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Mr Gaetano Ferrante
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Ferrante

Special measures monitoring inspection of Starbank School

Following my visit with Graham Tyrer, Ofsted Inspector, to your school on 8–9 January 2020, 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 July 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 local authority's statement of action is fit for purpose.

The school's improvement and action plans are fit for purpose.

The school may appoint newly qualified teachers before the next monitoring inspection. However, the school may not appoint any newly qualified teachers into the English department.

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

Yours sincerely

Bianka Zemke
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

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

- Ensure that there is a culture of safeguarding by taking appropriate action to ensure that all pupils feel safe, and are safe, in the school.
- As a matter of urgency, improve pupils' personal development, behaviour and welfare in the secondary phase by ensuring that:
 - all staff follow the school's agreed behaviour management policy consistently in lessons
 - leaders devise and implement an action plan to reduce incidents of serious misbehaviour
 - leaders use monitoring information about pupils' behaviour to devise suitable strategies to help improve behaviour
 - staff are trained to manage pupils' challenging behaviour successfully
 - pupils arrive to the school on time, wearing the correct uniform, and with the correct equipment to start lessons promptly.
- Improve the effectiveness of leadership and management, including governance, by ensuring that:
 - senior leaders unite leaders in the secondary phase, so everyone is working towards common goals for the benefit of all pupils
 - middle leaders in the secondary phase have a demonstrable impact on pupils' achievement in their specialist subject areas
 - governors develop an accurate picture of the school's work, especially with regard to pupils' behaviour and the use of sanctions
 - all fixed-term exclusions are recorded accurately
 - senior leaders strengthen communication with parents, particularly in relation to resolving their concerns or complaints.
- Improve the quality of teaching and learning across the secondary phase, so all pupils make good progress, by ensuring that:
 - teachers successfully build on pupils' prior learning from key stage 2
 - transition arrangements from key stage 2 to key stage 3 are improved, so that there is effective sharing of information, especially in relation to pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND)
 - there is stability in staffing, so that appropriately qualified teachers teach their subjects effectively
 - teachers raise their expectations of what pupils should achieve and set work that is challenging enough to meet the needs of all pupils.
- Ensure that teachers closely match reading books to pupils' phonics abilities.

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

Report on the first monitoring inspection on 8 January 2020 to 9 January 2020

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work and met with the headteacher and senior and middle leaders. Inspectors reviewed documents, including action and improvement plans, information about attendance and behaviour, and external reviews. Inspectors met with other members of staff, including the special educational needs coordinator and those with responsibility for safeguarding. An inspector met with two members of the interim executive board (IEB), including the chair and a representative from the school improvement service commissioned by the local authority. Inspectors also met formally with two groups of pupils and two groups of teachers. An inspector spoke to parents of primary-aged pupils and visited two primary settings that are not on the school's main site.

Inspectors held many conversations with pupils about their school and visited lessons in all year groups to evaluate pupils' behaviour and the quality of education. Inspectors visited the school's isolation room and Phoenix Centre. They observed pupils' behaviour during lessons, break and lunchtimes, as well as lesson changeover times. Inspectors discussed with pupils their views about the school during numerous conversations throughout the inspection.

Context

The appointment of the secondary-phase headteacher in September 2019 has brought much-needed stability to Starbank School. The previous executive headteacher left at the end of the autumn term. The secondary phase now has a functioning leadership team, following a secondment into the senior leadership team and clearly defined roles and responsibilities for all senior leaders.

An IEB was established to replace the school's governing body in November 2019. The chair and other members of the IEB have brought a range of expertise in education and governance to their roles and work effectively to support senior leaders.

A number of staff, at all levels, have left the school since the previous inspection. The appointment of new staff has proven to be challenging. As a result, there remains a high number of supply staff at the school.

The school currently works in partnership with a multi-academy trust (MAT), which is providing support in the form of expertise and creating capacity. There are plans under way for the school to become a sponsored academy in this MAT. The local authority is supportive of this move.

