

Ofsted
Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T T 0300 123 1231

www.gov.uk/ofsted



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Miss J Harlow
Merrill Academy
Brackens Lane
Alvaston
Derby
DE24 0AN

Dear Miss Harlow

Special measures monitoring inspection of Merrill Academy

Following my visit with Chris Stevens, Her Majesty's Inspector to your school 17–18 September 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 April 2019.

Having considered all the evidence I am of the opinion that at this time:

Leaders and managers are not taking effective action towards the removal of special measures.

The trust's statement of action is not fit for purpose.

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

Having considered all the evidence I strongly recommend that the school does not seek to appoint NQTs.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the board of trustees, and the chief executive officer (CEO) of the multi-academy trust, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Derby City local authority. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Chris Davies

Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

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

- Rapidly improve the school's procedures to keep pupils safe by leaders and those responsible for governance:
 - creating a secure and effective culture of safeguarding that permeates all aspects of the school
 - eradicating the incidence of bullying, discrimination and unsafe behaviour
 - ensuring that all statutory checks are undertaken for all members of the governing body and school leaders
 - building capacity within the safeguarding team to effectively manage safeguarding concerns
 - maintaining robust and accurate records of actions taken to address safeguarding concerns
 - establishing rigorous systems to monitor the effectiveness of safeguarding processes and procedures to ensure that ongoing weaknesses are identified and addressed promptly
 - maintaining accurate records of pupils' attendance
 - ensuring that pupils fully understand safeguarding risks and how to avoid them, including those related to radicalisation and extremism.
- Improve urgently the effectiveness of leadership and management, including governance, by ensuring that:
 - trustees, governors and leaders create a powerful strategic vision for school improvement that will drive change and rapidly improve all aspects of the school and outcomes for pupils
 - trustees establish and sustain leadership capacity, including local governance, to bring about significant improvements in the quality of education
 - members of the board of trustees and governors fulfil their roles and responsibilities, including their statutory duties.
- Urgently improve the quality of teaching, learning and assessment, and thereby the attainment and progress of pupils, by ensuring that:
 - teachers have consistently high expectations of all pupils and insist on positive attitudes to learning
 - teaching is better planned to bring about gains in knowledge, deepen understanding and develop skills
 - teaching meets the needs of different groups of pupils
 - teachers assess accurately and use this information to plan learning that addresses gaps in learning and challenges pupils to deeper learning
 - pupils understand what they are learning and what they need to do to improve.

- Improve the personal development, behaviour and welfare of pupils by ensuring that:
 - leaders urgently review the school’s approach to behaviour management and raise behavioural expectations for pupils
 - leaders enable staff to challenge and manage poor behaviour proactively, swiftly and effectively so that it does not disrupt learning
 - pupils show respect, refraining from swearing and from using offensive language
 - pupils understand the negative effects of bullying and discriminatory behaviour
 - pupils are confident that staff will listen to them and take their concerns seriously
 - teachers improve pupils’ attitudes to learning
 - pupils’ attendance improves, and persistent absence is reduced.

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

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

It is recommended that the school does not appoint newly qualified teachers.

Report on the first monitoring inspection on 17–18 September 2019

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work and scrutinised a range of documents, including the school's rapid improvement plan and school improvement plan.

Inspectors met with senior leaders, middle leaders, members of staff and groups of pupils. They also spoke with the chair of the governing body, the chair and CEO of the Northworthy Trust and officers from the Queen Elizabeth Grammar School Multi-Academy Trust (QEGSMAT). Inspectors observed behaviour during breaktime and lunchtime. They visited 19 lessons with senior leaders.

This monitoring inspection focused on aspects of leadership, management and safeguarding. It focused on personal development, as well as behaviour and attitudes.

The areas for improvement related to teaching, learning and assessment were not a focus for this inspection.

Context

Since the previous inspection, there have been significant changes to the leadership and staffing of the school and the organisation of the school day.

The new headteacher started at the school at the beginning of this academic year. Twelve teachers left the school at the end of the summer term. They have been replaced with teachers new to the school.

Leaders have formed a new student services department to complement the work of the safeguarding team and pastoral staff. An extra deputy designated safeguarding leader strengthens the safeguarding team.

The school day has changed to include a morning tutor time. Pastoral leaders have reorganised form groups into separate key stage 3 and key stage 4 mixed-age tutor groups. Leaders have changed the curriculum structure in most subjects to a three-year key stage 3 and a two-year key stage 4. The number of pupils on roll has increased, with a larger-than-usual intake of Year 7 pupils this September.

The sixth form closed at the end of last academic year. The school no longer provides post-16 education.

Trustees of the Northworthy Trust continue to be the responsible authority for the school. Trustees delegate some responsibility to the governing body. Since the previous inspection, the Department for Education (DfE) has brokered the support of QEGSMAT. Officers of QEGSMAT have provided considerable external support to leaders. The DfE has approved for the school to be rebrokered to a different academy trust and QEGSMAT is poised to become the school's new sponsor.

