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19 June 2015  
Dr Sharon Menghini  
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 17–18 June, 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 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.

Leaders 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 and the Director of Children's Services for East Sussex.

Yours sincerely

Lesley Farmer  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**

## Annex

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

#### What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Ensure that all posts for the key staff responsible for leading the safeguarding systems are filled.
- Improve the quality of teaching so that all groups of pupils make good progress and achieve well by ensuring that:
  - teachers have high expectations of the pupils they teach and provide consistently high levels of challenge for all pupils regardless of learning needs, but particularly the more able
  - pupils receive work that builds on their previous attainment, notably in English and mathematics
    - any gaps in pupils' knowledge are addressed, especially in their written work
  - teachers use assessment effectively to set targets for pupils' achievement, and provide pupils with feedback that helps them improve their work.
- Improve leadership and management at all levels to secure at least good outcomes for pupils by ensuring that:
  - all staff rigorously follow the school's policies for keeping pupils safe
  - risk assessments for pupils whose circumstances make them vulnerable are kept up to date and that record-keeping is of high quality and shared with key staff
  - an effective system for monitoring staff performance and holding them to account is established
  - formal middle leadership roles are established, making sure all middle leaders have the skills needed to lead their areas of responsibility well and that they are held to account effectively
  - the curriculum supports effective learning and achievement and prepares students well for their next stage in education, training or employment
  - leadership of the sixth form is effective and accountable.
- 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 management may be improved.

The school must meet the following national minimum standards for residential special schools.

- Where necessary, a child has a clear individual health and welfare plan or similar record, containing relevant health and welfare information provided by parents/carers and recording significant health and welfare needs and issues. This record should be agreed by parents/carers and include:
  - records of developmental checks
  - health monitoring required by staff
  - intimate care or bodily functions requiring staff help
  - the involvement of a child's parents/carers or significant others in health and welfare issues (NMS 3.12).
  
- The school ensures that:
- Arrangements are made to safeguard and promote the welfare of pupils at the school; and such arrangements have regard to any guidance issued by the Secretary of State (NMS 11).
- A written record is kept of major sanctions and the use of any physical intervention. Records may include the information in Appendix 2 (use of physical restraint). The record is made within 24 hours of the sanction being applied and is legible. Children are encouraged to have their views recorded in the records. The school regularly reviews any instances of the use of physical intervention restraint and examines trends or issues to enable staff to reflect and learn in a way that will inform future practice (NMS 12.6).
- The records specified in Appendix 2 are maintained and monitored by the school and action taken as appropriate (NMS 13.3).
- All adults visiting residential accommodation (e.g. visitors, outside delivery and maintenance personnel) are kept under sufficient staff supervision to prevent them gaining substantial unsupervised access to children or their accommodation (NMS 14.4).
- All staff have access to support and advice for their role. They also have regular supervision and formal annual appraisal of their performance (NMS 19.6).
- The school produces a written placement plan, agreed as far as is practicable with the child, the child's parents/carers and any placing authority for the child, unless the information is held elsewhere such as in the child's statement of special educational needs. The placement plan identifies the needs of that child that the school should meet and specifies how the school will care for the child and promote their welfare on a day-to-day basis. Where significant changes are made to the placement plan there is appropriate consultation. Where applicable the plan is consistent with the care plan of the placing authority for any child placed by a local authority.
- The placement plan is regularly reviewed and amended as necessary to reflect significant changes in the child's needs or progress in his or her development. Where feasible, children in the school are aware of the content of their placement plans, and confirm that the school is providing care for them that is consistent with the plans (NMS 21.1).
- Ensure that residential staff are provided with formal training in autistic spectrum disorder.

- Improve the internal audit system for medication, in particular for emergency medication and homely remedies.
- Ensure all residential pupils' independence plans reflect their individual abilities and incorporate their views.

## **Report on the second monitoring inspection on 17–18 June 2015**

### **Evidence**

During this inspection, I observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the principal, (who also serves as the chief executive officer,) a group of students, the Chair of Trustees and Governors, the vice-chair of trustees and an additional trustee. I also met with two groups of teachers, including three members of the teaching support staff. I met separately with the new leaders of literacy and numeracy and the head of education. I spoke on the telephone with a member of the East Sussex schools' improvement service who has attended the trustees' improvement board meeting and has reported recently on a scrutiny visit to the school. A few members of staff also requested to meet with me confidentially. In addition to the above meetings, I spoke on the telephone with a total of seven parents and took into consideration a total of eight email communications sent directly by parents to the inspection service provider, Tribal, during and after the visit.

This monitoring inspection focused on aspects of the educational provision judged inadequate at the previous section 5 inspection. At the time of this visit, a full inspection of the residential provision conducted in May 2015 had not yet been published.

