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Mr Heath Mason
Interim headteacher
Skilts School
Gorcott Hill
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Worcestershire
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Dear Mr Mason

Special measures monitoring inspection of Skilts School

Following my visit to your school on 9–10 May 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 December 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 local authority's statement of action is fit for purpose.

The school's action plan is fit for purpose.

The school may not appoint newly qualified teachers before the next monitoring inspection.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the governing body, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Birmingham. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Deb Jenkins

Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

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

- As a matter of urgency, improve pupils' behaviour and their safety by:
 - minimising the use of physical intervention
 - carefully monitoring the use and appropriateness of physical intervention
 - tracking behaviour incidents with more rigour, analysing the tracking information to discern any patterns and trends and responding accordingly
 - putting in place interventions as necessary to help pupils manage and improve their behaviour
 - providing staff with training so they properly understand and respond appropriately to pupils' challenging behaviour
 - supporting teachers to devise effective strategies for the management of pupils with particularly challenging behaviour.
- Improve the quality of leadership and management by ensuring that:
 - safeguarding procedures are clearly understood and adhered to by all staff, especially in relation to making a written record of any concerns
 - governors have an in-depth understanding of the school's strengths and areas for development and contribute fully to the school's strategic direction
 - all pupils have their full entitlement to a broad and balanced curriculum which meets their individual needs
 - the curriculum and teaching are carefully adapted for those pupils who are not thriving and progressing with the current offer
 - leaders carefully monitor and evaluate the use of additional funding for disadvantaged pupils so that it is used well to help them make good progress
 - leadership is more effectively distributed so that middle leaders have a wider impact on pupils' achievement across the school.
- Ensure that teaching is at least consistently good and leads to good outcomes by:
 - raising teachers' expectations of what pupils can achieve
 - identifying gaps in pupils' basic literacy and numeracy skills, and addressing these rapidly
 - providing work which is more challenging and makes pupils think harder, especially for the most able pupils
 - develop pupils' reading skills across the curriculum so they are given more frequent opportunities to practise and improve their reading.

An external review of governance should be undertaken in order to assess how this aspect of leadership may be improved.

Report on the first monitoring inspection on 9 May 2018 to 10 May 2018

Evidence

The inspector met with the interim headteacher and senior leaders, a group of staff and two members of the governing body, including the chair of governors. She also met with the chief executive officer (CEO) from Forward Education Trust, a national leader of governance who carried out the external review of governance and an external consultant who supports the school. She spoke to the local authority improvement adviser. The inspector visited classrooms during the inspection, usually accompanied by senior leaders, and observed pupils moving around the school at breaktimes and lunchtimes. The inspector spoke to pupils during the course of the inspection and looked at work in books. She scrutinised a range of documents, including safeguarding records, behaviour management records, physical intervention records, progress information and information about attendance and exclusions.

Context

Since the last inspection, the previous acting headteacher has left the school, and a new interim headteacher has been appointed. Approximately one third of staff is employed on a temporary basis through supply agencies. Two posts for middle leaders have been created on a temporary basis and a pastoral team has been established. A higher-level teaching assistant is providing targeted support to help pupils catch up with their learning. The local authority's commissioned school improvement service, the Birmingham Education Partnership, has facilitated support for the school from the CEO of Forward Education Trust and the Brays Teaching School and Specialist Alliance. The CEO of Forward Education Trust, the school's proposed academy sponsor (subject to headteacher board approval) is providing direct support for the school and has facilitated weekly support from a care and control consultant. Following a review of governance, a consultation is taking place to replace the governing body with an interim executive board. The school is currently experiencing financial difficulties.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

Despite the instability in staffing, there is a palpable shared drive and commitment from staff in wanting to improve the school. The interim headteacher, well supported by the acting deputy headteacher, has acted swiftly to tackle the areas for improvement identified at the last inspection. The commitment and drive of the interim headteacher is remarkable. With effective support from the CEO of the trust and the teaching school specialist alliance, actions taken to improve safeguarding and behaviour have ensured that the school is improving at pace.

The recent review of governance rightly identified that the current governing body is not fit for purpose. Governors have not complied with some of their statutory

duties, including headteacher appraisal, and have not monitored the school budget well enough. They have been too accepting of information that they have been given from previous leaders and have not challenged decisions and actions of leaders. The local authority and CEO of the trust have ensured that, subject to approval, an interim executive board is ready to take on responsibility for the governance of the school.

The local authority has only recently begun to act in a timely way to address some of the wider leadership and financial issues, which are out of school leaders' control and are constraining the school budget further. The local authority's special educational needs (SEN) assessment review team has now acknowledged that additional funding is needed to support some pupils who have complex difficulties. Leaders and governors anticipate that a timely resolution to the shortfall in funding will mitigate some of the school's budgetary pressures and ensure that pupils receive the support they need.