The progress made by the school in tackling the key areas for improvement identified at the section 5 inspection

Since the previous inspection, leaders have adjusted the school's behaviour policy. This is not resulting in the much-needed improvement in the management of pupils' behaviour. The numbers and proportions of pupils who are permanently excluded and excluded on a fixed-term basis remain too high.

The expectations for pupils' behaviour are not consistently high. The behaviour of a significant proportion of pupils in too many lessons is poor and disruptive. At times, it is wilfully uncooperative. This behaviour reflects pupils' poor attitudes to learning and the school. Some pupils continue to be disruptive and defiant.

Leaders have not brought about consistently good behaviour during breaktime, lunchtime and lesson changeover. Too many pupils are rude and defiant, despite the whole school's current focus on 'respect'. Pupils do not attend school well.

Leaders have ensured that registers are accurate and now monitor pupils' attendance more closely than previously. They have begun to support and challenge parents and carers to ensure that their children attend school regularly. The impact of these changes is not yet showing in pupils' overall attendance. Too many pupils are absent from school, and the proportion who are regularly absent from school is not reducing quickly enough. Disadvantaged pupils and pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities attend less well than their peers. This is a significant concern.

Leaders have begun to improve the provision for pupils' personal development. Pupils say that they value the time they spend with their tutors in the morning. The school day now gets off to a calmer start. There are plans in place to cover a range of themes in these sessions, including digital safety, healthy lives, mental health and decision-making. This planning is yet to be fully implemented.

Leaders know that there is much to do to improve the experience of pupils within and beyond the taught curriculum. However, there are some early signs that leaders are taking the right steps to improve this aspect of their work. For example, during the inspection, an assembly on 'respect' reinforced the school's values and renewed focus on personal development.

The effectiveness of leadership and management at the school

The new headteacher has a clear and ambitious vision for the school and understands the school's strengths and weaknesses. With the support of officers from QEGSMAT, she has created a draft improvement plan.

The school's existing sponsor, the Northworthy Trust, continues to provide some ongoing support to leaders, for example to improve the safeguarding arrangements. The trust's CEO provides support for the new headteacher. The director of school

improvement works at the school supporting the development of leadership. This support complements the direction and provided by QEGSMAT officers.

Both trusts have the school's best interests at heart. However, the confusion over who is responsible for the school has meant that some issues have not yet been tackled. For example, members of the governing body have not fulfilled their delegated responsibilities. They have not reviewed progress against the initial rapid improvement plan or the current improvement plan.

Leaders have addressed many of the safeguarding weaknesses identified at the previous inspection. Staff are trained to understand their responsibilities, and safeguarding policies are detailed and up to date.

Leaders have ensured that statutory pre-employment checks are carried out for all members of the governing body and staff. Those who manage the recruitment process have a clear understanding of their responsibilities and the purpose of safer recruitment processes.

Leaders have built capacity within the safeguarding team. They have employed additional staff, rearranged pastoral responsibilities and introduced an electronic system to record safeguarding concerns and follow-up actions. Staff with specific safeguarding responsibilities are well trained and know the most vulnerable pupils very well. They work well with external agencies to ensure that these pupils are safe. Safeguarding records are more accurate than at the previous inspection, but they are still not precise enough.

Governors have not monitored improvements in safeguarding arrangements effectively. The systems to monitor the effectiveness of safeguarding processes and procedures are not secure enough. Over half of the parents who responded to the online survey, Parent View, expressed the view that their children do not feel safe at the school.

Leaders have ensured that teachers maintain accurate records of pupils' attendance. However, a large number of pupils play truant from lessons. Leaders have not given enough thought to the safeguarding risks involved for those pupils who attend on a part-time basis.

Strengths in the school's approaches to securing improvement:

- Officers of both the Northworthy Trust and QEGSMAT are jointly focused on supporting the new headteacher and other leaders to improve the school. Leaders from both trusts and in school are working together in the best interests of all pupils.
- The new headteacher has a realistic appreciation of the school's strengths and weaknesses. She understands that significant improvement is required. She is ambitious for both pupils and staff at the school.

- The support provided by QEGSMAT is helping to build leadership capacity and improve management systems.

Weaknesses in the school's approaches to securing improvement:

- The Northworthy Trust as responsible authority and the governing body are not fulfilling their responsibilities to approve, review and monitor improvements as indicated in the school's development plan.
- The school is in a state of transition. Changes in governance mean that there is currently some uncertainty in the school's improvement journey.
- New management systems are not yet embedded across the school and are not yet showing sustained signs of improvement.

External support

Leaders have received valuable support from officers of QEGSMAT. This help has been useful in supporting leaders and in improving the school since the previous inspection.