The progress made by the school in tackling the key areas for

improvement identified at the section 5 inspection

The previous inspection report highlighted weaknesses at the school, predominantly in the secondary phase of this all-through school. There have been a number of improvements since the previous inspection, most notably the appointment of the new secondary headteacher, the creation of the IEB, effective safeguarding and the improving behaviour of pupils.

The headteacher at the secondary phase has worked hard to establish a baseline of the effectiveness of the school during his first term in post. He has used external reviews to prioritise and tackle the most pressing issues in the school first, namely the safety and behaviour of pupils. This has been done successfully.

The headteacher introduced a number of structures, policies and procedures to urgently improve pupils' behaviour. Leaders have worked hard on this aspect, and it is the most notable change in the school. The new behaviour policy, paired with higher expectations of pupils' behaviour, has resulted in improvements. Incidents of poor or dangerous behaviour have decreased significantly. Pupils now say that behaviour is better and that staff deal more readily with any poor behaviour that does occur. However, lessons are not free from disruptions yet. This is because a minority of pupils do not always follow the new rules. Equally, some staff do not consistently apply the new policies. Although much improved, the behaviour of some pupils still disrupts learning.

Senior leaders have established systems of recording behaviour incidents. As a result of their analysis, leaders are now able to spot any trends and patterns in behaviour and bullying quickly. Records of disruptions to lessons show that the majority of pupils behave well. Leaders track carefully any incidents and use appropriate sanctions. For example, now fixed-term exclusions are recorded and used effectively in keeping with guidelines. The number of fixed-term exclusions has risen. This is due to clearer, more stringent behaviour expectations. Pupils are now clear about what is expected of them and the sanction that may be imposed on them if they fall short of these expectations.

The majority of secondary pupils generally show positive attitudes to their learning. They wear the correct uniform and arrive to lessons on time with the appropriate equipment. These pupils are ready to learn. In lessons, most pupils follow the instructions they are given. Behaviour is managed more effectively than it was previously. When lessons are well planned and engaging, pupils respond positively. When lessons are poorly planned, particularly when expectations are too low or when staff do not consistently apply policies, pupils become distracted.

Pupils in the primary phase of the school show very positive behaviour and attitudes to learning. They enjoy lessons, follow instruction quickly and actively contribute to creating a happy and safe learning environment.

Since the last inspection, leaders have considered the school's curriculum. They

have identified some serious weaknesses in a range of subjects. These weaknesses have resulted in significant gaps in what pupils know and can do. The quality of education at the school remains variable. Newly introduced basic teaching and learning initiatives are beginning to establish daily routines. However, the successful implementation of improvement strategies is hampered by inconsistencies. Pupils do not yet benefit from a stable body of teaching staff. This is because of issues in recruiting new staff and high staff absence rates. This in turn hinders pupils receiving well-planned and sequenced lessons which build on their previous learning in many subject areas.

The curriculum in the primary phase is well planned and sequenced. Here it leads to strong outcomes for pupils. Leaders have successfully tackled the issues identified at the last inspection in relation to phonics. Pupils benefit from skilful and effective phonics teaching, and the vast majority of them are able to read at least at the age expected of them.

Inspectors spoke with many pupils. The most able pupils at the school are critical about the education they are receiving. They are disappointed that staff absences remain high, and most commented on the high number of supply staff in their lessons. Year 10 and Year 11 pupils rightly feel that they are not well prepared for their upcoming GCSEs. One pupil said, 'Things are definitely getting better, but it's way too late for us.'

Leaders are concerned about the gaps in pupils' knowledge. They are planning regular extra support sessions in Year 11 to help pupils address the gaps in their knowledge before their GCSE examinations. Leaders are having to do this because of the many weaknesses that have existed in the past.

Primary-aged pupils speak very highly about their school. They enjoy school, feel happy and safe and all would recommend their school to other children. A strong quality of education, skilful teaching and positive behaviours and relationships consistently lead to pupils being ready to start secondary education. Parents and carers are complimentary about the primary phase. Leaders work well to provide pupils with many opportunities for personal growth. For example, Year 5 pupils performed with other primary schools at the Birmingham Hippodrome.

