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Mr T Wilson
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Wilson

Special measures monitoring inspection of Small Heath School

Following my visit, with Mark Feldman, Ofsted Inspector and Karen Lockett, Ofsted Inspector, to your school on 26 and 27 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 that have been taken since the school's previous monitoring inspection.

The inspection was the third monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures following the inspection that took place in January 2015. The full list of the areas for improvement that 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 not taking effective action towards the removal of special measures.

The school may not appoint newly qualified teachers before the next monitoring inspection.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the interim executive board, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Birmingham. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Alun Williams
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection that took place in January 2015

- Improve the effectiveness of leadership and management by:
 - securing effective working relationships between the headteacher and senior and middle leaders
 - ensuring that the headteacher and leaders work with all colleagues in creating a vision for school improvement that is clearly communicated and widely shared across the school
 - strengthening systems for measuring performance which hold staff and leaders clearly and equitably to account for pupils' progress across the school
 - ensuring a regular supply of high-quality information on pupils' progress which allows leaders and staff in the main school and sixth form to compare the performance of key groups of pupils with that of other pupils nationally.

- Improve achievement, particularly in mathematics and for pupils with special educational needs or disability, by:
 - ensuring that teachers use assessment information to plan work which supports the progress of those who find learning difficult, and deepens the knowledge and understanding of those who are most able in each class
 - reviewing the systems for identifying and designating pupils with special educational needs, designing more appropriate packages of support for pupils with special educational needs and systematically evaluating their impact
 - ensuring that teaching assistants are well trained to provide effective numeracy interventions to those who find mathematics difficult.

- Improve the quality of teaching by:
 - ensuring that the marking and assessment of pupils' work are regular, informative, and are used systematically by pupils to correct or improve their work
 - securing consistently higher standards of presentation of work, especially for boys.

- Strengthen the governance of the school by:
 - establishing a forum or committee for more thorough and regular checks on standards and achievement
 - establishing more direct links between governors and school staff and subject departments to gain first-hand information about the school
 - appointing a governor for special education needs provision, as required by the new Special Educational Needs Code of Practice.

Report on the third monitoring inspection on 26 and 27 April 2016

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work and visited parts of lessons, some jointly with members of the senior leadership team. Inspectors met with the headteacher, members of the senior leadership team, all three members of the interim executive board (IEB), three groups of middle leaders and three groups of pupils. The lead inspector also spoke jointly with a representative of the local authority and the chief executive officer of the Birmingham Education Partnership (BEP), which provides school improvement services on behalf of the local authority. Inspectors spoke informally with many pupils and several members of staff, and considered 76 responses to a staff questionnaire. Inspectors scrutinised many documents, including the school's self-evaluation, improvement plans, and records about pupils' attendance, progress and behaviour and its work to keep pupils safe.

Context

Since the last monitoring inspection, the IEB has resigned and a new IEB was put in place in February 2016. The new IEB has held two formal meetings to date.

The senior leadership team is now complete. Two deputy headteachers have left the school. One new deputy headteacher has joined the school and a second has been appointed internally. Two assistant headteachers have joined the school and a third has been appointed internally. A new head of science and a special educational needs coordinator have recently joined the staff. An interim head of mathematics has been appointed internally, following the departure of the previous post holder. The school has 11 teaching vacancies, predominantly in science and mathematics, and these are currently filled by temporary members of staff.

Members of teaching professional associations have taken a total of 21 days of industrial action during this academic year, 17 of which have been since the last monitoring inspection. Industrial action has recently been suspended following negotiations involving the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (Acas). Acas is currently undertaking a 'mediated enquiry' in the school, with the aim of establishing positive working relationships among staff. The enquiry is due to be complete by July 2016.

The school faces financial challenges caused by reduced funding and decreasing numbers of pupils. Leaders are currently consulting with staff about several changes, including to the curriculum and the timetabled school day.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

Small Heath School has not made progress towards the removal of special measures. The 15 months since the school was judged to require special measures have been turbulent. In that time, the local authority has appointed two different IEBs, and the school has had a change of headteacher, several changes to senior leadership, a high staff turnover and ongoing industrial action. There is now evidence that the school's decline may have been stemmed, but there is as yet no hard evidence of improvement in many key areas. In effect, the school, its staff and especially its pupils have experienced a wasted year.

