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Mr Paul Holroyd
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Holroyd

Special measures monitoring inspection of The Forest High School

Following my visit with Andrew Lovett, Her Majesty's Inspector, and Duncan Millard, Ofsted Inspector, to your school on 4 and 5 July 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 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 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 previous monitoring inspection in September 2016 identified changes at senior leadership level as a significant factor causing the stalling of improvements at the school. Since that inspection another change of headteacher has taken place. The new headteacher has quickly secured the trust of the staff and, along with new senior leaders, is improving the quality of teaching, learning and assessment. The trust, governors and senior leaders accept that these improvements have come too late for current Year 11 pupils. Consequently, their progress is likely to remain below the government's floor target in 2017.

Having considered all the evidence, I recommend that the school does not seek to appoint newly qualified teachers.

I am copying this letter to the chief executive officer of the South Gloucestershire and Stroud Academy Trust, 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

Paul Williams
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 academy 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 academy 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 academy policies consistently, particularly for marking and behaviour.

Report on the third monitoring inspection on 4 and 5 July 2017

Evidence

Inspectors held meetings with the headteacher, senior leaders and middle leaders. The lead inspector held meetings with the chair of the local governing body and two other governors, the chief executive officer of the South Gloucestershire and Stroud Academy Trust and the leadership consultant engaged by the trust. The lead inspector held a meeting with the headteacher of Dene Magna Academy. Inspectors met with groups of pupils in key stages 3 and 4 formally and informally during the inspection. The lead inspector discussed the school's analysis of parents' views with the headteacher and considered a very small number of responses to Parent View, the Ofsted online survey. The inspection team observed learning jointly with senior staff across a range of age groups and subjects. Inspectors scrutinised samples of pupils' written work and looked at a range of documentation including development plans, analysis of pupils' progress, attendance and safeguarding documents and the school's review of its own performance.

Context

This 11 to 16 school is sponsored by the South Gloucestershire and Stroud Academy Trust. The school is small and remains undersubscribed. The executive headteacher who was leading the school at the time of the previous monitoring inspection left in December 2016. A consultant was employed by the trust to give the school extra leadership capacity during this period of uncertainty. A new, permanent, headteacher was appointed and took up his post in January 2017. Since that time, the school has appointed a new assistant headteacher who is now leading work on assessment and self-evaluation.

A senior leader for English has been appointed to work across the trust. This senior leader has worked within the English department at the school in a coaching role since November 2016, and as the subject leader since March 2017. The school joined the Dene Magna Teaching School Alliance in February 2017.

The chair of the local governing body was appointed in July 2016. Since then, the local governing body has undergone significant change. Several new governors have been appointed. They have brought new skills to the governing body, particularly in the area of literacy teaching.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

The disruption to the senior leadership of the school was the main cause of the loss of momentum noted at the previous monitoring inspection. The executive headteacher subsequently left the school at the end of the autumn term. This had a further unsettling effect on staff and pupils at the school. The trust acted swiftly to appoint a leadership consultant, with substantial experience of secondary headship,

to work at the school during November and December 2016. As a result, the school was stabilised in this period until a new substantive headteacher took up his post in January 2017. The trust recognises that these changes to senior leadership have resulted in much time being lost since the school was placed in special measures.

The new headteacher has acted astutely by keeping the elements of the school which were working and changing boldly those which were not. The school's evaluation of its effectiveness is realistic. The headteacher's vision for improvement is communicated well through development plans which pinpoint the key weaknesses and set out the actions required to remedy them. Consequently, senior leaders, middle leaders and staff are under no illusions about the performance of the school but they are working together to improve it.

The headteacher quickly secured the confidence of the staff. Staff absenteeism has fallen and staff morale has risen. In February 2017, soon after taking up his post, he ensured that the timetable was rewritten and the timing of lessons changed. Teachers are now deployed more efficiently and so a larger proportion of pupils are taught by subject specialists.

The headteacher is raising the expectations of staff. A new approach to target setting, using 'minimum expected grades', has quickly become established across the school. Effective assessment of pupils' progress against these targets and a more rigorous performance management process mean that pupils and staff consistently know what is expected of them. Even though the impact on pupils' progress is unlikely to be seen in this year's published exam results, leaders' actions have made a discernible difference to the quality of education offered by the school.

The leadership of teaching has become more effective and is beginning to have a positive effect. Where teaching is ineffective, it is challenged robustly. Where teaching needs to be developed, coaching and training are brought to bear so that teachers' skills improve. Senior leaders are now outward looking. They have sought collaboration and support from other schools. This growing culture of openness is leading to good practice being shared within the school and through informal links with other schools in the Forest of Dean.

