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Melanie Keating (Interim Headteacher)
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Dear Ms Keating

Special measures monitoring inspection of Hunters Hill College

Following my visit to your school on 8 and 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 September 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 local authority's statement of action is fit for purpose.

The school's improvement plan is fit for purpose.

The school may not appoint newly qualified teachers before the next monitoring inspection.

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

Yours sincerely

Tim Hill
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

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

- The quality of education is poor. Pupils' outcomes in many subjects are inadequate. Leaders need to provide subject leaders with the training and support they need so that they can improve their lesson planning. This will help pupils to know more and remember more.
- Pupils' literacy and numeracy skills are weak. They are not prepared well enough for the next stage in their education. Leaders need to use the extra funding for disadvantaged pupils to provide them with the help and support they need. Governors need to check that this is happening.
- All pupils have additional needs. Staff are not meeting these needs. Leaders need to provide staff with specific training on autism spectrum disorder and social, emotional and mental health needs. This will help staff plan learning better and manage pupils' behaviour more effectively.
- The management of behaviour is putting pupils' safety at risk. Leaders need to train and support staff in ways to promote good behaviour from all pupils. The management of behaviour needs to be consistent.
- Pupils' attendance is too low. This is limiting their progress. Leaders need to find better ways to improve pupils' attendance.
- The oversight and leadership of safeguarding need to be strengthened. The designated safeguarding lead needs to check the work of other safeguarding leads. There needs to be consistency of actions. Governors need to make sure that this is happening.
- Staff morale is low. Staff need more support from leaders. They need to be given the skills and knowledge they need to do their jobs well.

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

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the temporary executive headteacher, interim headteacher, interim deputy headteacher, assistant headteacher, four groups of pupils, the chair of the governing body, other governors, a large group of staff, two representatives of an organisation commissioned by the local authority to provide school improvement, and an assistant director from Birmingham local authority. The inspection focused principally on safeguarding, behaviour and attendance as these are the most urgent areas that the school needs to address.

Context

The headteacher left the school at the end of October 2019. The interim deputy headteacher took up post as interim headteacher from January 2020. An assistant headteacher has left the school since the last inspection. A temporary associate senior leader was appointed in December 2019. The head of care is currently not in school. The residential homes remain closed. Several governors resigned following the last inspection, leaving only two governors (excluding the headteacher). Three new governors joined the governing body in October 2019. The school has appointed an interim deputy headteacher. The temporary executive headteacher, commissioned by the local authority, continues to have oversight of the school for two days a week.

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

Despite some improvements to leaders' oversight of safeguarding, arrangements for safeguarding remain ineffective. Not all pupils feel safe while in school. There is not a reliable system in place for pupils to raise concerns. Pupils worry about how some staff manage pupils' behaviour. They say these staff use excessive physical force to control pupils. Pupils complain about being hurt by staff. Moreover, they believe that their concerns will not be taken seriously by some adults in school. This results in pupils not always telling leaders when they have been treated unfairly. Pupils are unsure who to turn to when they want to make a complaint. Governors have not made adequate checks to ensure that safeguarding procedures are effective. Recently, senior leaders have been working hard to build better, trusting relationships between staff and pupils. Now, when it is discovered that a member of staff may have acted inappropriately, the headteacher takes swift, decisive action to protect pupils.

Leaders have started to check the quality of safeguarding referrals and how they are followed up. They do this to ensure that deputy safeguarding leads take the right course of action to keep pupils safe. When an allegation is made about a

member of staff, leaders take immediate action and share their concerns with the local authority (LA). However, on occasion, leaders have been unaware of allegations about staff conduct because the LA has not informed the school about the concerns it has received. This has meant that pupils have potentially been left at risk. Despite these issues, leaders have been successful in raising the profile of safeguarding among staff. In addition, all staff have benefited from additional safeguarding training. Leaders use information from safeguarding records to decide on the training content that will be most useful for staff. Consequently, staff have a better understanding about how to keep pupils safe.

Staff understand when and how to report concerns. Record-keeping is usually of good quality. It shows that leaders take swift action when they discover a pupil may be at risk of harm. New leaders are more tenacious in following up referrals, using local escalation procedures when, in their view, the response from children's services has not been acceptable. Pupils learn about how to keep themselves safe through the school's personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) education curriculum. However, this is not matched closely enough to pupils' needs. Leaders know this and have already started to reconsider which topics are most important for inclusion within the PSHE curriculum.

Pupils' attendance remains very low. It has fallen further since the last inspection. The persistent absence rate for Year 10 pupils is exceptionally high, almost at 90%. This means that almost all Year 10 pupils have the equivalent of at least four weeks of lost learning per year. This has a detrimental effect on their education. However, since December, leaders' work to improve attendance has been positive. Leaders have adopted a more coordinated approach to tackling persistent absence. Staff are now identifying and targeting pupils more successfully. The school is working more effectively with other agencies to try and get the right support for pupils with low attendance. There are a significant minority of pupils who do not currently attend school at all. Leaders have tightened procedures to check on the safety of these pupils.

