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Mr Michael Sidebottom
Interim Principal
Smithills School
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Dear Mr Sidebottom

Special measures monitoring inspection of Smithills School

Following my visit with Deborah Bailey, Ofsted Inspector, to your school on 23 and 24 May 2017, 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 November 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.

Having considered all the evidence I am of the opinion that the school may appoint newly qualified teachers.

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

Yours sincerely

Anne Seneviratne

Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

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

- Improve outcomes for pupils by:
 - reviewing the targets set for pupils in all year groups and all subjects to ensure that they offer sufficient challenge to raise achievement significantly
 - taking urgent action to identify and remedy underachievement in key groups of pupils, especially the most able, the most able disadvantaged and pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities
 - taking urgent action to improve pupils' progress in English and mathematics.
- Improve the quality of teaching by:
 - ensuring that teachers use assessment information accurately and effectively to better meet the needs of all pupils and groups of pupils in their classes
 - ensuring that all teachers have high expectations of what pupils can and should achieve
 - ensuring that where weaknesses are identified in teaching these are addressed promptly and rigorously through additional support and challenge.
- Improve pupils' personal development, behaviour and welfare by:
 - improving the attendance of pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities
 - ensuring that teachers use agreed behaviour systems consistently to manage any poor behaviour in their lessons
 - taking action to improve the commitment of the minority of pupils whose attitudes to learning hinder their progress.
- Improve the effectiveness of leadership and management by:
 - ensuring that improvement planning and school self-evaluation focus on the impact of actions and priorities to improve the school.

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.

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

Report on the first monitoring inspection on 23 May 2017 and 24 May 2017

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the interim principal; senior leaders; groups of pupils; the joint executive board, including a separate meeting with the chair of this group; the chair of the governing body; and a representative of the trust. They observed teaching and learning and spoke with teachers. They also observed how pupils behaved around the school and talked to them informally.

Context

In March this year the principal left the school and a vice principal was appointed as interim principal. Two middle leaders have been temporarily promoted to the position of assistant vice principal. Three new assistant vice principals have been appointed and will take up their posts in September 2017, two of whom will lead the English and mathematics departments. The majority of the current staff in the English department are leaving at the end of this academic year. There will be eight new members of staff in this department from September. Discussions are currently taking place between the trust and the regional school's commissioner in relation to the future of the school.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

The joint executive board (JEB), appointed by the trust, comprises a group of experienced professionals who possess a range of skills and qualities. They have been the driving force of improvement in the school over the last six months. Minutes of their fortnightly meetings and reports of their visits to the school provide strong evidence of their astute and forensic approach to uncovering and addressing systematic failings across the school.

The trust is represented on the JEB but it lacks the capacity to take the school forward itself. The external review of governance that was carried out in January 2017 revealed some fundamental areas of concern relating to the roles and responsibilities of the local governing body and the trust. The strategic leadership and rigorous monitoring that were lacking from the trust are now being provided by the JEB. At this time, while the JEB is doing this very effectively, the role of the local governing body is unclear.

During the first four months after the school was judged to require special measures, the pace of change was not quick enough. However, in the brief time that the interim principal has been in post, he has made a significant impact. Staff who spoke to inspectors felt that he has brought clarity, transparency and direction

to the leadership of the school. As one teacher said: 'He has given us a sense of purpose.' They described staff morale as being very low at the end of last term but that it is now 'on the up'.

Pupils also commented on the difference that the interim principal has made. They are aware of an improved culture in the school and appreciate their teachers' efforts to help them achieve well. During an informal discussion at break, Year 11 pupils told an inspector how much they appreciate the way that they have been prioritised in recent months.

Senior leaders are now absolutely focused on the progress of pupils and the quality of teaching. Some staff echoed the view of the JEB that, until recently, too many other issues, which they described as 'clutter', have prevented a sharp focus on these key areas. There is a sense that leaders are now concentrating on what really matters.

The school's action plan provides an effective road map for the continuing journey of improvement. It has a clear focus on measuring and evaluating the impact of the actions that leaders are taking. This model is used by other leaders throughout the school.

Pupils in the school who have special educational needs and/or disabilities are very well cared for. However, the strategic leadership of this area is not sharp enough. There is a lack of clarity about who has overall responsibility for monitoring the attendance, behaviour and progress of these pupils. This means that these pupils are not making the best possible progress during their time at Smithills School.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

The leadership of teaching and learning is strong. In recent months, leaders have held staff to account for the quality of learning in their classrooms. Leaders have used external support effectively and teachers say that they value this more outward-looking approach to professional development. Where staff have not responded to this personalised support, leaders have used more formal approaches to tackle underperformance.

