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Dear Miss Jones

Special measures monitoring inspection of The Forest High School

Following my visit with Paul Williams, Her Majesty's Inspector, and Martin Watson, Ofsted Inspector, to your school on 21 and 22 September 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. Please also pass on my thanks to the pupils and to all members of staff we met during the inspection and praise them for their openness and frankness during our discussions.

The inspection was the second 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 not taking effective action towards the removal of special measures.

One year has elapsed since the school was judged to require special measures. While key systems and procedures have been put into place during this time, improvements in the overall quality of teaching have not been sufficient to raise pupils' achievement in all year groups and across a wide range of subjects. The trust is working within serious financial constraints and difficulties in recruiting teachers. However, disruptions to the senior leadership of the school led to the momentum generated by the time of the previous monitoring inspection in

December 2015 not being maintained. It is essential that the pace of improvement increases significantly by the time of the next monitoring inspection and that the impact is clear in the improved quality of pupils' work. The trust and school leaders fully understand the importance of the continued existence of this school to the local community.

The school's action plan is fit for purpose.

Having considered all the evidence I strongly recommend that the school does not seek to appoint newly qualified teachers (NQT).

However, we agreed that you should contact me to discuss the appointment of NQT whenever the need arises, with a focus on how the qualities of the NQT have been established and on the quality of the overall and subject-level support to be provided.

I am copying this letter to the chief executive officer of the South Gloucestershire and Stroud Academy Trust, the chair of the executive board, the chair of the local governing body, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Gloucestershire. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

James Sage
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

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

- Improve the quality of teaching so that students' achievement accelerates across all subjects, by making sure that:
 - all inadequate teaching is eliminated
 - teachers use information about what students can do to plan work that is at the right level of challenge for different abilities
 - teachers' assessment of students' work is accurate so that underachievement can be identified and tackled
 - teachers' questioning is used to assess students' learning and progress, to challenge and develop students' thinking and to deepen their understanding
 - teachers' marking gives students a clear understanding of what they need to do to improve, and that teachers check that students have improved their work as a result of the advice they have given
 - students practise their writing skills in different subjects
 - pupils use their mathematical skills and knowledge to solve problems across different subjects
 - students' behaviour is managed consistently well, so that poor behaviour is not tolerated and all teachers take swift action to prevent learning being disrupted.

- Raise achievement in all subjects by making sure that:
 - all students, including those who are disabled or have special educational needs, make the progress they should
 - the achievement of disadvantaged students in the school improves so that the gap between their achievement and the achievement of other students nationally is closed
 - boys' achievement improves so that the gap in achievement between boys and girls is closed
 - the most-able students make at least good progress and achieve well.

- Improve leadership and management by ensuring that:
 - assessment data are accurate across all subjects
 - leaders make more effective use of additional government funding to narrow the achievement gap between disadvantaged students and others in the school and nationally
 - leaders set out clear guidelines on the teaching of literacy and numeracy across subjects
 - subject leaders are held to account for the quality of teaching and students' achievement in their areas of responsibility
 - the curriculum more effectively reflects the different abilities of students and that it better supports students' achievement in English, mathematics and science

- leaders at all levels insist on staff applying school policies consistently, particularly for marking and behaviour.

An external review of the school's use of pupil premium should be undertaken in order to assess how this aspect of leadership and management may be improved.

Report on the second monitoring inspection on 21 and 22 September 2016

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the executive headteacher and other senior leaders, subject leaders, the chief executive officer (CEO) and deputy CEO of the South Gloucestershire and Stroud Academy Trust, the chair of the local governing body and a range of teachers and other staff. The lead inspector spoke with a senior leader from Pate's Grammar School, the school improvement partner. Inspectors held two formal meetings with groups of pupils and met many more around the site at break and lunchtimes and during the changeovers between lessons. Inspectors listened to a range of pupils reading individually, in lessons and in tutorial sessions. There were too few responses to Parent View, the Ofsted online survey, for them to be analysed. However, the lead inspector discussed parents' views with the executive headteacher. The inspection team focused much of its time on looking at the quality of pupils' work and talking to them about it, in lessons and by collecting together a wider sample of pupils' books.

Context

This small 11–16 secondary school is sponsored by the South Gloucestershire and Stroud Academy Trust. The trust operates within serious financial constraints. The school buildings and site are in a poor state of repair. It is very difficult to recruit teachers to the school.

