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Andrea Healey
Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Healey

Special measures monitoring inspection of Big Wood School

Following my visit with Her Majesty's Inspector Ian McNeilly to your school on 3–4 June 2014, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm my findings. Thank you for the help you gave during the inspection and for the time you made available to discuss the actions that have been taken since the school's previous monitoring inspection.

This was the second monitoring visit since the school became subject to special measures following the inspection which took place in November 2013. The full list of the areas for improvement 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 now appoint newly qualified teachers before the next monitoring inspection, but only in science, mathematics, history and modern languages.

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 Nottingham City Council.

Yours sincerely

John Peckham
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection that took place in November 2013

- Improve the quality of teaching so that rapid progress is made by all students by:
 - ensuring that teachers have high expectations of students and set challenging targets for the progress they should make in the short and medium term in both English and mathematics
 - planning learning activities that stretch and challenge the most-able students, particularly in languages and mathematics
 - providing effective support and challenge for students with special educational needs and those who are at risk of underachieving
 - ensuring that marking and feedback to students is meaningful and consistent so that it allows students to reflect on the quality of their work and act upon areas for development.

- Further improve work already undertaken to improve the attendance of students in all year groups, but particularly the older students and those at risk of underachieving, so that attendance is at least in line with national averages.

- Improve the quality of leadership at all levels by:
 - setting targets for students which are challenging and clearly understood by both staff and students, and which will lead to at least good progress
 - ensuring that subject leaders, especially of English, foreign languages, mathematics and science, carry out their monitoring activities frequently and effectively so that school policies are consistently applied and underperformance is addressed quickly
 - further develop support plans which attend to the needs of students whose circumstances make them vulnerable, so that they can all achieve their potential and make good progress
 - ensuring that governors improve their skills in challenging school leaders and checking for themselves the effectiveness of improvement plans.

Report on the second monitoring inspection on 3–4 June 2014

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the headteacher, other senior staff, groups of staff and students, two members of the governing body and a representative of the local authority.

During this inspection, the focus was placed on achievement, the quality of teaching and leadership and management. Future monitoring visits will inspect more closely the extent to which the school has developed support plans that attend to the needs of students whose circumstances make them vulnerable.

Context

At its meeting in March 2014, the governing body agreed to explore becoming a sponsored academy as part of the Redhill Academy Trust. Initial discussions have taken place and the Secretary of State has signed the academy order to allow this to happen. There are still, however, some areas of detail that have not been finalised, so it is not yet certain whether or when conversion to an academy will take place.

A number of teachers have left the school at Christmas or Easter and, in most cases, have been replaced by new staff. In modern languages, however, the school has been unable to recruit suitable subject specialists and temporary but unsatisfactory arrangements have been made. A number of vacancies remain at present unfilled for September.

Achievement of pupils at the school

Following the sharp decline in results in 2013, leaders have made significant efforts to improve the achievement of students. The school has provided a very high level of support to Year 11 students in the lead up to their examinations to help make up for significant underachievement in the last two years. This has included extra classes and revision sessions during the holidays.

Although the school uses robust procedures to ensure that its estimates of students' likely performance in their examinations are as accurate as possible, there remains some uncertainty about how much better examination results will be in 2014. This is because a great deal of additional support has been provided very recently and many students have estimates that are very close to grade boundaries. The school's judgement are that the 2014 examination results will be much improved compared to last year, but will remain below national averages. From their starting points in Year 7, it is estimated that Year 11 students will have made close to the national levels of expected progress in mathematics. This is much better than last year. The

exceptions to this are the most able students, as too few are on track to achieve the highest grades at GCSE. In English, the progress is not yet as good, although the school expects it to be better than in 2013. The proportions of students on track to have made better than expected progress are well below the 2013 national averages in both mathematics and English.

For the younger students, leaders have focused on improving the quality of teaching and there is strong evidence that these students are now generally making much better progress than in recent years in both English and mathematics. Not all groups or students are making better progress, however, because it depends on the quality of teaching, which is still variable within these two subjects. Across the wider curriculum, there is also variability in the quality of teaching. In some subjects such as modern languages, students and leaders are concerned about progress because of staffing difficulties and a lack of subject specialists.

