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Anthony Dickens
Interim Executive Headteacher
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Dear Mr Dickens

Special measures monitoring inspection of River House School

Following my visit to your school on 8 and 9 June 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. Thank you also for the welcome that you extended to Lynn Radley, Senior Her Majesty's Inspector, who was shadowing the inspection.

The inspection was the third monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures following the inspection that took place in May 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 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 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 that 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 third monitoring inspection on 8 June and 9 June 2016

Evidence

The inspector observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the interim executive headteacher, the interim deputy headteacher, the executive headteacher designate, members of staff with responsibility for safeguarding, other staff members, the chair and vice-chair of the governing body and two representatives of the local authority.

Context

No members of staff have left or joined the school since the last monitoring inspection. Several members of staff are currently absent on sick leave and their posts are being covered internally. River House is in the process of converting to become an academy as part of a multi-academy trust of special schools in the south Warwickshire area, led by Welcombe Hills school. This is expected to take place during the autumn term 2016.

The interim executive headteacher has recently reduced his time at River House to two days a week as a consultant headteacher. The interim deputy headteacher is acting as head of school. The headteacher of Welcombe Hills school has taken on the role of executive headteacher of both schools. This arrangement will continue until River House joins the multi-academy trust. It is intended that the head of school will continue in post for the 2016/2017 academic year in order to provide continuity and to keep changes to key personnel to a minimum.

The local authority does not intend to place any pupils at River House in September. This means that the school will only have a small number of pupils in Years 9, 10 and 11. Fifteen pupils will be taught on the River House site and six Year 11 pupils will attend college full time. As a consequence, fewer teachers and support staff will be needed. A process of voluntary redundancy is underway.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

The interim executive headteacher and the interim deputy headteacher have provided strong and stable leadership and a clear sense of direction. Their actions have made sure that improvements continue to be made.

Leaders have high expectations of staff and of pupils. Many of the school's policies and procedures have been updated to make these expectations clear, and leaders check regularly to see that what has been agreed is being carried out as intended. Because staff are implementing the school's procedures consistently, pupils' behaviour has continued to improve and their attendance has risen. There has also

been a substantial reduction in instances of physical intervention and the use of exclusion.

A comprehensive programme of professional development for staff, tailored to the school's needs, is also leading to improvements in teaching.

There has been considerable success in dealing with the school's predicted overspend. Thanks to the concerted and determined efforts of the interim executive headteacher, the school ended the financial year with a comfortable surplus.

The school's procedures for protecting pupils and keeping them safe are robust and clearly understood. All staff have appropriate training in child protection, safe handling and other aspects of safeguarding such as the 'Prevent' duty. Staff know the pupils and their circumstances very well and they know what to look out for. During this inspection, swift and appropriate action was taken in response to concerns about one pupil. School staff work closely with other agencies to try to meet pupils' particular needs, and they make regular contact with parents and carers. The school's family liaison officer frequently visits the small number of pupils who are unable to attend school to make sure they are safe.

The required review of pupil premium spending has taken place. The issues raised were largely being dealt with in the school's rapid action plan. Leaders are in the process of drawing up arrangements for more formal monitoring and reporting on the impact of the spending.

At the first monitoring inspection, the interim executive headteacher rightly identified changing the school's culture as one of the main challenges facing leaders and governors. The challenge continues. Although some members of staff have fully embraced the need for change, others are reluctant to do so. Added to this, concerns about the school's future and potential job losses have affected morale. Staff absence is very high. This is beginning to affect the progress that the school is making. The pace of change is slowing, but has not stalled.

The governing body has continued to support the school and to work for the best interests of the pupils. The chair of the governing body and other governors visit regularly. Minutes of meetings show that governors ask pertinent questions, for example, about the assessment information they have been given.

Links are being made between the staff of River House and Welcombe Hills as part of managing the transition to academy status. From September, closer working with Welcombe Hills school is planned. This is because there will be a need to share skills and expertise between the two schools in order to make sure that the pupils who remain at River House receive the broad and balanced curriculum to which they are entitled.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Teaching has continued to improve as a result of training and activities designed to enhance teachers' skills and expertise. Because staff are implementing the school's agreed approaches, pupils know what is expected of them. There is a good degree of consistency from one subject to another.

Since the last monitoring inspection, a revised procedure for marking pupils' work and giving feedback to pupils has been implemented. Teachers and support staff have adopted the new approach and are applying it consistently, but the skill with which they do this is variable. Sometimes, the feedback pupils are given about what would make their work better is not helpful enough. For example, teachers make suggestions for better behaviour, such as turning up for the lesson on time, rather than saying what would have improved that particular piece of work in subject-specific terms.

