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Mr James Pope
Marlwood School
Vattingstone Lane
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Dear Mr Pope

Special measures monitoring inspection of Marlwood School

Following my visit with Mary Massey, Ofsted Inspector, to your school on 24–25 January 2018, 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 May 2017.

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 improvement plans are fit for purpose.

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

I am copying this letter to the chair of the board of trustees and the chief executive officer, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children’s services for South Gloucestershire. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Andrew Lovett
Her Majesty’s Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection that took place in May 2017.

- Improve leadership and management at all levels by:
 - urgently improving governance, so that school leaders are held to account for pupils' progress and for the spending of targeted funding, including for pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities, pupil premium and Year 7 catch up funding
 - improving senior and middle leaders' skills by providing them with training to carry out their roles effectively
 - ensuring that middle leaders are held to account for the progress of pupils in the areas they lead
 - improving the rigour of performance management of staff
 - developing the curriculum so that it meets the needs of all pupils
 - improving communication with parents
 - developing a culture of sharing good practice that exists within the school and implementing the systems required to achieve this.
- Improve teaching, and raise pupils' achievement by:
 - taking urgent action to raise teachers' expectations of what pupils are capable of
 - ensuring that teachers provide learning which meets the needs of pupils, based on accurate and appropriate assessment of their prior learning
 - ensuring that the needs of different groups of pupils, including disadvantaged pupils, are met
 - providing pupils with activities that deepen their knowledge, skills and understanding, particularly for the most able.
- Improve the personal development, behaviour and welfare of pupils by:
 - improving the attendance of pupils, particularly disadvantaged pupils and pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities, to at least the national average.

External reviews of governance and the school's use of the pupil premium should be undertaken in order to assess how these aspects of leadership and management might be improved.

Report on the first monitoring inspection on 24–25 January 2018

Evidence

During this inspection, inspectors visited lessons and scrutinised pupils' books to monitor learning together with senior leaders. They examined documents and met with the headteacher, the chief executive officer (CEO) of the trust, members of the interim executive committee (IEC), senior and middle leaders, a group of staff and groups of pupils. They also took account of Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View.

Context

Following the last inspection, trust leaders replaced the local governing body with an IEC. The IEC began operation in September 2017. It reports to the trust board. During this initial phase, it is chaired by the trust's CEO.

The senior leadership team has changed substantially since the inspection. Several leaders have left the school and the trust has seconded an assistant headteacher from another school within the trust. There has also been a significant turnover of staff, including middle leaders. This turbulence has meant that some classes are currently being taught by temporary staff.

Sixth-form provision within the trust has been reorganised and in the future all sixth-form teaching will take place at another school within the trust.

The school has experienced a significant fall in the number of pupils on roll over the last few years. Consequently, it is revising its staffing structure.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

The headteacher has an accurate understanding of the school's key weaknesses. He has worked with the trust leaders to draw up plans that focus appropriately on the central issues. The plans are comprehensive and are a useful management tool to steer the work of leaders. The headteacher recognised the need to address issues of underperformance of staff immediately and he is tackling these robustly. He has been transparent with his team of teachers about his ambitions for the school and his expectations of them. He has balanced increased expectation with appropriate support. As a result of his approach, staff are united and motivated in their desire to improve the school's outcomes for its pupils.

The trust's CEO and board acted quickly after the inspection to strengthen governance. It replaced the local governing body with the IEC. The trust has ensured that the committee is composed of members who have the necessary skills and experience to hold school leaders to account. There is an appropriate focus on pupils' outcomes and on the quality of teaching, learning and assessment. The IEC

is monitoring the school's forecasts for the current year appropriately. It has also commissioned a report into the quality of teaching. While the committee is still in its early days, there are signs that school leaders are benefiting from this increased level of challenge.

The headteacher and his senior team have made their expectations of their subject leaders much more explicit. There is now a strong framework of accountability in place. Subject leaders report that they are clear what is expected of them. They meet with their senior colleagues weekly to discuss the quality of provision in their subject areas. They are relishing the increased expectation on them. Senior leaders have put significant training in place to develop the skills of subject leaders. They have also ensured that they are able to access networks of their colleagues across the trust. This combination of raised expectation and support has improved the ability of these staff to carry out their roles effectively. School leaders know that the next step is to focus on ensuring that all subject leaders are as effective as the best in raising the quality of teaching across their areas of responsibility.

Senior leaders have not yet achieved the same clarity of expectation for pastoral middle leaders. As a result, there is too much inconsistency between the practice of these leaders. This is now beginning to improve but it still lags behind the development of the role of subject leaders. Senior leaders have plans in place but they are yet to have the impact required.

Leaders have revised previously ineffective administrative systems throughout the school. Pupils' assessment data are now presented in a format that allows leaders to focus on areas of underachievement. Calendars of meetings and training have been simplified. The cumulative effect of these changes has been to allow staff to concentrate on improving the quality of their teaching with fewer distractions.

Leaders have put a comprehensive programme of training in place for teachers. Teachers attend weekly sessions that are designed to address the weaknesses highlighted in the inspection report. These opportunities are very popular with staff. Many teachers can point to improvements in their teaching as a direct result of this training.