Relationships between staff have improved since the last monitoring inspection. Although tensions remain, staff at all levels now share a common desire to move forward positively and to see the school improve. The views of staff, expressed directly to inspectors and through the staff questionnaire, can be summarised as increased confidence in the school's leadership and greater optimism about the school's future.

The arrival of three new substantive members of the senior leadership team in January 2016 means that this team is now complete for the first time since the section 5 inspection 12 months previously. Senior leaders are clear about their roles and accountabilities and several new initiatives have recently started or are planned to start shortly, following consultation with staff. It is too early for these to have shown any impact.

Leaders' evaluation of the school's strengths and weaknesses is broadly accurate and their plans to tackle its weaknesses are detailed and appropriate. However, many planned actions have not taken place and so there is little evidence of improvement arising from these plans. Members of the local authority's IEB have rightly identified the fact that their role in evaluating the success of improvement strategies is not well defined, nor sufficiently rigorous.

Leaders still do not have a detailed view of the strengths and weaknesses in teaching across the school, in different subjects or for individual teachers. This needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency. Some limited monitoring of teaching has taken place since the last inspection, through observing teaching and checking pupils' books. This has not provided leaders with an accurate view of teaching because leaders have not seen all teachers teach. Teachers have received some training, but it has not been well targeted at those areas and individuals where it is most needed.

New systems to collect and analyse teachers' assessment information are now in place. Senior leaders now have ready access to detailed information that they are beginning to use to identify underperformance and target extra help for pupils who have fallen behind. Leaders have also taken action to improve the accuracy of teachers' assessment of pupils' progress, but it is too early to know whether these actions have been successful. Leaders and governors cannot, therefore, be confident in the accuracy of the school's assessment information.

The understanding and use of assessment data by middle leaders and teachers remain very variable. Some middle leaders are beginning to use assessment information to target intervention, but others are not. There is little evidence that teachers are making effective use of assessment information to inform their planning. As a result, teaching still does not meet the needs of pupils, especially the most able and pupils who have special educational needs.

Middle leaders, who were described in the previous monitoring letter as 'a disparate and disunited group' now form a far more coherent group, whose members are united around a common purpose of seeing the school improve. However, several middle leaders lack a clear understanding of their role in improving teaching and they lack the skills required to lead such improvement.

Provision for pupils who have special educational needs is very weak. Teachers are not given accurate information about these pupils and so do not plan lessons that meet their needs. There is little additional help for these pupils, either in lessons or at other times, and they are making poor progress as a result. A new special educational needs coordinator has very recently joined the school, and plans are developing to address these weaknesses, but it is too early to see any impact from these plans.

Leadership of the sixth form is weak. Teaching in the sixth form is not improving. Leaders are not using assessment information effectively and their understanding of the importance of 16–19 study programmes is very limited. A new head of sixth form has recently been appointed and it is too early for this change to have provided evidence of any improvement. The current focus on improving recruitment rather than improving quality is misplaced.

The local authority's previous IEB was ineffective and failed to bring about any improvement in the school. The new IEB, appointed in February 2016, brings considerable commitment and expertise to the school. It has held two formal meetings and has been focusing on developing a clear view of the school's weaknesses and immediate priorities. It is too early to see any impact from the new IEB's work.

Successive governing bodies and IEBs have failed to meet their statutory responsibilities with regard to children that are looked after. The designated teacher has not been appropriately trained and governors have not received an annual report about children that are looked after from the designated teacher.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

The quality of teaching, learning and assessment has not improved since the previous monitoring inspection. Some good and better teaching continues around the school, but previously identified weaknesses remain. Teaching is strong in English, where an established team has high expectations and there is consistent practice. Teaching is weakest in science because of the high number of vacancies currently being filled by temporary teachers.

Teachers' planning still does not ensure that activities meet the needs of the most-able pupils and these pupils are not sufficiently challenged in too many lessons. The school's own assessment information confirms that the most-able pupils are making weak progress in Years 7, 8 and 9.

Pupils who have special educational needs are making poor progress, because teachers and other adults do not provide enough support in lessons. These pupils also receive very little extra help at other times, so they do not improve their basic skills and they do not catch up when they fall behind.

