

Tribal
Kings Orchard
One Queen Street
Bristol
BS2 0HQ

T 0300 123 1231
Text Phone: 0161 6188524
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.ofsted.gov.uk

Direct T 0117 311 5323
Email: suzy.smith@tribalgroup.com



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Dr Sharon Menghini
The Principal
St Mary's School and 6th Form College
Wrestwood Road
Bexhill-on-Sea
TN40 2LU

Dear Dr Menghini

Special measures monitoring inspection of St Mary's School and 6th Form College

Following my visit to your school on 5 March 2015, 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 recent section 5 inspection.

The inspection was the first monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures following the inspection which took place in November 2014.

Evidence

During this inspection, I met with you, the Chair of trustees and Governors, the vice-chair of the trustees, the vice-chair of the Governing Body and two additional governors. The head of education guided me on a tour of the school enabling me to visit lessons. I also met with the head of care and the head of therapies. One of your residential house managers escorted me on a visit to the residential accommodation. I also met with the consultant headteacher and the school improvement partner who are assisting with the implementation and evaluation of your improvement strategies. I scrutinised a range of documentation, including your revised child protection and safeguarding policies and the school's single central record of staff employed. I evaluated the trustees' statement of action and school improvement plan.

Context

Since the previous inspection, several staff members have left and new staff have been appointed. These include a full-time qualified social worker, a head of therapy, health and well-being, a head of literacy and a head of numeracy. Trustees have established a school improvement board to monitor leaders' progress in

implementing the statement of action and moving the school out of special measures. The board has met twice. Trustees have also secured the input to the board of a senior manager from the East Sussex standards and learning effectiveness service, who leads on special educational needs.

The quality of leadership and management at the school

Since the previous inspection, leaders have correctly focused on securing rapid improvements to the weaknesses identified in the section 5 inspection report. The inspection outcomes were not a surprise to leaders within the school. Many of the aspects identified already featured in leaders' self-evaluation. Drawing wisely on external support and guidance, leaders have wasted no time in putting together a comprehensive statement of action which identifies sensible strategies to remedy the weaknesses in safeguarding, teaching, achievement and leadership and management. Leaders are appropriately amending the school improvement plan to strengthen aspects already identified at the time of the previous inspection.

Importantly, the statement of action correctly identifies the national minimum standards for residential special schools that were not met at the time of the inspection, with details of how leaders intend to ensure that these standards are fully met. Although fit for purpose, this aspect of the plan requires minor amendment, so that parents and trustees can be clearer about why the national minimum standards were not previously met and be confident that those same shortcomings no longer pertain.

In order to improve achievement, systems to assess students' starting points on entry to the school are being reviewed. The head of education has identified with staff, ambitious but not unreasonable expectations of individual students' progress. Necessary training has been provided for staff with input from the school improvement partner and the consultant headteacher. In particular, training has sensibly focused on planning progression in students' learning. All teachers have been offered a personalised training and support programme. Those unwilling or unable to improve their practice have left or are leaving.

Records of monitoring show that these strategies are beginning to yield improvements in students' learning, as teachers familiarise themselves with the raised expectations of their practice and develop confidence in their abilities to gauge whether students are moving forward in their learning.

During my visits to classrooms, it was clear that students are set learning targets which are tracked, adjusted and put on display. Leaders have appointed heads of numeracy and literacy; both having recently taken up post at the time of this inspection. There are sound plans underway for these postholders to lead on the internal verification of teachers' assessments. Equally, the head of education has

made links with two other schools within the Bexhill alliance to secure external verification.

The newly appointed head of therapies has shrewdly begun to deploy her team to ensure that their work aligns appropriately with the work of the teaching staff to support students' achievement targets. She is rightly determined to make sure that her team maintains focused dialogue with teachers to identify barriers to the achievement of individual students with which her team can support. Plans are systematic, well considered and, importantly, linked to students' outcomes. However, this work is in its infancy and it is therefore too soon to gauge its effectiveness.

In order to strengthen the leadership and management of the school and address the identified shortcomings in safeguarding, the following actions were taken with immediate effect:

- an initial scoping meeting for an external review of governance has been held with the support of a consultant from the National Governors' Association
- the appointment of a full-time social worker who has reviewed all safeguarding and child protection policies and practice, attended several weekly residential management meetings and senior leadership group meetings, ensured that safeguarding is the business of all employees at the school and not just those employed within the residential provision
- a review of practice, procedures and record keeping in relation to all national minimum standards for residential care, led by the head of care with input from the social worker and overseen by the safeguarding trustee
- the introduction of stricter risk assessments and tighter auditing of safeguarding policies at regular intervals with feedback to trustees
- a requirement for consistency of practice across each of the residential houses in relation to all policies and the implementation of unannounced auditing of practice
- a review of the use of pupil premium funding, led by the school improvement partner, with the involvement of the head of education, to be presented to trustees by Easter
- the establishment of a school improvement board, whose function is to challenge the principal and other leaders on the implementation of the statement of action
- the appointment of two new members to the governing body with identified necessary expertise.

Leaders are taking effective action to address the shortcomings in safeguarding. Progress is being made in relation to each of the national minimum standards for residential care that was not met. They have diligently sought advice and input from

the East Sussex local authority duty officer for child protection matters and are acting on the advice received. However, the principal, trustees and governors fully recognise that there is much more to be done to secure the full confidence of parents.

Since the publication of the report, a parent consultation meeting has taken place, chaired by the school improvement partner, with the principal and trustees in attendance. Opportunities have also been offered to concerned parents to meet with the principal or the Chair of trustees on a one-to-one basis. Despite this, a number of parents remain adamantly unconvinced. Trustees are determined to ensure that their actions are explained and transparent to all concerned. To this end, a further series of parental consultation meetings is scheduled and parental communications are a high priority within the improvement plans.

Leaders have also given consideration to linking with a successful special school judged good or outstanding by Ofsted at its last inspection. Her Majesty's Inspector recommends that urgent action now takes place to secure such a link. This will provide important opportunities for teachers to observe and learn from best practice elsewhere. Moreover, it will also serve to ensure that parents and stakeholders can take confidence in the willingness of the principal and trustees to lay their plans and actions open to the scrutiny of serving practitioners with a secure track record of success.

Following the monitoring inspection the following judgements were made:

The trustees' statement of action is fit for purpose.

The school's improvement plan is fit for purpose.

The school may not appoint newly qualified teachers before the next monitoring inspection.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the Chair of the Governing Body, the Director of Children's Services for East Sussex and the Education Funding Agency. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Lesley Farmer
Her Majesty's Inspector