Leaders have implemented the changes to the curriculum that were planned before the inspection in 2017. The key stage 3 curriculum does now give teachers opportunities to meet the needs of pupils of all abilities. However, the curriculum is only a framework. Leaders are aware that improvements in teaching and learning are essential in order to ensure that pupils' progress is maximised.

At the time of the inspection, a significant proportion of parents were critical of the school, particularly of its arrangements for parents' evenings. The headteacher has responded to the complaints and revised the evenings. Parents are now significantly more positive about all aspects of the school's work, including the school's communication with them.

Pupils' absence has not been addressed with sufficient vigour by school leaders. Attendance, particularly of vulnerable groups of pupils, has been poor for some time and it shows no signs of significant improvement. The school's plans to address this are not well developed. This area of school life must improve if the school's recovery is to continue.

The leadership of the pupil premium has been weak. It is now improving. A recently appointed senior leader has conducted an analysis of the needs of Year 11 disadvantaged pupils and is putting a plan in place to address these needs. An external review of pupil premium funding is imminent. This will inform leaders' plans for next year. A more robust plan for 2018/19 must be a priority for school and trust leaders.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

The quality of teaching, learning and assessment is not of a consistently good standard. This prevents pupils from making all the progress they are capable of. However, there are signs of improvement. The level of expectation of what pupils can achieve is now higher in a good proportion of classes. Where this is the case, pupils are responding well.

The quality of teaching in English has improved significantly. Pupils are benefiting from teaching that stretches and challenges them. They are keen to engage with teachers in a dialogue about how to improve their work. They also enjoy the sense of achievement they get from producing higher-quality work. There are improvements in other subjects too. In mathematics and science, there are examples of raised levels of challenge and good pupil progress. However, these examples are far from universal. In mathematics, for example, pupils are not sufficiently exposed to activities that make them think deeply about reasoning or solving problems.

Teaching is most effective where teachers have a clear understanding of what pupils know, understand and can do. They are then able to map out the next steps in learning and share them with pupils. When this happens, for example in English and sometimes in mathematics and science, pupils make strong progress. However, too often the quality of assessment is less precise and so pupils do not make the progress they otherwise would.

Teachers are raising their expectations of the most able pupils. However, that improvement is not consistent, nor is it embedded. The most able Year 7 pupils are enthused by how their writing in English has developed since they arrived in September but complain that in some other subjects teachers take too long revising topics they have done in primary school before moving on to harder work. Some pupils' books also show inconsistent challenge over time. For example, they may be asked to consider a profound question in history or geography but then be asked to complete a mundane colouring-in task.

Lower prior-attaining pupils are not consistently set work that matches their needs. This is more often the case in classes where there are relatively few lower-attaining pupils. This results in pupils being unable to finish tasks and so unable to make good progress. There are some examples of good teaching that meets the needs of these pupils, but they are too infrequent.

The support in classes for disadvantaged pupils is not well developed. Teachers can identify these pupils but there is little evidence of any strategy to improve these pupils' learning and achievement. The newly appointed senior leader has assessed the situation accurately and is initially focusing on ensuring that Year 11 pupils achieve their potential in their GCSEs.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Attendance remains poor and it has not improved since the inspection in 2017. The persistent absence of some pupils, particularly vulnerable pupils, is far too high. The progress that disadvantaged pupils and those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities make is hampered by their poor attendance.

Pupils' attitudes to their work and the pride they show in their work is directly related to the quality of teaching they receive. Where expectations are high and they are stretched, their books are well kept and they are keen to respond to teachers' comments. Their response is less positive when teaching does not enthuse them.

Outcomes for pupils

In the 2017 GCSE examinations, pupils made less progress than those in other schools. The most able made particularly poor progress. Progress in English was below expectation and in mathematics broadly in line with national averages.

Pupils currently in the school are starting to show better progress. Leaders and teachers have accepted the need to raise the level of challenge for the most able and there is evidence in pupils' books that they are beginning to be successful.

There has been a significant improvement in the quality of work produced in English. In other subjects, some groups of pupils are also reaching good standards. For example, in mathematics, the most able Year 11 pupils are working well towards the highest grades. However, in other groups, standards remain low. Leaders and teachers are successfully starting to address a legacy of poor progress but there is much more to be done to tackle the inconsistent level of expectation and challenge pupils currently face.

The quality of pupils' spelling and grammar remains weak. Pupils' mistakes are not currently routinely corrected across all subjects. As a result, pupils tend to repeat their errors.

External support

The school is sponsored by the Castle School Educational Trust (CSET). CSET has provided good strategic leadership and supported school leaders effectively since the inspection. It acted swiftly to strengthen governance. It supported the headteacher in restructuring the leadership team. It recognised the need to increase leadership capacity and seconded a senior leader into the school. This strategic action has been a key factor in the school's effective response to the special measures judgement.

The trust has also acted to support the headteacher in improving the effectiveness of middle leaders. Its network of subject leaders has worked alongside the school's subject leaders and helped to ensure that teachers' assessments of standards are accurate.

While the majority of support for the school has come from the trust, leaders have also sought external help. School and trust leaders have worked together to ensure that the school makes good use of other local networks to give teachers training opportunities. For example, the training offered by a local teaching school alliance has proved useful in ensuring that teachers look outward and can gauge their teaching and the standards pupils reach against those of others across the region.