Leaders have focused on making sure that staff have a better understanding of the specific needs of pupils. Leaders invest time in sharing key information about pupils with staff. This is helping staff to develop a growing understanding of how best to support pupils. However, there is still considerable work to do. For example, many staff do not understand the primary needs of pupils, as outlined in their education, health and care plans. New leaders have begun to implement weekly staff training to help develop teachers' knowledge about pupils with social, emotional and mental health needs. Leaders have also arranged whole-staff training on specific special educational needs. For example, staff have undertaken training on how to provide a supportive environment for pupils with autism spectrum disorder. Staff are developing 'one-page profiles' for each pupil. These summarise information about pupils and the ways they can be best supported with their learning and personal development.

Pupils' behaviour is not improving quickly enough. This is because staff's management of behaviour remains inconsistent. Leaders have recently started to get staff to think more carefully about the organisation of classroom environments and how this affects pupils' behaviour. This is beginning to make a difference. The interim headteacher has drafted a revised behaviour policy. It is expected that this will be introduced later this term. One helpful initiative recently introduced involves leaders reviewing specific behaviour incidents with individual staff. They explore ways to manage a pupil's behaviour more effectively should it occur again. There are some green shoots in improving behaviour, but there is still a long way to go. While fewer pupils are absconding from lessons, there are still too many who are not engaging in classwork.

At times, when serious behaviour incidents occur, such as fighting, staff have had to use physical restraint to protect pupils. The interim headteacher has made it clear to staff that physical intervention should only be used as a last resort. Records indicate that there has been a reduction in the number of physical restraints recorded since the time of the last inspection. Almost all staff have had recent refresher training on the use of safe physical restraint. Leaders have rightly placed an emphasis on encouraging staff to use de-escalation techniques and reduce the need for physical intervention.

Pupils believe that the school's consequences for bullying behaviour sometimes, albeit inadvertently, reward the bully. For example, the bully may be given a period of internal exclusion in 'Frobisher' (one of the residential houses) where pupils might play pool with staff or enjoy a cup of hot chocolate. The interim headteacher has already identified this issue and plans to address this imminently.

While the quality of education was not the focus of this first visit, most pupils I spoke to said that they find some of their classwork too easy. Year 11 pupils say that they do not feel well prepared for their examinations or entry into college. They have aspirations for the future but have not had enough opportunities to discuss and plan their next steps. Leaders have begun to consider strategies to improve pupils' literacy and numeracy skills. Last term, teachers carried out baseline assessments to determine pupils' starting points. Leaders understand that some pupils need significant support in securing early reading and phonics skills. Teachers have started to create appropriate subject action plans to help improve the curriculum offer for pupils.

Staff morale is improving because the new headteacher, ably supported by other leaders, is keeping staff more informed of changes. She is also involving staff more in whole-school decision making. There is a real willingness among staff to make new approaches work, but they feel great uncertainty about their futures. Staff are generally positive about the direction of travel – most are on board with the changes and feel well supported by leaders. One teacher's comment summed up the views of many when they described recently appointed leaders as 'a breath of fresh air'.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

The school has been through a very turbulent period with staffing. This has contributed to the school's slow pace of change. Immediately following the school's last inspection, poor leadership at the time meant that some changes that should have been executed with urgency, were not. The school's weaknesses are extensive and there is much work to do and no time to waste. The executive headteacher made some important staffing decisions that has enabled the school to secure more effective interim leadership. The very recently formed interim leadership team is now working at pace to reverse the decline in the school's performance.

The interim headteacher, while only in post for a matter of days, has a clear vision for the school's future. This is underpinned by her steely determination to ensure that pupils are safe and experience an appropriate curriculum. The school improvement plan focuses sharply on the right objectives to move the school forward. Leaders have already started to plot their progress against agreed actions. However, in a few instances, the impact may be difficult to measure unless governors and others have a clear sense of where leaders are starting from. The newly appointed interim leaders are working together well, drawing on their unique strengths. The headteacher is undertaking a root and branch review of different aspects of the school's work that need improvement.

Governors have not acted quickly enough to check on the school's progress in addressing weaknesses. This is largely because of the almost total disbandment of the governing body following the last inspection. Shortly after this, there was a period of limited activity in terms of school improvement. During the second half of the autumn term, new governors joined the governing body. This has added much-needed capacity. They are beginning to get an understanding of the enormity of the task ahead of them. The new governors are already asking the right questions of leaders.

External support

The executive headteacher has provided strong support in the two days a week available to her. Much of this time has been spent in managing personnel and forming an interim leadership team. This has built leadership capacity and put the school on a good footing to embark on its school improvement journey. The service commissioned by the LA to provide school improvement is monitoring leaders' work. It may like to consider how additional support can be sought to help bolster the school's improvement plans. Reports from leaders and governors indicate that they feel that, at times, the LA has been elusive when support has been requested. LA officers do not agree. School leaders and the LA must work together to ensure that the school receives the agreed support and resources that are needed.