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Adele Howson
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Dear Mrs Howson

Special measures monitoring inspection of Water Hall Primary School

Following my visit to your school on 2 and 3 July 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 February 2019.

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 and the school's action plans are 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 board of trustees and the chief executive officer of the multi-academy trust, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Milton Keynes. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Lucy English
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection that took place in February 2019.

- Raise expectations across the school of how hard pupils should work, how well they should behave and the standards they should achieve in their work.
- Strengthen leadership capacity, including the effectiveness of trustees, by ensuring that:
 - trustees have a more in-depth knowledge of the school and use it to hold the local governing board and school leaders to account for how well pupils achieve and behave
 - any improvements, including new approaches to teaching, are stringently monitored and evaluated
 - assessment processes are accurate and leaders across the school have a clear overview of pupils' progress
 - pupils with SEND are suitably overseen and monitored so that they receive the additional support they need from teachers and assistants
 - pupil premium funding has a more positive impact on the learning and progress of disadvantaged pupils
 - the curriculum in a range of subjects, including in science, enables pupils to acquire subject-specific knowledge and skills, as well as broaden their vocabularies.
- Implement an approach to developing teaching so that:
 - teachers' subject knowledge improves, including their understanding of pupils' misconceptions and how to tackle them
 - the teaching of reading across the school, including phonics, is more effective
 - work is more appropriately pitched so that most-able pupils are challenged.
- Improve pupils' behaviour and the overall culture of the school by:
 - ensuring that pupils do not disrupt the learning of others through their behaviour in class
 - strengthening leaders' oversight of behaviour and developing teachers' skills in managing challenging behaviour
 - making sure that incidents of bullying are dealt with more effectively so that they do not recur
 - implementing a whole-school approach to improving the language pupils use when communicating with each other.
- Improve pupils' outcomes by ensuring that:

- teaching and the curriculum enable pupils to make strong progress across a range of subjects
- pupils with SEND make better progress from their starting points
- disadvantaged pupils make strong progress so that they can fulfil their academic potential and catch up with others nationally
- most-able pupils make the progress of which they are capable, so that they achieve at a higher standard.

An external review of the school's use of the pupil premium funding should be undertaken in order to improve this aspect of leadership and management.

An external review of governance should be undertaken in order to improve this aspect of leadership and management.

Report on the first monitoring inspection on 2 to 3 July 2019

Evidence

I observed the school's work and scrutinised documents relating to pupils' progress, pupils' safety, and the school's own monitoring and evaluation of its improvement work. I met with the deputy headteacher and assistant headteachers, groups of pupils and staff, including staff from the trust. I also met with the chief executive officer of the trust and the chair of the local governing board.

I visited all classes in the school jointly with the deputy headteacher to observe learning. During these visits I spoke with pupils and looked in their books. I also observed pupils' behaviour in lessons and around the school.

Context

Following the inspection, a class teacher and two teaching assistants left the school and were replaced. There will be more staff turnover at the end of the academic year, but the school is fully staffed for September, having also appointed a special educational needs coordinator (SENCo). Three trustees have left and two have been recruited; all trustee positions are expected to be filled by September. The chair of the local governing board left and a parent governor joined, also agreeing to fill the role of interim chair of the local governing board.

The substantive headteacher is currently on maternity leave and the interim headteacher was absent from the school at the time of the inspection.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

Leaders have moved the school forward on its journey of improvement. They have a clear vision for the values and ethos that must underpin all aspects of the school's work. They have explained this with clarity to the whole school community. This work has improved pupils' behaviour in lessons and around the school. It has also helped to develop greater consistency when staff respond to poor behaviour. However, written improvement plans for other aspects of improvement do not have consistently crisp targets. This means it is sometimes difficult to judge if targets have been achieved to the level intended.

Alongside improving behaviour, leaders have worked to raise aspirations and expectations throughout the school. These are still too low among many staff and pupils. Leaders are, rightly, concerned that some staff do not appear to appreciate the importance and urgency with which changes need to be implemented and embedded. For example, some staff suggested that new ways of working could wait for the new academic year. Leaders have responded robustly to this minority of voices but have struggled to ensure that everyone implements actions as quickly and successfully as intended.

Nevertheless, many staff do welcome the changes that leaders have implemented. They especially appreciate the extra training on values and the greater support for teachers, especially newly qualified teachers. These colleagues new to the profession have received a much better level of support since the inspection.

Leaders are currently replanning the curriculum to ensure that it is broad and balanced and achieves national curriculum requirements. They are using published research to help them to ensure that pupils gain knowledge and skills in a sequential and structured manner. They are aware of the need to support the new approach with thorough training and support for staff. This training is also intended to address weaknesses in staff knowledge relating both to subjects and to teaching strategies.

