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Mrs Kim Stoner
Executive headteacher
The Charles Dickens School
Broadstairs Road
Broadstairs
Kent
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Dear Mrs Stoner

Special measures monitoring inspection of The Charles Dickens School

Following my visit with David Powell and Patricia Slonecki, Ofsted Inspectors, to your school on 19 and 20 April 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 fifth 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:

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

The school may appoint newly qualified teachers before the next monitoring inspection.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the governing body, the regional schools commissioner, the Education Funding Agency and the director of children's services for Kent. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

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 disabled students 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 fifth monitoring inspection on 26–27 April 2016

Evidence

Inspectors met with the executive headteacher, deputy headteacher, other senior and middle leaders, the head of school from St George's CofE 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 21 lessons, 16 jointly with school leaders. A range of documents were analysed, including the school's self-evaluation, pupils' performance information and records of monitoring activities.

Context

Since the last monitoring inspection seven teachers have left and three teachers have returned from parental leave. In addition to the interim executive headteacher and head of school from St George's, two assistant headteachers have joined the leadership team at The Charles Dickens School, one as head of school and the other leading the development of teaching and learning.

In January a new chair of the governing body was elected and two new members joined the governing body. A financial review by the local authority identified a significant deficit and in March the delegated power for finance and personnel was withdrawn from the governing body.

Outcomes for pupils

In order to urgently improve GCSE results at the end of Year 11, leaders at all levels have made achievement in key stage 4 a priority. Senior leaders now express confidence that GCSE results in 2016 will improve significantly, including for disadvantaged pupils. Their confidence is informed by improvements in the quality of teachers' assessments, which have been verified by a range of moderation activities internally and by external partners. In addition, the curriculum was changed in January to allow Year 11 pupils to study a wider range of courses, which are designed to enhance their outcomes at the end of the year.

The school now collects and analyses information about pupils' achievements at the end of each term. This information is used to identify pupils who are not on track to meet their targets. Subject and pastoral leaders use this information to provide useful support to help pupils catch up. This practice is well developed and most effective in Year 11, and is beginning to have a positive impact in Year 10. In key stage 3, the achievement data is proving useful to track the performance of individual pupils, but the information is not yet evaluated thoroughly to identify the strategic improvements that are required. The school's self-evaluation provides detailed analysis of progress of pupils in Year 11 and some comments about Year 10, but no reference to pupils in Years 7, 8 and 9. This is partly because reliable assessment information has only been available since the end of term two in

December. End of term four data has been gathered, but not yet analysed to identify trends, apart from in Year 11. This makes it difficult for school leaders and members of the governing body to judge the impact of actions taken on the rates of pupils' progress.

The school's own term three performance information and work in books shows that the achievement of the most-able pupils is much lower than that of other pupils in every year group from Years 7 to 11. Pupils with the lowest starting points are generally making good progress. Effective steps have been taken to improve the performance of pupils who have special educational needs or disability. An external review of special educational needs provision during the autumn led to a number of improvements, including sharper identification of the learning needs of pupils, reorganisation of the department and well-targeted training of staff. Actions taken have had a positive impact and most pupils who have special educational needs or disability are now making good progress.

The progress of disadvantaged pupils in Year 11 is accelerating and the gap in their achievement compared with other pupils in the school and nationally is closing rapidly. Leaders have used additional pupil premium funding to motivate and support disadvantaged pupils imaginatively. In other year groups, individual pupils have been targeted for interventions. Alongside a heightened focus on disadvantaged pupils in classes, actions taken are beginning to show a positive impact, but inconsistencies remain.

