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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 David Martin (Additional Inspector) and Stephen Hunsley, Her Majesty's Inspector to your school on 24–25 September 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 us 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 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 school may appoint newly qualified teachers.

This letter and monitoring inspection report will be published on the Ofsted website and I am copying them to the Secretary of State, the Chair of the Governing Body, the Director of Children's Services for Nottingham City Council and the Executive Principal of the Redhill Academy Trust.

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 developing 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 third monitoring inspection on 24–25 September 2014

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the headteacher, other members of the senior leadership team and subject leaders for English, mathematics, science, world studies and expressive arts. An inspector met with the Chair of the Governing Body and another governor, spoke on the telephone with a representative of the local authority and met with the Executive Principal and Consultant Principal from the Redhill Academy Trust. Inspectors observed lessons and behaviour around the school site, and met with individual students and groups. Two inspectors met with a group of parents to hear their views about the experiences of their children and the improvements in the school.

As part of this inspection, additional survey work looking at the quality of careers education and guidance was conducted.

Context

A total of 13 teachers and one member of the support staff left the school at the end of the summer term. In September, 14 new teachers joined the staff, and all teaching posts apart from two are now filled with permanent teachers. The Redhill Academy Trust has increased the level of its support by appointing an experienced Consultant Principal from the start of this term. Three members of the senior leadership team have taken on new areas of responsibility from the start of the new school year.

Achievement of pupils at the school

The headline results at GCSE in 2014 are lower than in 2013. The proportion of students gaining five or more A* to C grades including English and mathematics was 40%. However, these students joined the school with lower attainment than the previous year group, so the proportion of students who made expected progress remained about the same as in 2013. These rates of progress are still much lower than the national rates, and the estimates of school leaders about examination results reported in the last monitoring visit report proved to be highly inaccurate.

Students with the lowest prior attainment made the best progress. Students of average and above-average ability underachieved the most. The results were significantly lower than expected and worse than last year in history, geography and Spanish. Some of these subjects were affected by staff absences last year. In other cases, the teachers' assessments of students' progress proved to be over-generous.

The gap between the performance of disadvantaged students and others closed significantly in 2014, but in English, this is only partly due to their better

performance as there was significantly worse performance on the part of others. Similarly, the gap between the performance of boys and girls closed, but this is due to a much steeper decline in the proportion of girls making expected progress. Year 11 students received significant amounts of additional support and teaching to boost their examination performance. Whilst this was very much appreciated by students and parents, it has not effectively made up for the long legacy of some inadequate teaching in the past.

Inspectors noted that many senior students, especially boys, have very poor spelling which has not been sufficiently corrected or challenged by teachers in the past. The new Year 7 students appear to have mostly settled well into the school and they are enjoying their new subjects, but teachers' expectations about the standards these students should reach are not always high enough.

The quality of teaching

Inspectors judged that the overall quality of teaching has improved since the last visit. Having a nearly full complement of permanent staff makes a big difference, although at this stage in the new term, a number of the new staff were still finding their feet. In the lessons observed, a good proportion of students were now making better progress. Teachers are more consistent in lifting expectations about the care that students take over their work and it is much more regularly and consistently marked than previously. There are, however, big variations in the skill with which teachers are able to adapt the pace of learning so that students can make faster progress.

Leaders' own assessment of the quality of teaching agrees with the inspectors in noting that work is not sufficiently adapted to suit the needs of different groups of students and that sometimes the pace is laborious. By contrast, some teachers were able to demonstrate a high level of skill in adapting their lessons to ensure that students' learning progressed at a brisk pace, sustaining their interest and building a strong sense of achievement. In a Year 11 English lesson, for example, students were making rapid progress in understanding linguistic techniques used by President Obama in a speech. The teacher successfully adapted her lesson and complimented students on their engagement and understanding, skipping planned elements in the light of their more rapid progress. Similarly skilful adaptation was observed in an information technology lesson where a small group of students who had made much faster progress were quickly given some more challenging work to extend their understanding.

In many other cases, it was clear that too much time is spent on laborious and unnecessary whole-class explanation and looking at examples of good work. Some students do not need this level of support and tend to become distracted and bored.

The school has adopted a new marking policy this term, and this has brought about a significant improvement in the frequency and quality of marking. Not all teachers have yet mastered techniques for ensuring that students gain maximum value from their marking, although there were some very effective examples. The policy also has the same expectation about frequency of marking for all subjects, but this does not make sufficient allowance for subjects such as English where students can complete a lot of work in between marking. Some students are able to exploit this and their books, where teachers had not regularly checked on the quality of work, showed a sharp deterioration in quality.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

Students and staff all believe that there have been some improvements to the behaviour of students. A new behaviour policy and a higher presence of senior leaders around the school have helped to bring a much greater consistency to the way that teachers and other staff deal with low-level disruption to learning. Some very logical changes, such as renaming detentions as 'Learning Recovery Time' and ensuring that purposeful work is carried out whilst students are there, are making a difference to the way that students understand the importance of behaviour that does not distract from learning.

