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6 November 2014

Mr Michael Taylor
Interim Headteacher
The Hawthorne's Free School
Fernhill Road
Bootle
Merseyside
L20 6AQ

Dear Mr Taylor

Special measures monitoring inspection of The Hawthorne's Free School

Following my visit with Andrew Henderson, Additional Inspector, to your school on 4 and 5 November 2014, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the 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.

This visit was the second monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures following the inspection which took place in February 2014. 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.

Having considered all the evidence I strongly recommend that the school does not seek to appoint NQTs.

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 Young People and Families for Sefton and the Department for Education – Academies Advisers Unit.

Yours sincerely,

Charles Lowry

Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection which took place in February 2014

- Improve the quality of teaching in all subjects, particularly in mathematics, by:
 - making sure the most able students are challenged in every lesson, make at least expected progress and achieve the highest grades
 - maximising opportunities to correct and extend literacy and numeracy skills in all subjects.

- Make effective use of the pupil premium funding so that students who are known to be eligible for support make at least expected progress and the gap in attainment between them and others narrows. An external review of the school's use of the pupil premium should be undertaken in order to assess how the deployment of the funding may be improved.

- Improve leadership and management, including governance, by:
 - making sure data are clear and accurate to enable leaders at all levels, governors and teachers to use them effectively to raise standards, accurately track students' progress and challenge performance
 - making sure leaders' judgements about the quality of teaching are based upon students' progress data and learning within lessons, so that there is an accurate view of the school's performance
 - ensuring the leadership of mathematics improves the quality of teaching and improves students' mathematical knowledge and skills.

- Raise students' attendance, including that of students who are supported by the pupil premium, by:
 - providing positive rewards and encouragement for good attendance and punctuality
 - reinforcing with students and their parents the importance of coming to school on time and the consequences of poor attendance.

Report on the second monitoring inspection on 4 to 5 November 2014

Evidence

Inspectors observed 14 parts of lessons taught by 14 different teachers. One of these observations was carried out jointly with the senior leader responsible for teaching and learning. Inspectors also observed students during one morning break and as they moved around the school between lessons. Meetings were held with you and other members of the senior leadership team, the Executive Principal, the subject leaders for English and mathematics and a group of class teachers. I also held a telephone conversation with the acting Chair of the Interim Governing Body. Inspectors also met with two groups of students, one group from Key Stage 3 and the other from Key Stage 4. My colleague and I scrutinised the work in a sample students' books. The purpose of this scrutiny was to determine the quality of teachers' marking and to evaluate the degree of challenge the work presented to the students. We also examined a number of documents including the Ofsted action plan, senior leaders' records of their analyses of the work in students' books and the quality of teaching. Inspectors examined the single central record of the checks made on the suitability of adults to work with young people to ensure that it was up to date and compliant with statutory requirements. They also analysed students' achievement data and evaluated the recently introduced electronic students' progress tracker.

Context

Since my previous monitoring inspection there have been a number of significant changes to staffing and the school's management structure. The headteacher, in post when I last visited, left the school at the end of September. You have been brought in as interim headteacher to bolster senior leadership capacity with the intention of giving energy and drive to your colleagues' work to improve the school. The governing body has been replaced by an interim board of governors. The latter understands its role as providing you with appropriate support and challenge and its members have the specific task of overseeing the transfer of the sponsorship of the school to a multi-academy trust. At the start of this academic year an assistant principal for strategic direction joined the senior leadership team.

Achievement of pupils at the school

The school's GCSE results for 2014 were disappointing. The school's predictions for the proportion of students gaining five high grade GCSE qualifications, including English and mathematics, were not realised. The results declined by five percentage points from the 48% achieved in 2013. In addition, the school's teacher assessment of students' progress in English and mathematics proved to be inaccurate when compared to students' actual results, with both progress measures remaining below 2013 national averages. The attainment gap between disadvantaged students and

