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Mark Jordan
Executive Principal
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Dear Mr Jordan

Special measures monitoring inspection of INSPIRE Free Special School

Following my visit to your school on 11 October 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 recent section 5 inspection.

The inspection was the first monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures following the inspection that took place in January 2016.

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 trust's statement of action is fit for purpose.

The school's action 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 chief executive of the Parallel Learning Trust, the chair of the advisory board, the regional schools commissioner and the director of

children's services for Medway. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Janet Pearce
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection that took place in January 2016

- Improve leadership and management at all levels so that essential improvements are made by:
 - implementing rigorous and effective systems for monitoring all aspects of the school's work
 - ensuring that self-evaluations are accurate
 - sharpening leaders' plans for improvement so that they are more focused on the key issues
 - developing middle leaders so that they can help to raise standards more quickly
 - ensuring that senior and middle leaders improve the quality of teaching and its impact on learning
 - securing high-quality external support for leaders as a matter of urgency
 - implementing improvements to the curriculum so that it fully meets the needs of all pupils, including learners in the sixth form
 - ensuring that procedures for managing teachers' performance are effective and staff are held to account for their impact on pupils' achievement.

- Significantly improve teaching to raise the achievement of all groups of pupils in all subjects, but particularly in English, by:
 - raising teachers' expectations for all pupils and groups of pupils so that work has the appropriate challenge and builds on what pupils already know and can do
 - tightening teachers' use of assessment so that work set in lessons is more closely linked to the needs of pupils with differing abilities
 - developing teachers' subject knowledge
 - ensuring that lessons more consistently capture the interest and enthusiasm of pupils.

- Improve pupils' behaviour through:
 - making better use of behaviour plans and how they link to the curriculum to reduce the number of exclusions
 - improving levels of attendance for all pupils.

An external review of governance should be undertaken in order to assess how this aspect of leadership and management may be improved.

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

Report on the first monitoring inspection on 11 October 2016

Evidence

Her Majesty's Inspector observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the executive principal, the chair of the advisory board and the chief executive officer of the Parallel Learning Trust. Meetings were held with senior leaders and a group of staff. Her Majesty's Inspector also met with a parent and a pupil. Visits were made to a series of activities, including mathematics, English, art, food technology and physical education lessons, accompanied by the executive principal.

Context

Since the previous inspection, the principal who was in post at the time of the inspection has left the school. Several members of staff have also left the school, including three teachers and two teaching assistants. The governing body which was in place at the time of the last inspection has been dissolved. The Parallel Learning Trust is now providing support and challenge for the school. An executive principal has been appointed by the trust to provide leadership for three days a week. An advisory board has been appointed by the trust to provide local governance of the school. There is currently no provision for sixth form students in the school, although the 16 to 19 provision is planned to reopen in September 2017. At present there are 17 pupils on roll.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

The executive principal has strengthened leadership, brought experience and expertise and stabilised the school. He has established clear job descriptions for each senior post. As a result, senior leaders now have a precise understanding of what they are responsible for and carry out their duties with greater confidence, autonomy and determination.

The executive principal and senior leaders have wisely focused on the immediate priorities for the school. In particular, they have succeeded in establishing more settled behaviour of the pupils in and out of lessons. They have also made improvements to teaching, learning and assessment in order to meet pupils' different needs more precisely. The executive principal has put the best interests of the pupils at the heart of his leadership. He has not shirked from making difficult decisions in order to make certain that teaching and behaviour improves. Important work has begun to develop a broader and more appropriate range of subjects and curriculum pathways for pupils in the school.

Senior leaders now visit lessons and monitor the quality of learning more frequently and thoroughly. They check pupils' work to evaluate its quality and suitability. Information about pupils' progress and their behaviour is collected regularly and

analysed in order to plan further improvements.

Pupils now have a better experience in lessons and also in some vocational courses at alternative providers. Pupils and staff report that lessons are more interesting and worthwhile. As one senior leader said, 'We want to make the pupils' world bigger and prepare them for their future beyond school.' Teachers now plan lessons in all subjects around common motivating topics, which have resulted in a more coherent day-to-day timetable. Pupils work in a more purposeful way and are beginning to enjoy learning for its own sake.

Staff are assessing pupils' needs more carefully and thoroughly. Teachers are provided with more detailed and precise information about pupils' abilities and difficulties. As a result, they set more ambitious targets and plan useful activities.

Leaders have ensured that teachers' skills and knowledge are developed and extended. Weekly training is building up teachers' confidence and knowledge and also enhances the work of teaching assistants. Leaders have made a positive start on managing teachers' and teaching assistants' performance more assertively with targets related directly to the quality of their work and the priorities for the school. In addition, teachers value the opportunities they have to attend relevant training.

