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Mr A Whitaker
Headteacher
Larwood School
Webb Rise
Stevenage
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Dear Mr Whitaker

Notice to improve: monitoring inspection of Larwood School

Thank you for the help which you, your staff and governors gave when I inspected your school on 13 October 2011 and for the information which you provided during the inspection. Please also pass on my thanks to the pupils for welcoming me and my colleagues to their classrooms.

Since the last inspection, one new teacher has been appointed to the school. There are now 46 pupils on roll, 10 of whom are boarding pupils.

As a result of the inspection on 21 June 2011, the school was asked to address the most important areas for improvement which are set out in the annex to this letter.

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 the pupils' achievement.

The progress pupils make is variable when their different starting points at particular ages are taken into account. There are some success stories where pupils surpass expectations and achieve extremely well, particularly in English. In contrast, there are also pupils not making the expected progress in English and mathematics. Progress made in lessons observed during this monitoring inspection was variable. Teachers do not always make sure that the language and resources they use are carefully matched to the levels of understanding of the pupils and this prevents pupils making the progress of which they are capable.

New systems for managing behaviour have not made a significant difference to the number of incidents occurring and pupils' behaviour remains inadequate. There are

still too many incidents when pupils do not engage with learning effectively, become angry, and staff have to intervene. Clear structures and routines help pupils to engage in learning but strategies are not always used consistently across the school or for individual pupils. When pupils are fully engaged in well structured and motivating lessons and where levels of challenge are adapted to their individual needs, behaviour is usually good.

The school has taken immediate action to improve safeguarding and the management of behaviour. Inappropriate practices of seclusion have been stopped and a new system for managing behaviour has been introduced. Although there has been some useful staff training there remains inconsistency in the approaches used. Physical intervention is used too quickly before other strategies for de-escalating a situation have been attempted. The senior team have also identified this through careful scrutiny of the reports of incidents. A very new support unit is a key part of the new approach. By analysing behaviour incidents, the leader of this unit is beginning to identify barriers to pupils' learning. Good additional approaches to address individual needs are being introduced. There are signs that the changes are helping to improve the progress of some pupils but it is too soon to evaluate this fully. The governing body has successfully identified one of their members to have a key role in challenging and overseeing the evaluation of this new approach. Whole-school policies are in draft form while changes to practice are made. This is not helping to give a clear and consistent message to staff or to set a clear baseline from which to start monitoring and evaluation.

The governing body has acted quickly in taking on the challenge of improving governance at the school. Members have a clearer understanding of the role they need to take in challenging the school and monitoring the action plan. This has been well supported by personnel from the local authority. External professionals have usefully been employed to give detailed and objective feedback on aspects of the school's work, which is also helping the governing body and senior leadership team to move forwards.

The school has rightly prioritised the issues relating to safeguarding and behaviour in their actions thus far. There has been less emphasis upon improving teaching. The monitoring of achievement and behaviour by one member of the senior team has increased opportunities for more helpful analysis. The links between weaker areas of progress, the quality of teaching and instances of behaviour are beginning to be identified.

The school has made reasonable progress in addressing the four national minimum standards that were not met during the last inspection. Health plans and systems to ensure immediate access to prescribed medication have been improved. Although these are still awaiting final sign-off there has been suitable progress made in the

time. The school has also ensured suitable actions have been taken in response to the most recent fire safety audit. Progress to improve the detail in behaviour management plans, although still adequate, has been slightly slower. The behaviour management plans for individual pupils who board are being developed alongside the wider school systems, and this liaison for improving behaviour management across the whole provision is a positive way forward. Currently, pupils have brief behaviour plans but these do not always give clear messages about actions to take in a range of situations. Work to improve these is continuing in close liaison with the school staff.

The local authority has amended the statement of action but not all the amendments are suitable. The school was judged outstanding by Ofsted in 2004 and, since that time, has received only light touch monitoring visits from the local authority. The local authority was therefore unaware of all the issues identified in June 2011. Interim milestones have been added to the action plan, providing a clearer monitoring tool. While most of the milestones are suitable to help the school make the improvements required within 12 months, there are some that need amending. The success criterion that the school should 'reduce the use of the time out room for seclusion by 95% by 31 December 2011' is highly unsuitable. It does not reflect the urgency of action required nor does it reflect the swift action already taken by the school that has already stopped this practice. The number of incidents needing any high-level intervention needs to be reduced and the success criteria do not provide a clear target or time line to help the action group monitor progress in relation to this. There has been one action group meeting very recently. Minutes had not been finalised at the time of the visit. However, there was no evidence that the group had held the school robustly to account for meeting the deadlines in the plan, for example, those relating to the revised behaviour policy. Support for the governing body has been effective and has helped to establish better lines of accountability and a clear routine of policy review. The local authority has secured some time for a school effectiveness adviser to work with the school. This support was due to start the day following this visit.

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

Yours sincerely

Janet Thompson
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection which took place in June 2011

- Improve safeguarding procedures and the management of challenging behaviours by:
 - immediately ceasing the routine practice of seclusion in the time out rooms except in the exceptional circumstances which might be permitted under current guidelines
 - reducing the need for the removal of pupils from lessons by ensuring that all staff are provided with the strategies they need to manage the behaviour of individuals effectively in class
 - updating all existing policies and procedures relating to behaviour management in line with current statutory guidance, establishing any further policies required, and ensuring practice matches them closely
 - ensuring that all practices for managing pupils behaviour are safe.

- Improve the effectiveness of the governing body by:
 - ensuring that governors always have a wide ranging set of relevant information to be able to offer support and challenge to the school in decision making
 - ensuring that all key policies are in place with timely and effective reviews.

- Increase the amount of good and better teaching and learning through robust systems of monitoring and support.

- The school must ensure that it meets those national minimum standards for boarding which have not been met by:
 - ensuring that each child has a clearly written health plan
 - ensuring the immediate availability of medication for children during trips away from the residential provision
 - ensuring that where behaviour is unacceptable, this is responded to by constructive disciplinary measures which are approved by the Head of care. In particular, this relates to the need to produce detail behaviour management plans
 - ensuring that the fire safety risk assessment is updated to reflect the areas identified for action during a fire safety audit undertaken in January 2011.