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Mr Gary Lewis
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Dear Mr Lewis

Special measures monitoring inspection of The Cavendish School

Following my visit with Paul Copping, Ofsted Inspector, to your school on 16–17 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 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 local authority's statement of action is fit for purpose.

The school's action plan is fit for purpose.

The school may appoint newly qualified teachers (NQTs) before the next monitoring inspection. It may appoint one NQT in each of the following subject areas: English, history, mathematics and geography. NQTs should not be appointed in any other subject area.

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

Yours sincerely

Kim Pigram

Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

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

■ Leaders must:

- establish a positive learning ethos so that pupils behave well and can learn without interruption
- implement effective tracking and monitoring systems for staff intervention and pupil progress, especially at key stage 3
- ensure that middle leaders and staff accurately assess pupil progress data across key stages 3 and 4, so they can plan support and intervention quickly
- use pupil premium funding to successfully improve outcomes for disadvantaged pupils
- ensure that leaders are trained and equipped to fulfil their roles effectively, especially pastoral and senior curriculum leaders
- make sure that initiatives to raise attendance are effective and rates of pupil absence decrease.

■ Governors must:

- develop robust systems to monitor and evaluate the impact of senior leaders.

■ Improve the quality of teaching, learning and assessment so that pupils make good progress from their starting points by:

- ensuring that teachers consistently apply the school's behaviour policy in all lessons
- ensuring that teachers plan challenging lessons that engage pupils more effectively, especially for the most able pupils
- raising teachers' expectations of what pupils can achieve so that standards of work and pupils' progress rapidly improve.

An external review of the school's use of the pupil premium should be undertaken to assess how this aspect of leadership and management may be improved.

Newly qualified teachers should only be appointed following discussion with Her Majesty's Inspector.

Report on the first monitoring inspection on 16 May 2018 to 17 May 2018

Evidence

Inspectors undertook learning walks with the executive headteacher, head of school and other senior leaders. Inspectors also met formally with the executive headteacher, the head of school, the senior leadership team, middle leaders, staff and groups of pupils. Inspectors also met with school improvement advisers from Herts for Learning (HfL), the representatives for the local authority. Various school documents were scrutinised, including information about safeguarding, achievement, pupil premium, and the school's own self-evaluation and development plan. The lead inspector also held a telephone conversation with the chief executive officer (CEO) of Future Academies, which is the potential future sponsor for the school.

Context

Since the previous inspection in May 2017, a head of school has been appointed to the school in a permanent capacity. He continues to be supported on a daily basis by the executive headteacher, who arrived at the school just prior to the previous inspection.

A number of senior and middle leaders have left since 2017, and a new deputy headteacher has been recruited. There have been considerable changes in governance since the previous inspection. A new, experienced chair of governors has also recently been appointed to increase the capacity and rigour of governance arrangements.

Following the previous inspection, the school worked closely with the Scholars' Education Trust in preparation to become a sponsored academy. This sponsorship then did not come about. Consequently, the transition support from this academy chain was removed in autumn 2017. A new academy sponsorship is currently in the planning phase with Future Academies. This is due to take place on 1 September 2018.

Current leaders have worked closely with local primary schools and their children's parents and carers in preparation for the prospective new Year 7 intake in September 2018. Although at the time of the previous inspection numbers in each year group had been decreasing year on year, the numbers of pupils due to join the school in Year 7 in September 2018 have risen rapidly.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

Despite a backdrop of considerable challenge and turbulence since the previous inspection, current leaders have managed to bring improvements to some crucial

elements of the school's provision, most notably in behaviour and leadership. Much of this improvement has been secured by the ongoing tenacious work of the executive headteacher and head of school. These leaders have continued to work determinedly, despite the major challenges of securing an academy sponsor and subsequent disappointments and upheavals when this has fallen through. However, leaders are under no illusions that they now need to speed up the pace of improvement to eradicate the remaining inadequacies in standards.

The accuracy of assessment has developed securely since the previous inspection. The chaotic assessment systems identified by inspectors in May 2017 have been eradicated. Leaders at both senior and middle leadership levels have embedded a 'one-stop-shop' assessment system for all staff to use. Additionally, staff training is increasing the accuracy and consistency of the information being put into this system. This is providing leaders with a stronger basis on which to implement effective intervention, especially to support Year 11 pupils in preparation for their final examinations this summer. This is also guiding leaders about where they need to commission additional external support, for example, in the marking and checking of practice examination papers. Collectively, leaders are developing a better understanding about where pupils are not making progress, and supporting them more appropriately.

Senior and middle leadership is also developing well. The executive headteacher and head of school are creating a more streamlined and focused approach to senior leadership responsibility. The arrival of the new deputy headteacher this term has added further capacity to this team. Subject leaders have been supervised intensively by the executive headteacher and head of school. Subject leaders are becoming more adept at identifying underperformance and tackling it. Particularly noteworthy this year is the tireless work of the new head of history, who has made a remarkable difference to the experience that pupils are receiving in the subject.

The local authority, through its HfL partners, has supported very specific aspects of the school's improvement well. In particular, the work that advisers have undertaken in English, history, science and mathematics has continued to support middle leaders in raising standards. Most notably, the work of the mathematics adviser has supported leaders in identifying the weakest areas of provision to improve quickly. However, the local authority has not ensured that the school has had the necessary resources to undertake the recommended pupil premium review as quickly as it should. Leaders have also identified that the significant weaknesses in the school's financial management at the time of the previous inspection continue to have a negative impact on the allocation of this funding. As a consequence, leaders have only recently undertaken this review and it is not yet possible to see the impact of its findings.