In the period from January until the end of the summer term in July 2016, the executive headteacher was deployed to support another school judged to require special measures and spent very little time in Forest High School. From March the school was run by a seconded leader from the trust, who followed on from the first seconded 'operational' headteacher who stepped down from this role. The executive headteacher has returned to run the school since September 2016.

The school's small senior leadership team, comprising the executive headteacher and the acting deputy headteacher, has been extended. The teacher acting as the teaching and learning coach has been part of the extended senior team since September 2015. The head of mathematics, with responsibility for the implementation of the new assessment arrangements, joined the team from January 2016. The assistant headteacher responsible for inclusion, well-being and attendance left the school in August 2016.

There have been significant changes to the membership of the local governing body, including the appointment of a new chair who has been in this post since July 2016. Several members have left and new governors appointed. The range of

expertise on the governing body is being deepened and broadened through further planned appointments.

Outcomes for pupils

The proportion of pupils gaining a good GCSE pass in English and mathematics improved markedly for all groups of pupils in 2016. There were significant improvements in the attainment of pupils in mathematics, notably for boys and disadvantaged pupils. Similar improvements were not achieved across a wide range of other subjects, although there were some small gains. The intense support of senior leaders and the relentless focus on English and mathematics, the key to these improvements, are not sustainable. They have not led to improvements in raising pupils' achievement across all year groups and subjects.

Pupils' work since the start of this school year in a wide range of subjects shows that most, including the most able, disadvantaged pupils, boys and girls are not working at the level they are capable of and not making enough progress. Pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities make progress when they are supported well, but their progress in lessons is widely variable. The work of current Year 11 pupils in English and mathematics indicates that they will need the same intensive additional support required for last year's Year 11 if they are to achieve at a similar level. Based on current work, this is also likely to be case for Year 10 pupils. The focus of the school improvement partner on better deployment of teaching assistants and other adults in the classroom has not yet led to any noticeable improvement in the quality of pupils' work or in their achievement.

Weak skills in reading and writing inhibit the progress of many pupils across a range of subjects. There is currently no effective coherent strategy for developing these skills across the curriculum for all year groups. Many pupils have difficulties reading for comprehension. Some in Year 8, whom the inspectors heard reading, found decoding unfamiliar words difficult and had no clear strategy for doing this. Many pupils admit to finding reading difficult and this affects their learning in many subjects. Pupils do not feel that their teachers understand this or do anything about it. The additional funds for supporting those pupils in Year 7 who need to catch up with their literacy and numeracy skills are used well. The gains they have made can be seen for those now in Year 8. The impact of this work is carefully evaluated and has led to better focused work with pupils currently in Years 5 and 6 who will join the school in Year 7 to identify and coordinate support as early as possible. This work is led well.

From the start of this term, pupils in all year groups spend two and a half hours each week in tutorials; half an hour at the end of each day. This time is used for a range of activities, including: assemblies; a personal, social, health education programme; time for developing reading, writing and speaking skills; and study skills for pupils in Year 11. However, their learning in these sessions is not captured and their progress is not monitored or recorded effectively. This significantly limits

the benefits of this work.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

As noted in the December visit, pupils are polite, respectful and a pleasure to talk to. They attend the school regularly and are mostly punctual at the start of the day. Despite three different versions of the uniform, as the school has changed sponsors, pupils are smart and show pride in their appearance and in the school. They feel it is an essential part of the local community. They are open, honest and very willing to engage in conversations and many have interesting and valuable views about what is working in the school and what needs to improve. Many are keen to be involved in talking with the school leaders about how to do this. They realise that they are not getting the high quality of education they deserve but do not come across as bitter and are ready to take on more challenge. Nevertheless, as noted before, they recognise the need for some of them to have more positive attitudes in lessons and that they need to develop the skills needed to respond to an increased level of challenge.

In lessons, pupils are mostly attentive and behave well. They follow safe working practices where required, although this is difficult to judge in science lessons as no practical work is currently undertaken due to lack of technician support. The pupils themselves recognise that they often switch off when the work lacks interest or is too easy. However, this mostly does not lead to poor behaviour except in some tutorial sessions where pupils do not value the work they are doing. During lesson changeovers, pupils move with purpose and, despite (or possibly because of) the lack of bells between lessons, they arrive on time and ready to learn. They move quickly during the warning bells at the end of break and lunchtimes.