### **Context**

At the time of this inspection, the principal and trustees were considering budgetary constraints resulting from the reduced numbers of students on roll. A number of teaching and non-teaching staff are set to leave at the end of the term. Some of these staff members will not be replaced.

### **Achievement of pupils at the school**

Achievement, although improving, is still variable. During this inspection, I was able to observe some students building well on prior knowledge and skills to make good gains in their learning. For example, in a Key Stage 2 mathematics lesson, students were encouraged to use a range of resources to develop their understanding of multiplication arrays. Good-quality questioning and probing enabled students to develop their thinking and apply their skills effectively. Equally, in art and physical education, students were able to apply their numeracy skills, consider a range of techniques and develop good team-building approaches to learning. However, similar gains are not being made consistently across all year groups or subjects. In particular, some students' progress with writing is weak because work is not set at the right level for them.

All students now have individual targets. In the past, this was not universally the case. However, the basis of the target setting is not sufficiently secure. This is

because leaders have rightly identified that previous systems to assess students' prior learning on entry to the school have not been reliable. Consequently, leaders have had to reassess all students' attainment on entry to be sure that prior learning gained elsewhere can accurately inform both students' targets and teachers' future plans. Since their appointment in March, the new leaders of literacy and numeracy have worked diligently and effectively, with the support of the head of education, to conduct a reassessment exercise. This time-consuming but necessary process is now almost complete in line with leaders' plans. Students' assessment data are now being transferred onto the school's information management systems, ready for teachers to access fully from September.

Valuable links have been made with two schools from within the Bexhill alliance to help teachers standardise their assessments. Additionally, the school's improvement adviser and a consultant headteacher have provided individual training for staff on how to use data to plan effectively so that students progress in their learning. Teachers with whom I met value this support and believe it is helping them to improve their effectiveness. Resources to help students learn in the key areas of literacy and numeracy are of good quality and designed to support the wide-ranging needs of St Mary's students.

Leaders track and evaluate differences in achievement between boys and girls. However, they are unable to evidence with enough certainty the progress of disadvantaged students or others vulnerable to underachievement compared to nationally, until accurate assessments of students' starting points are in place.

### **The quality of teaching**

Since the previous inspection, teachers have been able to access personalised training to help them improve their understanding of how to challenge students to learn more effectively. During this inspection, evidence from students' books and their responses in lessons indicate that this approach is beginning to yield improvements. For example, a strong focus on marking and feedback is ensuring that students know what they need to work on to improve. Equally, teachers' planning, a weakness identified at the previous inspection, now reflects due consideration of the learning and development needs of each student more effectively.

Despite significant changes in staffing, the quality of relationships between teachers, other adults and students is a striking feature and ensures that students engage with their learning well. Teaching across all subjects is often characterised by teachers' and other adults' good use of resources, designed to foster students' curiosity and encourage them to step outside their comfort zones by trying something new or unfamiliar. In an art lesson, students considered using a wide range of different materials to develop a specific technique. They were able to explain their work confidently. Good-quality support from other adults enabled the

students to debate properly the potential of each different type of material and also helped them to understand why they reached their final conclusions.

All staff are beginning to show their awareness of the need to exploit fully opportunities to develop students' literacy and numeracy skills, although to varying degrees of success. In a physical education lesson, students were challenged judiciously to organise and try out events for the forthcoming sports day. During a well-planned practice run-through on how to score, the teacher skilfully required students to rehearse their mental arithmetic and problem-solving skills. However, in other instances, particularly in relation to developing students' writing, teachers do not yet show sufficient skill in matching writing tasks to the abilities of each student. Furthermore, although teachers' plans now show a good awareness of the need to develop the skills of individual students, teaching does not incorporate clearly students' education and healthcare plan targets.

Students with whom I met invariably felt that they were challenged in most lessons. However, they felt that work was sometimes too easy or too hard in certain subjects, particularly those in which there had been frequent changes of staff, such as in information and communication technology.

### **Behaviour and safety of pupils**

Students' behaviour continues to be good. Students demonstrate very positive attitudes to learning in lessons. Mutual respect and support for each other's learning are common features. Attendance rates are good and no student has been excluded from school this year. This reflects their sustained positive approach to school despite the very many changes in staffing. Students say they are happy in the school and are free from harassment. They understand about different kinds of bullying and are clear about what to do or who to approach should a concern arise.

Since the previous section 5 inspection of the school, policies and procedures to keep students safe have been the subject of extensive internal and external review and monitoring. Leaders have sought external advice from the East Sussex local authority duty officer for child protection matters and continue to do so, where appropriate. A full-time social worker has reviewed safeguarding policies and practice. She is fully involved in, and consulted, about all safeguarding and child protection matters.

