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19 March 2015

Mrs S Howells
Cove School
St John's Road
Cove
Farnborough, GU14 9RN

Dear Mrs Howells

Special measures monitoring inspection of Cove School

Following my visit with Stephanie Matthews and Joseph Skivington, Additional Inspectors to your school on 17, 18 March, 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 March 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 to the removal of special measures.

Leaders may appoint a newly qualified teacher in each of the following subject areas: humanities, science, and modern foreign languages, 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 and the Director of Children's Services for Hampshire.

Yours sincerely

Lesley Farmer
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

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

- Improve the quality of teaching so that it is good or better by ensuring that all teachers:
 - raise their expectations of what students, especially those eligible for the pupil premium funding, are capable of achieving
 - use assessment information about students' prior attainment to set more demanding work for all groups of students
 - consistently check students' understanding in lessons and then adapt activities if the work is too hard or too easy
 - when marking students' work, tell students exactly how it can be improved and subsequently check that students are responding to these comments
 - always insist on high standards of presentation in students' work
 - have the highest expectations of behaviour and make sure that students demonstrate good attitudes to learning.

- Raise achievement in mathematics so that students make at least the progress expected of them and do as well as in English by:
 - making rapid and sustained improvements in mathematics a priority in the school's improvement plans and include specific, measureable targets to check the impact of actions
 - ensuring there are rigorous checks on teaching and learning in mathematics lessons and acting decisively when the quality is found to be less than good
 - ensuring that the subject leader for mathematics is supported and challenged to secure long-term, sustainable improvements to the quality of teaching and the achievement of students.

- Improve the impact of leadership, including governance, on students' achievement by ensuring that:
 - targets for school improvement are far more challenging
 - leaders at all levels, especially governors, have a consistently good understanding of the school's performance and the skills required to drive rapid improvement
 - all improvement plans are more sharply focused on securing consistently good teaching and at least good student achievement in all areas of the school's work
 - school systems are consistently and robustly applied by all, especially subject leaders, when making judgements about teaching and students' achievement
 - inadequate teaching and leadership are dealt with more swiftly
 - leaders act more quickly to address underachievement when identified and can show the impact of their work.

An external review of governance should be undertaken in order to assess how this aspect of leadership and management may be improved. An external review of the school's use of the pupil premium should be undertaken in order to assess how this aspect of leadership and governance may be improved.

Report on the second monitoring inspection on 17, 18 March 2015

Evidence

Inspectors observed parts of 26 lessons and made brief visits to one or two other lessons. Seven lesson observations were conducted jointly with school leaders. Inspectors also scrutinised a range of documentation, including information about students' current achievement, analyses of the 2014 GCSE results, the updated action plans and leaders' analyses of the quality of teaching. Meetings were held with three groups of students. Meetings were also held with the school improvement manager for Rushmoor and Hart along with another member of the Hampshire school improvement team and Chair of the Interim Executive Board (IEB) and three other board members.

Context

Since the first monitoring visit, a number of key staffing changes have taken place. The headteacher has left and an acting headteacher has been appointed. A deputy headteacher has also left, along with several other teachers. A few vacancies are currently filled by temporary staff.

Achievement of pupils at the school

GCSE results in 2014 did not reflect leaders' expectations or predictions. In particular, GCSE results in mathematics and a few other subjects were way below teachers' predictions. Consequently, the overall percentage of students securing five good GCSE grades including English and mathematics was below average.

Since her appointment in October 2014, the acting headteacher has carefully and appropriately revised the improvement plan. In particular, the leadership of mathematics has been strengthened. A deputy headteacher with subject expertise in mathematics is now 'hands on' in effectively leading the strategy to improve achievement in mathematics. Teaching of mathematics is now routinely observed and students' work scrutinised. Joint observations conducted with inspectors during this inspection were accurate. Leaders have drawn wisely on support from local authority school improvement advisers who have provided tailored training and support for department members. Although it is too soon to judge the overall effectiveness of these strategies, teachers express greater confidence in their ability to assess students' progress with greater accuracy.

Students in all year groups are now set aspirational targets for mathematics and sound systems have been set up to monitor and track their progress towards them. Students in Key Stage 4 are clear about their targets and have a good understanding of what they need to work on to improve. Scrutiny of their work in lessons indicated in many instances that they were making steady progress towards meeting them.

Nevertheless, during this inspection, some inadequate achievement was observed in this subject area. Furthermore, there was less evidence of this good practice in Key Stage 3.

Across other subjects where teachers' predictions have lacked accuracy, leaders have adopted a similar approach. Students with whom inspectors met, particularly those in Years 10 and 11, feel that much more is being done to help them achieve well. In particular, they value the newly introduced 'period 7' in which teachers provide extra help for GCSE subjects throughout the week.

The achievement of disadvantaged students and those with special educational needs is a strong priority within the improvement plan. Much work has been done to share information and successful strategies so that teachers can develop their understanding of what works best for these students on an individual basis. The approach is in its infancy and in many of the lessons visited, inspectors were unable to observe a discernible difference between the achievement of disadvantaged students and that of their peers. However, during visits to literacy catch-up lessons, inspectors were able to observe good learning taking place for many of these students.

