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Mrs Beverley Gates
Headteacher
Northern House School (Wokingham) Special Academy
Gipsy Lane
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Berkshire
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Dear Mrs Gates

**Special measures monitoring inspection of Northern House School
(Wokingham) Special Academy**

Following my visit to your school on 5 and 6 March 2019, 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 October 2018.

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 plan is 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 interim executive board, chair of the board of trustees, and the chief executive officer of Northern House School Academy Trust, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Wokingham. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Elizabeth Farr

Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection that took place in October 2018.

- Take immediate action to safeguard pupils by ensuring that:
 - staff are equipped to address pupils’ unsafe and challenging behaviours effectively
 - pupils are adequately supervised at all times
 - all pupils attend school often.
- Improve pupils’ behaviour so that it is good by ensuring that:
 - the behaviour policy is fit for purpose, sets out high expectations and clear sanctions, and is applied consistently across the school
 - rates of exclusion reduce so that they are reasonable and proportionate.
- Improve leadership and management by ensuring that:
 - the multi-academy trust and governors hold senior leaders to account rigorously
 - leaders, governors and the multi-academy trust share clear priorities and take effective action to improve the school without delay
 - leaders monitor pupils’ achievement across the school effectively to address underachievement
 - leaders implement and monitor the impact of planned changes to the curriculum and timetable.
- Improve teaching, learning and assessment so that pupils’ outcomes are good by ensuring that:
 - staff have consistently high expectations for pupils’ achievement and attitudes to learning
 - tasks are suitably demanding and interesting for pupils
 - teaching assistants support pupils’ learning effectively
 - teachers make use of effective questions and checks on pupils’ learning during lessons to adjust and increase the impact of their teaching.

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

Report from the first monitoring inspection on 5 and 6 March 2019

Evidence

During this monitoring inspection, lessons or part lessons in all age groups were observed jointly with you. I met with you, other staff with significant responsibilities, including two of the school's deputy headteachers and the school's designated safeguarding lead. In addition, I met with the chief executive officer (CEO) of Northern House School Academy Trust and the chair of the trust, who is also the chair of the interim executive board (IEB). I held a meeting with two parents at the start of the school day. I scrutinised the school's documents, including the school's own information on pupils' current progress and records relating to safeguarding. The single central record was checked.

Context

At all levels, there have been some changes to staffing arrangements. In December 2018, three teachers left, one with responsibility for humanities and Year 7, one for design and technology and computing and one for the primary phase. By January 2019, three new teachers joined, one as an English and humanities teacher, one as a Year 7 teacher and one with responsibility for primary-phase pupils. To cover teaching arrangements, some staff are teaching subjects that they have not had specialist training in. This includes computing and design and technology. The headteacher, who joined the school in September 2018, now also teaches Year 11 science.

The senior leadership team has been restructured. From October 2018, two members of staff have become assistant headteachers. An interim deputy headteacher joined in January 2019 to take on responsibility for public examinations, attendance and alternative provision. One of the school's deputy headteachers with responsibility for the secondary provision and teaching and learning has been absent since September 2018. The headteacher has assumed responsibility for teaching and learning, in the absence of this deputy headteacher. The other deputy headteacher now oversees admissions, special educational needs, acts as deputy designated safeguarding lead and is in charge of the primary department. Following the inspection, the school's business manager resigned and left. A new business manager took up post in December 2018.

The teaching assistant team has been restructured. Some teaching assistants have left. A senior member of staff, with responsibility for behaviour, attendance and the school's use of alternative provision, joined in February 2019. A new teacher with responsibility for Year 6 and Year 7 transition has been appointed and will start in April 2019.

The school's governance structure has changed. Following the last inspection, the trust decided to disband the local governing body, at which point most governors

resigned. In January 2019, the trust set up an IEB. Alongside the IEB, a tier of associate governors has also been appointed. Two governors, who were previously on the local governing body, have transferred to the IEB.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

Senior leaders and trustees accepted the inspection judgement and acknowledge that the school needs to improve. You reviewed the school's provision prior to taking up the post of headteacher. You note that the inspection judgement matched closely your own evaluation of the school's effectiveness. Consequently, you introduced a detailed and thorough improvement plan. This plan also serves as the trust's action plan and sets a strong steer for improvement. The school's plan covers all of the essential areas for improvement identified at the previous inspection. However, it would benefit from modification. The plan is too lengthy and, as a result, some of its precision is lost, particularly around the priorities for improvement. Nevertheless, you continue to work effectively to begin to bring about the necessary changes.