Middle leaders now have a more accurate understanding of the quality of teaching and learning in their subject areas because senior leaders have introduced a cycle of monitoring activities. The ability of middle leaders to improve teaching in their areas of responsibility is still too variable. Consultants, brought into the school by the trust, have been successful in helping middle leaders develop the curriculum in different subjects. Most notably this has happened in English, where a significant amount of work has recently been invested in planning teaching sequences which are relevant to the needs and abilities of pupils. The personal, social and health education curriculum has been significantly improved following practical support from the school's previous improvement partner, Pate's Grammar School.

Senior leaders have had some success in building links with local primary schools. For example, 280 Year 4 and Year 5 pupils recently visited the school to experience activities in science, technology and mathematics. The parent forum group, however, is still not well attended. Senior leaders are aware of this and are actively seeking better links with the community around the school. Recently, the school has been successful in recruiting more local people to the governing body.

Governors understand the need for urgency in improving the outcomes for pupils. The chair of the local governing body has continued to build its capacity to challenge senior leaders effectively. For example, following the previous monitoring visit governors have appointed a senior leader with responsibility for disadvantaged pupils and a new governor to oversee the effectiveness of this area of work. Consequently, there is a better line of accountability for the use of extra funding to support this group. Governors have decided to revise the strategy for helping these pupils for the next academic year.

The chair of the local governing body and the headteacher have developed a good level of trust. This has led to improved communication between senior leaders and governors. Senior leaders supply accurate information about the performance of the school to governors. Governors now have better expertise in evaluating this information. There is still much to be done to improve the quality of teaching, learning and assessment at the school. However, effective mechanisms now exist to ensure that governors challenge and support senior leaders to increase the pace of improvement.

The arrangements for keeping pupils safe are effective. Policies and procedures are fit for purpose and meet requirements. Pupils told inspectors that they feel safe at school. Recent surveys of parents' opinions back this up. The great majority of parents believe their child is safe and well looked after at school. Pupils understand about a wide range of potential risks. The school has introduced an effective personal, social and health education programme. This teaches pupils about risks, including those associated with the internet and the danger of extremist ideologies.

The vigilant safeguarding culture identified at the previous monitoring inspection continues. Governors are aware of their responsibilities because they receive effective training. Staff are trained thoroughly when they join the school and are kept up to date through regular briefings. Where there are concerns about the welfare of a pupil, staff know what action they are expected to take. The school's records show that concerns are followed up quickly and tenaciously. Although funding has been secured to replace a section of roofing, the buildings in general remain in a poor state of repair. Pupils, however, move around the site sensibly and they appreciate the more recently built facilities, such as the modern dining area.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

The quality of teaching, learning and assessment has improved since the previous monitoring inspection because teachers have responded well to the new headteacher's simple motto of 'know your pupils'. Consequently, more teaching is planned on the basis of a good understanding of pupils' abilities and current progress. Teachers' expectations are higher because targets are being set based on the progress of pupils in other schools locally and nationally. Subject leaders have begun to work with colleagues from the Dene Magna Teaching School Alliance to compare and moderate their assessments of pupils' progress in key subjects. This collaborative work is at an early stage of development and so has not yet had an impact in all subject areas.

Pupils are given good opportunities to practise their writing skills in many subject areas. In science, for example, Year 10 pupils are taught how to plan and write extended answers to examination questions. Pupils' books illustrate that they are using a range of writing styles. These exercise pupils' writing skills but, sometimes, longer pieces of writing are not used well by teachers to develop pupils' ideas. Hence, pupils do not exercise their thinking skills.

Disadvantaged pupils are supported well outside of lessons. Staff are very aware of their needs and help them overcome some of the difficulties they face because of their circumstances. Within lessons, teachers focus on supporting pupils as individuals to fill gaps in their knowledge and understanding. As teachers have become more adept at doing this, disadvantaged pupils' progress has risen.

In recent months, the number of temporary teachers used to cover for absent staff has reduced. Pupils say this has significantly helped their learning and progress. Along with changes to the timetable in February 2017, this has ensured that pupils are taught regularly by subject specialists.

Even though there have been marked improvements in teaching, it is still too inconsistent. Better teaching has not yet led to enough improvement in pupils' progress across subjects and within subjects. For example, there is high-quality practice in mathematics, where pupils are challenged with work which is interesting, stimulating and pitched at the right level for individuals. In the same subject though, there are examples where 'through the door' activities, provided for pupils at the start of lessons, are poorly planned. Hence, they do not effectively support the development of pupils' knowledge and understanding.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Pupils are polite, friendly and courteous. They speak to visitors readily and, as noted in the previous monitoring inspection, they are open and honest about the quality of education they experience. During the inspection pupils took part in sports day. They showed pride in their houses as they competed in various events.

This pride was also evident in the work in their books, much of which showed care and attention to detail.

Pupils' behaviour in lessons is good in general. In recent months, senior leaders have introduced a new system for managing behaviour. Pupils report that on the rare occasions where pupils' conduct falls below the standard expected by the school, teachers are now quick to take action. Consequently, disruption of any sort is not common. Pupils follow instructions readily and show respect for their teachers. However, many pupils continue to lack self-assurance. When the work they are given is not sufficiently challenging or interesting, they can switch off. Pupils do not yet have the self-confidence to challenge themselves to work at a higher level.

