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Mrs Eleanor Hatchett
Headteacher
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RG2 7AY

Dear Mrs Hatchett

Special measures monitoring inspection of Phoenix College

Following my visit to your school on 26 and 27 June 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 previous monitoring inspection.

The inspection was the second monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures following the inspection that took place in November 2018. 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.

The school's improvement plan is not fit for purpose.

The school may not appoint newly qualified teachers.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the interim executive board (IEB), the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Reading. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Sarah Hubbard
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

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

- Urgently review and sharpen safeguarding processes so that:
 - the role of the designated safeguarding lead is clearly understood by leaders and staff
 - all adults know what to do if they have a concern about a pupil
 - leaders systematically record concerns and communications about pupils' well-being, and document their decisions and actions appropriately
 - leaders ensure that appropriate safeguarding and staffing checks are completed before pupils attend alternative education off-site.
- Improve the quality of leadership and management and governance by ensuring that:
 - a sustainable and effective leadership, governance and staffing structure is in place
 - leaders use the newly introduced systems to monitor the progress of pupils effectively, including disadvantaged pupils and the most able, so that it is clear what teaching and additional support is working and what is not
 - pupils access a broad, balanced and appropriate curriculum, well suited to their needs
 - all subject leaders are fully accountable and develop the necessary skills to enable them to raise standards and improve the quality of teaching in their subjects
 - leaders reliably analyse information about pupils' behaviour and attendance to inform their actions to bring about improvement
 - additional funding to support disadvantaged pupils is used effectively to improve the progress and outcomes of this group
 - staff receive appropriate training and support so that they have the necessary skills and resources to manage pupils' behaviour effectively
 - leaders, including governors, rigorously evaluate the suitability and effectiveness of any alternative education arrangements
 - all pupils access their entitlement to full-time education.
- Improve the quality of teaching, learning and assessment so that pupils, including the most able and those who are disadvantaged, make consistently good progress in all aspects of learning, by ensuring that:
 - all staff have high expectations for all pupils' behaviour and achievement, including the most able

- teachers have reliable subject knowledge in the subjects they teach
- teachers make effective use of information, from their assessment of pupils' progress, to provide suitably challenging teaching that builds on pupils' prior learning and matches their needs
- teaching assistants rapidly develop a clear, successful and consistent role in supporting pupils' learning.
- Improve pupils' personal development, behaviour and welfare, by ensuring that:
 - pupils attend school regularly
 - the newly introduced policies and procedures for managing pupils' behaviour are understood by all staff and followed consistently
 - staff undertake thorough risk assessments for managing pupils' behaviour and for taking pupils off-site
 - all bullying, racist or homophobic incidents are accurately recorded, acted upon by leaders, and evaluated to inform future provision.

An external review of the school's use of the pupil premium should be undertaken.

The school may not appoint newly qualified teachers.

Report on the second monitoring inspection on 26 to 27 June 2019

Evidence

This monitoring visit focused upon safeguarding, behaviour, personal development and welfare, along with the impact of leaders' actions on improvements in these areas. Her Majesty's Inspector observed the school's work, making short visits to every class in the school and making a visit to see an off-site activity. She also observed an intervention delivered by an external organisation and met with a small group of pupils. Her Majesty's Inspector met separately with the headteacher, who is also the designated safeguarding lead, senior leaders, a member of the interim executive board (IEB), staff responsible for overseeing safeguarding and attendance records, leaders responsible for behaviour and attendance, a group of staff and a representative from the local authority who is the school's improvement partner (SIP). She made telephone calls to the chair of the IEB and also to seven parents. In addition, Her Majesty's Inspector scrutinised documents, including records of safety checks made on staff when they are appointed and the post-Ofsted improvement plan.

Context

A new deputy headteacher, who took up their role just after Easter, left shortly after joining the school. The head of art and design left shortly before Easter 2019. There is no full-time business manager at the school.

The local authority, regional schools commissioner and IEB are currently in consultation with a number of potential academy sponsors with regard to the academisation of the school.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

The headteacher has worked determinedly with leaders and teachers to improve the school. Together, they have successfully introduced new approaches to managing pupils' behaviour which have led to a calmer, safer school environment. Leaders have also made changes that have strengthened safeguarding and the quality of teaching. However, senior leaders and a number of middle leaders are new to their roles and need to develop their expertise further, including in curriculum design. Although there have been improvements in many of the areas for development from the previous section 5 inspection, some improvements are fragile. The school is very dependent on the extensive support package put in place by the local authority, as well as the assistance of IEB members with relevant expertise. The local authority and IEB are aware that leadership needs to develop further so improvements are more consistently secure.

Leaders have worked alongside trainers commissioned by the local authority to develop new approaches to managing behaviour. Pupils' behaviour is not as

aggressive, so pupils and staff are safer. In addition, leaders have developed the way behaviour incidents and rewards for good behaviour are tracked and collated. They have also instigated a new, effective approach to setting behaviour targets using this information. Parents and pupils commented to the inspector about how much safer the school environment is. One parent remarked that their son now 'looks forward to school'.

Leaders have strengthened a number of safeguarding systems and procedures since the previous monitoring visit. In particular, there is a much tighter approach to updating pupils' personal risk assessments. The school's care officer continues to monitor closely pupils who do not attend, including making regular home visits to check on their well-being. The proforma that staff use in order to raise a safeguarding concern is now well established. However, there is no formal mechanism for staff to use to alert leaders to any general concerns they may have about pupils. This means that leaders do not have a detailed overview of the range of concerns that staff have about pupils. As a result, there is a risk that some potential safeguarding issues may be missed.

