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Mr Marcus Shepherd
Head of Academy
Merrill Academy
Brackens Lane
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Derbyshire
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Dear Mr Shepherd

Special measures monitoring inspection of Merrill Academy

Following my visit with Julie Sheppard, Ofsted Inspector, to your school on 11 and 12 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 taken since the school's previous monitoring inspection.

The inspection was the second monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures following the inspection that took place in June 2016. The full list of the areas for improvement that were identified during that inspection are 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's improvement plan is fit for purpose.

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

I am copying this letter to the executive board, the regional schools commissioner

and the director of children's services for Derby. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Sally Smith

Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

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

- Urgently ensure that there is sufficient high-quality leadership capacity within the school to bring about the rapid and sustained improvements needed.
- Ensure that all pupils behave well in school by making sure that:
 - a well-understood behaviour policy is in place and that all staff consistently apply it
 - leaders develop a culture in school where all staff work together and make pupils' good behaviour everybody's business.
- Ensure that precise and pre-emptive strategies are put in place so that more pupils attend school regularly.
- Improve outcomes for pupils by ensuring that:
 - the high proportion of pupils who enter school with attainment that is significantly below the national average are effectively supported to develop the literacy and numeracy skills they need to catch up
 - those most able pupils who have fallen behind their peers are challenged to make rapid progress
 - the progress made by pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities is tracked precisely so that the correct support can be put in place to remedy any gaps in learning
 - the achievement gaps that exist between male and female pupils and disadvantaged pupils and others in the school continue to narrow
 - the underperformance of pupils in science is immediately addressed by improving the quality of teaching so that it is consistently good.
- Improve the quality of teaching by making sure that:
 - all teachers use the information about pupils' starting points to plan lessons that provide sufficient support and challenge for different groups of pupils
 - all teachers provide helpful marking and feedback to help pupils understand how to correct their mistakes and improve their work
 - opportunities are planned more often in all subjects to develop pupils' reading, writing and mathematical skills
 - teachers are challenged and supported to tackle effectively the poor behaviour of a minority of pupils so that the learning of others is not disrupted.
- Improve the quality of the 16 to 19 study programmes by making sure that effective leadership is in place to drive the rapid improvement that is required.

Report on the second monitoring inspection on 11 July 2017 to 12 July 2017

Evidence

Inspectors met with the head of academy, members of the senior leadership team, the coordinator for English as an additional language and the chief executive officer from the Northworthy Trust, who was there as a representative of the new sponsor. Inspectors visited a number of lessons across different subjects and age groups, accompanied by senior leaders. During these visits to lessons, inspectors looked at pupils' books and talked to pupils in order to evaluate the quality of their learning. Inspectors met with pupils from all year groups, both formally and informally, including during break- and lunchtime, when they observed pupils' behaviour. The inspection team evaluated the impact of the school's actions since the last inspection on: behaviour, attendance, pupils' outcomes, the quality of teaching and learning, the sixth form and the effectiveness of leadership and management, in line with the areas for improvement identified in the previous inspection report.

Context

Since the last inspection, one teacher of English has left the school.

The regional schools commissioner is currently in the process of re-brokering the sponsorship of the academy. The new sponsor has been confirmed as the Northworthy Trust, but it is not due to take over sponsorship of the school until January 2018.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

The head of academy has successfully maintained the improvements seen at the last monitoring visit in terms of behaviour and attendance. He is very well supported by the senior leadership team, who follow his example of visible and energetic leadership. Together, they are achieving the majority of milestones on their school improvement plan.

Pupils say that senior leaders are everywhere and having a positive impact on raising standards at the school. The head of academy has created stability and confidence at the school, after years of change and uncertainty. He has made all school improvement pupil centred and successfully shared this with everyone. He is passionately committed to further raising aspirations and life chances for all pupils. This has allowed staff and pupils to believe that necessary improvements will happen. Parents are also supporting the positive changes through a parent action group and the wider community is starting to become more involved in supporting the school. The perception of Merrill Academy is changing for the better.

Leaders have not slowed the pace or momentum. They are constantly reviewing and evaluating all that they do, so that their actions have a positive impact for pupils. All new initiatives are shared with staff and pupils, and therefore everyone is clear about expectations and school policies are applied consistently.

The Northworthy Trust has now been confirmed as the new sponsor for the school. It has started to support strategic leadership at the school and provide staff with access to wider training from across the trust schools. It has also helped the school to reintroduce music back into the curriculum through supporting the appointment of a music teacher across the trust schools.