The effectiveness of leadership and management at the school

Senior leadership of the secondary school has been strengthened since the previous inspection. A new headteacher has been appointed and a deputy headteacher has been seconded for three days per week from a successful secondary school, to provide additional support and expertise. All senior leaders now have clearly defined roles and responsibilities. The headteacher challenges and supports his colleagues well. Although not yet a member of the MAT, trust leaders work effectively with senior leaders and members of the IEB to plan and evaluate improvement strategies.

There is a clear lack of strategic oversight of the school as an all-through school

since the previous executive headteacher left. The school is currently not functioning as an all-through school. Leaders and members of the IEB agree that the school feels and operates like two separate schools.

Senior leaders know what the school does well and what needs to improve. They have good plans that explain how they will improve the school. Leaders recognise that the improvements they have made thus far represent a positive start but that they are only the first stage in the improvement process. Since the previous inspection, leaders have focused successfully on safeguarding and behaviour. The headteacher has high expectations of pupils and staff and is ambitious for the school. However, not all of the school's staff are supporting effectively the changes to bring about improvements.

The previous inspection report highlighted concerns with the school's governance. Governance of the school is now provided by an IEB. Members of the IEB, including the chair, bring a wealth of expertise to their roles. In a short period of time they have worked well with school leaders to provide support, challenge and aid the introduction of many policies and procedures. Members of the IEB know the school's strengths and weaknesses very well. They understand that staffing continues to be an issue. They have accurately evaluated that continuing high staff absences currently hinder the consistent introduction of new teaching and learning initiatives and have devised plans to address this issue.

Leaders have successfully tackled the safeguarding issues raised at the previous inspection. For example, safeguarding procedures are now robust, and poor behaviour incidents have decreased. The school is a safe environment, and pupils agree. Staff receive regular safeguarding training. Leaders have introduced new systems to record concerns. All concerns raised are quickly followed up to ensure that pupils are safe. Staff know what to do if they are concerned about a pupil's welfare. Safeguarding staff work effectively with outside agencies such as the police to keep abreast of local development. This information is then shared with all staff to be extra vigilant and safeguard pupils.

The leadership of teaching and learning at the school is currently overseen by the headteacher. The headteacher and members of the IEB recognise that middle leaders do not yet play an active enough part in driving school improvement. This is partly due to middle leaders not having received the training they need to be able to do this.

The leadership of the primary phase remains strong. Each primary site has a site leader. They work collaboratively to plan and share practices. For example, they share curriculum and improvement plans. They have worked together to tackle the few issues raised in the previous inspection. As a result, these issues are now no longer a concern. The teaching of phonics has been strengthened, and pupils' books are now well matched to their reading ability. Site leaders know their settings well and continue to ensure that children receive a strong quality of education.

Strengths in the school's approaches to securing improvement:

- Leaders, including those with responsibility for governance, have an accurate understanding of the school's current position. They are aware of the areas that require significant improvement and are starting to take action to secure the necessary improvements.

Weaknesses in the school's approaches to securing improvement:

- Leaders and those responsible for governance have begun to evaluate the quality of education that the secondary phase provides. Actions to address the many shortfalls, including within the school's curriculum, have not yet been taken. This is partly due to staffing issues and the school being in the process of converting to become an academy within the MAT.

External support

The school has developed a successful working relationship with a MAT. The required legal and financial checks are being undertaken to enable the school to join the trust. In the meantime, a trust leader is part of the school's IEB.

The school has received good support from the local authority (LA) since the previous inspection. It has organised a range of support from a variety of sources. The LA has brought support from a practising headteacher; this colleague is now the chair of the IEB. It has also organised support for subject leaders from a number of Birmingham secondary schools. The school's improvement adviser has effectively supported the headteacher in reviewing the effectiveness of many aspects of the school. The LA played an important role in strengthening the leadership of the school, for example through new appointments and secondments. The LA continues to monitor the school's progress and complements the range of support provided by the MAT.