Following the last inspection, the interim headteacher has worked with the school's external support to introduce a comprehensive package of safeguarding and behaviour management training for all staff. The school's behaviour policy has been reviewed to ensure that it is fit for purpose. The acting deputy headteacher is now trained as a designated safeguarding leader. Staff are clear about their safeguarding responsibilities, including the procedures for reporting concerns. Records show that any concerns are followed up in a timely way.

The interim headteacher has been instrumental in making significant changes to the school's environment and the ways in which it is used to support pupils' learning and behaviour. Each classroom has been reconfigured to provide a reflection space for pupils to use when they begin to struggle to manage their behaviour. The use of this alternative space reduces the need for pupils to leave the classroom. These spaces are helping pupils to regulate their own behaviour more effectively before it reaches a crisis point. A sensory room and soft play area now provide additional withdrawal space for pupils to use to help them manage their anxiety levels. Classrooms now have a 'sensory box' with a range of equipment that pupils can use to help them regulate their own behaviour, such as 'fiddle' toys and weighted blankets.

Staff are receiving ongoing training in behaviour management, which focuses on a graduated approach to the de-escalation of challenging behaviour, with the use of physical interventions seen as a last resort. The introduction of risk reduction plans (RRPs) for pupils who have the most complex needs have given staff a greater understanding of pupils' behaviour. Staff have been supported to identify pupils' triggers for exhibiting certain behaviours and appropriate strategies they can use to de-escalate inappropriate behaviour.

The newly designed behaviour and reward system has had a positive impact on pupils' behaviour. The 'red, amber, green and gold' system is well understood by

staff and pupils and is implemented consistently. The system has a strong emphasis on recognising and rewarding positive behaviour, but does not shy away from reinforcing basic expectations of behaviour, or helping pupils to understand the consequences of their behaviour.

Leaders have introduced a detailed tracking system for behaviour, which links to the reward system. Staff record pupils' behaviour outcomes at the end of every lesson, which enables leaders to reflect, on a daily basis, on patterns of behaviour. The weekly 'heat map' provides a useful overview of behaviours over time. It shows that not only are behaviour incidents reducing but also that the majority of the pupils are behaving well for the majority of the school week.

Leaders have reflected on the skills that already exist within the school, and have made changes to staffing to maximise the individual strengths of staff. Two skilled teachers have now assumed a middle leadership role. However, there is currently no capacity within the school to provide them with any release time, so their impact is not as strong as it could be. The introduction of a pastoral team has been a fundamental change to the school's provision. The team supports staff to manage pupils' behaviours both within and beyond the classroom. They meet frequently to review pupils' RRP's to ensure that they are fit for purpose. As a result of the wide-ranging changes that have taken place, teachers are now equipped with a 'toolkit' of strategies to help them manage pupils' behaviours more effectively.

Improved behaviour management in the school has resulted in a reduction in the number of physical interventions taking place. Furthermore, fewer pupils are now exhibiting behaviours which require staff to physically intervene to keep them safe. Records show that staff are thinking carefully about the need to physically intervene with a pupil, and only use this strategy as a last resort. Records are detailed, and pupils are given the opportunity to reflect on the incident which has required additional support. There are still too many physical interventions being carried out, but leaders acknowledge this and are confident that the changes they have made will continue the downward trend of interventions.

Leaders have made swift adaptations to the curriculum to make it more engaging and suited to pupils' needs. They are working on a longer-term curriculum review but have already made some positive changes. These include pupils' increased opportunities to access forest school and physical education activities, weekly food technology sessions and individual and group music therapy. Staff are using their creative skills to devise activities that engage and inspire the pupils, and better use is being made of the school's outdoor environment. Leaders recognise the opportunities and the challenges that the 72-acre site brings. In the interim, leaders have taken additional steps to safeguard pupils in the outdoor environment. The CEO of the trust is liaising closely with the local authority's health and safety team to identify actions to reduce these risks further.

The interim headteacher has introduced weekly school newsletters to re-engage

parents and carers and keep them better informed. Parents have been given opportunities to visit classrooms, and transport has been provided for those parents who find it difficult to travel to the school. Newsletters are informative and provide examples of the activities that classes enjoy. Leaders report a recent increase in parents attending school events.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Leaders have an accurate picture of the quality of teaching and learning in the school. They have refined their assessment system so that they can track pupils' progress closely and identify any gaps in learning. Leaders use assessment information to check on the quality of teachers' lesson planning to make sure that activities are well matched to pupils' abilities. Leaders and teachers meet every term to discuss pupils' progress and identify where additional support is needed. Assessment information shows that instability in class staffing has a negative impact on the progress that pupils make in some classes.

The inspector saw pupils engaged in learning activities which were interesting and sustained pupils' attention. In one class, pupils were using a variety of different chocolates to explore their senses, and writing similes and using alliteration to enhance their poetry writing. Pupils used exciting words, such as 'scrumptious', and created similes to describe chocolate including 'as smooth as a wrecking ball' and 'as dark as dirt'. In another class, pupils were using the stimulus of a story they had read together to create their own story opening. Pupils were encouraged to write independently and use their phonic knowledge to spell new words. In another lesson, pupils followed an instructional text to create a mini-garden and talked confidently about how they had made it and the materials they had used.

