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22 November 2012

Mr D Miller
Headteacher
Pebble Brook School
Churchill Avenue
Aylesbury
HP21 8LZ

Dear Mr Miller

Special measures monitoring inspection of Pebble Brook School

Following my visit to your school on 21–22 November 2012, 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.

Newly qualified teachers may not be appointed.

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 Governing Body and the Director of Children's Services for Buckinghamshire.

Yours sincerely

Sheila Nolan
Additional Inspector

Annex

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

- As a matter of urgency improve the rate of progress for all students by:
 - setting challenging improvement targets that are monitored regularly to gauge students' progress
 - improving the level of literacy support available, especially for those students with reading difficulties
 - developing a whole-school programme for teaching independent writing skills across subjects
 - providing students with better levels of support to develop their mathematical skills.

- Take immediate action to improve the quality of teaching so that it is effective for all students by:
 - ensuring that lessons take full account of students' individual levels of ability and their prior learning
 - ensuring that lessons are stimulating, move at a good pace and use a wide range of approaches which engage students actively in their learning
 - reducing the use of worksheets and finding more imaginative ways for students to demonstrate their learning and achievements
 - involving learning support assistants more productively when supporting students in their learning.

- Strengthen the impact of leadership and management by:
 - making better use of performance management to address shortcomings in the work of staff, including senior staff, in contributing to the school's effectiveness and improving the quality of teaching, learning and outcomes for students
 - holding teachers robustly to account for the progress of students within their lessons and in their care.

- Ensure the school meets all the national minimum standards for boarding schools.

Report on the first monitoring inspection on 21–22 November 2012

Evidence

The inspector observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the headteacher and acting deputy headteacher, the Chair of the Governing Body, and a representative from the local authority. Only the main area for improvement in the boarding provision was considered.

Context

Following the inspection of May 2012, there have been changes to the senior leadership of the school. After a period of turbulence, the school now has a stable leadership team of the substantive headteacher, the new acting deputy headteacher, the head of the sixth form, the business manager and the head of care. Robust action by the headteacher has resulted in some staff changes but challenges still remain within the school's staffing structure. Currently, there is a full complement of teaching staff. The planned deficit budget is reducing rapidly.

Pebble Brook is now designated to provide for students aged 11 to 19 and to cater especially for students with communication and interaction disabilities. As a result, the school roll has risen significantly and now stands at 83, significantly higher than at the time of the last section 5 inspection. Boarding continues to operate as previously with 20 places for students from the school and from other special schools in the area. The re-building works are on track to be completed by March 2012. Currently, the school has no science laboratory or food technology facilities but these will be restored with the completion of the building plan.

Students at Key Stage 3 are taught in six groups organised by the ability profiles of the students. One of these groups, the Gateway, caters especially for those with complex needs. At Key Stage 4, there are two classes in age-related groups and at Key Stage 5, there is currently one mixed group.

Achievement of pupils at the school

The school has been successful in introducing systems and procedures through which to capture information on the attainment and progress of the students. Since the beginning of the new school year, a common weekly reporting mechanism for class teachers has resulted in a regular, short-term picture of achievement across all subjects. Senior leaders are now able to scrutinise carefully the immediate impact of the week's activities on the students' learning. Whole-school centralised systems are still developing and the school recognises that further work on the information held is necessary to show the progress of all groups. Although individual students are

meticulously tracked and work is beginning on sub groups, the expected and more than expected progress of students from their starting points, ranging from Levels P6 to 2, is only recently in a readily accessible form. Nevertheless, information from the second part of the summer term, and that from this term so far, indicates that an increasing proportion of students are beginning to catch up and close gaps resulting from earlier underachievement. This is particularly so in reading where some students have gained as much as several years. The records show, however, that while Year 7 students are making fast progress in English, Years 11 and 12 have significantly underachieved over their time in the school. The paucity of records of students' progress from earlier terms means that reliable data are only really available from the summer term of 2012. As a result, the school can only accurately measure progress from starting points in September.

The 2012 external accreditation record for the Year 11 cohort indicates significant underachievement for those students taking examinations at GCSE or entry level. Current Years 10, 11 and 12 students receive much more sharply focused support and intervention to help close gaps in learning from previous years. Each student now has an ambitious target that, if met, would lead to at least good progress. These overall targets are appropriately translated into short-term goals in individual lessons and are understood by staff and students alike.