The school's programme of personal, social and health education changed at the start of this year so it is too early to fully evaluate its impact. The programme is organised and led well and is comprehensive. However, discussing with current pupils matters such as sex education, relationships and consent, mental health and preventing extremism and radicalisation identified gaps in their understanding. The leader responsible is planning to review the impact of the programme with pupils in the near future. She is also fully aware of variations in the quality of the delivery of the programme across tutor groups and has clear plans to deal with this. She has the credibility, respect of staff and the authority to make this happen.

The school site is not conducive to a calm and orderly atmosphere. In many areas pupils are out of sight of staff and there are few amenities or activities to engage their interest, particularly at lunchtime. Some pupils are boisterous, particularly playing the rather wild games of football. However, all pupils spoken to say they feel, and are, safe. The area for Year 7 pupils, where some Year 11 pupils provide good 'buddying support', is calm and a protective environment for these younger pupils.

Some areas of the school site are potentially unsafe. There are still many loose and uneven paving slabs and steps that are not clearly marked. Pupils are fully aware of these risks and behave accordingly. As noted in the previous monitoring letter, school leaders and staff try hard to make the buildings bright and cheery, but their efforts are seriously limited by their poor state of repair.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

The report following the inspection in May 2015 and the letter from the monitoring visit in December 2015 both identified key weaknesses in the quality of teaching. Underpinning these was the need for teachers to have a much more precise understanding of pupils' abilities and current progress to ensure that their expectations of the quality of pupils' work became higher. This has not improved sufficiently and remains a key weakness.

Little progress has been made against the points set out in the first monitoring letter that built on those in the May 2015 inspection report. Teachers do not set out to plan work at too low a level but a lack of precision in knowing what pupils already can do, know and understand, means expectations are too low and learning does not proceed at a good pace. This limits the progress made by all groups of pupils, including those who are disadvantaged and the most able pupils. The checking of pupils' learning in lessons is not sharp enough to ensure that progress is rapid. Pupils in all year groups, including the most able, and across a wide range of subjects are set work that repeats what they can already do or it is too easy. Pupils are very open about this and would relish more difficult work. For example, when Year 7 pupils are set interesting and challenging problems in mathematics they respond with enthusiasm and take pleasure and pride in their work.

There is a small pocket of effective, and some highly effective, teaching in the school. At this stage, this has not reached the 'critical mass' necessary for it to begin to raise the quality elsewhere. In this very small school, it is difficult to use these effective teachers in a coaching role to support others. Where this has been done, using the teaching and learning coach, it has made a clear difference. Some subject leaders are unable to demonstrate effective teaching for their subject teams, limiting senior leaders' ability to spread good practice. One focus of the support from Pate's Grammar, the school improvement partner, as requested by school senior leaders, has been on developing a new assessment system. However, this has not yet had a noticeable impact on raising the overall quality of teaching in the school.

The school has introduced a new marking policy. This is being used across the school so that pupils' work is marked regularly and they are provided with feedback on their work. This makes clear what they need to do to correct their work. However, much of this feedback does not help pupils know what they need to do to develop their learning further or it accepts work that is at too low a level for that pupil. The new assessment model introduced in key stage 3 is designed to provide

higher levels of challenge but it is too early to see any impact of this. However, all subjects have developed a curriculum that provides a much improved basis for planning teaching and learning, monitoring pupils' progress and evaluating their achievement.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

The disruptions to the school's senior leadership from January to July 2016 have significantly inhibited the progress made towards the removal of special measures. There has been insufficiently rigorous attention to improving the overall quality of teaching to raise pupils' achievement across all year groups, for all groups of pupils and across the full range of subjects. The weaknesses noted at the inspection in May 2015 and during the first monitoring visit in December 2015 are still apparent now. The school improvement partner has not been used well to provide the intense focus on improving teaching required. A full year has elapsed since the school was judged to require special measures and a rapid acceleration will be required to improve the school sufficiently within the allocated time period. The return of the executive headteacher to run the school has started to regain some of the momentum lost during the six months up to the end of the last school year. All of the areas noted for improvement in the letter of the December monitoring inspection need to be addressed as a matter of urgency.