To support staff development further and to ensure greater consistency of the quality of teaching, learning and assessment, leaders have restructured the way classes are organised. They are in the process of appointing subject leaders to oversee aspects of the curriculum from September. Leaders are acutely aware of the need to monitor all of these changes and ensure that they deliver the better-quality provision that leaders intend.

Trustees, and members of the local governing board, are as dedicated to the school as its leaders and articulate equal determination and passion for the school. As required by the inspection, the trust commissioned an external review of governance. This was completed in June 2019 and the trust has acted swiftly on its recommendations, including reorganising the structure of governance and the trust itself. The new structure will commence in September 2019. They intend that this new structure will remove layers of bureaucracy and enable governors and the trust to hold leaders routinely to account more effectively.

The external review of use of pupil premium has not been completed. This is now scheduled for September 2019. School leaders are undertaking their own review in the meantime, but this delay hinders improvement. It is currently not clear how this money has been used to remove barriers to learning for disadvantaged pupils. However, some actions since the inspection, such as reducing persistent absence, have been successful.

The trust has also appointed a new SENCo for September. Currently the director for inclusion has been filling this role on a part-time basis. Improvements have been made since the inspection, but there is still much work to be done in order to ensure that pupils with SEND receive appropriate support.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Teaching, learning and assessment are variable, and the overall quality is still low. Some learning activities are purposeful and delivered clearly, indicating subject and pedagogical expertise. However, other tasks are both confused and confusing and

do not support pupils to learn well.

Some staff have high expectations of what pupils can and should achieve, but others do not. Leaders have provided professional development to address this. There have also been greater opportunities for teachers to plan together and/or use lesson plans developed by the director of education as a starting point. This work has had limited success.

Leaders have improved the validity of assessment through training and monitoring. They have also worked closely with other schools to moderate assessments. However, leaders' scrutiny of pupils' work in books shows there is still much work to be done to ensure that assessment is accurate and used to identify the next steps pupils need to make strong progress.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Pupils, staff and leaders are adamant that behaviour has improved since the inspection. Certainly, during my visit, I did not observe the extremely poor behaviours, including aggression, described in the inspection report. However, behaviour remains a concern. The improvements leaders have achieved are not yet secure, especially where the quality of teaching is weak.

Behaviour in lessons is generally compliant. Pupils say that behaviour in class is better when staff follow the new processes to manage behaviour. However, some learning is still disrupted, and some pupils are still distracted by the behaviour of others. Expectations are too low overall. A minority of pupils ignore instructions in class. In some cases, teachers did not appear to notice this. For example, there were times when individual pupils kept their backs to teachers despite the whole class being asked to face the teacher.

Pupils report that bullying is sometimes dealt with well, but it depends which member of staff they talk to. They describe an inconsistent approach to how bullying and derogatory language, including racist and sexist language, are followed up. However, pupils like the work they have done on values, especially the celebration assemblies that recognise the 'star of the week' from each class. They feel there is now more attention given to pupils who behave well and that they do not have to misbehave to get noticed.

Pupils have a secure understanding of how to keep themselves safe, for example, when working online or while playing out in the sun. For example, a child in Reception Year explained that she had to wear her hat and stay out of the sun to 'keep healthy'. Pupils enjoy their lessons outside and are proud of the lovely school building and grounds. However, they are less sure about 'structured play' and do not always want to play as a class. Nonetheless, they report that the focused, happy play that I observed is now typical, and an improvement when compared to that at the time of the inspection.

Pupils' learning about modern Britain is insecure. For example, few had heard of 'democracy' and those who had were not able to explain what it is. They are, however, clear about the need for tolerance, and feel that the school is an inclusive place, especially for pupils whose families are 'non-traditional'.

Attendance has improved since the inspection, especially for pupils with SEND. Persistent absence has also reduced. These improvements are due to relentless work by the family support worker. This work remains a strength of the school and continues to make a positive difference to pupils and their families.

Outcomes for pupils

Results of recently taken national tests have not yet been published. School information indicates that there have been improvements in pupils' attainment in reading, writing and mathematics at the end of key stages 1 and 2. However, the proportion of pupils reaching the expected standard in the phonics screening check remains low. The proportion of children reaching a good level of development at the end of Reception Year is also low.

Pupils' books present a varied picture. Some progress can be seen, especially recently. However, standards are low overall.

Pupils with education, health and care plans have made good progress against their specific targets. This is due to the support from the inclusion team. Other pupils with SEND have made variable progress.

External support

The trust has engaged the services of various external consultants who have helped them to review the events leading up to the decline in standards and establish safeguards so that they are not able to be repeated. This work has helped the trust to develop a well-considered action plan and to change the structure of governance.

Priorities for further improvement

- Establish the leadership structure for September and ensure that all staff have the support and capacity to make and sustain the rapid improvements required.