At the time of the last inspection, it was reported that pupils were at risk of harm because of their unsafe behaviour. You have worked intelligently, and pupils' behaviour is now managed more effectively. You are beginning to reduce the number of serious incidents. By making changes to the school's timetable, lessons now start and finish across the school at the same time. This means that pupils' transitions from learning tasks to social activities are in unison. This is helpful, as different groups do not come and go at variable times, which previously disrupted learning sessions. In addition, this has enabled you to sensibly increase the level of supervision. More adults are now available to manage pupils more effectively during social times. Furthermore, you have made sure that senior staff are always on hand during breaktimes. Other physical changes, including the installation and/or adjustment of security fencing in key areas, have made a positive difference. As a result, pupils are not able to easily access rooftop areas, making it more difficult for pupils to become unsafe. At face value, the school is now under better control than it was previously.

You know that other aspects of the school's safeguarding procedures remain ineffective. However, you have already begun to strengthen some of these processes. For instance, the recording of concerns is now much clearer. Staff regularly report concerns using the school's 'pink form' system. However, together, we noted that some records lack the detail needed, such as dates and times. You have also made sure that concerns are at the forefront of everyone's minds by reporting the necessary detail in the morning and afternoon briefing sessions for staff. However, when we sampled a number of concerns together, we noted that some, which met thresholds, had not been referred on in a timely manner to the appropriate agencies, such as children's social care. During the inspection, you were quick to take appropriate action on two such cases, reporting them to the relevant authorities.

Despite governors' regular checks on the school's recruitment processes, the single central record (SCR) is inaccurate. Although the SCR contains the necessary headings, some information, such as that relating to whether staff are prohibited from teaching, is not recorded. In addition, there are some missing entries for some staff as well as some that have been renewed after employment has started. Also, new governors, including those who serve as part of the school's IEB, have not received a sufficient level of check.

You are beginning to shape the school's curriculum so that it is more effective for pupils. New ways of working are supporting pupils to extend their engagement in learning and, in turn, their enjoyment. However, you know that some staff are struggling to implement new ways of working consistently. When tasks are extended for too long, pupils' behaviour often deteriorates. Furthermore, leaders' oversight of curriculum material, including in the primary department, needs to intensify. During the inspection, you and I agreed that some video content shown to primary-aged children about weaponry was inappropriate and not sufficiently explained or contextualised.

The quality of governance, including at trust level, is not improving. Despite the structural changes to the school's governance arrangements, members of the IEB do not demonstrate the necessary expertise to offer robust challenge to school leaders. For example, despite regular checks on the school's SCR, governors have not identified the non-compliance issues for themselves. Governors are too accepting of the information they receive from staff and leaders receive too little challenge. This is because governors do not have the depth of understanding needed to ensure effective oversight. A review of governance did not take place in the autumn term. Despite the changes made, it is my strong recommendation that the review of governance is actioned urgently.

Trustees have supported you in improving the physical fabric of the building by ensuring that finances are readily available. New fencing and door locks have contributed well to providing a safer environment for pupils. Pupils are no longer able to access the roof or leave the site so freely. Redecoration has also improved the entrance area, making it more welcoming. Nevertheless, trustees, members of the board and associate governors are not holding leaders to account with a secure understanding of the issues faced. For instance, they have not ensured that statutory policies are in place, such as those relating to special educational needs, exclusion or attendance. This is hampering the effectiveness of adults within the school as there is no clear guidance on what is expected.

Your leadership is starting to effect positive change, but you are very much working in isolation. At this point in time, the school's improvement is overly reliant on one person's influence. Despite your best efforts to generate a more distributed leadership structure, this is not yet evidenced in practice.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

In some classes, teachers are developing their skills effectively. In such instances, adults are more alert to ensuring that pupils move more quickly from one task to the next so that they retain their interest and focus. However, this is not consistently the case and, consequently, the quality of teaching remains highly variable. During the inspection, in some classes, teachers still struggled to manage the behaviour of some pupils. Where behaviour management strategies are less effective, situations sometimes escalate unchallenged. For instance, during a science lesson, it was necessary for you to intervene to stop two older pupils fighting. Nevertheless, such events are becoming less common.

