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Mrs Kim Stoner
Executive Headteacher
The Charles Dickens School
Broadstairs Road
Broadstairs
Kent
CT10 2RL

Dear Mrs Stoner

Special measures monitoring inspection of The Charles Dickens School

Following my visit with David Powell and Susan Cox, Ofsted Inspectors, to your school on 2 and 3 December 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 previous monitoring inspection.

The inspection was the fourth monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures following the inspection which took place in September 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 taking effective measures towards the removal of special measures.

The school may 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 Education Funding Agency, the Chair of the Governing Body and the Director of Children's Services for Kent.

Yours sincerely

Theresa Phillips
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

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

- Improve the quality of teaching in the school by:
 - ensuring students, including those in the sixth form, acquire a secure understanding of key ideas and knowledge in every lesson and in every subject
 - ensuring that all teachers have an accurate and thorough grasp of what students know and understand throughout lessons, and are assessing students' work accurately, so they can adjust their teaching as required
 - giving students of different abilities, especially the most able and those who find learning difficult, work that involves appropriate levels of challenge.

- Improve the effectiveness of the leadership of the school by:
 - communicating the school's vision and priorities consistently and clearly, making accurate judgements of the quality of teaching and providing effective staff training
 - improving how information about how well students are doing is presented to help middle leaders and other staff use it to support students' achievement more effectively
 - improving the development plan so it can support school improvement and accountability
 - ensuring that an external review of governance is undertaken in order to assess how this aspect of leadership and management may be improved
 - ensuring that an external review of the school's use of the pupil premium is undertaken in order to assess how this aspect of leadership and management may be improved.

- Improve the progress that all groups of students make in all subjects by:
 - identifying strategies that help students to make rapid and secure progress in some subjects, and sharing this good practice with all staff
 - establishing a clear strategy for the use of the pupil premium and monitoring its impact frequently
 - improving the strategies used to support the achievement of students with disabilities and those with special educational needs to accelerate their progress.

- Improve behaviour and safety by:
 - improving attendance to at least the national average
 - helping students to understand the importance of having positive attitudes to differences between people, addressing bullying in the school and preparing students for life in modern Britain
 - delivering a programme of e-safety in all year groups to help students stay safe on the internet
 - eliminating low-level disruption to lessons.

Report on the fourth monitoring inspection on 2 and 3 December 2015

Evidence

Inspectors met with the executive headteacher, deputy headteacher, other senior and middle leaders, the head of school from St George's C of E Foundation School and groups of pupils. The lead inspector also met the Chair of the Governing Body with two other governors, and a representative from the local authority. Inspectors observed 24 lessons, nine jointly with school leaders. A range of documents were analysed, including the school's improvement plan, pupils' performance information and records of monitoring activities.

Context

Since the last monitoring inspection, the headteacher and 10 teachers have left and a deputy headteacher and nine teachers have joined the school. At the end of August 2015, the partners offering support changed from The Coastal Academies Trust to St George's C of E Foundation School. On 12 October 2015, following the departure of the headteacher, the headteacher from St George's C of E Foundation School took up post as executive headteacher of The Charles Dickens School, supported by the head of school at St George's C of E Foundation School. The school is not recruiting pupils into Year 12 for next year.

Outcomes for pupils

Examination results for pupils in summer 2015 were lower than expected. Steps taken by the school to raise achievement did not lead to an overall improvement in GCSE results. The proportion of pupils making expected progress in English was similar to that in 2014 and in line with the national average, but expected progress in mathematics declined. There was an increase in the proportion of disadvantaged pupils achieving five GCSEs, including English and mathematics at grade C or above, but the gap between disadvantaged pupils and other pupils nationally is still very wide. The gap in school between these pupils and their classmates is not closing fast enough.

Senior staff are very well aware of the urgent need to make improvements to pupils' progress in a range of subjects. The new leadership team moved swiftly to introduce a new system for assessing pupils' work and tracking their progress. Careful steps have been taken to check the accuracy and reliability of the assessment information, although external moderation has not yet taken place. Senior subject leaders and teachers are making effective use of this performance information to reorganise classes and plan lessons based on pupils' starting points. School leaders are also more accurately identifying pupils who are falling behind and putting in place interventions to help them catch up.

There are signs of improving achievement by current pupils, particularly in Year 11. Pupils with special educational needs in all years are already making faster progress. There are indications that the school's newly determined focus on meeting the needs of different pupils, including disadvantaged pupils, is beginning to make a difference. Pupils show a greater commitment to studying and, together with increased expectations, this is generating positive attitudes to learning across the school. However, it is too early to see the full impact of these improvements as the school has only recently established secure baseline information against which to judge pupils' rate of progress over time. In the sixth form, progress in vocational subjects is stronger than in academic ones.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

School leaders sensibly commissioned an external review of the quality of teaching and learning early in the autumn term. This helped to identify strengths and weaknesses and, as a result, well-targeted training was provided. In addition, senior leaders issued clear messages about high standards now being required in all classrooms. The quality of teaching is improving and some teachers were keen to tell inspectors how they had benefited from the coaching they have received. Leaders have shown robust responses to teachers who are not improving rapidly. However, the school finds it difficult to recruit well-qualified and high-quality staff to replace those who leave.

