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2 November 2015

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 13 and 14 October 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 May 2015.

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 local authority's 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 and the Director of Children's Services for Warwickshire. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

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 first monitoring inspection on 13 and 14 October 2015

Evidence

The inspector observed the school's work on the River House site and at the CHES centre, scrutinised documents and met with the interim executive headteacher, the Chair of the Governing Body and a representative of the local authority. She spoke informally to other members of the senior leadership team, other staff and students.

Context

There have been several changes to staffing since the inspection in May 2015. The headteacher, who was absent at the time of the inspection, has since resigned. The deputy headteacher is currently absent from school. Three members of teaching and support staff have left the school and six further members of staff, including teachers and teaching assistants, have accepted redundancy and will leave at the end of the autumn term. No new staff have been appointed to the school.

The school is currently led by an interim executive headteacher. He started working at River House shortly before the inspection in May. In order to further strengthen leadership, the local authority has recently arranged for an acting deputy headteacher to work at the school for three days a week.

Following discussions between the local authority and the Department for Education, the decision has been made to seek a sponsor so that the school can close and reopen as an academy. It is intended that the new academy will be an alternative provision academy and that its work will include admitting students in the short term, with the expectation that they return to mainstream education when ready. The interim executive headteacher has been invited by governors to stay on and lead the school through the transition process.

No students have been admitted to Year 7 this academic year.

Outcomes for pupils

Since the school was inspected in May, the results of examinations taken by last year's Year 11 students have become available. All of the students gained at least one qualification, but typically at low levels. The majority achieved a pass grade in functional skills in both English and mathematics at entry level or level 1. None of the few students who took a GCSE examination in any subject attained a grade C or above. Only one of the students taking vocational options as part of their individual learning programme achieved a qualification at the end of the year. Many students, including those who are disadvantaged and those with the potential to attain higher grades, underachieved over their time at River House.

All of last year's Year 11 students have gone on to college, an apprenticeship or are repeating Year 11 at River House. Staff cannot say with certainty that all of them are continuing to study English and mathematics in order to try to gain higher grades. Currently, all of the students are still attending their college placements.

Improvements have been made to the systems for assessing attainment and tracking the progress of students currently at the school. At the end of the summer term, students' attainment was assessed in order to provide a baseline from which to measure progress in future. Senior leaders have made clear their expectations for the minimum amount of progress that students should make over time. Assessments will be carried out every half term to make sure that all are on track. The first set of assessments will be carried out shortly. At the time of this inspection, there was insufficient information to judge whether students' progress is improving over time.

Students are beginning to make better progress in lessons, because of recent improvements to the quality of teaching and to their attitudes and behaviour. There is still a long way to go, however.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Teaching is beginning to improve. The executive headteacher has introduced whole-school systems for planning lessons and for marking students' work to ensure a consistent approach. Teachers are also expected to explain to students what they are going to learn during the lesson, and to take account of the particular needs of individual students. Observations in classrooms during this inspection confirmed that teachers are largely meeting these expectations. However, the new systems are not firmly in place and are not as effective as they could be in promoting good progress. This is because the lesson plans are not all of good quality, reflecting variations in teachers' skills and knowledge. The plans also highlight that not all teachers are taking account of the requirements of the revised National Curriculum, for example in mathematics.

Teachers and support staff have been given the time to meet to talk about the lessons where they will work together. This means that teaching assistants have a better idea of what students are expected to achieve in lessons and what their role should be. Lesson plans, however, do not always make clear how teaching assistants are expected to support and guide students' learning in addition to helping them concentrate and behave acceptably. In many lessons, there are as many adults as students. This does not always lead to good learning, as the adults sometimes complete the tasks for the students, or offer too many prompts and clues. On other occasions, additional adults stand back and watch rather than play an active part in promoting good behaviour and learning.

Relationships between staff and students are often positive and supportive. Staff are patient and understanding, and when they provide activities that capture students'

interest, lessons proceed smoothly and with minimal interruption. Not all staff are equally skilled at defusing potential confrontations or managing difficult behaviour, which means that the same students learn much more in some lessons than in others.

Teachers know that they are expected to adapt activities and adjust their expectations of what students will achieve in a lesson based on their knowledge of each student's prior learning and particular needs. This does not always work. Where students are allowed to choose which activity they will complete or which indicator of success they will work towards, they may still end up with work that is not well matched to their needs.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Staff say that the school is a happier place these days. Simple steps, such as removing furniture from the corridor and repainting the walls, have introduced a calmer atmosphere. Students move more sensibly around the school and between lessons, and lunchtime in the hall during this inspection was quiet and sociable. Students are beginning to be given the chance to take responsibility, for example by acting as prefects.

