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Mr Michael Sidebottom
Principal
Smithills School
Smithills Dean Road
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Lancashire
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Dear Mr Sidebottom

Special measures monitoring inspection of Smithills School

Following my visit with Emma Gregory, Her Majesty's Inspector, and Deborah Bailey, Ofsted Inspector, to your school on 6–7 March 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 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 November 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 joint executive board, 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 third monitoring inspection on 6–7 March 2018

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the principal, senior leaders, groups of pupils, a group of teachers, the leader of the school's inclusion unit and an external reviewer of this facility. The lead inspector also met with the chair of the joint executive board (JEB) who is also the new chief executive officer of the trust, the chair of the trust and the chair of the local governing body. Inspectors observed teaching and learning and looked at pupils' written work over time. They also talked informally to pupils and observed how they behaved around school.

Context

The interim principal was appointed as the substantive principal in December 2017. The trust has a new chief executive officer who is also the chair of JEB. In January, a non-teaching member of staff took on the responsibility of leading the school's inclusion unit, Pathways.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

Senior leaders are continuing to drive improvements at the required rate. The appointment of the interim principal to the substantive post has given a clear message about the long-term vision for this school. Staff and pupils believe that he has been the driving force behind the positive changes in the school over the last year. Ably supported by a strong senior leadership team, the principal is working tirelessly to make Smithills School a place where all pupils benefit from a good-quality education.

Members of the JEB are to be commended for the way that they have developed the capacity of senior leaders. They continue to provide the right balance between support and challenge to leaders across the school. Their very clear strategic vision has steered the school successfully through the challenges of the last 15 months. The effective way that the trust and the JEB have worked together has contributed significantly to the pace of improvement in the school.

Members of the JEB are quite rightly planning for progression in terms of future governance. Work has already started to create a local governing body standards committee. Care has been taken to ensure that members of this committee have the relevant skills and expertise to provide ongoing challenge to leaders in relation to pupils' progress.

An assistant vice-principal has brought much-needed highly effective leadership to mathematics. On taking up his post in September, he swiftly identified the areas

that required significant improvement in the department. He has wasted no time in taking actions to tackle these and the department is in a better position now than it was six months ago. He has achieved a considerable amount in a short time. However, issues relating to the quality of teaching and leadership within the department are taking longer to turn around. He is therefore accurate in his evaluation that there is still a distance to travel.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Thorough and systematic quality assurance procedures are now embedded. It is clear that senior leaders know what the quality of teaching is like in classrooms across the school. They state that approximately two thirds of teaching is typically good or better. Inspection evidence, such as pupils' workbooks and discussions with pupils, indicates that this assessment is accurate. While this is an improvement on the situation at the previous monitoring inspection in November 2017, it means that a significant proportion of pupils are still not benefiting from routinely good teaching.

Despite the recent improvements in mathematics, there is still too much variation in the quality of teaching in this subject. Pupils are more likely to experience good teaching in key stage 4, particularly in Year 11. The experience for pupils in key stage 3 is much less likely to be positive. It is therefore not surprising that most of the key stage 3 pupils who spoke to an inspector reported that mathematics was their least favourite subject. Teachers do not challenge younger pupils enough. The work is often too easy and there are limited opportunities to develop problem-solving skills.

Many teachers do have high expectations of what their pupils can achieve. Pupils relish this and respond positively, pushing themselves to reach high standards. An example of this was seen in a Year 10 English lesson where the teacher had really developed pupils' contextual understanding of 'Macbeth'. Despite their low prior attainment, in response to the teacher asking probing questions, pupils were able to articulate high-level thinking on how power shifts between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth at different stages of the play.

Staff continue to speak positively about the model for planning learning. This is particularly the case now that senior leaders have agreed that teachers can use the structure more flexibly to facilitate breadth and depth of learning.

