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8 February 2013

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

Dear Ms Howson

Special measures monitoring inspection of Furness School

Following my visit with David Coulter, social care regulatory inspector, to your school on 6 and 7 February, 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 second 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 second monitoring inspection on 6 and 7 February 2013

Evidence

The focus of this integrated monitoring inspection was the quality of teaching and of residential care. The inspectors observed the school's work and scrutinised documents. They 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. They held discussions with staff and students. Six lessons were jointly observed with a senior member of staff. An inspector carried out two learning walks to observe teaching and behaviour around the school; one of these walks was with the Principal. An inspector also observed after-school activities in the residential department.

Context

There have continued to be some changes to staffing since the school's section 5 inspection in May 2012. A new Deputy Principal joined in January 2013 and spends three days a week in school. Other senior staff from Lilac Sky Schools work in the school to improve teaching and assessment. The acting head of care is due to leave the school soon and a new, substantive appointment has been made. The new Chair of the Interim Executive Board joined the board in December 2012. At the time of this monitoring inspection, there were no Year 7 students at the school. Student numbers have reduced following some students' transfer to other placements. At present, the school is not accepting any mid-year referrals of new students.

Achievement of pupils at the school

Overall achievement remains inadequate, but there are signs that targeted work is helping some students to catch up. Progress remains slow in some key subjects and is variable between year groups. As a result of improved teaching in some areas, the proportion of lessons in which students make good progress is increasing.

Students respond particularly well to opportunities to develop their practical skills, such as in art and food technology. Information held by the school indicates that the percentage making expected progress in mathematics remains encouraging in Years 8 to 10. Very recent information indicates that the majority of Year 11 students entered for GCSE are on track to achieve the grades they are aiming for. This is also the case for those entered for GCSE in English. Work is progressing to develop staff skills in promoting and developing numeracy and literacy (including communication) skills across the curriculum. The impact of this is more noticeable in literacy and communication and this development is still in relatively early stages.

The school has insufficient data to show that progress is consistent across the board. Senior leaders recognise that more work will have to be done to make sure that the target setting and tracking information held by the school clearly demonstrates the progress that is being made by students in each subject and year group.

The quality of teaching

The quality of teaching remains variable. While there is some good teaching, it is not yet consistent enough to ensure that students make adequate progress across all subjects. The strongest teachers share with students what they are going to learn and provide many opportunities for them to assess for themselves how well they are doing. They demonstrate good subject knowledge and so students develop their own interest and enthusiasm for the subject. This is particularly so in areas containing a practical element such as art, science and hospitality. In some other subjects, the learning objective is not always clear and too much emphasis is placed on students working through what they have to do rather than building on prior learning. To an extent this is reinforced by questions to students, displayed in every classroom, that begin with, 'What am I doing?' while 'What am I learning?' comes second. As a result, plenary sessions do not consistently provide either teachers or students with enough information about how much has been learnt.

Good relationships help students to listen and respond to one another more positively and this helps their personal development. Expectations of what students can achieve are gradually being raised and the quality of lesson content has improved overall. More lessons provide interesting activities which involve the students well. In some, time is wasted while teachers and students wait for others to arrive, without any constructive learning taking place. Teaching assistants have rightly been allocated to key subject areas. This move is recent and so many teacher assistant teams are still developing effective ways of working together. Whilst it is encouraging that teaching assistants no longer spend time following or tracking students who are out of class, their contribution to students' learning is not consistent. For example, many opportunities are missed for teaching assistants to model tasks or to observe and record progress. They tend instead to prompt students or check that they are on task and so risk interfering with students' independent learning.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

In contrast to previous visits, no student expressed negative views to inspectors about the school. It is particularly encouraging to see students who were previously in the Learning Centre now being integrated into the full life of the school. There is no doubt that there has been a continuing improvement in students' attitudes to learning. There has been a significant reduction in incidents of violent behaviour and students are much less inclined to react aggressively if they are upset. The numbers of exclusions have dropped noticeably, although the school rightly takes action when any student's behaviour risks the safety or well-being of others.

