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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 3 and 4 July 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 third 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 only be appointed after consultation with the lead inspector.

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 third monitoring inspection on 3 and 4 July 2013

Evidence

The inspector observed the school's work, visited seven lessons and observed the students during recreation and moving around the school. Classroom visits were made jointly with the headteacher and the assistant headteacher responsible for improving the quality of teaching. The inspector also scrutinised documents, including those related to safeguarding, met with the headteacher, the acting deputy headteacher, the assistant headteacher, the business manager and a representative from the local authority as well as two local headteachers working in partnership with the school. The inspector spoke informally with a number of students and spoke by telephone to the Chair of the Governing Body. Boarding provision was not considered on this visit. On the second day of the monitoring visit, students were out of school on a planned summer excursion.

Context

Since the previous monitoring visit, a substantive assistant headteacher has taken up her post. Five new staff have been appointed to join the school in September. Currently, there is one vacancy for September for a qualified teacher. A few long-term staffing issues remain and the headteacher continues to take robust action to support the performance of all staff.

The school has a three-year plan, yet to be approved by the local authority, to manage the current deficit in the budget. The new building is now well established and the school is finalising playground resources, an outside classroom and various other improvements to the school grounds. From September, the school roll is set to rise to 102 students, with 20 students in Year 7. The roll, by 2013/2014, is likely to stand at 130 students. Post-16 provision will also expand to include students beyond the present groupings. All but one student from the Year 11 cohort intend to stay on into the sixth form in September 2013.

The findings of a very recent social care inspection are being challenged by the school at present and a final report has not yet been published.

Achievement of pupils at the school

The 2012 external accreditation already available for the Year 11 cohort indicates that most students have made up much of their previous significant underachievement. All but two Year 11 students have gained Entry Level 3 qualifications in English and three have entered for Level 1 accreditation. This is a marked improvement on the outcomes from the previous year. There are similarly improved results in mathematics where five students are entered for Level 1

examinations. Year 11 students have also achieved well in physical education, animal care, construction and science. For example, each Year 11 student has gained Entry Level 3 in science and Level 1 in the Certificate of Personal Effectiveness.

Other year groups are also making faster progress than previously. Already Year 10 students have gained Entry Levels 2 and 3 in English and mathematics and are preparing for GCSE examinations in Year 11. These students have also had notable success in Entry Level 3 in information and communication technology as well as in small animal care. Post-16 students have also made faster progress over the past year with students now working between Levels 2 and 4, and making at least two levels of progress over two terms.

At Key Stage 3, students are making good progress in reading as measured from the school's first reliable data in September 2012. Some students have improved their reading skills by as much as one or two years as recorded in their recent assessments. They have also improved their communication skills significantly as a result of the school's emphasis on speaking and interaction. Nevertheless, the school rightly recognises that more work is still to be done to improve the students' writing skills, including handwriting and presentation.

Students' gains have been brought about by rapid improvements in the quality of teaching, raised expectations of staff through challenging target setting, and effective interventions for literacy and numeracy. The regular capture of tracking information on students' progress and the frequent moderation of staff's assessments of students' work have laid strong foundations on which to build progress checks and to hold staff accountable for students' progress. As a result, the school now has an accurate picture of the rate of progress of the students. For example, it can demonstrate that across the whole school population at least eight out of 10 students have made two sub-levels of progress between September 2012 and May 2013 and close to half have made three sub-levels of progress in the same period.

The quality of teaching

The permanent appointment of a senior leader charged with the management of the quality of teaching has, and is continuing to have, a positive impact on the students' classroom experiences. Following regular themed observations across the school, sessions are tailored to staff needs. The proportion of teaching that is regularly good continues to increase and there is very little inadequate teaching. None was seen on this monitoring visit. The stimulating environment provided by the new building has done much to improve the students' engagement. Staff and students are more able to work collaboratively together as staff confidence in students' positive responses to discussion and tasks has grown. This was very evident in the way the students were at ease in discussions and in giving extended answers to teachers' questioning in a

lesson on sequencing the events for making a film. Most learning support assistants are very well integrated into the lessons, helped by the school's expectations of joint lesson planning. The drive to ensure that work is closely matched to each students' needs and previous learning is a strong factor in the students' accelerating progress. Visual and practical resources are now regularly in use as are imaginative ways for students to demonstrate their learning in lessons. Improvements in the quality of teaching are reflected in the students' readiness to learn and their enjoyment of the work.

In those lessons that were less than good, teaching sometimes demanded lengthy listening from the students, resulting in a slow pace of learning. There were also too few planned opportunities for students to practise extended writing. Occasionally, support staff have a too superficial understanding of the concepts involved in an aspect of the work covered and there is scope for middle leaders to develop learning assistants' subject knowledge more systematically.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

Students behave well in class and in practical outside activities. They now clearly enjoy learning and feel secure in expressing their understanding and needs in a polite and friendly way. The level and quality of interactions between staff and pupils and between pupils themselves have improved markedly since the previous monitoring inspection. Behaviour around the school is also mainly good although a little boisterous at times. Students are polite to visitors, willing to engage in conversation, and observe a range of courtesies such as holding open doors for adults. Attendance levels, at 93.4%, continue to be above the national average for special schools.

The quality of leadership in and management of the school

The school now benefits from a strong and stable senior team. The headteacher is very well supported by the deputy and assistant headteachers. At senior leadership level, the school is well on its way to managing without intensive external support. The headteacher has forged helpful links with other local schools. These partnerships are now well established and are likely to provide good mutual support both for staff and students as need arises. A few legacy staffing issues remain, and the headteacher, together with the local authority, is continuing to tackle such matters robustly.

Performance management procedures are well embedded and all staff continue to be held to account for the students' progress. Recently promoted middle leaders are making a key contribution to school improvement. However, subject leadership is of variable quality, and this is an area that requires further improvement. Nevertheless, the majority of staff now share a common vision for the future of the school and are

working collaboratively with senior staff to prepare the ground for the rising school roll in the next academic year. Post-16 provision is also growing and diversifying. Only one student from the current Year 11 plans to move to another establishment for the sixth form. This is mainly because of the need for specialist provision unavailable within the remit of the school.

The school is planning very carefully for the new academic year. The curriculum has been reviewed as has the grouping of students. New courses leading to worthwhile and accessible accreditation are ready for implementation. New facilities will be put in place over the summer break so that some courses, currently taught off site, can take place in the school. The timetable has been thoughtfully adjusted to meet the wide range of complex personal and learning needs of the students as well as the increases in the school roll.

Members of the governing body play a very active role in the development of the school. This is a significant improvement since the last inspection. The Chair of the Governing Body not only supports and challenges the school very successfully but also challenges other governors to fulfil their functions effectively. Issues raised in the recent social care inspection with regard to boarding have been dealt with rapidly and effectively.

External support

The local authority has continued to support the school well. It has agreed with senior leaders that only minimal support will be provided or needed in the next academic year. Budgetary issues for the new financial year have still to be resolved and the school's three-year plan for reducing the deficit has still to be approved.