 2103 Winterhill, started to formally support Abbey. Following several requests, no documentation has been produced to detail clear lines of responsibility, reporting lines, success criteria or costs. To date it is unclear who should be registered as the Head teacher at Abbey. In 2013-14, Winterhills support cost Abbey £100k. In 2014/15 it cost £55k.

**Staff resistance:** Following a period of due diligence, Winterhill set out a clear direction, in the form of a school development plan (SDP). However, due to Winterhill being a mainstream school, significant numbers of Abbey staff challenged their ability to implement effective change. Also I feel a number of staff were resistant to any change, no matter who was leading it, in fact a small number of actively posed significant barriers to prevent change. In interviews with staff, it became apparent that those I met believed that insufficient time and effort was spent engaging them in a shared vision.

Believing it would have the best outcome for students, the stance of the new leadership appears to have been to enforce change, rather than to engage as many staff in the change process as possible.

**Teaching performance:** Winterhill then continued to try to implement, support and monitor their School Development Plan.

The quality of teaching and learning (T&L) showed very little improvement from the Jan 2013 review to the last documented review of T&L in Dec. 2013.

- Jan 2013 T&L graded Inadequate
- Oct 2013 observations (2 Good, 5 Require improvement and 3 inadequate)
- Dec 2013 observations (2 Good, 5 Require improvement)

During this period, available records show that no staff were dismissed on capability.

**Restructure and subsequent management of finances:** In November 2013 all staff were initially put into consultation, with the consultation being quickly narrowed to impact teaching staff only. One of the stated reasons for the restructure was that the school was over staffed. However, at the point of the restructure only 58% of the budget was spent on staffing, which is significantly below the norm.

There appears to be no Governor minutes detailing the financial implications or agreements with the LA on how the redundancy costs would be paid (£173k). At this point the school had a surplus of £256k. Abbey now has a predicted deficit of £361k for the end of the financial year 2014/15. This is mainly due to supply cost for the year being predicted to be over £400K. (A decision was made not to take out sickness absence cover for year 2014/15, however there is dispute who made this decision)

I believe that due process was followed during the selection process for the restructure. However, due to the timing of the restructure and the agreements set up around the redundancies, 7 teaching staff and a number of TA's left at February half term with no permanent staff to replace them available until Easter. I also believe the recruitment process was made more difficult due to the strike action over the restructure.

**Pupil Behaviour:** Behaviour at Abbey is reported to have deteriorated from the time of the review. The exact timing of the decline is difficult to pinpoint, due to limited records from Jan 2013. However, there was a steady increase in the number of days students were excluded, from 58.5 (2011/2012) to a high of 82 (2013/2014). To date 52 (2014/2015), however this does include a surge of 22 days following the announcement to consult on closure.

During this period I understand that the Pupil Referral Units in Rotherham were closed and from what I have been told, the needs of some students entering Abbey changed.

**Intermittent leadership at a crucial time:** In April 2014 the Executive Head Teacher at Winterhill was suspended without prejudice, not returning until after the Ofsted inspection at Abbey. This I believe is the reasoning behind the reduction in costs for Abbey from £100K to £55K, for the financial year 2014/15. The Deputy assumed the role of Executive Head at Abbey for this period.

The support for Abbey during this difficult transition period appears to have reduced due to the increasing demands on the Winterhill Deputy at her substantive school. The role of the Acting Executive Head wasn't clear during the Ofsted inspection and was not clear to the Executive Head when questioned during this review process.

**Consultation on closure:** Following the Ofsted decision to place Abbey in Special Measures, the decision to consult on Abbeys closure was made. The investigations I have made during this review, have given me no reason to believe there is or was any link to any decision made regarding Abbey and the SEND review. I also believe that there is no link between the decision to close and budget requirements.

I believe that Abbey has been through a period of turmoil for at least 18 months and has been a school with a number of significant issues for an extended period of time. It is the belief of the county officers I met, that to secure the best education and care for these students, closure has to be considered.

However, the way this has been communicated to parents, pupils, staff and other Head Teacher colleagues has not been clear. There is also a perception by some parents and staff, that parents were pressurised to place their children in other Special Schools.

### **Summary of Findings:**

- 1.) The LA's monitoring systems for Special schools did not provide robust enough challenge and is too dependent on "Whistle Blowing" or Ofsted.
- 2.) The LA's setting of clear success criteria, lines of responsibility and reporting were inadequate.
- 3.) The LA's monitoring of: "Schools causing concern", monitoring of the quality of support implemented (including Governance support) and the management of costs during this process were inadequate.
- 4.) The Governors of both Abbey and Winterhill, did not clearly define lines of responsibility.
- 5.) The decision to use Winterhill to provide a support package was correct:-
  - They have a proven track record of school improvement.
  - They are an organisation large enough to have the capacity to provide leadership, staffing and resources support,
  - They have a network to access appropriate specialist support.

➤ Geographically, they provide a “Lunch time solution”.

6.) Winterhill and Abbeys leadership style appear to be very system led rather than a combination of engagement, support and challenge

7.) The Leadership (including Governors) did not hold underperforming staff to account as would be expected (through challenge, support and ultimately dismissal on grounds of capability). I would question if appropriate HR advice was sought or possibly provided.

8.) The Governance of the restructure, the redundancy costs and the process was inadequate. This includes the decision to let a third of the teaching staff leave on redundancy, before suitable replacements had been found.

9.) The HR advice/challenge to Governors and leadership re the restructure, appears not to address the question of why staffing needed to be reduced, when only 58% of income was being spent on staffing. (Expected percentage 78% and possibly higher for Special)

10.) In this case, the LA’s financial monitoring of school budget to allow the budget to reach such large deficit, was inadequate.

11.) The Governors monitoring of the budget was inadequate.

12.) Audit to investigate finance, HR and Governance procedures.

13.) The LA should have acted to secure extra support when the Executive Head was suspended and realized the possible risk both schools were put at due to this.

14.) The LA should have considered a moratorium on student admissions when concerns with Abbey were first highlighted, to reduce behaviour pressures.

15.) Communication with other Head teachers re the need to place other students needed to be communicated more clearly.

16.) Following the decision to move students to other schools, the LA needed, and needs, a clearer communication strategy with staff, parents and especially students to allow as smooth a transition as possible.

## **Recommendations**

There are the start of green shoots for the school, in terms of behaviour and staff starting to work together. However, if the LA wishes to consult on possible closure, they need to ensure that they work at pace and lead a transparent, quick and decisive process. This will ensure that students and staff needs have the best chance of being met.

The LA needs to review their procedures for identifying schools that are causing concern and schools that need support. It is also recommended that they review how and where that support can be accessed, and how it is brokered and quality assured. (A model that Lincolnshire are developing is a “Peer to Peer” review network with a central board. There are of course other models, such as “The London Challenge”)

The underlying priority in all of this is that any decision made, needs to make it easier for the students at Abbey to move forward and for them to access the high quality of care that they deserve.

Finally, all parties need to step back and reassess, are they putting the students needs first and last. This core purpose seems to have been lost and must to be placed firmly at the top of all agendas.

**Peter Bell, Executive Head Teacher, Community Inclusive Trust, Grantham (NLE / Additional Inspector for Ofsted), January 2015**