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16 May 2014

Mrs Mary-Nest Richardson
Headteacher
Penn School
Church Road
Penn
High Wycombe
HP10 8LZ

Dear Mrs Richardson

Special measures monitoring inspection of Penn School

Following my visit to your school on 14 and 15 May 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 third monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures following the inspection which took place in May 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 not appoint newly qualified teachers before the next monitoring inspection.

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, the Director of Children's Services for Buckinghamshire and the Education Funding Agency.

Yours sincerely

Andrew Redpath
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

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

- Improve the quality of teaching so that it enables all students to make at least good progress, ensuring that:
 - lessons are planned to build on the prior learning of students
 - the intended learning outcomes of all lessons are clear and precise for individuals and groups
 - activities are purposeful and relevant
 - support from adults is always effective in improving learning and promoting students' independence
 - students are encouraged to be more active in lessons and take responsibility for their own learning.
- Improve students' achievement by:
 - ensuring that the assessment of students' current learning is accurate
 - setting challenging targets for students' progress based on their starting points and, where appropriate, according to national expectations
 - regularly monitoring progress to identify any underachievement and intervening when necessary.
- Strengthen leadership and management by:
 - reviewing and clarifying roles, including establishing clear accountabilities for students' progress and for the quality of teaching and the residential provision
 - ensuring leaders, including governors, have the necessary skills in order to carry out their roles and offering training where necessary
 - sharpening monitoring and evaluation procedures so that leaders, including governors, have a clear analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the school
 - developing school improvement plans that have measurable outcomes and clear timescales and carrying out actions agreed.
- An external review of governance should be undertaken in order to assess how this aspect of leadership and management may be improved.
- Meet the national minimum standards for residential special schools.

Report on the third monitoring inspection on 14 and 15 May 2014

Evidence

The inspector observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the headteacher, senior leaders, two governors including the Chair of the Governing Body, the Chair of the Trustees and two groups of students. He held a telephone discussion with an independent educational consultant who has supported the school. The residential provision did not form part of this inspection.

Context

Since the previous monitoring inspection a permanent appointment has been made to the post of deputy headteacher. Members of staff have assumed new responsibilities for leading on English and science.

Achievement of pupils at the school

Students in Year 11 and in the sixth form are studying a broader range of courses at examination level. They report that the school is expecting them to work harder and they are proud of their achievements. Most students are expecting to gain GCSE or Entry Level qualifications in English, mathematics and science. Depending on their interests, students are studying additional courses, for example in history, information and communication technology, food technology, photography, art and work-related subjects. Several students are expecting to gain higher-grade passes at GCSE. Achievement in art is particularly high, with impressive examples of students' work displayed around the school.

Students' speaking skills are often higher than their standard of written work. This reflects the lack of focus in the past on the development of reading and writing skills. Staff are currently developing agreed approaches across the school to raise attainment in reading, writing and mathematics.

Teachers have been moderating their checks on students' progress with colleagues to make sure the information is more accurate. This is helping teachers to set more-challenging learning targets for students. Staff are usefully exploring links with another special school to share information on students' attainment. The school has introduced an appropriate system for recording students' attainment and checking their progress against National Curriculum levels. Current evidence shows that progress is improving, although most groups are not making the progress that might be expected given their starting points. However, the information is not yet analysed fully to identify the possible reasons for underperformance.

The quality of teaching

Teachers' planning has improved and it is much clearer what students are expected to learn. There are good examples of learning targets being recorded at the front of students' books or displayed on classroom walls. In the best lessons, teachers are ambitious for students to excel. An example was seen in a physical education lesson when students gained confidence in using the trampoline. They showed a real sense of achievement when they had completed a difficult exercise. Students often work independently and show initiative, for example when they tidy up and put tools away at the end of a design and technology lesson. Occasionally, teachers' planning does not set out tasks in small enough steps, particularly for students with more complex needs. This results in students relying too heavily on adults for help in completing an activity, rather than learning to solve problems on their own. There are good examples of highly skilled staff using signing, pictures, symbols and communication aids to promote learning. It is noticeable how the presentation of students' work has improved. Students' books are generally marked in more detail and points for improvement noted and followed up.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

Students enjoy coming to school and unexplained absence is rare. Almost all feel that they have made faster progress since joining the school. They are proud of their achievements, for example when older students show visitors how they set up a chicken coop as part of a caring for small animals course. Students report that they feel safe and appreciate the individual support they receive. They display a positive attitude to learning in lessons and mix amicably with others at break and lunchtimes. Incidents of anxious behaviour are rare and are managed well by staff.

The quality of leadership in and management of the school

Staff morale is higher and there is a more purposeful atmosphere across the school. The new senior and middle leaders share a strong commitment to raising achievement. Since the last monitoring inspection they have sharpened their skills in evaluating the quality of teaching and learning and have a good grasp of the school's strengths and areas for improvement. Roles and responsibilities are now clearer. Teachers' knowledge and skills have been audited and matched to particular subject responsibilities. Some senior leaders are developing their roles, especially in relation to forward planning for their departments and monitoring the impact of policies. Arrangements for managing the performance of staff at all levels are in place. However, targets for the headteacher and senior leaders are quite general, which makes it difficult to judge the full impact leadership is having on improving the school.

The governing body is providing better support and challenge to the school. Its range of expertise has been enhanced through the recruitment of new governors. In particular, the Chair of the Governing Body demonstrates considerable drive and commitment to improving the school. Key governors are linked to particular subjects and to aspects of the school's work. They visit the school regularly and attend joint planning meetings with staff. The governing body monitors the action plan and reviews progress on meeting targets. This arrangement is working well enough, although several changes being introduced by senior leaders are not yet included in the school's action plan. This lack of coordination limits the governing body's ability to have a complete overview of developments. The Chair of the Governing Body and the headteacher have been active in leading a discussion about the future direction of the school. They have held consultations with the local authorities who refer students and made visits to other schools. There is now a shared view about future admissions and the range of special educational needs the school is best able to meet. As a next step, the trust and governing body recognise the need to link future plans with the deployment of the school's resources.

External support

Staff have drawn on support from a local successful special school to improve subject plans, for example in mathematics. Visits have been made to other schools to review approaches to the teaching of reading and writing. An independent educational consultant has worked effectively with senior leaders to extend skills in the use of learning targets, measuring students' progress and developing management skills.

Following the visit to the school, I recommend that further action is taken to:

- develop a longer-term plan for the school that links changes in the student intake with the deployment of resources
- strengthen arrangements for evaluating the performance of the headteacher and senior leaders.