There are, however, still some inconsistencies. Even some well-established staff are not yet in the routines and habits that will ensure that minor misconduct is quickly and effectively dealt with. Leaders' checks on consistency have not yet extended to the time that students spend with their form teachers, and inspectors saw much less application of the school's policy during this time. Some teachers are experiencing a degree of challenging behaviour, sometimes because they are less experienced or new to the school. Leaders do, however, know who these teachers are and are providing additional support and training where required.

The proportion of students who are excluded from the school is continuing to decline. This is a further indicator of improved standards of behaviour. The attendance of students is now good, a further improvement on previous inspections and a reflection of some very concerted action on the part of leaders.

The quality of leadership in and management of the school

The senior leadership team, strengthened by a reallocation of responsibilities, is beginning to establish effective strategies to check carefully on the work of the school. Lesson observations, work scrutiny and regular walking around the school to make quick checks are firmly established by the senior team. Much higher expectations are being placed on subject and faculty leaders, supported by detailed accountability discussions, but they are still at an early stage of development. These checks, supported by an ambitious training programme, are the right thing to bring about longer-term improvement in the quality of teaching. Insufficient attention has been paid, however, to ensuring rapid compliance with all the new elements of behaviour management and marking. Achieving this, so that using the agreed behaviour management system becomes automatic for all staff, is an essential goal to prevent a gradual decline in behaviour over the year.

The school development plan has now been rewritten to extend the actions and plans for the coming academic year. It is not, however, sufficiently ambitious, and does not map out a clear route for the school to become at least good. It also lacks clarity about how the governing body will receive sharp, professional evaluation of progress during the year. There is also insufficient clarity about the non-negotiable requirements for all staff that will help to ensure more rapid progress.

Governors are continuing to extend the ways in which they gain a better understanding of the work of the school. The Chair of the Governing Body visits the school regularly, and other governors have been involved in training about how to evaluate students' work and teachers' marking.

The quality of information, advice and guidance

The information, advice and guidance students receive to facilitate progression opportunities are good. A comprehensive personal, social and health education (PSHE) programme starts in Year 7 and builds up the students' understanding, resulting in applications into sixth form, college and/or apprenticeships in Year 11.

Good pastoral support provided for students who are identified as 'at risk' help them to make positive progression decisions. Good early interventions while prospective students are often still at primary school allow effective initiatives to be put in place to support their transition through to Year 11 and beyond. A wide variety of support mechanisms, such as learning mentors, help students make informed choices about their progression opportunities. Ongoing liaison with parents in conjunction with school staff identifies the best way forward for the students on leaving school.

There are no trained careers advisors employed by the school. Careers teachers supply appropriate support for students and the school 'buys in' professional advisors from Futures (Futures Nottingham and Nottinghamshire). Staff from Futures

attend school events regularly and provide positive impartial advice for students when leaving school, to include progression to FE colleges, sixth form colleges, apprenticeships and work opportunities. Staff and parents have a clear understanding of A-level progression with a view to accessing university, however only a few fully understand the apprenticeship options available for students. The majority of Year 11 students have one one-to-one meeting allocated with the Futures advisor, however information from a school survey and discussions with students highlight that a few students would prefer to have more opportunities to meet with the advisor in order to discuss their options further. The students identified as 'at risk' have good unlimited access to the Futures careers advisor, but costs prevent this access for all students.

Local colleges and employers attend events to promote their courses and work opportunities for students, while students regularly attend external events and visits organised by the school.

The school's information is that a high level of students progressed into further education (76%) in 2013 with 12% going into employment with a training element. The proportion of ex-students who are not in education, training or employment has declined over a three-year period and only 3% of the Year 11 leavers in 2013 did not establish a suitable placement.

External support

The school has received significant support from the local authority since the original inspection judgement in November 2013. Local authority representatives have conducted reviews of departments and of behaviour. They have also provided coaching to support subject leaders and offered a leadership coach to support the headteacher, although this was not taken up. The initial tentative links with Redhill Academy Trust have been strengthened this term, but the uncertainties around whether and when conversion to academy status might take place have meant that this support has not yet shown impact. The Consultant Principal from the Redhill Academy Trust is now spending two days each week in the school and has established a clear view of priorities.