Governance has not moved forward as quickly as it should have done. Partially, this has been linked to the false start regarding the school becoming an academy in autumn 2017. Initially, the school was anticipating an imminent transition.

Governors acknowledge that during this time they did not focus sufficiently on standards. However, there was an urgent and necessary reorganisation of governance in the spring term. The number of governors was significantly reduced, and new governors were appointed who had very specific expertise in areas previously lacking, such as education, finance and law. The new chair of governors is highly experienced in supporting schools in challenging circumstances and raising standards. She has developed a thorough understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the school in a short space of time. This is mainly through her visits and her rigorous questioning of leaders since her arrival. However, governors acknowledge that, given the length of time it has taken to get to this position, they now need to develop their effectiveness rapidly. The role of the local authority in supporting this reorganised governing body has also not been agreed.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

The previous inspection in May 2017 identified that teachers' expectations about pupils' classroom behaviour, progress and standards of work were not high enough. Leaders have made strong headway in raising expectations about behaviour in lessons. Lessons start punctually; pupils come to school ready to learn; and they now learn in a calm and orderly environment.

Equally, leaders have made some steady inroads to raising standards of teaching and learning, albeit from the very low starting point identified by inspectors in May 2017. Leaders have secured a more accurate assessment process, recruited well to some subjects and supported middle leaders in raising the quality of teaching. A number of new teachers in areas like English, geography and more recently mathematics have also started to bring some improved teaching to these subjects. This work has been well supported by local authority subject advisers, particularly in mathematics and English.

There has been rapid improvement in the history curriculum, which has been re-written, including the assessment processes. A new staff of history specialists have much higher expectations about what pupils should be achieving. Pupils talked animatedly about much-improved lessons and meaningful learning.

Despite this headway, leaders know that the quality of teaching, learning and assessment, most notably at key stage 3, remains too varied. In particular, pupils' experience in science is poor.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Leaders have brought secure and significant improvement to pupils' behaviour. In lessons, pupils can now focus on their learning without interruption. Throughout the day, pupils' behaviour around the school site, both between lessons and during break and lunchtimes, has also improved considerably.

Inspectors spoke to a number of pupils throughout these times, as well as a number of pupils formally in meetings. Almost all pupils who spoke to inspectors said that poor behaviour is a thing of the past. Pupils said that this is a direct result of the routine presence of senior leaders throughout the day, especially, but not exclusively, the executive headteacher. Pupils were also clear that bullying is not an issue at the school and that staff are active in supporting their welfare needs. A number of pupils spoke about pastoral staff being 'awesome' and 'always there to help'.

The day-to-day running of the school has improved, because leaders have got on and dealt with issues on the ground. When reviewing individual pupils, leaders have evidence of positive impact on behaviour and attendance. However, leaders know that the overarching picture of fixed-term exclusions is too high, while pupils' attendance is not improving quickly enough. Leaders have identified that their analysis of behaviour and attendance is not systematic or strategic enough about what they need to focus on next. In response, the new deputy headteacher has very recently created a revised format for leaders' monitoring of whole-school behaviour and attendance. It is far too early to see any evidence of this in practice.

Safeguarding remains effective, as identified at the previous inspection. Leaders acknowledge that some of the administration around this needs improving and reviewing, especially as the school transfers pupils' information to an online monitoring and recording system.

Outcomes for pupils

Outcomes in the summer of 2017 were extremely poor. The progress that pupils made, including the most able pupils and disadvantaged pupils, was much lower than that of other pupils nationally. Year 11 pupils last year were already undertaking examinations when the previous inspection was occurring. These outcomes cannot be seen as a reflection of new leaders' work in leading the school.

Leaders can point to the difference they are making to the current Year 11, whom they have been supporting since the previous inspection. Year 11 pupils also told inspectors that the level of support and quality of provision that they have received this year have improved significantly. However, despite leaders' intensive work, pupils have significant and deep-seated gaps in their knowledge and skills as a consequence of so many years of poor-quality provision. Leaders' more accurate assessment information suggests that current Year 11 pupils are doing significantly better than previously. However, the overall progress that they are making is still too weak to help them achieve as well as they should have done, given their starting points when they joined the school.

Leaders acknowledge that there is still a long way to go before pupils catch up with others nationally across subjects in all year groups. In particular, the recruitment of staff to science and the knock-on effect on achievement remain a considerable

worry for leaders. This is one of the few areas where they cannot show improvements in the provision.

External support

Most school improvement support comes directly from HfL. Its advisers provide routine and regular support for individual subject areas. This help has been pivotal and effective in supporting these areas to improve thus far. The local authority remains responsible for all statutory provision in the school, such as safeguarding.

The local authority continues to work with leaders to overcome the significant and wide-ranging issues around the financial management and organisation of the school. Many of these problems have been relieved considerably by this work. However, the financial deficit in the school's budget remains an ongoing concern for leaders and the local authority.

The school is also being supported by other local schools, most notably from the executive headteacher's other school, Kings Langley School. This support includes school-to-school moderation and sharing of good practice in teaching and standards. In particular, the schools are supporting leaders well in gaining a greater consistency and accuracy in assessment.

The local authority, HfL and governors have been working with the regional school's commissioner to find an appropriate academy sponsor for the school. The proposed sponsorship from Future Academies, while highly likely, is not yet confirmed. The CEO of the trust has visited the school and been involved in some recruitment activities with leaders.