The advisory board of governors provides definite challenge and insight. Members of the board monitor the school's work diligently and are clear-sighted, ambitious and astute. Evidence from their regular meetings shows that members do not hesitate to challenge school leaders if improvements make little impact.

The action plans to improve the school are useful working documents that are reviewed and evaluated regularly. The improvement plans helpfully focus on the top priorities for the school and practical strategies to improve teaching, learning and behaviour.

Staff morale is high. It is encouraging that so many effective long-serving staff members have cheerfully sustained their total commitment and loyalty to the school and its pupils, while still recognising that they need to improve their work. Many staff have willingly and successfully taken on additional teaching duties outside their own subject areas because there have been significant difficulties in recruiting specialist staff.

Parents have noted the improvements in the school too, according to the school's own survey. For example, one parent told Her Majesty's Inspector that in the past she had 'given up hope', but now has 'confidence in the school'.

School leaders have improved the school environment. Some dark and unwelcoming spaces have been brightened up with helpful displays and celebrations of pupils' work. However, delays in the long-awaited building work have not been helpful for the school. During the monitoring inspection, Her Majesty's Inspector noted that

while the outside site was made safe for pupils with securely fenced-off areas, the overgrown playground areas were derelict and dispiriting. Pupils currently do not have access to enough suitable outdoor space to play games and have physical recreation and fresh air.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Teaching, learning and assessment have improved. There is better planning and sensible use of information about pupils' abilities, needs and interests. Teaching is now enabling pupils to make more progress and demonstrate their steps of learning. Pupils talk more about what they are learning, rather than their behaviour.

Teaching assistants are being deployed more effectively, building on the expertise that was identified at the previous inspection. They are now attached to subject areas rather than tutor groups. Learning is the top priority for all adults working in the school. Leaders have identified that teaching assistants are extending their knowledge and have better insight into teachers' planning and target-setting for pupils. As a result, expectations have been raised and pupils' attitudes and conduct are improving.

Teachers place more emphasis on short-term rewards for pupils' attitudes to learning with a simple and easily understood points system. Pupils value the points they earn for the respect they show each other and adults, and for how well they have contributed and learned in the lessons.

Senior leaders have reviewed the way that teachers assess pupils' progress and how they give feedback on pupils' work. New and improved systems for tracking pupils' progress throughout the year have now been introduced, although it is too soon to evaluate their full impact. However, early signs are positive: pupils now have folders of work in all subjects, which clearly show a steady upturn in their motivation and confidence.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Improvements made to leadership, teaching, learning and assessment have had a pleasing impact on pupils' behaviour. Overall attendance has improved; many more pupils attend and remain in lessons. Those pupils who are reluctant to contribute gradually increase their active participation. The numbers of exclusions and serious incidents, including those that require restrictive physical intervention, have declined.

Staff feel more optimistic and behave more supportively towards pupils, which contributes to the orderly and positive atmosphere. A senior leader commented that staff no longer go 'marching out to challenge poor behaviour' but see the 'whole child'. Staff try to catch pupils behaving well and reward them, while not praising pupils unless they truly deserve it.

Generally, relationships between pupils and with staff are warm and respectful. In most lessons, pupils are responsive and try hard to concentrate and stay focused. However, there are moments when boundaries between pupils and adults are blurred and pupils overstep the mark. Some pupils have not caught up with staff's raised expectations of behaviour and the improved ethos, so there are still too many moments when challenging behaviour flares up or bad language is used.

Outcomes for pupils

As yet, outcomes for pupils are not showing as much improvement as seen in other areas of the school. Until learning and behaviour reach the required standard, pupils' progress will lag behind. However, there are encouraging signs that better teaching and improved attitudes are leading to more progress for current pupils. Pupils' work is beginning to demonstrate a gradual improvement in writing, reading and mathematics. School leaders correctly note that pupils need to be reading more and producing more extended writing.

Pupils are beginning to show better progression in some of the vocational courses on offer, including food technology. In addition, pupils enjoy and try hard in physical education. When teachers introduce more challenging content and provide time for pupils to think and reflect, more progress is made, even when pupils are not used to taking their learning seriously.

External support

Immediately following the previous inspection, the school remained too isolated and potential sources of support were uncertain. Action plans formulated by leaders and governors were weak and their drive to improve the school lacked urgency.

Following the re-brokerage of the school in April 2016 and the appointment of the executive principal and local advisory board, the pace of improvement has increased significantly and made up for the valuable time that was lost. The school is now a much more outward-looking place. School leaders have sensibly sought links with other schools and obtained useful support from external partners and the trust. The school has benefited from a series of visits from a school improvement adviser, who has observed teaching, evaluated pupils' progress and provided essential advice and guidance for senior leaders.