their peers also grew in 2014, just over one quarter of these students achieving a high grade GCSE in English and mathematics, down from one third the previous year. However, within this disappointing picture there are some early signs of recovery. The proportion of students who achieved at the highest A* to A grades in a number of subjects showed an encouraging increase in 2014, most notably in the separate science subjects, geography and Spanish. In chemistry, for example, over half the students who were entered for this subject achieved at least an A* or A grade. In Spanish the proportion of students achieving the top grades improved by 23 percentage points. This measure of performance moved from significantly below the 2013 national average to well above it last year. Improvements in attainment in history and Spanish contributed to the increase in the proportion of students leaving The Hawthorne's in 2014, having met the requirements of the English Baccalaureate. Although students' progress in English and mathematics remained at broadly below the average levels seen in 2013, this static performance was due to the underperformance of the boys. The girls on the other hand improved their performance on this measure in English by eight percentage points and 10 percentage points in mathematics. These data indicate the positive impact of the work done by some subject departments to challenge the most able students and, in particular, girls. However, you are acutely aware that more still needs to be done to iron out inconsistencies between departments and improve the quality of teaching so that achievement, particularly the achievement of boys and disadvantaged students, improves rapidly.

My visit coincided with this year's first assessment week signalling the end of learning cycle one. Consequently, teacher assessment data have been collected and analysed only for students in Year 7 and Year 8. These data are showing that the majority of students are either on or above their attainment targets for this first half term. Attainment gaps between disadvantaged students and their peers in Year 8 are closing. However, although these data are encouraging, they need to be treated with a degree of caution as they have yet to be subject to rigorous independent validation.

Senior leaders' work to improve students' literacy and in particular their reading skills is beginning to bear fruit. The results of tests given to students in each year group indicate that students' combined reading ages have improved from below their chronological ages prior to the summer term to broadly in line with them now. When the data are analysed by groups, the gap in the reading ages for disadvantaged students and their peers has been closed in current Year 8 and Year 11.

The quality of teaching

Inspectors' observations of classroom practice and scrutiny of work in the sample of students' books revealed no evidence of any inadequate teaching. Teachers' planning is now much sharper and lesson plans, known as progress plans, are used consistently. These identify the different groups of students in the class, state clearly

what the learning intentions are and provide a map showing the learning path the teacher intends to take during the lesson. This tighter planning means that lessons are highly structured and well organised. However, occasionally this can lead to teachers adopting too rigid an approach and not deviating from the plan when some students cannot keep up, do not grasp the key ideas of the lesson quickly enough or finish the work early and have to wait for the next task. This slows the progress of all. As one student said, 'the teacher sometimes moves on too quickly before I am ready.'

Students' progress is at least good when teachers' expectations of what the students they teach can achieve are high. Teachers' strong subject knowledge and enthusiasm captures students' interests and, as a result, engages them in their learning. A characteristic of the most effective practice is illustrated by teachers carefully framing questions so that students of different abilities are motivated to formulate answers, which forge links between ideas so that students are able to glimpse the bigger picture and broaden their understanding. For example, in one very effective science lesson students were asked to explain the complex ideas in relation to how chemical elements react together to form compounds. Most students were able to demonstrate their secure understanding of atomic theory to explain why certain atoms react together and others do not, going on to explain this concept, with clarity, to others, demonstrating their higher order thinking skills.

Even though there is evidence of some good teaching, overall it lacks consistency. Where teaching requires further development, teachers do not take enough account of what students already know, can do and understand when planning lessons. For example, in one mathematics lesson, a group of students was learning about algebra and, in particular, how to deal with numbers and terms in brackets. Although students were able to apply the correct mathematical strategy to tackle the problem, some weaker students still arrived at the wrong answer because they have yet to grasp some basic mathematical ideas, for example, knowledge of times tables or being able to subtract single and double digit numbers mentally. Consequently, teachers are trying to build students' understanding of challenging mathematical concepts on very weak foundations. As a result, some students, particularly those of middle and lower ability, are not making the progress expected of them. However, the head of mathematics is working with members of his team to develop the mathematics curriculum. For example, there is evidence that students have more opportunities to apply their mathematics' skills to solve problems set in real-life contexts.

In the sample of books provided by the school for the work scrutiny, inspectors found that students' work is marked regularly. Teachers carry out this aspect of their work in compliance with school policy. However, its impact on students' progress remains inconsistent. In English, for example, teachers point out the strengths in a piece of work and give students advice on how it can be improved, which students act on in dedicated improvement and reflection time known as 'dirt'. As a result,

students' progress in English is beginning to accelerate. However, not all marking is of this quality. In some subjects, teachers' suggestions for improvement do not sufficiently challenge students. As a result, students either do not act on their teachers' advice or, when they do, give responses that are superficial and so have little impact on their learning.