Where teaching is most effective, teachers continually check pupils' understanding of key ideas throughout the lesson. Teachers then respond by revisiting ideas covered earlier, or by accelerating pupils on to more demanding work to take their learning further. In lessons across the curriculum, teachers engage pupils and skilfully extend their learning. Inspectors found pupils thoroughly absorbed in a range of activities, including perspective drawing in art, performing 'Blood Brothers' in drama and understanding sound waves in science. Strong relationships between teachers and pupils are promoting better learning. However, too much teaching still over-emphasises the completion of activities and does not prioritise the quality of pupils' learning. Teachers do not always plan for the needs of individual pupils well enough. This means that less-able pupils are not given sufficient support and the most-able pupils are not challenged. Pupils described how some teachers have lower standards of behaviour and standards of work required than others. These inconsistencies are slowing the progress of too many pupils.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Pupils' behaviour has improved. Since the new members of the leadership team took up their posts, exclusions have fallen dramatically. Pupils reported that the new form of detention has led to a reduction in poor behaviour, including bullying. Low-level disruption during lessons is now infrequent, but when teaching is less effective, some pupils lose concentration and become distracted. The atmosphere around the school at break- and lunchtime is pleasant and pupils conduct themselves well. In the playgrounds, a few pupils are a little boisterous at times but most respond rapidly when staff challenge their behaviour.

Attendance has improved significantly and has now reached the national average as a result of better systems to monitor and respond to absence. However, too many disadvantaged pupils are persistent absentees.

Arrangements to keep pupils safe have improved due to revised policies and effective training leading to sharper practice. Pupils told inspectors they feel safe. All pupils commented that the school provides plenty of opportunities to learn how to stay safe online.

Effectiveness of leadership and management

The appointment of the executive headteacher has had immediate impact on the culture of the school. Staff are clearly enjoying working within the collaborative ethos that now pervades the school. The executive headteacher and head of school from St George's C of E Foundation School acted decisively to agree changes needed to drive rapid improvement. Senior leaders have benefited from clear direction and have willingly led their teams through the introduction of new procedures and raised expectations. They have gained confidence from working closely with their equivalent leaders at St George's C of E Foundation School. For example, while conducting a work scrutiny, senior leaders were prepared to debate robustly with each other what pupils' work was showing about the effectiveness of the teaching and how they needed to adjust planning to better meet pupils' learning needs. Previously, middle and senior leaders at the school did not work so well as a team.

School leaders have improved the way the school's vision and priorities are communicated to staff, pupils and parents. A daily morning briefing helps staff be clear about changes taking place and provides more opportunity for sharing ideas. Updated policies are now all available on the school website. There has not yet been systematic gathering of parents' views about the changes taking place and very few parents have used the online questionnaire, Parent View, to give feedback to the school. Both staff and pupils reported that they were much clearer about expectations and appreciated the consistent messages they were receiving. School leaders feel that they are empowered by the executive headteacher and involved in making strategic decisions. For example, the head of the sixth form conducted a

review of post-16 provision and standards, which contributed to the suspension of recruitment into the sixth form for next year.

Since the last monitoring visit, governance has been strengthened considerably. Before the end of the summer term, a new Chair of the Governing Body and vice-chair of the governing body were elected, and new governors have brought welcome expertise. Following a skills audit, governors have embarked on training programmes and are ambitious for the school to succeed. They are now better informed, offer more challenge to senior leaders and are playing a closer role in monitoring the work of the school.

Senior leaders' judgements about the quality of teaching, learning and assessment are mostly accurate. Leaders and governors know the strengths and weaknesses of the school well. The school's improvement plan outlines many appropriate actions required to raise standards rapidly. Arrangements for monitoring actions and success criteria for evaluating their impact are present. However, it is not always clear who will carry out the evaluation. The role of governors in judging how successfully leaders are improving teaching and raising standards is not clear.

The improved governance and leadership support from St George's C of E Foundation School has already made a difference to the quality of education at the school. Self-evaluation is accurate, plans are under way to address weaknesses and there is a sense of clear purpose throughout the school. Decisive action has been taken, for example to rewrite the timetable from January 2016 to improve the curriculum coverage for some Year 11 pupils and to reduce the level of teaching by unqualified teachers. Nevertheless, there is much improvement necessary before the school will no longer require special measures. With a period of stability ahead, school leaders will need to provide tangible evidence of their impact on the quality of teaching, learning and assessment and pupils' outcomes at the next special measures monitoring visit.

External support

Following the full inspection in September 2014, which placed the school into special measures, the local authority arranged for local partners within The Coastal Academies Trust to offer advice to the school's leaders. This arrangement did not bring about the hoped-for improvement in standards at the school. The local authority commissioned school leaders from St George's C of E Foundation School to intervene in the school leadership from September 2015 and subsequently to lead the school from 12 October 2015. This change was instrumental in bringing about the rapid changes currently under way at the school. The local authority is monitoring the school regularly to check the actions taking place and to evaluate their impact. It would be helpful to clarify the relationship between the local authority and school governors in holding the executive headteacher to account for improvements at the school.