The quality of teaching

Students with whom inspectors met were clear that in general, the quality of teaching is now better than in the past. 'Teachers help you a lot more' was a comment echoed by more than one student. Inspectors agree. Teachers' planning is improving. They are beginning to put to good effect the data about students' progress that they now routinely receive. Consequently, many lessons are more stimulating and provide opportunities for students to move forward in their learning. Teachers are developing their skills to question more effectively and probe more deeply to stimulate discussion. However, in some lessons, questioning strategies remain too superficial and fail to fully engage or enthral students.

Helpful marking was in evidence across all subjects within the school, and students say this has improved. In particular, they say that it is more consistent now, whereas in the past, this was not always the case. Where teaching is most effective, teachers' expectations are high; they plan lessons that match students' needs well while also developing their skills of reasoning, analysis, application of knowledge and evaluation. For example, in a stimulating French lesson, students were challenged to apply their understanding of how language works to translate and make best use of new vocabulary. The teachers' expectations of students were very high; students were clearly motivated to succeed. Careful planning and a secure knowledge of individual students' strengths and weaknesses ensured that all students made good progress and were motivated to give of their best.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

The school provides a calm environment which students value and respect. Students with whom inspectors spoke say that behaviour in lessons has improved. The acting headteacher has 'raised the bar' in relation to expectations of uniform, attendance and behaviour. As a result, fixed term exclusions have gone down and attendance overall has improved. Students generally wear the uniform with pride.

Students told inspectors that they see a lot more of senior staff now, through visits to lessons, in the corridors or on the playground. They recognise that expectations are high and welcome the fact that leaders express belief in their capabilities through assemblies. These frequently articulated expectations are motivating students to 'raise their game' and try a lot harder.

In lessons, students' attitudes to learning are generally good. However, where teaching is less effective, some students lose concentration, become distracted and engage in 'off-task' chatter. Where this happens, students' progress is slower.

Around the site at break and at lunchtimes, students conduct themselves well. They show maturity and respect for each other and the environment. Inspectors found students to be punctual, welcoming and polite. During this inspection, no incidents of disruption were witnessed.

The quality of leadership in and management of the school

Since the first monitoring visit in September 2014, leaders have taken decisive steps to improve the quality of teaching. Teachers are now fully aware of the need to 'raise their game'. Equally, leaders have explained fully how all staff will be supported to improve. Some teachers have since left. Teachers that remain are keen to improve their practice and feel valued and well supported to do so.

The acting headteacher is calm and purposeful in her approach. She has skilfully set about the task of building staff confidence and capability with a keen resolve. No time has been wasted in making necessary and sensible changes to the roles and accountabilities of senior staff. Each member of the senior team now has a clearly defined role related to bringing the school out of special measures.

Senior leaders now make good use of the revised improvement plan, returning to it frequently, to check progress and maintain a watchful eye on the priorities for improvement. In particular, the acting headteacher has ensured that there is complete transparency for all staff in relation to leadership roles, what leaders are accountable for and to whom. There are no grey areas. Consequently, staff express confidence in the leadership and know who they can turn to for support.

In addition to the senior staff role changes, the following necessary actions have been implemented successfully:

- aspirational targets have been set for all students, ensuring that all staff now measure the progress of students in their classes at regular intervals across the year
- teachers have been required to use students' targets to inform their lesson plans and their teaching
- staff have been trained on how to use data and how to assess students' progress
- subject leaders have been required to agree subject targets and monitor the subject's distance to the target set
- subject leaders have been required to work with their team to intervene if students are lagging behind
- staff have been provided with information and helpful strategies to adopt in relation to disadvantaged students or those with special educational needs
- subject leaders and senior leaders have been required to monitor the gaps in achievement between disadvantaged students and other students in each year group and take necessary actions to close the gaps
- staff have agreed performance management targets linked to their students' achievement targets, against which their performance will be reviewed.

Members of the IEB are knowledgeable and discerning. They have a clear understanding of their roles and accountabilities, informed by successful experience of IEB membership elsewhere in the past. They have high expectations of senior leaders and conduct routine monitoring activity such as learning walks and scrutiny of leaders' monitoring activity. They have backed fully the headteacher's decisions concerning staff performance and the re-design of the senior team. They now expect to see rapid improvement and clear evidence of the impact of leaders' actions.

During the inspection, a few Year 11 students expressed concern about an unfilled vacancy for a full-time geography teacher, to which leaders have been unable to recruit on a permanent basis. Inspectors share their concerns. Leaders are actively pursuing all avenues to secure a qualified geography teacher. Although alternative strategies are being adopted, such as joint group sessions, taught by the head of geography, these are far from ideal. It is therefore imperative that the vacancy is successfully filled as a matter of urgency.

External support

The local authority has provided well-targeted and valuable support. Officers have supported the IEB in securing an acting headteacher with a good track record of success and have provided training and verification of teachers' assessments in the subject areas of greatest need. These actions have contributed well to the progress the school is now making. Officers are now working closely with members of the IEB

to secure continuity of good quality leadership, so that a speedy removal of special measures is achievable.