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18 October 2012

Jill Howson
Acting Principal
Furness School
Rowhill Road
Hextable
Kent
BR8 7RP

Dear Ms Howson

Special measures monitoring inspection of Furness School

Following my visit to your school on 16 and 17 October, 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 which 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 which took place in May 2012. The full list of the areas for improvement which were identified during that inspection is set out in the annex to this letter. The monitoring inspection report is attached.

Having considered all the evidence I am of the opinion that at this time the school is making reasonable progress towards the removal of special measures.

The school should not appoint newly qualified teachers at this stage.

This letter and monitoring inspection report will be published on the Ofsted website. I am copying this letter and the monitoring inspection report to the Secretary of State, the Chair of the Interim Executive Board and the Director of Children's Services for Kent.

Yours sincerely

Anne Duffy
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection which took place in May 2012.

- Make urgent improvements in the school's safeguarding arrangements to ensure the safety and well-being of students.
- Accelerate students' progress and raise attainment, especially in mathematics and in communication skills.
- Eradicate inadequate teaching and promote high professional standards by:
 - raising teachers' expectations of students' capabilities
 - using assessment information when planning lessons to ensure that work meets pupils' needs and is sufficiently challenging
 - ensuring that lesson content motivates and engages students in their learning
 - ensuring that lessons effectively promote students' personal development.
- Ensure that all adults respond effectively and consistently to any incidents of inappropriate behaviour.
- Ensure that students develop respect for themselves and others and feel safe in school.
- Develop effective strategies to ensure that all students attend school regularly and adopt safe practices in lessons and around the school site.
- Secure effective leadership and management at all levels in order to promote rapid and sustained improvement.

Report on the first monitoring inspection on 16–17 October 2012

Evidence

The inspector observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met the Principal, Executive Principal, the Director and other colleagues from Lilac Sky Schools, the Chair of the Interim Executive Board and a representative from the local authority. She held discussions with staff, students and a parent. The inspector observed eight lessons; five of these were joint observations with a senior member of staff.

Context

There have been a number of changes since the school's last inspection. After a short period of closure, the school reopened on 11th June 2012. The local authority now has a three-year contract with Lilac Sky Schools, a provider of educational services, who have put a new senior leadership team in place. There is a new Principal and an Executive Principal who spends two to three days a week in school. Other senior staff from Lilac Sky Schools work in the school to improve teaching, pastoral care and administration. The Interim Executive Board is new and members held their first meeting in September 2012. At the time of the inspection, there were no Year 7 students at the school.

Achievement of pupils at the school

Students' achievement remains inadequate, although there are some signs of improvement. A few Year 11 pupils gained GCSE grades A* to C, or equivalent, in art and in information and communication technology in the summer. For some pupils, progress in mathematics is accelerating. However, progress overall remains slow in too many subjects and is too variable between year groups.

Better checks on pupils' progress, including in reading, means the school is more able to give extra support for those who need it. Helping students to communicate rather than react physically strengthens their speaking and listening skills. In the best lessons, students are encouraged to talk about what they learn, which also helps their communication skills. As a result, they take part more confidently in lessons and are keener to learn.

The school recognises that, in the past, some teachers have been too optimistic about how well their pupils are doing. Senior staff work hard to make future targets both realistic and ambitious. They recognise that some more work will have to be done to make sure that staff are correct in their assessments and predications of future success.

The quality of teaching

The senior leadership team has an accurate view of the quality of teaching and has made a positive start in tackling areas for improvement. Training has been provided for teaching and support staff, and more is planned. Assessment is not used well enough to help students to make the best possible progress. For example, teachers are clear about what they want students to learn and they share this with the class at the beginning of the lesson. However, they do not always check how much students have learnt. As a result, they do not know how well each student is doing and this makes it harder for them to plan the next lesson. The strongest teachers develop good relationships with their students and encourage them to try harder. These good relationships also help students to listen and respond to one another without being rude or dismissive and this helps their personal development.

The quality of lesson content varies. Some lessons provide interesting activities which involve the students well but there are still too many worksheets or workbooks which do not. When teaching assistants join in with activities, this helps to show students what good learning looks like. For example, in an art lesson, a teaching assistant sketched her own picture and asked a student to comment on how well she was doing. This encouraged him to review his own work and to try to improve it without asking for help.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

The school feels a much safer place. Many staff and students speak positively about the changes in the school: 'Look at them, they're happy,' said one member of staff. 'We're not perfect yet,' said a student. Although a few students have a less positive view of the school, they are no longer the majority.

Staff training and the appointment of a pastoral manager have changed the approach to behaviour management. Students say that they feel more confident that their concerns or others' behaviour issues will be dealt with. While incidents of violent behaviour or individual outbursts still exist, staff respond more by talking instead of physically controlling students. Students are much less inclined to be drawn in when others want to misbehave. For example, a group of students were keen to carry on working and did so with their teaching assistant even when their teacher left the room for a few minutes to tend to a disruption next door.

Attendance remains below average but is improving. Students now feel more welcome when they enter the school and go into lessons. As a result, they are more inclined to attend. Fifteen students currently achieve 100% attendance but there are still a number of persistent absentees. Alternative off-site provision helps some students to change their attitude to learning and begin their reintegration to full-time education. Key workers work closely with students and gradually help them to manage their own behaviour and remain in class so that the amount of internal truancy has greatly reduced.

The quality of leadership in and management of the school

The school now has a leadership team which has a track record of success. This, and their leadership style, has made staff, students, and their parents and carers feel more secure and confident about the school's future. Leaders have an accurate view of the school and are ambitious for its improvement. A much more positive and calm atmosphere exists and the Lilac Sky philosophy of 'Have fun, make someone's day, be relentless and follow the script' increasingly makes a difference.

Safeguarding has been a priority within the school. Members of the Interim Executive Board are aware that it must remain so. Students are less subject to physical response from staff and, in response, are less violent themselves. Students who are residential say that they are safe and happy, but this part of the school's provision has not been an area of priority for the school's leaders or the Interim Executive Board so far. The school has not analysed the use of any additional funding it has received from the pupil premium initiative.

The range and balance of subjects and other activities (the curriculum) has been altered to give students more support in developing their skills in reading, writing and number, and to help them to gain useful qualifications. At the moment, the curriculum does not include a modern foreign language and the school is aware that this will need to be reviewed in future. Systems for managing the performance of teachers and other staff are just being introduced. New job descriptions are in use and the school is providing more training for staff as the systems are put into place.

A statement of action was drawn up and approved following the last inspection. The school's '100 day plan' has been a useful tool for introducing the changes necessary for rapid improvement. However, a clear school improvement plan which shows next steps, how progress can be monitored, and by whom, is now required.

External support

The local authority has maintained close contact with the school during this period of change and is committed to working with both the Interim Executive Board and Lilac Sky Schools in supporting the school further. The Lilac Sky Schools organisation has proved itself to be an effective partner and has made a positive start in developing the school's capacity to meet the needs of the pupils more successfully in future.