The sixth form now caters for small numbers of learners: 16 in Year 13 and 20 in Year 12. The reduced range of courses is better suited to the needs of the learners. Some Year 13 learners who underachieved last year are following different courses this year, and the school's information shows they are now on track to meet their targets. Achievement across the sixth form is improving.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Leaders have worked hard to ensure that teachers are equipped fully with the necessary information, support, guidance and training to improve the impact of teaching on learning. During this inspection, there was evidence of teachers applying their improved skills with varying degrees of success. All teachers now demonstrate a growing awareness of which pupils are vulnerable to underachievement, particularly those who are disadvantaged or have special educational needs or disability. However, not all teachers are yet able to provide stimulating and challenging learning experiences for all pupils. Teachers' willingness to engage with the improvement agenda is clear for all to see. Through close monitoring and training, leaders have been successful in helping targeted staff to develop their teaching so that more of it is consistently good than in the past.

Overall, the quality of teaching continues to improve. Strong relationships between teachers and pupils are promoting better learning. Most pupils show positive

attitudes and willingly complete tasks set. Most teaching now enables pupils to work steadily, but too often falls short of inspiring and generating inquisitiveness and intellectual curiosity. This is mainly because not enough teachers are capitalising on pupils' better behaviour and their greater willingness to be challenged and stretched. Too little teaching involves adapting work to reflect the needs of pupils of different abilities. In particular, teachers often fail to tailor work to meet the needs of the most able and, as a result, these pupils are not making the progress of which they are capable. Although school leaders recognise this weakness, steps to address the underperformance of the most-able pupils are at an early stage.

The quality and effectiveness of feedback to pupils is improving. Stickers in books provide helpful advice to pupils, in line with the school's policy. Pupils are increasingly using feedback to improve their work, especially when it provides precise guidance. Sometimes, the advice tends to focus on the completion or correction of work, rather than offering further stretch and challenge.

Pupils inspectors met were clear that, in general, the quality of teaching is now better than in the past but there are inconsistencies between and within subjects. Pupils described how a few teachers still have lower expectations of behaviour and the standard of work required than others. Key stage 4 pupils explained how they had experienced several unsettling changes of teacher in some subjects during this academic year, including in English and mathematics. In some cases this was welcomed, but other pupils expressed frustration as the teachers they had the most confidence in were moved to other groups. Some of these changes were caused by necessary adjustments to the curriculum in January. Also, teaching groups were reorganised when teachers left. In some cases, staff departure has followed leaders' actions to address weakness in teaching.

Teaching in the sixth form is improving. Teachers with strong subject knowledge use probing questions skilfully to offer appropriate support and challenge. This helps learners progress well.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Pupils conduct themselves around the site in a pleasant and cheerful manner. They take pride in their uniform, the environment and the positive changes which have taken place in the school. There is a spirit of friendliness and cooperation. Pupils say that they feel safe in the school, and that instances of bullying are rare and are tackled by staff promptly and effectively.

Pupils are willing and ready to learn. They usually work diligently, although on occasion they lose interest when the work is too easy or they are not clear what is expected of them. Sometimes the impact of previously poor teaching and learning is still evident. For example, some pupils still need a lot of support and encouragement to express their ideas in lessons.

Behaviour throughout the school has improved, partly due to consistent use of a clear behaviour system. Inspectors saw no instances of low-level disruption, although pupils report that the behaviour of a few pupils sometimes slows learning in some classes. Since September, fixed-term exclusions have fallen dramatically. Better use is made of a strengthened system for internal exclusion. A student referral unit (SRU) offers provision for pupils who would previously have been given a fixed-term exclusion from school. There are early signs that this is having a positive impact on pupils' attitudes, but they do not consistently use their time in the SRU productively. Arrangements to ensure pupils are safely supervised when off-site need strengthening.

Attendance has improved and is now near the national average as a result of better systems to monitor and respond to absence. However, the attendance of disadvantaged pupils remains too low.