Leaders have introduced a consistent way of planning learning across the school, which has raised classroom expectations. Pupils have embraced this and talk enthusiastically about what they see as a new way of learning that has made lessons far more engaging. This system is not yet embedded across the school, but already many staff feel it has made a positive difference to their teaching.

More teachers now have higher expectations of what their pupils can achieve, particularly the most able. For example, it was evident in Year 8 French lessons that pupils are used to being challenged, as they coped well with using the conditional tense to speak about protecting the environment. Also, in English, most teachers

use questioning effectively to probe and develop pupils' knowledge and understanding. In contrast, appropriate challenge and high expectations are not prevalent in the mathematics department.

Leaders are planning for a full complement of permanent teaching staff from September. However, at the time of the inspection, there were 10 supply staff teaching classes throughout the school. This means that some pupils have little chance of benefiting from high-quality teaching across their subjects.

The senior leader responsible for teaching and learning has an accurate understanding of the strengths and weaknesses across the school. However, an effective quality-assurance cycle is not yet in place. For example, leaders do not systematically scrutinise pupils' work to evaluate the progress that they are making over time. Leaders have observed most staff teaching but they do not have an accurate understanding of what is typically happening in classrooms on a day-to-day basis.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Teachers use effective classroom-management strategies to ensure that pupils behave well during lessons. Pupils understand these routines and very little learning is disrupted because of poor behaviour. The small number of pupils who are educated in the school's inclusion unit, 'Pathways', are benefiting from the personalised provision that they receive there.

While pupils who demonstrate challenging behaviour might also have special educational needs, this is by no means always the case. Leaders do not have a clear understanding of this, which gives cause for concern. There is not a clear enough distinction in the way leaders meet the specific needs of these two groups of pupils.

There has been a slight improvement in the overall attendance figure but this still remains below the national average. A similar slight improvement can be seen in the attendance of disadvantaged pupils. The key area of concern at the last inspection was the poor attendance of pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities. There has been a more significant improvement here, but it is still below the national average. Of some concern is that the number of pupils who are persistently absent has risen from last year. Leaders do not know how many disadvantaged pupils or those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities do not attend school regularly because they do not track specific groups of pupils to identify this. Leaders now understand that they must monitor particular groups of pupils in order to target their actions to improve attendance more effectively.

Leaders also do not monitor and analyse the number of fixed-term exclusions by pupil group. Consequently, although they could inform inspectors that the number of fixed-term exclusions has increased this year, they do not know how many

disadvantaged pupils and those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities have been excluded and how often. Leaders say that the rise in exclusions is a result of raising the expectations of pupils' behaviour.

Outcomes for pupils

Since taking up his post, the interim principal has ensured that Year 11 pupils are the number-one priority for all staff. A senior leader is coordinating and monitoring the wide range of actions that are taking place to help these pupils improve their performance in the forthcoming examinations. This cohort of pupils has been most affected by the legacy of poor leadership and teaching in recent years.

Consequently, these recent efforts are very likely to lead to only a very small improvement in Year 11 outcomes this year. This means that there is a strong possibility that the school will not meet the government's current floor standard.

Leaders responded swiftly and positively to the external review of the school's use of the pupil premium. There is a much clearer focus on ensuring that disadvantaged pupils make the best possible progress, and leadership of this area is strong. Leaders are taking a range of actions to improve the progress that these pupils make. Sadly, this sharp focus on the achievement of disadvantaged pupils has come too late to have a significant impact on outcomes for Year 11. However, this cohort of pupils has made better progress throughout the year.

Leaders are using more explicit strategies to ensure that the most able disadvantaged pupils attain high grades on completion of their courses. For example, a group of Year 7 and 8 pupils are enrolled on a programme with Manchester University aimed at raising achievement and aspirations. Pupils will remain on this programme through to Year 11.

It is not possible to say whether pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities are making better progress as leaders do not track this accurately. This means that leaders cannot evaluate whether the support that they are giving these pupils is having a positive impact on their achievement.

All pupils now have challenging targets. Throughout their time in school their progress is tracked against these targets and actions are taken to support pupils who are falling behind. However, it became clear during the inspection that the assessment information that teachers enter into this system is not always accurate.

A scrutiny of pupils' work provided clear evidence of the legacy of underachievement over recent years. For some pupils, poor-quality teaching throughout the year means that they have made very little progress in certain subjects. This work scrutiny also revealed grave concerns about some pupils' literacy skills. Inspectors saw examples of key stage 4 pupils producing work which was littered with very basic literacy errors. Even more worrying was that teachers were ignoring this.

External support

Since the last inspection, leaders have made the most of a range of sources of external support to bring about improvements in the school. This has been particularly the case in the area of teaching and learning. Staff from seven departments have benefited from working with other schools. These partnerships have been brokered through the local authority. The quality of leadership in the school has improved as a result of the support and challenge provided by members of the JEB.