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Mr Ben Stitchman
Headteacher
The Dormston School
Mill Bank
Sedgley
Dudley
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Dear Mr Stitchman

Special measures monitoring inspection of The Dormston School

Following my visit with Mel Ford, Her Majesty's Inspector, and Alicia Welsh-Kuligowicz, Additional Inspector, to your school on 26–27 February 2014, 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 previous monitoring inspection.

The inspection was the second monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures following the inspection which took place in June 2013. 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 may only appoint newly qualified teachers before the next monitoring inspection after consultation with me.

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 Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council.

Yours sincerely
James McNeillie
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection which took place in June 2013

- Improve the quality of teaching to raise standards and students' achievement by ensuring that teachers:
 - consistently plan and deliver lessons that provide suitable challenge for all the students by using all available data about students' progress
 - encourage students to take responsibility for their learning through greater opportunities for group work and problem-solving activities
 - use the students' own good responses to problems or provide models of good practice so that students can assess their own progress against the best
 - use questioning more effectively to probe and deepen students' understanding
 - use their marking to correct basic errors in spelling, punctuation and grammar and then check that students improve their work as directed
 - consistently give students written feedback that shows them what they need to do to reach the higher levels
 - give students time to reflect on, and respond to, comments about their work.

- Improve leadership, management and governance at all levels by:
 - ensuring that the checks made on teaching focus on the quality of learning and the progress made by students rather than the activities they undertake
 - making sure that the leaders and managers who check on the quality of teaching are properly trained and can make accurate judgements
 - providing guidance and support to teachers to help them improve their practice, including the chance to see the best teachers teaching
 - checking on the implementation and impact of whole-school policies, especially the marking policy
 - undertaking an external review of governance in order to assess how this aspect of leadership and management may be improved
 - taking rapid action following the review to improve governance so that governors are able to ask challenging questions and hold the school to account for improvements in teaching and students' achievement.

Report on the second monitoring inspection on 26–27 February 2014

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with you and other leaders of the school, a group of teachers without leadership responsibilities and a group of students. I spoke by telephone to the Chair of the Governing Body and the headteacher of the outstanding school with which The Dormston School is in a formal partnership. I also met a representative from the local authority.

Context

Since my last visit, a new Chair of the Governing Body has been appointed and three teachers have left the school. From January 2014, you have also restructured the roles of the 'Heads of House' leaders.

Achievement of pupils at the school

Published data confirm that the achievement of students who left the school in the summer of 2013 was inadequate. The school's records also show that the current Year 11 students are not on track to make at least nationally expected progress in English and mathematics by the time they leave the school. This is because of a legacy of chronic underachievement. Across year groups, gaps in the progress of students eligible for support from the pupil premium funding (additional money from the government to support students known to be eligible for free school meals and those in the care of the local authority) and their classmates remain too wide. The most-able students continue not to make enough progress. However, the school's own records show that students, and a wide range of groups of students, are beginning to make better progress in all years. These positive improvements were confirmed by inspectors in our observations of the quality of students' learning in lessons and in their work.

The quality of teaching

Senior leaders and teachers have worked well together in making improvements to the quality of teaching. Inspection evidence shows that these improvements are clearly beginning to have a positive impact. You, your fellow senior leaders and governors are very well aware that there still remains much to do to make sure that these day-to-day improvements make the much-needed difference to students' achievement over time.

In the lessons observed, teachers demonstrated good subject knowledge and many use this well to engage students and promote positive attitudes to learning. Teachers asked a good range of questions to test out how well students understood what they were learning, as well as to deepen students' understanding. These

observations show that training for teachers on how to use questioning to promote students' learning is making a positive difference. The best teaching, including some that is outstanding, is characterised by teachers' high expectations of what all students can achieve, regular and helpful feedback to students and carefully chosen activities and strategies that enthuse students and enable them to develop their knowledge, skills and understanding very well. This means that students are making accelerated progress.

All teachers are provided with a good range of information on students' current levels of skills and knowledge. However, not all teachers are using this information well enough to plan learning activities. This means, for example, that the most-able students in a class are not challenged enough or those students who struggle with the learning are not provided with sufficient support. Senior leaders understand that until teachers' planning and teaching in the classroom is more precisely matched to the abilities of different groups of students, students' achievement is not going to improve quickly enough.

Students are now experiencing more regular and helpful marking of their written work. As a result, many have a clearer understanding of what they need to do to improve. Increasingly, but not yet consistently, students are responding to and acting on the advice of their teachers. School leaders have a good awareness of where the strengths and weaknesses are in this aspect of teaching and they are regularly checking on and supporting those teachers who need it the most.