Senior leaders are adept at identifying individual and departmental needs. They then address these through professional development and personalised support. Staff are positive about the way that training is delivered. They welcome the opportunity to attend a range of sessions which help them to improve their classroom practice.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Pupils continue to demonstrate positive attitudes to learning. On the rare occasions when this is not the case, it is related to the quality of teaching. The majority of pupils conduct themselves well around school. However, inspectors did note that some pupils are rather boisterous and loud around the site. During unsupervised time, some pupils also use inappropriate language to each other.

Senior leaders use attendance and exclusion data very effectively to identify any issues. Overall attendance and fixed-term exclusion figures give no cause for concern because they are broadly in line with national averages. While rightly proud of this, leaders are acutely aware that behind the headline figures concerns remain about specific groups of pupils.

The attendance of disadvantaged pupils remains lower than the national average and that of others in school. Leaders have been meticulous in how they have identified specific groups within the larger disadvantaged cohort. This has enabled them to take a range of specific and focused actions, for example to improve the attendance of pupils from a particular minority ethnic group. A disappointing response so far from families has not dampened leaders' determination to find ways to encourage this group of pupils to attend school regularly.

Pupils who have special educational needs (SEN) and/or disabilities, and those who are disadvantaged, still make up a higher proportion of pupils who receive fixed-term exclusions. However, a closer look at the figures shows that the picture has improved since January. This relates to the improvements that have been made to the school's inclusion unit, Pathways.

Senior leaders responded swiftly and decisively to the concerns raised at the last monitoring inspection about Pathways. They immediately commissioned an external review from a local multi-academy trust that specialises in education for pupils who have social, emotional and mental health needs. Leaders have used the recommendations of the report to bring about tangible improvements to this facility in a short time. Ongoing support to help bring about sustained improvement is being provided by this multi-academy trust.

The Pathways accommodation is now fit for purpose and provides an appropriate environment in which to support pupils and engage them in their learning. Senior leaders acknowledge that there are still a couple of small actions that would improve the environment even further. The most significant improvement is that the unit is now led effectively. The new leader has a clear vision for Pathways and there is no doubt that he is totally committed to providing appropriate support to meet the emotional and behavioural needs of the pupils.

Pupils in Pathways speak positively of the difference that the new leader has made. Parents and carers are also very appreciative of the support that he gives to them

and their children. This is clearly making a difference to pupils' behaviour. In the last three months, there has been a significant reduction in the number of behaviour points and fixed-term exclusions that these pupils have received.

Senior leaders understand the importance of building on these early improvements to ensure that pupils in Pathways can really make a success of their education. The principal accepts that the strategic senior leadership of this facility is still not good enough. In addition, more work is required to ensure that pupils have an appropriate personalised curriculum which meets their needs and enables them to achieve.

Outcomes for pupils

Senior leaders continue to use pupils' performance information very effectively to drive further improvements. The very strong strategic leadership of this area means that this information is shared with subject leaders and class teachers in a clear and useful way. Staff use the information to take focused action to improve pupils' progress.

The most recent assessment information shows that pupils in the current Year 11, including those who are disadvantaged, are making much better progress than their peers in 2017. Senior leaders acknowledge that while their actions have enabled disadvantaged pupils to make better progress, they have not had as much success in improving the attainment of this group of pupils.

Inspectors saw evidence of this improved progress in many pupils' books in Year 11. This reflects leaders' view that Year 11 pupils are the top priority for all staff. A scrutiny of the work of pupils in other year groups revealed the effects of the inconsistencies that still exist in the quality of teaching both within and between departments. Some teachers still do not have high enough expectations of what their pupils can achieve, particularly in key stage 3. Leaders acknowledge that there is still more to be done to embed the literacy marking policy across the school.

External support

The school continues to benefit from the specialist expertise of members of the JEB. For example, members conduct reviews and 'health checks' on such areas as mathematics and provision for the most able. The external review of Pathways provided a clear direction for leaders' actions. The school is continuing to work with this local multi-academy trust to maintain the momentum of improvements in Pathways. There are also plans for school staff to participate in professional development with this trust.