Attendance remains below average but has improved considerably overall. Two students have maintained 100% attendance since September and the number of persistent absentees has reduced. Some students who were attending alternative off-site provision have been able to return to full-time education in school. The amount of internal truancy has continued to decline.

The quality of leadership in and management of the school

The unwavering determination of the Principal sends a clear message to all concerned that the school is going to continue improving. As a result, the very large majority of staff is committed to ensuring that it does. There is a tangibly collegiate atmosphere amongst staff which in turn has a positive effect on the students.

A change in the senior leadership team is bringing about a fresh approach to improving teaching. This is relatively new but has been welcomed by teaching staff. Comprehensive systems for managing the performance of teachers and other staff have been introduced and the school continues to take rigorous action where weaknesses exist in staff performance. It is now going through a process of strengthening the middle tier of leadership. This needs to be done with some urgency in order to spread responsibility for leadership more fully across the school.

The school recognises that it currently provides a restricted version of a secondary curriculum and is rightly exploring ways in which it can be enriched, both in and out of school hours. It has been successful in clarifying which students are eligible for pupil premium funding and has begun to analyse the impact of this.

The school's action plan and '100 day plan' have been replaced appropriately by a school improvement plan which shows next steps, how progress can be monitored, and by whom. Safeguarding has remained a priority and risk assessments are used well to support health and safety within, and outside, school.

External support

The local authority has maintained contact with the school during this period of change although, due to unforeseen circumstances, two recently-planned visits have not taken place. The respective roles of the local authority, interim executive board and Lilac Sky Schools are now clearer so that each partner can make a decisive contribution. For example, the local authority worked swiftly to arrange education welfare officer involvement and is well placed to provide moderation opportunities both for teaching and progress monitoring. The new Chair of the Interim Executive Board is beginning to develop a very clear view of the school's strengths and areas for development. The Lilac Sky Schools organisation has proved itself able to provide a high level of challenge where necessary in order to make sure that the school can continue to demonstrate improvement.

Overall effectiveness of the residential experience

Residential provision is provided by two teams of motivated staff who are managed effectively by two experienced house managers. Members of the interim executive board acknowledge that there has, to date, been insufficient monitoring of the provision by senior leaders, including themselves. However, the local authority has provided regular reports. There are effective policies, procedures and working practices in place to keep young people and staff safe. Risk assessments are used extensively for both on-site and

off-site activities. Safeguarding procedures are effective and students are cared for by staff who have been appropriately vetted and deemed suitable to work with vulnerable young people. Relationships between students and care staff were observed to be good and based on mutual respect. Bullying is not seen as a problem and incidents of young people going missing are extremely rare. Students respond positively to the clear behavioural boundaries that are set and consistently applied. They are involved in decision making and can exercise choice over many aspects of their care, including culinary preferences and types of activity. The range of activities available to students is adequate but does not always meet individual interests as fully as possible.

There is a well-established and effective care planning system. Care plans are well organised and accessible. They are updated regularly in response to changing circumstances and contain clear guidance for staff on such things as daily routines, risk assessments and dietary requirements. Daily reports are used effectively to monitor each residential student's progress. Responsibility for the health and well-being of the students remains with their parents or carers. However, staff monitor carefully the health of each student and seek outside help to address specific problems. Students have access to mental health services and an in-house counselling service provides effective support that students value. Arrangements for the storage and dispensing of medication are appropriate.

Both residential units are structurally sound and in generally good decorative order. They have been subject to improvements and have comfortable communal areas. Residential students are accommodated in their own well-appointed rooms with en-suite bathrooms. They talk positively about the quality of their accommodation. Some upgrading is required in one of the houses in order to bring it up to the standard of the other.

Recommendations from the last inspection have been generally met. The school is aware that, in order to improve the quality of the students' residential experience, refurbishing of some parts of Blue House is needed. This includes updating the kitchen and repainting the fire escape. A system of regular formal and informal monitoring by senior staff from the school and representatives of the interim executive board is also required.