The off-site activities which pupils access are well set up and leaders have worked closely with providers to ensure that pupils are safe. Some off-site activities, such as rock climbing, enable pupils to develop specific skills and know-how. However, the current curriculum does not cohere well enough. There is too great a gulf between the academic subjects, often delivered in the mornings, and the off-site activities that pupils access. The school does not offer enough subjects that bridge the gap between these two very different curriculums. Some pupils 'cherry pick' and come into school for the off-site activities and trips but do not attend when academic subjects are timetabled.

The revised improvement plan is closely aligned to the areas for improvement from the section 5 inspect report. Members of the IEB and leaders carefully check that planned actions have been carried out. However, there is further work to do on the plan. The success criteria do not describe clearly enough the difference that the planned actions will make to pupils and staff. As a result, the success criteria do not support leaders and IEB members well enough in ascertaining whether actions have had enough impact.

The IEB continues to offer strong support and challenge. Board members have extensive relevant expertise, which they use to strengthen different aspects of the school's work. For example, a board member trains staff on approaches to managing behaviour. Although some of their work is by necessity operational, minutes from meetings show that the IEB holds leaders stringently to account. The IEB commissioned a review of pupil premium funding which was exacting and detailed. IEB members have fully taken on board the recommendations from the review, which are extensive.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Broadly speaking, improvements in pupils' behaviour in class mean that there is a greater focus on learning than previously. Lessons are now sequenced better so that activities link together. Pupils are able to concentrate on the tasks they are set and teachers are increasingly using questioning to check pupils' understanding.

Some parents and pupils mentioned that the work was not sufficiently stretching. Leaders are aware that this aspect of teaching needs further development. The middle leader with responsibility for interventions has made a good job of matching additional help to pupils' needs. He has rightly focused on developing a suite of literacy interventions.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

There have been noticeable improvements in the conduct and behaviour of pupils. Exclusions for the first half of the summer term are lower than for the previous half-term and there has been a steady decline in the number of serious incidents that place pupils and staff at risk.

Teaching assistants now work effectively with pupils at the start of the school day to review their behaviour and set targets for the following week. They make good use of information provided by the school's behaviour tracking system to do this. Pupils treat each other and members of staff with greater respect. They are willing to learn and respond better than hitherto to the instructions that staff give to them. Pupils and their parents commented favourably to the inspector about the positive impact of the recent improvements in behaviour.

Teachers and leaders are also making better use of systems for recording behaviour incidents. Leaders are sensibly using this information to identify behaviour 'hot spots' and those teachers who may need some additional support in managing pupils' conduct. Leaders' analysis of collated information is still in its early days and not always joined up enough. For instance, although leaders regularly collate information about exclusions, they have not spotted that a very high proportion of exclusions are for half a day. This indicates that staff need to refine the approaches they employ to behaviours which are not dangerous but nevertheless challenging, so that more pupils spend the whole day in school.

Leaders now have a wider repertoire of strategies for responding to pupils' behaviour. A new overarching approach to managing all aspects of pupils' behaviour is sensibly planned for September 2019. In preparation, senior and some leaders have received extensive professional development on this aspect of their work, including on behaviour triggers and de-escalation techniques. These new approaches have started to influence the way leaders currently work with pupils, including the language they use when addressing pupils. However, these new strategies are in their early stages and are not yet being used by all staff.

Attendance remains an issue and, to date, is far too low for the year. Fewer than half of the pupils in Years 7 to 10 were at school during the inspection. This meant that in most classes there was a ratio of one member of staff to one pupil. Leaders are trying hard to improve attendance, including collecting pupils from their homes before the start of the school day. Of note is the bespoke support given to individual pupils, assisting them to reintegrate back into school life after very long absences. However, leaders' analysis of the information they have on pupils' attendance is not sharp enough. They have not set milestones for improving attendance going forward, nor targeted groups of pupils for specialised support. For example, there has been a very recent, sharp decline in the attendance of approximately 20% of pupils. Approaches to ensuring this group attend school regularly are not bespoke enough.

Outcomes for pupils

Recent improvements in behaviour are gradually leading to better outcomes, especially for pupils in key stage 3. Pupils are now gaining knowledge and understanding from the tasks they are set. They also make progress on the practical activities they do each week. For instance, pupils who go rock climbing have developed their skills over time and were able to tackle climbs that required special holds.

The intervention leader has identified pupils who need additional literacy help and works with them on a one-to-one basis. The additional help he provides is starting to have a positive impact. However, pupils access a wide range of additional individual support, including assistance provided by external organisations and charities. There are some inconsistencies in the impact that this support is having on pupils' learning and development. Senior leaders' oversight of interventions, including those delivered by external organisations, is not effective enough.

Leaders rightly have high ambitions for pupils. Each Year 11 pupil was entered for approximately six GCSEs. Leaders have not given enough consideration to how suitable these qualifications were for the pupils in Year 11. There was a very high rate of non-attendance for Year 11 pupils during the examination period. A number of pupils missed most of the examinations for which they had been entered. This will mean that some pupils will leave school with very few qualifications.

External support

The SIP has worked closely alongside leaders to devise an extensive package of support, upon which the school is very reliant. The support has been closely tailored to meet the school's needs. The in-class support provided for staff by an educational charity has been successful in the short term. It has assisted staff well in building positive relationships with pupils. The SIP has also sought to strengthen leadership capacity by providing a wide-ranging programme of training for leaders at all levels in the school. This has rightly focused on the leadership of

safeguarding, behaviour and the curriculum. The SIP has also ensured that newly qualified teachers currently at the school have opportunities to observe teaching in local good or better schools. Training on the new approach to behaviour, that will be implemented next academic year, has also been provided by the local authority. Leaders have not yet formulated an effective strategy to evaluate the impact of the support they receive.