Teaching to help students develop and use their literacy skills well needs to be improved and this will be a specific focus in my next monitoring inspection. During this visit, inspectors did not find much evidence of teachers specifically supporting the development of literacy skills or of students' being able to apply these skills consistently well. However, there is some evidence of developing good practice. For example, of teachers of subjects other than English giving specific areas of improvement in their marking related to basic errors in spelling, punctuation and grammar. In addition, in one history lesson, the teacher encouraged students to use a helpful strategy to find groups of related words when reading a text.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

In the lessons observed, students' positive attitudes and good behaviour made a significant contribution to their learning. Good relationships exist between students and their teachers, and with their classmates. All of the students and teachers inspectors spoke with described considerable improvements to behaviour in lessons and around the school. They attributed this to the high expectations introduced this academic year, and to the better quality of teaching in lessons.

Students are polite and friendly. They were keen to tell inspectors about the changes to their school. They told us that they feel safe in school and that teachers and other

adults are there to help them if needed. Some of the students inspectors spoke to said that there was some name-calling in school, which they did not like. Students generally move sensibly around the school buildings, although this is less orderly on the stairs and when students are coming into the buildings from outside at the end of break and lunchtimes.

As headteacher, you have set clear boundaries of what is and is not acceptable behaviour. This has resulted in higher levels of permanent and fixed-term exclusions because some students have struggled to conform to these increased expectations. However, there is evidence that these, and other sanctions, are having an impact because there are now fewer incidents of students' poor behaviour, such as swearing at staff, than was the case in the first few months of this school year. I will explore this further with you and other school leaders during subsequent monitoring inspections.

Students are attending school more regularly than was the case in previous years, and leaders are also tackling to good effect those students who are late to school in the mornings.

The quality of leadership in and management of the school

Staff and students are unanimous in saying that your leadership is the most significant reason for improvements to the school. You have made sure that staff and governors are fully aware of the significant inadequacies that previously existed in the school's work, and that some of the substantial improvements needed will take time. Nonetheless, there have been some clear improvements in a short space of time.

The systems and structures I referred to in my previous letter are now beginning to bear some fruit in terms of having a positive impact. Leaders know how well students, and different groups of students, are achieving in each year group and this means that teachers can provide additional support to the many students who are suffering as the result of years of underachievement. The careful tracking of the achievement, attendance and behaviour of students eligible for support from the pupil premium funding has quickly highlighted the wide gaps that exist between these students and their peers. A sensible range of approaches are in place to tackle these issues but have not yet had time to have had any substantial or sustained impact. Overall, leaders need to be sharper in their analysis of the wide range of data that they have available to them for all aspects of the school's work. This will mean that any trends can quickly be spotted and, if necessary, halted, but also will mean that leaders can see what is working well and build on this.

There are regular, effective and supportive checks on the quality of teaching that are resulting in improvements to students' experiences in the classroom. Joint work between senior and subject leaders is building a consistency in accurate judgements

on the quality of teaching and sharing good practice. Helpful reviews by senior leaders of the subject areas they manage identify strengths as well as areas for development. However, the quality and consistency of written feedback to teachers on the quality of teaching still needs to be improved. Teachers are pleased with the training opportunities they have been given and some of these, such as improvements to teachers' use of questions in lessons, mentioned above, are having a direct impact in classrooms.

Subject leaders and other leaders of aspects of the school's work told inspectors that they consider there is a good balance of support from senior leaders and being held to account for their work. For example, two of these leaders explained that they now know more about the work of the colleagues for whom they are responsible than ever before and are beginning to tackle weaknesses that exist. You have sensibly used external consultants to support all teachers of English and mathematics in a number of ways, including by all of these teachers undertaking joint observations of learning in their subjects.

You, other senior leaders and governors have a clear vision of what is needed for the school to be 'good', and indeed 'outstanding'. You also have a realistic view of how long this will take. The collective aspirations of the school's leaders are also evident in your drive to have more teaching that is outstanding. You are supporting teachers in this by arranging in-school and external training and experience.

The governance of the school is improving. The recently appointed Chair of the Governing Body has increased the level of challenge provided by governors to senior leaders. Governors are developing their understanding of achievement data and other aspects of the school's work, including through focused visits to school.

This letter has highlighted the many improvements to the work of the school in a short space of time and these should not be underestimated. However, what also must not be underestimated is the considerable amount of work that is still required to improve the school's effectiveness and, in turn, the quality of education the students are receiving. Much of the work of the school is at a relatively early stage in terms of having a substantial impact and the short period of time since the school was placed in special measures means that this impact cannot yet be considered to be sustained.

External support

The local authority has provided effective support since the time of my last visit. It has continued to partly fund the school's formal partnership with Balcarras School, provided highly valued support from a consultant and undertaken reviews of the school's progress through a review of teaching in English and mathematics and a formal review meeting. The records of the teaching review and the formal review board meeting are suitably evaluative. However, I would caution the local authority

on making what could be considered as summative statements about the quality of teaching when the impact of that teaching over time has not been considered. In addition, the minutes of the review board meeting took too long to be sent to the school, being received only during this inspection.

Leaders are positive about the support received from Balcarras School and from its headteacher, who is a National Leader of Education. The developing impact of this work and that commissioned from external consultants is evident in the improvements to the quality of teaching, students' behaviour and the leadership of the school.