Behaviour of some pupils around the site was seen to be boisterous in the previous inspection. While there are still a few pupils whose behaviour is sometimes challenging, effective steps are being taken to help them behave appropriately at break and lunchtime. The total number of exclusions is higher this year than last year. However, a large proportion of these exclusions took place in the first half of the academic year. The rate of exclusions in recent months has been much lower than it was previously.

The personal, social and health education programme has developed during this academic year. It is highly valued by pupils and has been successful in deepening their understanding of a wide range of topics. Senior leaders have reorganised the time used for tutorial activities. Pupils say that tutor time is now used more productively, even though there are still variations between different tutor groups.

Outcomes for pupils

Pupils' attainment in GCSE mathematics rose in 2016. This improvement was noted at the previous monitoring inspection and has continued for current Year 11 pupils. The school's assessment information indicates that pupils' progress in mathematics is on track to be at least as good as last year and in many cases better. Boys, in particular, continue to improve. Their attainment in mathematics now matches the girls'. Pupils' progress in GCSE English, however, is weak. Senior leaders recognise this. They have provided intensive extra help for Year 11 pupils, outside of their English lessons, in the run up to the GCSE examinations. Nonetheless, pupils' progress in English is unlikely to exceed that seen in 2016.

Pupils' progress in science, humanities and modern languages has improved since the previous monitoring inspection because of higher expectations in these subjects. Senior leaders introduced a new system of minimum expected grades based on a thorough analysis of previous assessment information. This is raising teachers' expectations of pupils' capabilities. However, pupils' progress in key stage 4 has not been rapid enough to fill the gaps in understanding from the past. Pupils' progress across eight GCSE subjects is likely to remain below average in 2017.

Pupils' progress in key stage 3 is improving but is still inconsistent across subjects and across year groups. For example, pupils in Years 7 and 9 are making better progress than previously; however, pupils in Year 8 have not responded as quickly to raised expectations. Work in pupils' books illustrates that in many subjects, key stage 3 pupils are now rising to the challenge that teachers are presenting them with. Boys are showing signs of improved understanding. For example, in a Year 8 science class, boys were motivated by work about different types of rock, which was pitched at the right level of difficulty. These boys could subsequently explain the reasons why different types of rock come about.

Disadvantaged pupils' progress is rising, and senior leaders estimate that overall progress across a range of subjects for this group is now comparable to other pupils in the school. However, it remains well below the progress of other pupils nationally. The work of the most able pupils, including the most able disadvantaged pupils, shows sophistication. This was typified by a very able Year 10 pupil in history, who eloquently explained the trading strategy employed by our nation during the Elizabethan era.

Information supplied by the school indicates that pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities are responding well to better deployment of teaching assistants. Consequently, they are developing their knowledge and understanding more quickly. However, as with other groups, these pupils are still too reliant on intensive support provided immediately prior to the examinations in Year 11.

Intervention in English is used well for those pupils in Year 7 who need to catch up with basic literacy and numeracy skills. Pupils' confidence in reading and writing still holds some pupils back. However, school-wide strategies are being brought to bear and they are having some effect on pupils' literacy skills. For example, a recent initiative to insist on the use of full sentences has raised pupils' awareness of the need for accuracy and attention to detail in their written work. These initiatives are at an early stage and have come too late for many Year 11 pupils.

External support

The South Gloucestershire and Stroud Academy Trust continues to provide support for the school. In November 2016, the trust employed a leadership consultant, with considerable experience of secondary headship, to strengthen the leadership team at a time of transition. The consultant worked effectively with senior leaders to provide stability prior to the successful appointment of a new headteacher for January 2017.

Since the appointment of the new headteacher, the trust has continued to support and invest in the school. For example, the trust commissioned work from specialist external consultants to provide leadership coaching for staff in the science and special educational needs departments. This coaching built up the skills of the

teachers concerned, making a valuable contribution to the improvements in teaching, learning and assessment seen in the last six months. The appointment of a senior leader for English across the trust, and his subsequent deployment to work in the school, has provided significant support to the English department in this period. Although much further support is necessary in this area, the English curriculum has improved considerably as a result of this work.

At the time of the previous monitoring inspection, Pate's Grammar School was acting as an improvement partner for the school. Since then, some joint work has continued, especially the successful introduction of a new personal, social and health education programme. However, the relationship has not developed further and will cease at the end of this academic year.

Senior leaders began working with the Dene Magna Teaching School Alliance in February 2017. Since then, middle leaders have received valuable support from their counterparts at Dene Magna on assessment in English, mathematics and science. This has contributed to growing confidence in the accuracy of assessment in the core curriculum. Further collaborative work is planned for next academic year.