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Mr Anthony Dickens
Interim Executive Headteacher
River House School
Stratford Road
Henley-in-Arden
Warwickshire
B95 6AD

Dear Mr Dickens

Special measures monitoring inspection of River House School

Following my visit to your school on 12 and 13 January 2016, 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 May 2015. 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:

Leaders and managers are taking effective action towards the removal of special measures.

The school 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 Warwickshire.

Yours sincerely

Linda McGill
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection which took place in May 2015

- Improve leadership and management at all levels by ensuring that:
 - subject leaders draw up more detailed and effective plans as to how they will make sure all groups make good progress in their subjects
 - leaders, including governors, check more carefully on students' progress and hold teachers to account for this
 - leaders present information for governors more clearly so they can easily see which groups of students are making slower progress
 - the curriculum is reviewed, especially in Key Stage 3, so that it is better placed to provide for and meet the special educational needs of the students and prepare them for their next steps in education, training and life
 - decisions for pay awards for teachers are directly related to the quality of teaching and to students' progress.

- Improve students' behaviour and attendance by ensuring:
 - all staff understand and consistently follow the agreed policies and practices to improve students' attitudes to learning and their concentration
 - leaders keep a closer eye on students' absence and devise effective ways of improving this so that the overall attendance rate improves rapidly
 - all staff use the agreed rewards systems consistently to help students' understand what good behaviour looks like
 - where students are following part-time timetables, there are clear and time-limited plans in place for their swift return to full-time education.

- Improve the quality of teaching and the impact on students' achievement by ensuring that:
 - activities and work provided challenge the most-able students to achieve as much as possible
 - more students make better than expected progress
 - staff provide more opportunities for students to apply their skills effectively in literacy and mathematics
 - students take and achieve the level of qualification they are capable of, including more qualifications that employers will value
 - individual students' targets are used more effectively by staff and students to help them make faster progress and to develop their key skills
 - students are clear about how they can improve their work and reach higher levels of skill.

An external review of governance, including a specific focus on the school's use of the pupil premium, should be undertaken in order to assess how these aspects of leadership and management may be improved.

Report on the second monitoring inspection on 12 and 13 January 2016

Evidence

The inspector observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the executive headteacher, acting deputy headteacher and assistant headteacher, a group of pupils, the Chair and vice-chair of the governing body and a representative of the local authority.

Context

Since the last monitoring inspection, six members of staff have left the school. The deputy headteacher has tendered his resignation and will not return to the school. No new members of staff have been appointed. The intention remains for the school to close and re-open as part of an academy trust, but plans are not far advanced and there is no agreed date for when this will happen. The independent learning programmes (ILP) that are currently part of River House's provision will not be part of the new academy. Alternative arrangements are being sought for the pupils who currently attend the ILP.

Outcomes for pupils

Outcomes for pupils are improving. Since the last inspection, staff have carried out the first set of assessments of pupils' attainment and have measured progress from the baselines that were set in September 2015. The information shows that, overall, pupils are making progress in all subjects, but also that the rate varies from subject to subject, between year groups and between individual pupils. In English and mathematics, pupils are making better progress in Key Stage 4 than in Key Stage 3, for example. Pupils are making faster progress, overall, in practically based subjects such as physical education, horticulture and technology. In every subject apart from English, progress is at least in line with what the school has set as its expected minimum. There are no discernible differences between the progress being made by disadvantaged pupils and others. As these assessments were the first since the baseline at the start of the autumn term, it is too soon to see patterns or trends. The next step is to use the information to identify those individual pupils who are not progressing as quickly as their classmates and to take action to improve their rate of progress

Pupils' progress in lessons during this inspection was variable. Where the pupils' interest is captured they generally work well and make some progress in deepening or extending their knowledge and understanding. A geography lesson on the rainforest, for example, caught pupils' attention and they were keen to identify and name countries and continents where rainforests occur. It is not the case that pupils only make progress where the topic is exciting or stimulating, however. During this

inspection, older pupils reinforced their understanding of writing in the first, second or third person as they worked steadily through a written task. One reason that pupils do not make the progress that is intended in lessons is because they have chosen not to participate.

The work in pupils' books also varies in quality and quantity. Most books show the content that has been covered, but in some there is not enough finished work to give a clear picture of what progress has been made over the course of the topic.

Staff know that poor reading skills and a lack of confidence with reading are holding some pupils back. The profile of reading is to be raised and the school is about to invest in an online reading and assessment programme designed to increase the number of books that pupils read and to quickly improve their reading skills.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Teaching is continuing to improve, but is not yet having a consistently good impact on pupils' progress in lessons and over time. There is no question that teachers want to improve their practice and to put into action the school's agreed approaches. During this inspection, some teachers were keen to talk about their plans for lessons and activities that were not observed, as well as the ones that were. Teachers are clearly putting a lot of effort into thinking about what they want the pupils to learn in each lesson and how they will enable the pupils to do so. They also think about key words and the use of appropriate technical vocabulary, and are increasingly making links between subjects.

Teachers know that getting the pupils involved from the start means that they are more likely to be able to teach a successful lesson. They use a wide range of strategies such as video clips, sound tracks, presentations, role play and pictures at the start and throughout lessons as a means of keeping pupils interested in the topic. They also try to put the learning into a context that has some meaning and relevance for the pupils. Despite all of this, some pupils decide quite early on whether they are interested in what is being taught or not, and this affects how much progress they make.

