

Ofsted
Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 4234
www.gov.uk/ofsted



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Mr Dominic Crompton
Headteacher
Skills School
Gorcott Hill
Redditch
Worcestershire
B98 9ET

Dear Mr Crompton

Special measures monitoring inspection of Skills School

Following my visit with Linda McGill, Ofsted Inspector, to your school on 24–25 September, 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 fourth monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures following the inspection that took place in December 2017. 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 not taking effective action towards the removal of special measures.

The school may not appoint newly qualified teachers.

I am copying this letter to the chair of trustees, the regional schools commissioner and the Director of Children's Services for Birmingham. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Deb Jenkins

Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

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

- As a matter of urgency, improve pupils' behaviour and their safety by:
 - minimising the use of physical intervention
 - carefully monitoring the use and appropriateness of physical intervention
 - tracking behaviour incidents with more rigour, analysing the tracking information to discern any patterns and trends and responding accordingly
 - putting in place interventions as necessary to help pupils manage and improve their behaviour
 - providing staff with training so they properly understand and respond appropriately to pupils' challenging behaviour
 - supporting teachers to devise effective strategies for the management of pupils with particularly challenging behaviour.
- Improve the quality of leadership and management by ensuring that:
 - safeguarding procedures are clearly understood and adhered to by all staff, especially in relation to making a written record of any concerns
 - governors have an in-depth understanding of the school's strengths and areas for development, and contribute fully to the school's strategic direction
 - all pupils have their full entitlement to a broad and balanced curriculum which meets their individual needs
 - the curriculum and teaching are carefully adapted for those pupils who are not thriving and progressing with the current offer
 - leaders carefully monitor and evaluate the use of additional funding for disadvantaged pupils so that it is used well to help them make good progress
 - leadership is more effectively distributed so that middle leaders have a wider impact on pupils' achievement across the school.
- Ensure that teaching is at least consistently good and leads to good outcomes by:
 - raising teachers' expectations of what pupils can achieve
 - identifying gaps in pupils' basic literacy and numeracy skills, and addressing these rapidly
 - providing work that is more challenging and makes pupils think harder, especially for the most able pupils
 - developing pupils' reading skills across the curriculum so they are given more frequent opportunities to practise and improve their reading.

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

Report on the fourth monitoring inspection on 24 and 25 September 2019

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the headteacher and deputy headteacher (who are also responsible for safeguarding), and subject leaders. The lead inspector met with the chair of the interim executive board (IEB). She spoke on the telephone to the chief executive officer of the Forward Education Trust. Inspectors met with subject leaders for English and mathematics as well as a group of staff. They talked to pupils informally during the inspection during visits to lessons and at break- and lunchtimes.

Context

Since the previous visit, there have been further staffing changes. The residential provision has closed and several staff have been made redundant. Further redundancies are planned. There are fewer pupils on roll. The associate leader has left the school. A new subject leader for English has been appointed. The school is still somewhat reliant on agency staff due to staff absence.

Currently, a consultation is under way to relocate the school to a site in the east Birmingham. If the relocation is approved, it is planned to happen in 2021. In the interim, there are plans to increase pupil numbers at the current site. The school continues to be in financial deficit, which is projected to increase to well over £500,000 in the current academic year.

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

The headteacher is dealing with day-to-day issues rather than leading the school strategically. He recognises that the recent lack of capacity in the leadership team has adversely affected the pace of improvement. The headteacher and the chair of the IEB are not working together well enough to make sure that the school continues to improve at pace. The chair is concerned that the headteacher has not maintained the school's drive for improvement. At the same time, the headteacher is not being held to account by the IEB. The minutes of board meetings show that the previous time allocation to discuss the school's improvement has been reduced again. There is no swift follow-up of actions from meetings because information is not shared quickly. The IEB chair and the headteacher have limited input into the meeting agendas. There has been poor attendance at recent IEB meetings by some board members.

While leaders can talk about what needs to improve further, they have not been quick enough to make a plan to address what needs to be done. The school's development plan is not suitable. It does not identify all of the school's priorities. For example, there is no mention of how the school will meet pupils' social, emotional and mental health needs. It is not clear how success will be checked. This means

that the IEB will not be able to check the progress of actions taken. The plan has not been shared with all staff and governors. The headteacher has delayed the production of the plan, but the IEB has not challenged this decision.

While there are many aspects of the school's work that make sure pupils are kept safe, the headteacher and the chair of the IEB have not followed the correct procedures for reporting and recording safeguarding concerns when allegations have been made. This is a significant weakness in leadership.

Despite the recommendations on previous visits, the headteacher has not yet formulated a suitable plan for spending the pupil premium funding. He has not been challenged by IEB members about this.

Some pupils are not getting the additional help they need to help them learn because of staff absence.

The school's relatively new system for recording concerns is being used well. Staff are confident about how to use it. They are reporting concerns quickly. All staff have benefited from safeguarding training provided by the trust. Leaders have planned additional training on relevant topics including neglect, youth violence and gangs. Pupils have frequent opportunities to learn about keeping themselves safe. These include online safety, making safe choices, and being aware of risks in the environment.

Leaders have continued to improve the quality of the education that the pupils are receiving. The curriculum for English and mathematics is well matched to the national curriculum. In these subjects, pupils get the chance to revisit what they have already learned. They can then build on what they already know. In mathematics, pupils are using practical materials with confidence. This helps them understand different number rules. They confidently showed inspectors how two-digit numbers can be represented by groups of tens and ones.