Medium-term curriculum plans include guidance on how teachers should take account of pupils' individual needs when they plan their teaching. In addition, the range of interventions provided for each pupil is now recorded on an individual 'provision map'. Despite this, there is still too much of a one-size-fits-all approach in lessons. Staff know that there is a very wide range of prior attainment in each class and understand the different ways in which pupils prefer to learn, yet pupils' books show that often the same questions or instructions are given to everyone, regardless of their ability to read.

Teaching assistants are playing an increasing part in supporting pupils' learning as well as their behaviour. Several teaching assistants teach groups of pupils confidently and are involved in marking pupils' work.

Pupils are becoming more engaged and involved in lessons but they are still, on the whole, quick to switch off if their interest is not held or something else takes their attention. Sometimes, however, pupils whose thoughts were seemingly elsewhere will answer a question, showing that they were listening all along. Many pupils are not resilient learners and become frustrated if they are not successful straight away, or fail to meet a time deadline for a piece of work.

The accuracy and reliability of teachers' assessments of what pupils know and can do and the progress they are making are the biggest issues that remain to be sorted out. The assessment leader put together a tracking system that took account of the removal of national curriculum levels. However, because teachers' assessments were not checked by looking at the evidence that supported them, the information on attainment and progress was not reliable. Whole-school progress information provided to governors was not useful and gave an over-optimistic picture. Leaders realised this and are revising the process, seeking to learn from best practice elsewhere and taking into account the system used at Welcombe Hills. They have also made sure that pupils have taken externally standardised

assessments to help provide a benchmark for teachers' assessments.

As the school will have only 15 pupils on site in September, leaders are rightly focusing on providing a personalised curriculum for each one, tailored to their individual next steps. Assessment arrangements will follow the same approach.

The school has recently introduced a new approach to raising the profile of reading and boosting attainment in reading. Although it is a new innovation, there are already signs of a positive impact. Pupils read readily at the start of the day and can be seen walking about carrying books. They are keen to record what they have read on the online recording system.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

As mentioned above, pupils' behaviour has continued to improve. Incidents of unacceptable behaviour have decreased steadily with a consequent reduction in fixed-term exclusions. The atmosphere in school is generally calm and orderly. Nevertheless, there is still some way to go before behaviour in some lessons is as good as it needs to be in order to lead to better progress. In some lessons, such as food technology, design and technology and other practical subjects, pupils concentrate, work well and are proud of the finished product. On other occasions, however, pupils' inappropriate behaviour affects their own learning and that of others. Some boys frequently use unacceptable language to staff and to one another. Staff take care to acknowledge good behaviour and to highlight when pupils have made the right choice, as well as making it clear when pupils have overstepped the mark.

Pupils still remove themselves from lessons, sometimes, but not always, because they are trying to manage anger or get away from a frustrating situation. As seen on previous monitoring inspections, staff manage the pupils calmly, gently and with great patience and understanding. Usually, these pupils return to class quite willingly, but they have lost learning time.

During this inspection, pupils in key stage 4 were sitting mathematics examinations. They persevered, staying in the room for some time, and behaved well when they came out.

Attendance rates have continued to improve, but are still adversely affected by the few pupils on the school's roll who never attend. Arrangements have been made for alternative placements for these pupils from September.

Outcomes for pupils

There are some signs that outcomes are improving. Pupils' books show that they are completing more work in lessons and over time. More of the tasks require pupils to think and do things for themselves rather than filling in blanks on a worksheet.

Some pupils try to make improvements in response to teachers' marking. But in many books there is still insufficient work to enable teachers to make a judgement about progress over time and whether pupils are catching up on what is expected for their age.

The new approach to teaching reading is already having a positive impact. All of the pupils who have completed a second assessment have improved their reading ages, and some have made good gains in a short space of time.

However, because of the unreliability of assessment information, the school is not yet in a position to demonstrate the value that it is adding to pupils' learning and progress.

Not all of the pupils in Year 11 have yet secured a place in education, training or employment for September. The staff are providing a good deal of guidance and support to help them make the right choices. This includes practising for interviews, helping with writing applications and taking pupils to look round colleges.

External support

The local authority has continued to fund the interim deputy headteacher's post to strengthen the school's leadership capacity. It is working to secure the school's transition to academy status. Meetings of the school's task group and visits from the school's link officer mean that the local authority has a clear and accurate understanding of what is working well and where further work is needed.