Students with reading difficulties have individually tailored programmes of phonics (the letters that sounds make) and reading recovery support. Specialist support staff are now responsible for the reading provision across the school. Students show an increased interest in reading and in the use of the library. Greater demands from subject teachers are helping to improve students' writing skills. Good strategies are in place to help those students who find forming letters and words physically difficult. The impact of recent work to improve students' mathematical skills is not yet fully evident, partly because of the inaccuracy of previous data on attainment and progress. There are now a range of effective measures in place to improve the students' facility with calculations.

Within lessons seen on this monitoring inspection, all students were very purposefully engaged in their learning and some are clearly making considerable gains in their learning. This was especially so in a mathematics lesson involving a wide range of groups in calculations which stretched from multiples of 10 to three-digit and money addition.

The quality of teaching

Senior managers, well supported by the local authority, have taken robust action to improve the quality of teaching. Training opportunities, staff changes, a regular cycle of monitoring and the accurate evaluation of classroom practice are beginning to have an impact on the quality of teaching. Inadequate teaching has declined since

the last inspection and none was seen on this visit. There is a growing proportion of good teaching demonstrated well in the lessons for the least able students and also in mathematics. There is a strong drive by the school to make all teaching at least good. Lesson planning is now consistently tailored to the needs of groups within the vertically organised classes and to the needs of individual students at Key Stage 4 and at post-16. All students now have carefully orchestrated targets which teachers' planning now takes account of in each lesson. The genuine engagement of students in their work is a reflection of the more imaginative and stimulating activities offered to the students on a daily basis. Support staff are generally very well deployed and relationships between staff are excellent. This helpful modelling of behaviour is reflected in the mostly good cooperation seen between the students and with their teachers.

The impact of professional development is evident in the detailed lesson plans provided by all staff on this visit. Resources and practical equipment, including the use of new technology, are used effectively to stimulate students to concentrate and challenge themselves. The required weekly assessments are sharpening teachers' and support staff's awareness of students' small steps in learning, lesson by lesson.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

Students are generally cooperative in lessons and demonstrate that they find lessons increasingly interesting. In most classes, behaviour is at least good because it is managed very well by staff. There have been no exclusions since the last section 5 inspection. Around the school and in the playground, students mostly take care to behave safely and ensure that others are not harmed during play. There is just the odd outburst of boisterous behaviour in corridors or occasional lapses from what is expected behaviour, sometimes from those new to the school. Students are beginning to take a real pride in their achievements and are very pleased when special rewards are given for good work or service. Attendance levels are above the expected national figures for special schools.

The quality of leadership in and management of the school

Current senior leadership is still under strength. Despite this, very determined efforts have set the school well on the road to recovery. The headteacher and acting deputy headteacher have focused their energies on developing the capacity of existing and new staff to improve their classroom practice as well as assessment routines. They have robustly tackled inadequate teaching and set in place a rigorous programme of monitoring and training for classroom staff. Staff are increasingly well held to account, not least through the weekly moderation of their progress returns. Governance is strengthening under the able guidance of a committed chair person. There have been rapid improvements in the rate of students' progress so that gaps are now narrowing between what has been achieved and what should be achieved. Secure foundations are in place for the new and developing post-16 provision. The

issue for the Boarding provision from the last section 5 inspection has been addressed and staff are following courses to gain the required qualifications. There has been a determined push to involve parents and carers in understanding the students' targets so that they can support opportunities to reinforce students' learning in lessons. The school has a good understanding of how it must improve as well as of its growing strengths.

External support

The local authority statement of action meets requirements and has structured support for the school well. In practice, the local authority has given extensive, good quality and well-coordinated help to address the issues of the budget and those relating to human resources. Individual consultants and advanced skills teachers are supporting subject teaching effectively, for example. There is an ongoing commitment to secure improvements in teaching and to raise attainment within the school, the impact of which is evidenced by the latest encouraging progress data. Nevertheless, the local authority is keenly aware of the importance of extending the capacity of the senior leadership team and is taking urgent measures to address the issue.