The school's provision for students who have special educational needs is of high quality and these students are showing some of the strongest progress in the school in Key Stage 3. Some students who struggled with literacy when they joined the school have made exceptional progress in their learning. Younger students who are eligible for the pupil premium (a grant paid to schools to fund support for students who are entitled to free school meals or looked after by the local authority) are being supported to make progress at least as well as their peers. In Years 10 and 11, however, school assessments show that there is still a gap in achievement between these students and others. They are estimated to be about half a grade behind their peers in English and nearly a grade behind in mathematics.

Students all know their minimum expected grades, have a challenging aspirational target and have regular assessments to see whether they are on track to meet it. The expectations of students and their teachers about the quality and level of challenge in work, however, are still too low. Far too much written work is untidy, unfinished or of poor quality. There are notable exceptions to this; for example, the least able Year 7 students have well-presented English books because they are regularly and rigorously marked for literacy. Similarly, in a Year 10 physical education group, because of the teacher's high expectations, the students' work is well organised, neat and shows their progress clearly.

Homework is regularly set but students reported that they did not always complete it, so it is not yet making a strong contribution to improving progress. Most students want to learn and do well, and they cooperate and participate well in most lessons; nevertheless, they are often reluctant to extend or complete their work on their own. This has led some teachers to take the easier route of lowering their expectations of students' capability instead of insisting on them producing their best. Students spoke most highly of teachers who provide the highest levels of challenge. One Year 8 student, for example, said of his geography teacher: 'He is strict but fun and fair. We work for him because we know he's going to work for us.'

Marking is improving. Students and teachers are recognising the improvements, but not all teachers have yet understood the full contribution that high-quality feedback can make to students' learning. In some cases, marking is too infrequent to enable teachers to assess progress or identify misunderstandings, or to show students that teachers care about the quality of their work. Teachers' expectations about presentation and quality of writing are generally too low to effectively promote higher literacy standards. For students with the very weakest literacy skills, help and guidance are highly effective, and they are making rapid progress because teachers focus closely on basic skills and insist on students doing their best work. However, the work to promote literacy across all subjects among those with better skills is much less effective and students are 'getting away' with poor presentation and incomplete work. Teachers say they find it hard to get good writing from most students.

The quality of teaching

Leaders have dramatically improved the accuracy of their judgements about the quality of teaching over time. Lesson observations by the school now take into account a much wider range of evidence, including student progress data, to assess the typical quality of teaching. Leaders are now able to provide accurate, detailed feedback to support teachers to improve their work. Sometimes this is the first time that some teachers have experienced this in their teaching careers.

Teaching quality varies throughout the school. Some is outstanding or good, but much requires improvement and some is still inadequate. Because all teachers have now been assessed through more rigorous procedures, they know how their teaching is judged and some are now actively engaged on a coaching and improvement programme. All subject leaders have been trained in how to observe and judge teaching quality and in how to provide helpful feedback to teachers. The best teachers have been trained as coaches and have begun work with colleagues. It is too early to assess the impact of this work in improving the practice of teachers who are receiving coaching.

Teachers' and students' expectations about behaviour and the quality of students' work are still not high enough in many lessons. This makes it harder for the staff as a whole to establish good study habits and approaches to enable students to take a greater pride and involvement in their own work and progress. Sometimes the activities that students have to do in class are not challenging enough, particularly for the most able. Teachers do not use questions and activities that encourage students to think more deeply about their learning and so improve their understanding. Inspectors observed subjects where students were more engaged in their learning, such as science, mathematics and history and geography. Too often, however, students are allowed to be passengers in their lessons, carried through at the pace of the teacher, and are not inspired to fully engage with learning.

Students explained to inspectors that the consistency with which teachers used the school's behaviour policy has improved, but there are still some teachers who give too many warnings rather than consequences for misbehaviour. Some teachers have improved their use of the rewards system by giving out credits more fairly, and students in one class said that behaviour had improved as a result. However, most students still do not know how many credits they have received. Because of this and the fact that rewards are too often given for compliance or improvement rather than good study habits, the rewards system is not effectively contributing to better learning behaviours in the longer term.

The quality of marking, using the school's new policy, has also improved since the last visit. It is still too variable, however, with some books being very rarely marked by the teacher, and some teachers still not fully understanding how to use it as a tool to promote learning and progress. Students said that where the marking practice was best, they really appreciated both advice about how to improve and the time to make sure that their learning was consolidated before they moved on to new topics.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

Leaders have successfully improved the attendance of the younger students. Attendance in Key Stage 3 is now better than the national average. In Key Stage 4, however, particularly in Year 11, rates of attendance are still well below national levels.