Some interventions, which are particularly aimed at addressing pupils' individual needs, are increasingly effective. This is because sessions are well planned, and teachers have the skills necessary to manage pupils' social and emotional needs adeptly. For instance, pupils in a personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) education session were able to articulate their opinions and debate with one another. In activities such as these, staff skilfully challenge pupils' stereotypical views and deepen their understanding of the associated issues. As a result, pupils listen well and are respectful of each other's views. In some subjects, teachers have high expectations and manage pupils' needs effectively.

You know that the quality of teaching in some subjects is less secure. Where you have identified this, you are tackling the issues raised and bolstering the quality of learning personally. This is particularly the case for Year 11 pupils. By taking on the responsibility of teaching science in this year group, you are modelling your own high expectations to staff and pupils. Some other subjects have also begun to improve. For instance, all pupils are now gaining a richer experience of computing, through the purchase of new laptops, although this is at a very early stage. However, you know that because of difficulties recruiting new staff there are still some gaps in the school's curriculum, particularly for secondary-aged pupils.

Some pupils are educated off site and attend a whole host of alternative providers. Some do not attend the school for any of their education. You know that some pupils are in receipt of an alternative offer because the school is unable to meet their social and emotional needs well enough. You and I agree that too many pupils are subject to these arrangements. With the support of key personnel, including the local authority's officers, you rightly plan to review this aspect urgently and ensure that the educational offer for each pupil is linked more strongly to the targets in their education, health and care (EHC) plans.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

The school's new behaviour policy has been agreed and introduced to all staff. The policy is fit for purpose. Although you have set out your expectations clearly you concur that success has been mixed. During the inspection, you and I agreed that

there were still stark examples where pupils' use of derogatory language went unchallenged. Nevertheless, you have set out your stall clearly, modelling and expecting higher standards of conduct. For example, in most classes, pupils now greet staff more formally rather than communicating on first name terms. Pupils are still getting to grips with these higher expectations.

It appears that fewer days are now lost due to fixed-term exclusion. Some pupils are placed on reintegration packages and gradually building up their participation in full-time schooling. However, leaders' use of exclusion is inconsistent as key stakeholders have not reviewed the school's policies and procedures against current statutory guidance for some time. The school's approach to managing the most disruptive of behaviours is still unclear. This means that patterns and trends are unreliable. Leaders and governors are not clear on their legal responsibilities in this aspect. Some pupils are not allowed to attend but have not been formally excluded.

You have wisely ensured that staff's training has strengthened. Staff are now all trained in appropriate de-escalation techniques. However, at the point of crisis, some staff struggle to implement what they have learned. Some are far more effective at defusing situations than others. Some staff use distraction or time out strategies well because they understand pupils' triggers and emotional states. Other staff fail to follow the school's systems and processes, resulting in pupils continuing to readily disengage from the learning in hand.

Parents and carers talk positively about the school's provision. They say that their children's engagement with schooling has improved since joining Northern House. They say that their children are far more interested in school than they used to be. Many join the school after having missed significant periods of schooling in their previous placements. However, for many pupils, attendance remains low and absence is too high. For some pupils, in recent times, their engagement and attendance at school have steadily improved on a month-by-month basis. However, overall attendance figures remain lower than last year.

Outcomes for pupils

The school's use of assessment information is at a very early stage. You are determined to refine and improve on the existing systems so that they become fit for purpose. Systems to measure pupils' progress against their EHC plan targets are being constructed but are not yet in full use.

The school's assessment information shows that pupils are underachieving significantly in some subjects and some age groups. Leaders' analysis of information is at a very early stage. It is too soon to evaluate if pupils' rates of progress are beginning to strengthen. You are also just beginning to compare how well particular groups of learners are progressing.

Teachers' subject knowledge is variable. In some subjects, adults scaffold pupils'

learning well so that they make good gains in their understanding. However, this is inconsistent across the school.

External support

External support for the school has not been forthcoming. Although the school has made attempts to seek outside support, there is very little in place. Furthermore, although internal support through the trust is an option, there is very little evidence to demonstrate that this has intensified since the last full inspection. Currently, the school is solely reliant on the headteacher's expertise to effect positive change.

Some pupils are not in receipt of an education that meets their needs. Some pupils have not attended for some time. However, despite requests to the placing local authorities, these have not been acted on. Some pupils are still waiting for a suitable placement to be allocated. In the meanwhile, this group of pupils are not receiving their entitlement to a full-time education.