Teachers' use of questioning to check on and deepen pupils' understanding of their work remains weak. As a result, teachers rarely adapt lessons in the light of what pupils already understand, know or can do, and pupils make less progress than they should as a result.

The quality of feedback that teachers give to pupils about their work varies greatly across the school and often does not help pupils to know how to improve their work. Leaders and teachers have drafted a new marking and feedback policy, with the intention of addressing these weaknesses, but the policy has not yet been implemented.

Teaching in the sixth form shares all of the characteristics of that in the main school. Teachers' planning, questioning and feedback remain weak.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Pupils behave well in most lessons and as they move around the school between lessons, at morning break and at lunchtime. They are usually polite and courteous to each other and to adults. Behaviour is poor in a minority of lessons when teaching is weaker. At these times, pupils do not listen, they talk over the teacher and they do not work hard.

Leaders, teachers and pupils told inspectors that behaviour had deteriorated but that leaders' recent renewed focus on establishing basic standards, including punctuality and wearing the correct uniform, had led to a rapid improvement. Staff, and particularly pupils, welcome this recent improvement.

Attendance in the main school remains high and is well above the national average for secondary schools. Attendance in the sixth form lags a little behind that for younger pupils.

Pupils remain fiercely loyal to their school and their teachers. Pupils in Year 11 told inspectors that they appreciated the work that many of their teachers have done in helping them catch up with learning missed because of industrial action. Pupils continue to feel safe in school. They say that bullying is rare and they have confidence in their teachers to deal with any bullying or other issues that might arise.

The school's work to keep pupils safe remains effective and leaders have addressed the concerns raised in the previous monitoring letter. Staff monitor pupils more closely as they travel between the school's two sites. All staff have been trained in appropriate physical contact with pupils.

Leaders are committed to ensuring that pupils are kept safe and they continually seek to ensure that their practice is strong. Birmingham City Council's resilience adviser completed an audit of safeguarding policy and practice in December 2015, but no written record of the audit was completed. The audit is to be repeated shortly.

Outcomes for pupils

Published GCSE results for 2015 confirm the trajectory of decline in standards of achievement at Small Heath School over the past three years. The progress that pupils make has declined in most subjects, including English, mathematics, languages and the humanities. The school's headline figure for the percentage of pupils achieving five or more GCSEs graded A* to C, including English and mathematics, has fallen to 47%.

Over this period, girls' progress has deteriorated and boys' progress has remained consistently low. Disadvantaged pupils' progress has been weak and gaps between their achievement and that of other pupils have grown. Pupils who have special educational needs have made consistently poor progress.

Learners in the sixth form have made less progress than expected for three years. AS-level results were particularly poor in 2015. More than 40% of entries were ungraded, despite teachers' forecasts being much more optimistic. Many Year 12 learners did not return to complete Year 13 in September 2015.

The school's own assessment information about the progress that pupils are currently making presents a mixed picture. Leaders believe that the GCSE headline figure will fall again, but that pupils' progress in Year 11 will improve as a result of the extra help and support that teachers have given. However, if the school's assessment information does prove accurate, considerable weaknesses will remain in mathematics and for pupils who have special educational needs.

Forecast results for the sixth form also indicate that there will be some improvement in 2016, but leaders cannot have confidence in this data, given the inaccuracy of forecasts made 12 months ago.

The school's assessment information confirms that pupils in Years 7, 8 and 9 are not making good progress. It suggests that boys and the most-able pupils are making particularly weak progress. Although this data must be treated with caution, it is supported by inspectors' first-hand observations of lessons and the work in pupils' books and folders.

External support

The local authority's failure to ensure that the school has had stable and effective leadership and governance over the past 15 months has been a key factor in the school's lack of progress since being judged to require special measures. However, the local authority has provided effective support more recently in helping leaders to address the school's financial and staffing challenges.

Throughout this academic year, the local authority has commissioned support for school improvement through the Birmingham Education Partnership (BEP). This support has not been effective as there has been no improvement in the quality of teaching, learning and assessment in the school over that period.

A new range of support is now planned to start shortly, including the services of an experienced headteacher who will support the school's leadership and governance. It is too early to see any impact from this support.