Effectiveness of leadership and management

The executive headteacher continues to provide steady and firm leadership for the school. She and senior staff from St George's CofE Foundation School give a strong and consistent message that the school is improving and becoming a happier and more successful place to learn, but that more is expected and that standards must continue to improve rapidly. Communication with all stakeholders is significantly better. Staff overwhelmingly support the changes made. The few responses to the Ofsted online questionnaire Parent View do not reflect the positive feedback from current parents gathered by school leaders. The school is oversubscribed with applications for admission into Year 7 in September.

Whole-school responsibilities of the deputy and assistant headteachers are clearer. Subject leadership has moved from assistant headteachers to six 'executive directors'. This has allowed the deputy and assistant headteachers to focus more sharply on a strategic response to school improvement priorities. As a result, systems are now more securely in place for improving attendance, tracking pupil progress, using pupil premium funding to accelerate the progress of disadvantaged pupils, improving the provision for pupils with special educational needs and responding effectively to poor behaviour. Leaders are not yet able to evaluate the sustained impact of their actions on pupils' outcomes, as reliable assessment information has only been available since December.

The leadership skills of middle leaders in the school are developing well. Executive directors are becoming more confident about steering improvements in their subject areas. Their collaborative work is leading to greater consistency across the school. For example, in February they coordinated a drive to raise the quality of feedback by teachers, and their monitoring shows pupils' work is improving when they follow the school's policy of advice written on coloured stickers. This positive response was confirmed by inspectors, although it is too soon to evaluate the impact of this feedback on the achievement of different groups of pupils, including the most able. Heads of year are using assessment information now available to identify

underperforming pupils better. They devise a range of responses to help pupils progress faster. In key stage 4, especially Year 11, the attitude and performance of this target group are checked frequently and recent assessment data for Year 11 indicates that gaps are closing.

Senior leaders' judgements about the quality of specific teaching, learning and assessment are mostly accurate, but there is a tendency for school leaders to be slightly generous about overall judgements. This is because leaders do not take enough account of the impact of teaching on pupils' progress, including the most able.

The leadership skills of substantive leaders in the school are developing well. However, the capacity for securing further improvement is still heavily dependent on external support.

Since the last monitoring visit, a new chair of the governing body was elected and a new vice-chair and parent have joined. These new governors have brought welcome expertise. Governors probe leaders more rigorously, but their ability to hold school leaders to account is limited as there has only been reliable and comprehensive pupil progress information for a few months. Governors acknowledge that their focus has been on Year 11 outcomes and they show little knowledge about the achievement of key stage 3 pupils. In January, following concerns about a budget deficit, governors and the interim leaders commissioned a financial review by Kent County Council Financial Services. This identified significant financial pressure. The local authority suspended the delegation of the budget and personnel powers from the governing body, with their agreement. Governors will need to work closely with the local authority to restore a balanced budget. They also need to provide continuity as new external partners support the school from September.

External support

External support by leaders from St George's CofE Foundation School will cease at the end of July 2016, in accordance with the memorandum of understanding between the governing bodies of both schools. The executive headteacher and her colleagues from St George's have driven rapid improvement at The Charles Dickens School. They identified strengths and weaknesses quickly and accurately, and set out to address them systematically. Leaders have shown relentless determination and resilience to bring about a significant culture change among staff and pupils. They have reorganised leadership roles and established monitoring systems, including reliable assessment of pupils' performance. The executive headteacher has robustly held teachers to account. Staff in the school have responded well and most embraced the required changes. They now face a period of uncertainty as a new school will support The Charles Dickens School from September. At the time of this monitoring inspection, the identity of the partner school had not been published.

Following the financial review, the local authority provided helpful support for the necessary ongoing restructuring process. Monitoring activity by advisers has

strengthened and is now more thorough, although they do not evaluate the impact of actions taken by leaders fully. Thus the view of the local authority is overly optimistic at this stage. The external interim leaders have brought vision, stability, professionalism and rigour to the school. However, the departure of the interim leadership team, without new leaders yet in post, requires considerable support by the local authority for a smooth transition over the next few months in order to maintain the current momentum of improvement.