Students still report that behaviour inhibits learning in some lessons, and in some cases this is leading to students making little or no progress. Behaviour is very closely linked to the quality of teaching. Most students judge that behaviour out of lessons is generally better than in class. Where teaching is uninteresting, unclear or insufficiently challenging, students quickly disengage and behaviour deteriorates. Some teachers, however, are able to inspire a high degree of commitment and additional work from their students. In their lessons, students are attentive, responsive and work hard. Students are more aware of a regular senior staff presence around the school since the last monitoring visit and say that this has helped to improve conduct.

Students' own behaviours are not yet making a strong contribution to their own success and progress. This is particularly evident in the lack of care and pride in their work, with unfinished and untidy work, and books and planners with graffiti and inappropriate comments. This is because some teachers' expectations are too low and because the checks that they make are not sufficiently rigorous. For example, a form teacher had regularly signed a student planner containing some quite obscene comments, with no indication that the comments were unacceptable.

In other cases, teachers have allowed students to leave work incomplete or uncorrected.

There is some evidence that the relationships between some teachers and students have become more strained since the school went into special measures. Some teachers are clearly feeling under pressure to help raise achievement, resulting in less effective approaches; some say they feel that students and parents respect them less because of the special measures judgement and are blaming them. Many students do not understand why there is a stricter approach to behaviour and school uniform.

The quality of leadership in and management of the school

The senior leaders have responded quickly and effectively to many of the issues raised following the inspection last November. Leaders have implemented a range of initiatives and actions, some of which appear to be showing some impact. These actions have, to an extent, been reactive to urgent need and have been supported by external advice and support. The school's short-term action plan has been rewritten to make it much more accessible to all staff, but it has no actions planned beyond September. Leaders have not yet prepared a suitable plan for the coming school year and beyond.

Much progress has been made in improving the accuracy of judgements about the quality of teaching and learning. Systems to hold middle leaders and teachers to account for the progress of their students, such as the use of transition matrices, are much more effective than previously. Training for senior and middle leaders has been good. Systems to track the progress of students are thorough and enable underachievement to be identified quickly and addressed. Senior leaders and the governing body have taken key strategic decisions about partnerships with other schools and about staffing matters when needed. The governing body is becoming much better at holding leaders to account, although its mechanisms to gather evidence and provide feedback to the headteacher about the quality of leadership and management are undeveloped.

Although leaders have been effective at developing systems that are fit for purpose and at conveying some of the urgency and ambition required to lift the achievement of the school, staff, students and the community are not yet clear about the bigger picture. A high proportion of the teaching staff still feel that the original Ofsted judgement was incorrect and that the school is fundamentally good. Not all teachers understand why the judgements about the quality of their teaching have become more rigorous. Although staff generally have confidence in leaders, there is much to be done in helping all members of the school community fully understand the journey of improvement still required by the school.

Although the governing body has decided in principle to become an academy sponsored by the Redhill Academy Trust, it is not yet certain that this will take place. The uncertainty has led to some delay in planning beyond September for fear that action begun will need to be changed to fall into line with expectations from the sponsor. This lack of a clear, long-term plan is a serious deficiency in preparing for the new academic year.

External support

The local authority school improvement consultants have provided extensive and effective support and challenge to leaders in the school. They have provided incisive and useful reviews of some departments, including English and mathematics, with powerful recommendations. Leaders have acted promptly on the advice provided and inspectors were able to see the impact of this, for example in the leadership support being provided to the English department. Leaders have also actively engaged with further advice and training from a variety of sources including Ofsted, the George Spencer Teaching School and, more recently, Redhill Academy. Leaders have been quick to draw ideas and strategies from these opportunities where they believe they can make a contribution to more rapid improvement, with some success.

An external review of governance was provided by the local authority governor support service, and governors are currently completing a skills audit as a result of a recommendation from this.

The school should take further urgent action to:

- Develop an agreed support plan with Redhill Academy, which will either support a smooth transition to sponsored academy status or, in the event of the school not becoming a sponsored academy, provide a structured plan for ongoing support and development.
- Prepare a key strategic plan for the coming year to include a focus on a new start in September with significantly raised expectations for:
 - the quality and completion of written work and care of books
 - the consistency and effectiveness of behaviour management
 - the rigour with which teachers show that they care about the progress and quality of work of their students.