A key concern is the limited ability of some subject leaders to improve the quality of teaching rapidly enough. There are some encouraging signs that can be built on; in mathematics, for example, and, to some extent, in science. However, the small size of the senior leadership team and the teaching commitments of the teaching and learning coach make the scale of the support required daunting. There has been some very effective use of a coaching model with the coach and teacher planning, teaching and assessing pupils' progress together and then evaluating the impact of this collaborative work. However, there is limited amount of time available to use this approach widely enough to secure the full extent of improvements needed. Much more focused and effective use of the school improvement partner, or other external support, is required.

The role of the two progress leaders appears to have become unclear, limiting the impact they can make. They have a key role in understanding pupils' backgrounds and individual needs and targeting the support they need to help them make good progress. This role needs to be reinforced so that they can undertake this work effectively. The school special educational needs coordinator continues to support pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities well. However, the progress that was being made – ensuring that these pupils learn as well as they can in lessons – has lost impetus.

There are some encouraging signs in the new assessment arrangements. They have stimulated useful discussions about the curriculum within subject and curriculum teams. This has not yet led to fruitful conversations about what good subject

teaching looks like, but it is beginning to in some subjects. Leaders are thinking about how pupils can become involved in these discussions.

The recent changes to the leadership and membership of the local governing body means that it is currently building its capacity to provide the quality of challenge to the school leadership that is essential to ensure the increased pace of improvement required. The chair is clear about the need for governors to ask leaders difficult questions but is currently not clear what these questions should be. The local governing body cannot hold the school senior leaders to account robustly enough at this time. However, the chair and executive headteacher are working together to establish the mechanisms needed to ensure that governors have the information they need to better provide the essential balance of support and challenge to the school's senior and subject leaders. The chair ensures that the current interim arrangements for safeguarding, in development due to changes in staffing, responsibilities and governance, are effective.

The parents' forum is still active but not well attended. The executive headteacher fully understands the importance of working with parents and taking full account of their views. She works hard, with good support from other teachers, to ensure the place of the school at the heart of the local community.

The arrangements for safeguarding pupils are effective. Policies and procedures are up to date and meet requirements. Pupils are safe and say that they feel safe. They have a good overall understanding of how to keep themselves safe, but there are some gaps in their understanding of the full range of risks that they can expose themselves to. Current leaders know that work is required through the personal, social and health education programme and more effective use of tutorial time to address these. Despite the poor state of repair of the buildings and site, pupils mostly conduct themselves sensibly and safely, although the school leaders fully understand the need to reduce the over-boisterous behaviour of some pupils during lunchtimes. Work is already underway to provide a wider range of activities for pupils during this time.

The trust has led work to ensure that all staff fully understand their safeguarding roles and responsibilities and carry them out well. Trust staff have supported school leaders to develop effective systems and procedures, such as maintaining and reviewing accurate records of incidents and the careful analysis of attendance data. They also provide well-targeted training for governors, including those new to the local governing body. Through this, there is a strongly developing effective culture of safeguarding that permeates the school.

External support

The academy sponsor, the South Gloucestershire and Stroud Academy Trust, was responsible for the appointment of the executive headteacher and the seconded associate headteacher from South Gloucestershire and Stroud College who led the

school from March to July 2016. The previous associate headteacher was seconded from the Cabot Learning Federation. The trust has provided overall leadership and strategic, practical and financial support. The deputy CEO of the trust devotes significant time to supporting the school. However, the support provided during the period from January until the end of the summer term in July 2016 did not lead to sufficient improvement in the quality of teaching to ensure that pupils made enough progress. The decision for the executive headteacher to be taken out of the school for six months had a seriously detrimental effect on limiting the progress the school has made towards the removal of special measures. Her return to run the school from September has resulted in greater clarity about what needs to be done and regained some of the momentum lost. The trust also recognised the need to strengthen the local governing body and has been successful in recruiting to extend the range and depth of expertise on the body.

The school's improvement partner, Pate's Grammar School, is providing practical support in developing and implementing the new assessment arrangements and bringing in expertise to help teachers use teaching assistants more effectively. These areas were identified by the trust. However, the impact of this work cannot yet be seen and has not yet led to marked improvements in the overall quality of teaching. The impact of the work undertaken by Pate's continues to be limited by the lack of a long-term secure arrangement. The need to constantly secure short-term funding is a major hindrance to the ongoing effectiveness of the support Pate's can provide.