Pupils were confident to read their work aloud to the inspector or to read extracts from books and talk about what they had read. Leaders have used additional funding to improve reading resources in school. Reading corners in every classroom are promoting a love of books. There remains a variation in pupils' phonic skills, and, where these are weaker, pupils' progress in reading slows. Leaders recognise that not all staff have the necessary skills to teach phonics effectively and plan to introduce whole-school training in a systematic approach to phonics.

During the inspection, pupils generally behaved well in lessons, especially when they were engaged in their learning and well supported by staff. On occasions, activities were stopped so that the teacher could ask the whole group questions. This had a negative impact on the pace of learning as some pupils became disengaged with the activity.

Teaching assistants provide effective support in lessons, helping pupils with their learning and asking effective open-ended questions to make pupils think. Activities are usually well matched to pupils' abilities, but work in books and some class teaching shows that the most able pupils are not yet being challenged enough in

their learning.

The acting deputy headteacher works closely with the higher-level teaching assistant (HLTA) to identify those pupils who are not yet making expected progress in their learning. Pupils are supported by the HLTA on an individual basis to help them catch up with their peers. These intervention sessions have only recently begun, but work in pupils' books shows that it is having a positive impact on pupils' progress. Leaders recognise that they do not yet have enough capacity to support pupils in accelerating their progress and are currently focusing on improving the proportion of pupils making expected progress.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Leaders have introduced 'The Skilts Way', a vision for good practice, which focuses on pupils' safety, resilience and respect for the environment. This approach now threads through all school activities. Staff fully support the recent changes that have been introduced by leaders, as they recognise that this vulnerable group of pupils deserves the very best support. Staff told the inspector that their confidence and morale have improved because of the positive changes that have taken place in the school.

The school's behaviour system allows pupils to reflect on their behaviour and engagement in learning at the end of every lesson. Pupils are developing their resilience and are more accepting of when their behaviour has not reached the gold standard. Staff emphasise the importance of a fresh start and help pupils to recognise when they have made good choices to put right what has previously gone wrong. Staff spoke highly of the professional development opportunities they have received. They said that recent training in attachment theory has helped them better understand the impact of pupils' early experiences on behaviour.

At the last inspection, pupils were leaving classrooms and not being supervised by staff well enough, or staff were intervening too quickly. During this inspection, very few pupils were out of class and, if they were, were well supported by staff. Staff used a clear, calm approach to help pupils reflect on what had gone wrong for them in the lesson.

Pupils have a clear understanding of the rewards system and of how it links to their behaviour in lessons and around the school. There is a strong emphasis on different types of rewards, which can be given out on a lesson-by-lesson basis, or can be worked towards over a longer period of time. Leaders ensured that pupils were consulted about the types of activities they would like to take part in. Pupils enjoy the enrichment afternoon, which provides reward-based activities. They are able to choose from activities such as outdoor learning, the newly created games room, or preparing cakes to sell at the weekly enterprise Skilts café. Pupils are also motivated to achieve the highest level award, which gives them access to the VIP room. Pupils who disrupt the learning of others are expected to catch up with their work during

this period. Pupils to whom the inspector spoke were able to articulate clearly the reward system and expressed the view that it is a 'fair' system.

There has been a further increase in exclusions since the last inspection. One reason cited by leaders for this is that exclusions are now being recorded accurately. Prior to the previous inspection, some pupils were sent home when their behaviour was unacceptable, but this was not recorded as an exclusion. Leaders said that they would like to set up a system for internal exclusion, rather than having to resort to a fixed-term exclusion, but they do not currently have the staffing capacity to put this in place.

Pupils' attendance remains at a stable rate, just below 90%. Leaders track pupils' attendance closely. A small number of pupils are making the transition to be home educated. Leaders ensure that 'safe and well' checks are carried out for these pupils in the interim period. The weekly school newsletter promotes positive attendance.

Outcomes for pupils

Pupils' work in books is generally well presented and shows progress over time. The schools' assessment information shows that more pupils are making expected progress in reading, writing and mathematics than was the case in the autumn term. However, the instability in staffing has had an impact on progress in different classes. Where staffing is stable, pupils are making much better, and in some cases accelerated, progress. Leaders know that this is not the case for all pupils. There is also some variation in pupils' progress between different groups. There are still too many pupils who are not making expected progress. Children looked after are not making as much progress as their peers.

Leaders have worked with a neighbouring school to devise an assessment system, 'lifelong learning goals', which will track the progress pupils make in their social and emotional development. Plans are in place to implement this system in September 2018.

External support

The additional support that the school receives from the trust and the teaching school specialist alliance has had a considerable impact on the drive for improvement in the school. Support is well balanced and is strategic as well as operational. Leaders value the guidance and help they receive, particularly from the CEO and external behaviour consultant. The school is reliant on this additional support in the short term, but there are early signs that staff are developing the necessary skills to sustain the green shoots of improvement over a longer period, and reduce the reliance on external support.