The frequency of fixed-term exclusions has reduced a great deal in a short space of time, because both staff and students know what is expected of them and what the consequences of misbehaviour will be. Greater attention is being given to dealing with inappropriate behaviour within school, rather than sending students home. Nevertheless, there is still quite a lot of disruption in lessons, and students are regularly out in the corridor when they should be in class. Students are not always challenged when they leave class without permission. The school's records show that incidents of misbehaviour have reduced considerably since the start of term, apart from in Year 8. The reasons for this are being investigated.

Attendance is improving, but is still very low. Although attendance rates have risen at River House, the attendance of students on individual learning programmes is only just over 50%. About 10% of students have not attended at all this term and several of these students had exceptionally low rates of attendance last year. Some of these students are reported to have medical or mental health difficulties that prevent them from attending. However, there is no evidence that these students are receiving the full-time education to which they are entitled. It is also not clear whether River House offers the type of provision that is best suited to their needs.

A good deal of work has gone into making sure that the school's systems for protecting students and keeping them safe are robust. Issues raised during previous inspections have been addressed. All staff have recently completed safeguarding training. The local authority also conducted a safeguarding audit during the summer term. One of the prefects recently carried out a survey to find out how safe other

students feel in school. The large majority said they feel safe, but a small number did not. The prefect is now doing further work to find out the reasons and to see what should be done next.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

Stronger leadership and a clearer sense of direction and purpose have led to the improvements noted above. The executive headteacher has made a good start at dealing with the many long-standing weaknesses in leadership and management, but there is much still to do.

The executive headteacher is putting into place the systems, procedures, checks and balances that are lacking, and making clear his high expectations. Some staff have welcomed this, but it will not be an easy task to deal with the ingrained culture and attitudes that have prevailed for so long. The school's work is rightly being refocused on the needs of the students rather than those of the staff. Students all wear uniform and some members of staff are appropriately dressed in a business-like way. However, other staff members, both women and men, do not present a good role model but come to work in casual clothes such as tee shirts and jeans. The executive headteacher intends to draw up a code of conduct for staff that will include guidance on dress.

The executive headteacher has not shied away from making tough decisions. The actions he has taken to deal with overstaffing have been effective and will ease some of the strain on the school's budget. He is also making sure that staff take responsibility commensurate with their salaries. Arrangements for managing the performance of staff have been tightened up and all teachers will have an objective related to the progress of the students they teach.

The school's action plan is short term and well-focused on the areas for improvement identified at the inspection in May. It contains clear targets and shows how progress will be checked and reported to the governing body. It is to be updated regularly as progress is made.

The weekly timetable has been amended to give greater emphasis to the core subjects of English, mathematics, science, and information and communication technology in the mornings; and time for practical work in subjects such as art, cookery, outdoor education and horticulture in the afternoons. Field trips and adventure activities, as well as visitors to school, enrich the curriculum well.

Subject leaders at River House have drawn up medium-term plans, in accordance with the school's action plan. However, they have not cross-referenced their plans with teachers of the same subjects at the CHESS centre, so it is not clear whether all students have the same entitlement or expectations.

Governance is improving. The Chair of the Governing Body and other governors are well aware of the shortcomings in governance in the past and are determined that this will never happen again. Following the review of governance recommended at the last inspection, a schedule of training events has been planned. Minutes of governors' meetings show that questions are asked and challenges raised. Teachers are preparing to give reports on progress in their subjects to governing body meetings so that governors can question them in person. The Chair of the Governing Body is a regular visitor to the school. Other governors are now expected to increase their first-hand knowledge of the school by visiting more frequently.

A review of pupil premium spending has been commissioned but has not yet taken place. Some information has been posted on the school's website. It lists a number of things that the funding was spent on in the last academic year, but there is no evaluation of the impact. Governors are not able to assess whether the spending gave value for money.

External support

The local authority has a good understanding of the challenges that the school faces. Its statement of action sets out clearly what is to be done, the expected outcomes and the ways that progress will be measured. The local authority has taken effective steps so far to bolster leadership and this has helped the school to move forward. The first review of progress has been carried out in accordance with the timescale set out in the statement of action. The local authority intends to keep a close eye on progress both through regular reviews and meetings of a task group. The local authority is ambitious for the school and the deadline of the autumn term 2016 for the removal of special measures reflects this.

Priority for further improvement:

- The school and local authority must work together to determine the provision that will be made for those students who refuse to come to school or who are not well enough to do so.