When asked, students showed an awareness of their targets in each subject. However, they are not always sure how the work they do relates to their targets. As a result, they are too reliant on their teachers to tell them how well they are achieving and so opportunities for them to take ownership of their learning and progress are not being fully exploited.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

In those lessons observed by inspectors, interactions between students and their teachers were invariably cordial, warm and respectful, contributing to an atmosphere conducive to learning. Between lessons students move purposefully around the school. As a result, they arrive punctually to class and ready to learn. Uniform standards are high and students value the work that has been done to brighten up the corridors and classrooms. This is reflected in the litter- and graffiti-free school site and the well-maintained wall displays. These are a mixture of students' work and published display materials, used to reinforce the school's message of high aspirations for all.

Senior leaders' work to improve students' attendance and punctuality is continuing to be effective. The gap in attendance between disadvantaged students and their peers is closing and the number of students who are persistently absent from school has been reduced. Senior leaders recognise, however, that there is still work to be done with some students to improve their attitudes to school, raise attendance and reduce rates of persistent absence even more.

Those students spoken to by inspectors said that they feel safe in school. They said that bullying is rare, but that when it does occur, they are confident it will be dealt with effectively by their teachers.

The quality of leadership in and management of the school

The departure of the previous headteacher and governing body just after the start of term had a destabilising effect on the strategic leadership and direction of the school. However, in the interim period before you joined the staff the executive principal took overall responsibility for running The Hawthorne's in order to provide stability and help maintain the pace of change. However, the hiatus between the departure of the previous headteacher and governors and your appointment has meant that some key leadership and management activities have been delayed. For example, although you have gained valuable information about the school, in the

short time since your appointment, senior leaders' evaluation of how well the school is doing has not been completed and the school development plan not updated. Consequently, while progress is being made against the targets in last year's plan, new priorities have not been established and, as a result, the time available to deal with these emerging issues is reducing. The delay has also meant that the external review of the use of the pupil premium, recommended at the last inspection, has not been completed. Nevertheless, the early indications are that senior leaders are getting to grips with the key issues. Members of the leadership team spoken to by inspectors said that they are now much clearer about their roles and responsibilities and are held to account for the impact of their work.

In September, senior leaders revised the way that students' targets are set and their progress monitored. The system for setting targets has been refined to reflect the reforms to the National Curriculum and the revised assessment arrangements at GCSE. The strategy for monitoring students' progress is bringing much needed clarity to the management information available to senior leaders and governors. The intention is to enable them to keep a close eye on how well students are doing in each year group and ensure that extra help is available for those students who fall behind. However, these systems are in their infancy and checks on the reliability of teacher assessment data are yet to be established. Consequently, it is too early to measure their impact.

Much more rigour has been introduced to senior leaders' monitoring of the quality of teaching and learning, which is contributing to an emerging culture of accountability across the school. However, evidence from senior leaders' records indicates that when lessons are observed, too much emphasis is placed on what the teacher is doing and not enough on the impact that teaching has on students' progress. Mechanisms for teachers to experience what consistently good to outstanding practice looks like have yet to be established, for example, in English and mathematics.

Although the school's curriculum is broad in terms of the subjects available for students to study, you are aware that its predominantly academic nature is not meeting the needs and aspirations of some students. Accordingly, you are undertaking a review of the school's curriculum and considering the inclusion of more vocational subjects in the future, to make the curriculum more balanced and give it wider appeal.

A new governing body has now been constituted to take over responsibility for the strategic direction and vision of the school. However, at the time of the monitoring inspection this group of stakeholders had yet to hold its first meeting and formally agree terms of reference and governor responsibilities. Nevertheless, the interim Chair of the Governing Body demonstrated knowledge of the key issues facing the school and an understanding of the urgency required to establish the board of governors in order to make sure that the school's transition to the multi-academy

trust does not have a negative impact on the school's progress out of special measures.

External support

The school has forged a productive link with another free school. This has enabled The Hawthorne's staff to share with their partner school colleagues ideas about what constitutes effective practice in the classroom. Staff from the partner school have also worked with senior leaders to establish management systems to monitor and evaluate the work of The Hawthorne's.