Now that the new higher standards for behaviour and attendance have been firmly established, leaders have turned their focus to improving teaching and learning and ensuring that the curriculum content and pathways are appropriate for all pupils. These will form the focus of the next Ofsted visit.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Leaders have introduced new whole-school teaching and learning expectations. These are built around challenge, questioning, sharing best examples of work with pupils and assessment. Each curriculum area has been assigned one of these whole-school priorities. Teachers have visited good and outstanding schools around the country to see best practice before adapting ideas for Merrill's pupils. These areas will be the focus for staff training, professional development and quality assurance at the school from September 2017.

Leaders ensure that staff who need additional support and coaching continue to receive these and that they are effective in raising standards of teaching and learning across the school. Staff are now willing and open to sharing ideas and engaging in professional dialogue about teaching and learning, so that outcomes for pupils improve. The improvements in behaviour and attendance at the school can be seen in classrooms, where pupils are now keen to answer questions and have a renewed sense of interest and engagement with their learning. Teachers also support pupils to develop their vocabulary by using subject-specific language in lessons. Pupils who spoke with inspectors said that learning has improved across the school.

Leaders agreed with inspectors that presentation in pupils' books now needs to improve to reflect the higher standards expected in lessons. Not all teachers provide suitable challenge for pupils appropriate to their starting points. Pupils need more opportunities to apply their learning and to write at length to consolidate their knowledge and understanding. However, there were some good examples seen in pupils' English books.

There was also very little difference in the quality and quantity of work seen in

disadvantaged pupils' books compared with that of other pupils in the school. This reflects current school information that the difference between the attainment of disadvantaged pupils and non-disadvantaged pupils at the school is diminishing.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

The improvements in behaviour at the school have been maintained since the last visit. Higher standards have been sustained and staff apply the new behaviour system consistently. Pupils say that the school's 'consequences' are effective deterrents and they welcome the new calmness and harmony prevalent at school, which enables them to learn. Leaders have identified that pupils who have low literacy levels still misbehave more than other pupils. They have planned further changes to the curriculum from September 2017 to better support these pupils and help their engagement in learning.

Pupils are highly motivated by the reward system, especially the recent introduction of bronze, silver and gold badges awarded for points achieved and linked to the house system. Pupils were proud to show these to inspectors and explain their significance. All staff make sure that pupils receive rewards equally, including the 'forgotten champions' who always follow school rules and behave well.

Pupils continue to value their mentor groups and the interaction and support which they get both from their tutor and pupils of different ages. The head of academy shares key messages with pupils through assemblies and ensures that they are informed and involved in whole-school decisions. Pupils share their ideas for school improvements through suggestion boxes and their mentor. They feel proud and appreciate it when their ideas are taken up. Leaders have successfully created a community spirit at the school. Pupils talk repeatedly and positively about their school 'family' and how everyone supports each other. Pupils told inspectors that they have a sense of belonging and belief that, 'teachers will help us to fulfil our dreams and ambitions. We now believe we can be anything.'

Leaders have supported pupils to train as interpreters and work with pupils who speak English as an additional language and their families. This enables these pupils to integrate quickly into the school, access the curriculum and feel part of the school community.

The school continues to call home twice daily when a pupil is absent from school. One call is made by the attendance team and a further follow-up call is made by the mentor. All pupils who spoke to inspectors clearly understood the importance of good attendance. Pupils' attendance continues to improve, although it is still below the national average for disadvantaged pupils.

Leaders identified that pupils were absent from school more regularly on a Friday than any other day of the week. Senior leaders made phone calls home to address

this and the head of academy raised this issue in the school newsletter. Attendance on Friday has improved as a result. The head of academy has also recently appointed heads of house to oversee pupils' attendance, although it is too early to see the impact of their work yet.

Outcomes for pupils

As pupils recently sat examinations at key stages 4 and 5, these will be evaluated at the next inspection, along with outcomes at key stage 3.

16 to 19 study programmes

Students praise the support which they receive from the head of sixth form, particularly in terms of finding relevant work experience and apprenticeships both at the school and locally. The head of sixth form carefully monitors students' progress and makes sure that any student who is not meeting their targets gets extra support to catch up, including the most able students. This has meant that the number of students who stay at the school from Year 12 to Year 13 has improved and more students have taken up university places this year.

Students feel valued and listened to. Equally, they enjoy supporting younger pupils to help improve their behaviour and with their learning in lessons. Students develop their confidence through leading and delivering house assemblies.

External support

The Northworthy Trust has started to support leadership at the school and provide access to training. An external consultant continues to provide the head of academy with additional support and advice, which is effective in helping leaders to focus on school improvement.