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23 April 2021

Christine Smiles
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Dear Mrs Smiles

Additional, remote monitoring inspection of Talbot House Trust

Following my remote inspection with Stephanie Innes-Taylor, Her Majesty's Inspector (HMI), of your school on 23 March 2021, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the 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 to provide education to all pupils during the current circumstances.

This monitoring inspection was conducted under section 8 (2) of the Education Act 2005 (as amended) and in accordance with Ofsted's published procedures for visiting schools while routine inspections remain temporarily suspended. It was additional to the usual monitoring process for schools that are judged to require improvement.

This monitoring inspection was carried out remotely. As such, the range of evidence available to inspectors was narrower than would normally be the case during an on-site inspection. As a result, this letter provides a more limited level of assurance than our usual monitoring reports.

The inspection took place because the school has received three successive judgements of requires improvement. The school's most recent section 5 inspection took place in May 2019.

Having considered all the evidence and taking into account the impact of COVID-19 on the school, I am of the opinion that at this time:

Leaders and those responsible for governance are taking effective action to provide education in the current circumstances.

Leaders and those responsible for governance should take further action to:

- identify and assess the very weakest readers and implement appropriate strategies to support them, including the use of a phonics-based approach where appropriate, and
- ensure that the necessary strategies continue for as long as they are required, including when pupils move from the primary phase to the secondary phase.

Context

- Since the section 5 inspection, there have been some changes to your senior leadership team. You have appointed a new leader for the primary phase of the school and a new leader to take responsibility for your careers and enrichment curriculum.
- As a special school for pupils with social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) needs, as well as other special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND), all your pupils have education, health and care (EHC) plans. You consider all your pupils to be vulnerable. You remained open throughout the period when schools were largely closed to most pupils at the start of the spring term. During this period, the approximate proportion of pupils educated at school gradually increased from around 33% to just under 90%.
- At the time of this inspection, almost 90% of pupils were attending on site.

Main findings

- Your curriculum is designed to meet pupils' complex SEMH and other SEND needs. Additionally, it is designed to accommodate the fact that pupils join at different points in the year, from different education settings and with different experiences. As such, your curriculum is 'fluid', which means that pupils follow a curriculum determined by what is right for their particular needs, not how old they are. As a result, you have taken effective action to create a curriculum which is responsive to the particular complexities of your school.
- Pre-pandemic, you overhauled your curriculum. Based on the national curriculum programmes of study in English, mathematics, science, art and design, and computing, you wrote schemes of work which set out the content of what should be taught, and in what order. In the 'upper school' of Years 10 and 11, pupils follow courses which lead to nationally recognised accreditations. Together with a new focus on post-16 next steps, this provides strong evidence of leaders' high aspirations for all your pupils.
- Also pre-pandemic, you decided to strengthen your 'enrichment' curriculum. In your school, enrichment is as important a component of the curriculum as is 'academic' study. It is the means by which you prepare your pupils for adult life, for being able to move on at 16 years of age with the 'life skills' to do so

with confidence. The enrichment curriculum is planned and focused, not ad hoc.

- The growing effectiveness of the 'enrichment' curriculum is demonstrated by pupils telling us how much they enjoyed the group visits and experiences that they participated in prior to the pandemic. COVID-19 restrictions required many enrichment activities to be paused, but you are now working towards their resumption once government regulations allow it.
- During the most recent period of lockdown, you adjusted your curriculum in places, as a result of COVID-19 restrictions. You identified those parts of subject schemes of work which did not lend themselves to remote teaching for your pupils, such as algebra in mathematics, as well as some practical components such as science experiments. You have already reordered the curriculum so that all missed components have been repositioned in your curriculum plans.
- To further support you in making informed decisions about resequencing your curriculum, you have taken effective action to find out what pupils have learned and remembered from your curriculum. You have used your 'personalised learning curriculum' assessments to measure pupils' understanding, including those in Year 11. As a result, you have identified what gaps there are in pupils' knowledge.
- To support pupils in their reading, various strategies are in place. However, particularly for older pupils, the system for identifying the very weakest readers and how best to support them is not effective. The transition of pupils from the primary phase to the 'upper school' does not ensure that the weakest readers continue to be supported with appropriate strategies, including a phonics-based approach. As a result, it is possible for pupils with the most pressing need for support with reading to fall through the gap.
- Your remote learning provision is necessarily not 'one size fits all'. This is because pupils and their families require an individualised approach. Leaders have put in place a broad menu combining recorded 'live' lessons and work pack. The precise nature of the provision is agreed in consultation with pupils and their families.
- Trustees have been effective in supporting and challenging leaders through their ongoing 'link' trustee work. This has enabled them to hold leaders to account for the pandemic curriculum, including the quality of the remote learning provision.
- The trust chief executive officer (CEO) has provided resolute support for leaders, especially in maintaining the shared high ambitions for all pupils. She has been ably supported in assuring herself of the effectiveness of leaders' actions by the school improvement partner (SIP) from Newcastle upon Tyne local authority.

Evidence

This inspection was conducted remotely. We spoke to you, other senior leaders, the CEO, pupils, staff, one of the trustees and the SIP to discuss leaders' actions to provide education to all pupils during a national lockdown.

We also met leaders with responsibility for pupils' reading and for the school's safeguarding arrangements. We looked at responses to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, including three free-text responses, and 31 staff questionnaires.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the board of trustees and the chief executive officer of Talbot House Trust, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Newcastle upon Tyne. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Steve Shaw
Her Majesty's Inspector