Improvements in assessment procedures mean that teachers' understanding of pupils' attainment and the progress they are making is more secure. The school's assessments show that there is a very wide range of prior attainment in most year groups. Although teachers adapt tasks and explain different levels of difficulty, lessons typically begin from the same starting point. Not enough account is taken of what pupils already know and can do at the start of the lesson.

Teachers also consider the support that individual pupils might require in lessons and how additional adults should intervene where necessary. However, in some lessons the skills of teaching assistants are under-used. Additional adults typically sit

alongside pupils, giving praise and encouragement to complete tasks, or work outside the classroom with one or two pupils. There is little evidence of teaching assistants being deployed in a more dynamic and effective way in lessons, for example, to model for the pupils the sorts of responses that the teacher is looking for, to ask probing questions of the teacher or the pupils, to engage in role play or to teach part of the lesson, where appropriate. As yet, teaching assistants do not play a fully active part in promoting learning in lessons, other than by providing support to help pupils manage their behaviour or complete their tasks.

As at the previous monitoring inspection, both teachers and support staff are patient and calm in their dealings with the pupils. Relationships are positive and supportive.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

The school's records show that there has been a marked reduction in fixed-term exclusions, the use of physical intervention and in incidents in school since the start of this academic year. The boys who spoke to the inspector said that the fact that they are much less likely to be excluded is one of the biggest changes that has happened at River House this year. They said that they now know what the boundaries are, and what the consequences will be. As at the last inspection, staff and pupils said that the school is a much calmer and safer place than it used to be.

There is still quite a lot of low-level disruption throughout the day and dealing with this is a key priority for the school. Some pupils struggle to live up to the staff's expectations of how they should behave in lessons. There is still some way to go before remaining in lessons is the norm and walking out of them is unusual. There are some instances of staff being too tolerant of repeated swearing, or of allowing pupils to leave the classroom without questioning them about the reason. A few books from one year group have graffiti on the covers that includes inappropriate words and images. This needs to be challenged and pupils need to know that it is not acceptable.

The system for acknowledging and rewarding good behaviour has recently been changed because it was not working as well as it should. The pupils who spoke to the inspector were not clear about the rationale for this change or what will take the place of the old system. They also said that the school council has not met for a while, and regretted this.

There has been a slight improvement in attendance overall, but the number of pupils who never attend continues to depress the figures. This matter was raised as a priority for action at the last monitoring inspection. As a result, there have been meetings between school staff and local authority officers to discuss individual cases and to decide the next steps, which have been helpful. The school now checks daily that the pupils are safe and staff visit them at home once a week to provide work for them to complete. However, the work is not usually done and these pupils are not

receiving any direct teaching. Planned reviews of their statements of special educational needs and transitions to education, health and care plans have not taken place for a variety of valid reasons. No decisions have yet been made about the most appropriate placements for these pupils.

Effectiveness of leadership and management

The executive headteacher and acting deputy headteacher provide a strong lead. They have high expectations of both staff and pupils and are working hard to change the culture of the school to one that is enabling, positive and supportive. They are meeting with some success in this. Together with staff they have reviewed the 'rapid action plan' that was implemented last term and have drawn up a new short-term plan for this term. The plan is ambitious and reflects the desire of staff and governors to come out of special measures as quickly as possible.

Leaders know what is working well and where efforts need to be focused next. They carry out a range of activities to check that improvements are being sustained, including regular visits to classrooms and checks on pupils' work in their books. They are visible around the school throughout the day.

The acting deputy headteacher is taking the lead on improving teaching and learning. He has provided a number of training sessions to help teachers better understand how to improve their practice, for example, through asking more challenging questions at appropriate times. All classroom observations during this inspection were carried out jointly with members of the senior leadership team. Leaders accurately picked out strengths in teaching and identified where improvements were needed to boost pupils' learning further.

Governors are now given clear and comprehensive information about pupils' progress, behaviour, attendance and the outcomes of monitoring activities.

Arrangements for managing teachers' performance are up and running. The first cycle has been completed and new objectives have been set for teachers. No teachers received a pay rise this year.

The required review of the effectiveness of the school's use of pupil premium funding has not happened. The local authority undertook to arrange this but a date still has not been agreed. This must happen as soon as possible.

Individual members of the governing body have taken part in suitable training on a number of topics, including financial matters and safeguarding. They have also attended training sessions for staff held at the school. Minutes of meetings of the full governing body and of committees show that meetings are well attended and that governors are asking probing questions about the information that they are given. Governors are expected to visit the school; for example, the governor with

responsibility for safeguarding recently visited to check arrangements first-hand. Governors rightly have a keen interest in the school's future and are involved in considering the next steps, but it is not clear that the school's leaders, governors and the local authority all share the same view of the best way forward.

External support

The local authority continues to fund the appointment of the acting deputy headteacher and this is much appreciated by the governing body because of the strength that is added to leadership as a result. The local authority's link officer has visited the school to review action taken and its impact as planned, but meetings of the 'task group' have not taken place in line with the schedule set out in the local authority's statement of action. This means that leaders have not been fully held to account for the implementation of the rapid action plan.

It became clear during this monitoring inspection that there is some tension in the relationships between the governing body and the local authority. Governors report that phone calls are not always returned and feel that they do not always understand the reasons for some decisions that are made. It is vital that this is resolved, so that attention is not diverted unnecessarily from the main priority – which is working towards the removal of special measures.