### **The quality of leadership in and management of the school**

Overall, progress in this aspect of the school's provision is uneven. In several important respects, leaders have made good gains in responding to the inadequacies that were identified at the previous section 5 inspection. In particular, governors and trustees have responded rapidly to the need for a review of their practice. They have listened to and acted on advice from an experienced external consultant from the National Governors Association and have recently completed a full review of their



respective roles and accountabilities. A comprehensive audit of their expertise and areas for further development has also taken place. At the time of this inspection, governors and trustees were set to meet and adopt the newly defined terms of reference.

The need for an external review of pupil premium funding expenditure, identified at the previous section 5 inspection, has met with an immediate response. Having contacted all placing local authorities, governors and trustees now have a better picture of which students are supported through the additional funding. This was not entirely apparent in the past, owing to the ways in which local authorities transfer funding. A full evaluation of expenditure, led by an external consultant, has now been completed. Trustees and governors are now in receipt of a written evaluation. As a result, they know more about this funding, how to evaluate its impact and how to undertake their statutory duties to question the chief executive officer (CEO) and her staff about how this funding is spent.

Policies for keeping students safe are known to staff and checked by leaders. The students I met were adamant that they feel safe in school and know who to turn to if they feel concerned or unhappy. The single central register of staff employed within the school meets requirements.

To strengthen the leadership capacity, two formal middle-leader roles have been established to drive improvements in literacy and numeracy respectively. Although these post-holders are new to the role, they are quickly gaining the necessary skills and expertise. Staff commented favourably on the value they attach to these posts and the quality of the additional guidance that is now available to teaching staff to help them improve students' literacy and numeracy skills. A necessary restructuring has ensured that the head of education now has formal oversight of the sixth form, an area that lacked specific leadership in the past. Since undertaking the leadership of the sixth form, the head of education has carried out a necessary review of the curriculum offer, to ensure that sixth form students can access qualifications that will equip them properly to make the next steps in their training, education or employment. A consultant headteacher has also provided valuable external input to the process.

Systems to set appropriate targets for staff and monitor their performance have been reviewed. All staff have targets linked to students' outcomes. This was not formerly the case. Leaders monitor teaching frequently. They are supported by two external consultants who have also worked alongside identified staff to help them improve their teaching. Staff acknowledge they are being supported to improve their performance. Those unwilling or unable to improve their teaching have left.

Leaders have undeniably taken necessary and unpopular decisions to rectify a legacy of weak strategic management, inadequate monitoring and under-achievement. The school is not full to capacity. At the time of this inspection leaders anticipate further roll reductions in the near future. This has compounded the need to pare back



staffing further and look critically at the affordability of aspects of provision that leaders judge to be desirable but not essential. However, although reasonable progress has been made, there is still much more to be achieved in relation to the following three key areas:

- how leaders respond to parental concerns and formal complaints
- leaders' approach to rebuilding the trust and confidence of the wide majority of the parent body
- leaders' approach to building a vision for the school that both empowers remaining staff to be able to offer solutions and also inspires their full trust and confidence in the senior leadership and governance of the school.

During this inspection, leaders provided convincing evidence of many parents who express confidence in the leadership of the school. I was also able to speak on the telephone with several randomly selected parents, who voiced similar satisfaction with the way leaders are working. However, an equal number with whom I had telephone or written contact expressed serious concerns about poor-quality communications. Some parents expressed concerns about the complaints policy which has not been amended properly to ensure that where a complaint arises about the CEO, this will be investigated by an independent officer reporting directly to the Chair of the Trustees. Leaders have very recently appointed a customer relations officer who is undertaking a review of the complaints policy. However, at the time of this inspection, no action had been taken to remedy this specific concern. A number of parents also express concerns about cuts, such as to physiotherapy, identified within their child's education and healthcare plans as desirable.

Staff with whom I met demonstrate a keenly felt commitment to St Mary's students and a desire to play their part in moving the school out of special measures. They understand and accept the need for cutbacks and for change. However, they also express concern that their voice is not being heard. Within a context of significant cuts and changes to staffing, there is considerable anxiety and fear among staff for the future of the school. Her Majesty's Inspector will expect to see evidence of more rapid progress in improving the impact of leadership and management at the next monitoring inspection, particularly in relation to the three aspects identified above.

### **External support**

Leaders continue to draw wisely on external support provided by two former special school headteachers. This support has helped leaders to identify teaching that is inadequate or requires improvement and has enabled some teachers to develop and improve their practice. It has also enabled trustees and governors to be clearer about how to evaluate the impact of pupil premium funding. Although some contact has taken place between the CEO and a headteacher of a school judged good at its last Ofsted inspection, no formal links have yet been established.