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28 February 2013

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 27–28 February 2013, 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.

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 second monitoring inspection on 27–28 February 2013**

### **Evidence**

The inspector observed the school's work, visited eight lessons and looked at the classroom provision for dedicated literacy enhancement across the school. Classroom visits were made jointly with the headteacher, as was the inspection of the new building to view the science and technology facilities. The inspector also scrutinised documents, including those related to safeguarding, met with the headteacher and acting deputy headteacher, the Chair of the Governing Body and a representative from the local authority. The area for improvement relating to boarding provision was not considered on this visit.

### **Context**

Since the previous monitoring visit, there have been a number of staff changes. An assistant headteacher, seconded from another local authority school, has joined the senior team and will remain in post until the end of the summer term. A substantive assistant headteacher has been appointed to take up her post at the beginning of the summer term. Continued robust action by the headteacher on the performance of staff has resulted in further personnel changes but some long-term staffing issues are yet to be fully resolved.

The budget deficit continues to be a concern for the school as current funding is not sufficient to cover staff costs. The local authority is working closely with the school to resolve the matter. On Monday 4 March 2013, the new building will be open for students. Science and food technology facilities will be available from that date. Additional recreational space is also now open to the students.

### **Achievement of pupils at the school**

The school has further embedded its systems for capturing information on the students' attainment and progress. Central records show clearly the progress students have made since September 2012, the first date for which secure in-house information is available. Challenging targets are set for each student and their progress towards these targets is closely followed by senior managers. Teachers and support staff are now held accountable for the progress of students and for the impact of intervention activities to support those students making too-slow progress. The school is aware, for example, that intervention activities in mathematics have been especially successful while those in English have been less so. This has resulted in changes in practice in English.

Current assessment information shows that those students with P-level and Level 1 and 2 starting points in September are making much faster progress than previously. Those with Level 3 or 4 starting points in September, however, are making relatively

slower progress than other groups. All students are making significant gains in their reading. Some have gained as much as 18 months over two terms. Work on reading is complemented by a focus on handwriting skills and more-extended writing in lessons. Literacy provision has strengthened with dedicated times assigned throughout the school. In lessons, students are successfully linking sounds and letters as they encounter new words or try to spell words they already know.

The school is striving to ensure that the legacy of underachievement for older students is overcome as quickly as possible and students are gaining ground as they also realise that expectations of them have risen significantly. The current Year 11 cohort have already gained entry-level qualifications in English and mathematics and one student obtained a Grade G in a GCSE short course in ICT. Predictions for accreditation in the summer indicate that students are likely to gain entry-level qualifications in a range of subjects, including science and physical education. Vocational courses include construction and hair and beauty with a number of students on track to gain Level 1 qualifications. Post-16 students are working towards functional skills qualifications in English and mathematics as well as growing in confidence in life skills.

In the lessons seen on this monitoring inspection, the overwhelming majority of students were very focused on their learning, be it dealing with money in the context of a café or comparing their experiences of 'scary' literature and developing their writing and spelling skills in their literacy time.

### **The quality of teaching**

The proportion of lessons seen where teaching was at least good has increased when compared with the sample seen at the time of the last monitoring visit. The work of the seconded assistant headteacher is proving effective in supporting the understanding of staff of how individual students' needs can be met in lessons. The new special needs provision plan guides teachers well on how to manage students' progress towards their targets in each subject area. Lesson observations and work scrutiny by senior staff are helping to ensure the accuracy of teachers' assessments of the students' attainment and progress. Middle leaders' skills and expectations when observing lessons have been well supported by the senior leadership team. The school now has a very clear and accurate picture of the quality of teaching throughout the school.

Well-organised training activities have encouraged staff to move away from the 'worksheet' culture of previous times to a much more practical curriculum where students can gain valuable learning experiences through a range of media. In mathematics, in particular, students' skills are improving through grounding their work firmly in real-life situations. In many of the lessons seen, support staff are very well deployed in helping the students to make gains in their learning. Specialist

support staff work within the core subject areas and are increasingly confident in handling small groups of students.

Common strengths within lessons visited were the very good management of the students' behaviour and the positive relationships which helped to engage the students well in their learning. Teamwork between the support and teaching staff is a real strength, as is the growing use of practical activities to help students understand ideas and concepts. In the best lessons, tasks were very well matched to the students' earlier learning and to their targets, as was seen in the mathematics session for a group of students with very complex learning difficulties.

There is still work to be done, however, in ensuring that students' needs and targets are translated into subject-specific details and that there is sufficient challenge for the most able within the group. Not all staff are yet able to constantly assess students' progress throughout lessons and re-shape their activities as needed. Work scrutiny, as well as records of observations, confirms the findings from classroom visits, and shows that some students would benefit from more opportunities for extended writing arising from actual experiences rather than from books or imaginary situations.

### **Behaviour and safety of pupils**

Behaviour in lessons and around the school is rarely less than good. Students enjoy their learning and are excited by good achievement and rewards. Working relationships between staff and students are excellent. Increasingly, students are able to contribute to their whole community as well as helping others. Post-16 students, for example, were happy to help with tidying up the gardens in preparation for the opening of the new building. They also raise significant funds for local charities through a wide range of events and activities. As a result of some excellent personal and social education, students are gradually becoming more independent in managing their own behaviour and in taking the initiative in their daily lives. Attendance levels remain above the expected national figures for special schools.

### **The quality of leadership in and management of the school**

The headteacher and senior leaders have a very good understanding of the school's strengths and areas for development. In this, they have been helped with the appointment of a seconded assistant headteacher. Their evaluation of the quality of teaching is accurate and the systems for tracking the progress of students are embedding well. The management of the new building has been smooth with staff and students well prepared for the transition. The senior team will be further strengthened by the appointment of a substantive assistant headteacher from April of this year. The headteacher continues to manage robustly legacy issues of staffing.

Performance management procedures are rigorous and staff are regularly held to account for the progress of their students. The monitoring and evaluation of classroom practice is a priority for senior leaders and the impact of their work is seen in the increasing proportion of good or better teaching. All staff have clear targets for development and those curricular areas demonstrating weaknesses have well-considered improvement plans in place. Post-16 provision is developing well and numbers are increasing as students and families recognise that it is now worthwhile to stay on at the school.

There has been a rapid improvement in the quality of governance. Not only is there an almost full governing body in place, but much training has been undertaken to make sure that each governor fully understands the assigned roles and responsibilities. The Chair of the Governing Body is relentless in challenging as well as supporting the school, and in ensuring that members of the governing body fulfil their functions as well as possible.

### **External support**

The local authority continues to support the school well. Officers have a well-considered plan to gradually reduce the level of support so that the school is self-sustaining. Individual consultants provided good-quality guidance for subject areas and work well with senior leaders on improving the quality of teaching. The capacity of the senior management team has been strengthened considerably by funding for the appointment of the seconded assistant headteacher. The support provided has had a marked impact on the outcomes for the students. Nevertheless, there are budgetary issues still under consideration as the school's current income does not match its staffing or other needs. Currently, officers are working closely with the school to address finances.