All staff have now received phonics training. Everyone is now following the same approach. Pupils are responding well to the daily phonics sessions. The teaching of phonics is helping to improve pupils' reading and writing. Pupils who are developing their phonics skills continue to have books matched to their phonics ability. Inspectors listened to some pupils read. They read quite confidently. When they became stuck on a word, they used their phonics knowledge to blend the letter sounds and read the word successfully. However, reading records show that pupils are not reading frequently enough. Some pupils have not had a reading book since June. Leaders have not made sure that there is a sense of urgency about getting pupils reading quickly and often.

Pupils learn about other subjects, such as geography and art, through themes. Themes change every term. Teachers plan these to make sure that pupils cover everything that they need to. However, teachers' planning does not make sure that pupils build on what they already know from theme to theme. Leaders and staff are

working with schools in the trust to make sure that the teaching of foundation subjects will be better planned. This work has already started.

A new system for assessing how well pupils are getting on is proving to be helpful for teachers. They can now check on the small steps of progress that pupils are making in English and mathematics. It helps teachers to make sure that there are no gaps in what pupils should know. They can use this information to plan what pupils need to learn next.

Pupils get a lot of help and support for their personal and social needs. Throughout the school day, adults help pupils to think about making good choices about the way they behave. Inspectors heard pupils discussing what can make people feel happy or sad, in a thoughtful way.

Pupils' behaviour continues to get better because staff are applying rules consistently and fairly. Pupils come into school safely and sensibly. The school is generally a calm place to be. Pupils take pride in their work. Pupils' workbooks are well presented. Pupils usually follow teachers' requests and get on with their work in lessons.

Staff keep a careful watch on pupils at breaktimes and lunchtimes. They help the pupils play together sensibly. Sometimes, pupils need additional help to manage their behaviour. This can often be through a gentle reminder. If pupils need additional help, adults give this in a calm and sensitive way. Incidents are continuing to reduce. More pupils are behaving well for the whole of the school day. There are fewer exclusions. Physical interventions are not being used as often. Occasionally, disruptive behaviour is ignored for too long and this disturbs other pupils' work.

Despite the weaknesses in leadership and governance, the pastoral team continues its good work. They offer support and guidance to staff to help manage pupils' behaviour in class. They use the information they collect to check on whether staff or pupils need extra support or advice. They make sure that parents and carers are involved in helping to make decisions about the right support for pupils. The empty residential building is now being used as a well-being centre for the pupils. Pupils can visit this space to calm down, chat to adults or take part in planned small-group activities.

Attendance continues to improve. Pupils are attending school much more regularly. However, the attendance of a small group of pupils has been affected this term because of staff absence. Pupils in one class could not attend for three days because leaders did not make other arrangements for their education. With further staff changes planned, senior leaders will soon be taking over the responsibility of checking and following up pupils' attendance on a day-to-day basis. They will also have to manage new pupils' transition into school. They do not have the capacity to do this.

Staff have had additional training in assessing risks before taking pupils on trips. In the past, some pupils have had to miss out on trips because their behaviour was not safe. Now, staff are planning activities carefully. They make sure that pupils have the right support. As a result, some pupils were able to enjoy a residential trip to Blackwell in the summer term. They learned more about their local area and how to be safe in an outdoor environment.

Pupils continue to enjoy the rewards they earn. Staff use the reward system consistently. Rewards help pupils to think carefully about their behaviour in lessons and around school. Pupils are encouraged to think about why they may not have achieved the highest gold awards. Pupils show consideration for others. They make comments such as, 'How can I help my friend get to gold?'

The effectiveness of leadership and management

Leaders and board members are having to make difficult decisions about staffing. This is because the school's income is less than what is being spent. The debt continues to increase rather than reduce. These additional challenges, along with staff absence, are making it more difficult for leaders to do their job well. The headteacher has been distracted from school improvement priorities. As a result, the school has not kept up the pace of improvement seen on previous visits.

Leaders are not being tenacious enough in making sure that pupils who need to go to a different school do so quickly. The local authority is slow to place pupils who need a change of placement. This results in some pupils missing school for long periods of time.

Subject leaders for English and mathematics are enthusiastic about their responsibilities. The subject leader for English has clear plans in place to further develop the teaching of English. The mathematics subject leader is drafting a plan for improvement.

Despite the circumstances, staff morale at the school continues to be high. Staff say that they feel well supported by senior leaders.

Strengths in the school's approaches to securing improvement:

- Leaders are making sure that the curriculum continues to improve. Staff are working with other schools in the trust. They are developing 'progression ladders' for different subjects. They intend that this will help teachers to plan activities that build on what pupils already know.
- Pupils' behaviour and attitudes to their learning continue to improve. Pupils are approaching their work with more determination to get things right.

Weaknesses in the school's approaches to securing improvement:

- The IEB is not holding senior leaders, particularly the headteacher, to account.
- The reduced capacity of leaders has had a negative impact on improvement since the previous visit. The headteacher knows what needs to be done, but has not addressed issues with enough urgency.
- The school is in a precarious financial position. This is having a negative impact on leaders' ability to carry out their roles effectively. It is also stalling the process of the school converting to an academy.

External support

Staff are benefiting from access to wide range of good-quality professional development. Training is being provided to the school by the proposed academy trust, free of charge. Teachers are now working with colleagues from other schools in the trust. Teachers value these opportunities and say that it helps them improve their practice.