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10 July 2014

Ms Sarah Pickering
Acting Headteacher
Mill Water School
Honiton Bottom Road
Honiton
EX14 2ER

Dear Ms Pickering

Special measures monitoring inspection of Mill Water School

Following my visit with Andrew Penman, Associate Inspector, to your school on 8 and 9 July 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 November 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 local authority's statement of action is fit for purpose.

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

Yours sincerely

Andrew Redpath
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

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

- Improve the quality of teaching by:
 - ensuring the pace of lessons is quickened to sustain pupils' attention
 - providing all staff with training to use signing and symbols more effectively to help pupils' communication skills, and ensuring all staff use the appropriate level of language
 - ensuring activities provided are more stimulating to fully motivate pupils
 - providing opportunities for staff to observe outstanding teaching and learning in other schools.
- Improve the learning of more-able pupils by:
 - providing them with additional challenge that meets their needs, rather than just extra of the same work
 - improving marking so that it informs pupils of the next steps they need to take in their learning
 - making better use of homework.
- Raise achievement in mathematics by:
 - making sure teachers balance better the introduction of new concepts with opportunities to consolidate skills
 - making sure teachers use imaginative and interesting resources, including practical resources.
- Improve provision in the Early Years Foundation Stage and the sixth form by:
 - making sure younger children do not wait too long when they need help in class and sixth form students have work that is geared to their age and ability
 - improving accommodation and resources
 - checking progress data effectively to identify what areas need most attention.
- Improve the leadership and management of the school through:
 - ensuring the school's self-evaluation is accurate and more rigorous
 - focusing improvement planning to secure good teaching and learning
 - using additional Year 7 catch-up funding appropriately and measuring the impact of its use
 - ensuring middle leaders use assessment information better to identify strengths and weaknesses of each area and plan more systematically.
- Improve governance so that:
 - the single central record meets requirements and is monitored
 - statutory requirements for the website are met
 - governors check the work of the school rigorously and accurately.

An external review of governance should be undertaken in order to assess how this aspect of leadership and management may be improved. Ofsted will make recommendations on governance to the authority responsible for the school.

Report on the second monitoring inspection on 8 and 9 July 2014

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with senior leaders, individual teachers, a group of teaching assistants, two groups of students, the Chair of the Governing Body and one other governor, and held a telephone discussion with a representative of the local authority. They observed 11 lessons, of which four were observed jointly with the acting headteacher.

Context

You are continuing as acting headteacher while the substantive headteacher remains on an extended period of absence due to ill health. The school is completing plans to enter a multi-academy trust with a partner primary school and is due to move into new purpose-built accommodation in January 2015.

Achievement of pupils at the school

Attainment is low due to the lack of accredited courses provided for older students. Students in Year 11 and the sixth form who are leaving school at the end of the current academic year will leave without any recognised qualifications. Senior leaders are aware of this weakness and have plans for introducing appropriate courses from September 2014. A good system for recording and checking pupils' progress as they move through the school has been established. The information on pupils' levels of attainment has been moderated with other special schools to make sure it is accurate. It is also being analysed to spot areas of weakness. For example, teachers now know that many pupils perform less well in mathematics when trying to apply what they have learned. Although the school is building a more accurate picture of pupils' learning, information is quite recent and it is too early to show the progress of different groups over time.

The quality of teaching

Teachers have improved their planning to focus more clearly on what pupils are expected to learn. They are setting work at the right level, which has helped to quicken the pace of learning. The lack of historic information on pupils' progress makes it difficult to have a complete picture of the potential of some pupils, particularly the most able. However, expectations are generally higher and learning targets are more challenging. A new system for recording children's progress in the Early Years Foundation Stage is being used well to monitor progress in more detail and to plan the next steps in learning. The wider variety of activities provided in lessons is helping to capture pupils' interest and sustain their concentration. This includes the use of photographs and information and communication technology,

and more opportunities for pupils to work alongside those of similar ability. Resources to support teaching and learning have been improved, particularly to develop reading skills. There is a lack of resources which take account of the age of older students, particularly in mathematics. Staff have completed training to raise their awareness of how pupils' communication needs affect their learning. Signing, pictures and symbols are used effectively in most classes to enhance pupils' understanding and to reinforce routines.

Teaching assistants often make a significant contribution to pupils' learning, for example when they run small groups to promote language skills, or when they observe pupils' learning and keep records of their progress. However, in some lessons, adults routinely give help to pupils rather than expecting them to try and complete tasks on their own. This limits pupils' ability to develop the resilience and independence they will need in order to succeed when they leave school. An agreed approach to marking pupils' work has been introduced which is implemented consistently in classes across the school. This includes notes on how pupils have completed their work and suggestions for improvement. Homework is now used more widely and linked to developing pupils' academic and independence skills. A suitable range of books has been purchased to support the home-school reading programme.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

Better teaching with a stronger focus on learning has helped to improve pupils' behaviour in lessons. Pupils generally settle to work quickly and are absorbed in their work. They get on well with each other in the playground and around the school. The number of incidents of pupils displaying anxious behaviour shows a marked drop and it is now at a low level. There is a positive atmosphere in the school. Staff are sensitive to pupils' individual needs and establish respectful relationships with them. Pupils report that they feel safe and that if they have any concerns they can raise them with staff. They enjoy coming to school and unauthorised absences are rare.

The quality of leadership in and management of the school

The acting headteacher continues to provide thoughtful and determined leadership for the school. She has galvanised senior leaders and staff into an effective team that shares a common purpose to improve pupils' learning. Staff are particularly pleased with the good level of communication established within the school which keeps them well-informed about planned changes. Senior leaders have used their expertise in the field of special education well to make rapid improvements to the school's performance. They now have a better understanding of the school's strengths and weaknesses based on more robust arrangements for checking pupils' progress and the regular monitoring of teaching and learning. They are reviewing teachers' lesson plans regularly and making sure that new policies, for example in

marking, reading and writing, are applied consistently in classes across the school. Year 7 catch-up funding has been used to provide additional reading resources but it is too soon to assess the impact of its use.

The governing body has a clearer view of its role following a recent external review. Governors are more involved in the life of the school. They are monitoring and challenging the work of the school more effectively through focused visits and the fortnightly meetings of the action plan monitoring committee. They have gained a better understanding of pupils' progress through examining data and samples of pupils' work. The school action plan is clearer and includes milestones for measuring success. New arrangements for the appraisal of staff performance have been introduced which are supported by a more targeted use of training and professional development. Job descriptions have been updated to reflect recent changes in senior leadership responsibilities. However, work on defining some middle leadership roles and subject responsibilities is not yet complete. Procedures for recruiting staff and conducting checks to make sure they are suitable for working with children have been strengthened and now meet requirements.

The governing body is not allowing the new school building project to deflect from its desire to raise standards. A separate sub-committee has been established to oversee the building development. A sponsor academy has been identified and plans for transition to academy status are being considered. There remains some uncertainty over the arrangements for longer-term leadership once the school has entered into the academy trust; particularly in relation to how the specialist knowledge currently existing within Mill Water School will be reflected in the new leadership structure.

External support

The school continues to benefit from a good range of external support which is having a clear impact on improving pupils' learning. Links with partner special schools have been used well to clarify the features of good or better teaching through shared lesson observations and visits to observe best practice. The local authority has provided appropriate support to the governing body to help it understand how to hold the school to account more effectively. It has also commissioned an experienced educational consultant to conduct regular visits to the school and report on its progress in tackling the areas for improvement identified in the last full inspection report. Following the judgement at the first monitoring inspection, the local authority has now taken appropriate steps to ensure that the statement of action is fit for purpose.