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Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 4234
www.gov.uk/ofsted



20 December 2017

Marcus Shepherd
Headteacher
Merrill Academy
Brackens Lane
Alvaston
Derby
Derbyshire
DE24 0AN

Dear Mr Shepherd

Special measures monitoring inspection of Merrill Academy

Following my visit to your school on 6–7 December 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 June 2016. 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.

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 board of trustees, the chief executive

officer of Derby College Education Trust, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Derby. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Ian McNeilly
Senior 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 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 third monitoring inspection on 6 December 2017 to 7 December 2017

Evidence

The lead inspector met with the headteacher, the chief executive officer of the incoming sponsor, and senior leaders with responsibility for teaching and learning, behaviour, attendance and pupil outcomes data. He also met with four members of staff who are undertaking a programme to become teaching coaches, as well as three members of the local governing body, two of whom were also representatives of the outgoing academy sponsor, Derby College Education Trust. The lead inspector visited several classrooms to see the learning that was taking place and he also met with four Year 11 pupils. He also evaluated the quality of a wide range of pupils' books from different year groups. The quality of provision in the school's small sixth form was not considered on this visit.

Context

The school will join the Northworthy Trust in January. Since the last monitoring inspection which took place in July, five teachers have left the school and five have joined the school's staff.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

The school's headteacher continues to lead by example. He is relentless in his drive to make Merrill Academy the best school it can be. A collective team spirit has been forged as staff work together to improve the life chances of the children in their care. The leadership of the school goes to great lengths to share pupils' successes both within and without the school; this is appreciated by all, including parents.

The leader with responsibility for teaching and learning has an accurate view of the quality of provision and is working effectively to improve this area.

The school improvement plan requires revision and updating in order to make it more effective, given the changing circumstances of the school. When a review takes place, there should be more precision in identifying the specific individuals who are responsible for evaluating the effect of actions. The curriculum has not yet been reviewed in detail in order to make it most appropriate for individual pupils' needs.

The re-brokering of this school has been a protracted process which is, fortunately for all concerned, finally set to complete next month. The delays and uncertainty have been an unwelcome distraction for the school's senior leadership team.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

A clear direction has been set for improving the quality of teaching across the school. Teachers are better able to articulate the aims and objectives of lessons to pupils. This leads to clearer understanding and a better basis for learning to take place.

Pupils' books are generally of a higher standard than seen previously and they show that more progress is being made than that reflected by the poor key stage 4 outcomes of 2017. A greater degree of challenge is evident, as is an increased pride from pupils in the work they do. Peer assessment is used increasingly and pupils usually welcome the opportunity to help improve each other's work. Subject-specific and higher-level vocabulary is beginning to feature more prominently in learning.

The teaching and learning coach is beginning to have a positive effect on the practice of the teachers with whom she is working. These teachers are more reflective on their own practice and enthusiastically articulate how the process is helping them. The intention is that they, in turn, become coaches themselves to help their colleagues as a main part of making the necessary improvements to teaching across the school. Teaching and learning conversations and professional development is becoming more common as the need to focus solely on behaviour is reducing.

A key area for improvement concerns assessment; there is only an emerging system of assessment at key stage 3. This means that teachers, pupils and leaders do not have a full understanding of how much progress has been made. Some teachers do not follow the school's policy on feedback, particularly in terms of acknowledging work or offering timely advice. Although there is a greater degree of challenge in tasks evident than on previous visits, this needs to increase further and particularly so throughout the school for the most able pupils – these pupils are still clearly underachieving.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

As previously reported, pupils' behaviour is much better than it was at the time of the last full inspection. There is still some way to go before it could be called good overall. Regardless, the hard work of leaders, staff and pupils means that there are far fewer sanctions given both in and out of classrooms. The pupils really appreciate the rewards system and there is healthy competition to achieve in this regard.

All staff are aware that behaviour requires a constant focus and the headteacher leads from the front in this regard. During breaktimes and lunchtimes, he relentlessly and politely cajoles pupils into conforming to the school's uniform policy. Pupils appreciate his friendly and respectful manner when doing so. He has even learned some Romani phrases in order to help build positive relationships with pupils who speak this as their first language; they delight in his successful attempts

to communicate in their language.

Pupils interviewed said that behaviour continues to improve, though they acknowledged that litter can still be an issue. The headteacher rarely misses picking up any litter when walking the corridors, such is his pride in the school environment. There is a significant staff presence during breaktimes and lunchtimes as colleagues work together to maintain and improve standards. Pupils are much more punctual to lessons than in the past.

However, leaders are aware that there is still work to do to ensure that behaviour in the school could be judged as good overall. A minority of pupils still display disengagement with their learning and/or fail to comply with the school's policy on uniform and littering. Leaders in charge of behaviour and attendance, supported by other colleagues, are working hard to ensure that a focus remains on these areas, regardless of the improvements already seen.

Maintaining good standards of behaviour in the school is not helped when pupils who exhibit challenging behaviour arrive at Merrill Academy from other local schools. These arrive in significant numbers and often without the requisite information to help ensure those pupils are properly looked after from the start. The local governing body and a representative of the incoming sponsor has raised this as an issue with Derby City Council.

Outcomes for pupils

The outcomes for the pupils who left Merrill Academy at the end of Year 11 in 2017 were poor and only just above the minimum expectations set by the government. They were particularly weak in English and were very poor indeed for the school's small number of most-able pupils. However, those pupils taking vocational subjects performed better, including in health and social care, and childcare. Pupils studying physical education performed relatively well. The progress being made by pupils currently in the school, as evidenced by work in books, is better than the poor historical outcomes. Predictions for the current Year 11 pupils reflect improvement in most subject areas. However, school leaders accept that this needs to be further moderated to ensure a greater degree of accuracy.

External support

The incoming sponsor has provided a teaching and learning coach whose supportive approach is warmly welcomed by the members of staff with whom she works. This is helping to improve teaching. The chief executive officer of the new sponsor has provided helpful, personal support to the headteacher.