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Paul Yeomans
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Dear Mr Yeomans

Special measures monitoring inspection of Springfield House Community Special School

Following my visit with Catherine Crooks, Her Majesty's Inspector (HMI), to your school on 15 and 16 June 2021, 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 most 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 March 2020. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005. The monitoring inspection report is attached.

This was the first routine inspection the school received since the COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic began. We discussed the impact of the pandemic with you and have taken that into account in our evaluation.

Having considered 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 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 interim executive board (IEB), the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Birmingham. This letter will be published on the Ofsted reports website.

Yours sincerely

Alun Williams
Her Majesty's Inspector

Report on the first monitoring inspection on 15 and 16 June 2021

Context

The school used to be federated with Lindsworth School. The federation was dissolved in October 2020. The executive headteacher left the school in August 2020. The acting headteacher joined the school in November 2020. The IEB replaced the governing body in January 2021.

An assistant headteacher has joined the school, seconded from the multi-academy trust (MAT) that is supporting the school. An educational consultant works in the school for one day each week. New leaders of early reading and mathematics have been appointed this year.

The school occupies an attractive, rural site of more than 13 acres. It has several buildings and some, dating back to the 18th century, are listed. The nature of the site poses considerable challenges for leaders. For example, maintenance costs are high. Although the school is due to become a sponsored academy, no sponsor has yet been identified. The costs associated with the school's site have proved a key impediment to finding a suitable sponsor.

The progress made towards the removal of special measures

The school is improving in all areas, most notably in safeguarding, behaviour and the quality of education provided to pupils. Improvement was slow initially because of several factors, including the process of defederalisation and the impact of COVID-19. The pace of improvement is faster now, although several challenges remain. These include a high level of staff absence and continuing uncertainty about the school's long-term future.

Leaders are ambitious for the school and its pupils. They and the school's staff are committed to seeing the school continue to improve. Support from the MAT has helped to increase the expertise and capacity of leaders. For example, effective leadership is now evident in many areas, including safeguarding, reading, mathematics and behaviour. It is therefore very concerning that the school does not yet know what support, if any, it will receive in the next academic year. This uncertainty is making planning for next year more difficult and there is a risk that the pace of improvement will slow or even cease as a result.

Safeguarding is now effective. Leaders have addressed the weaknesses identified during the inspection of March 2020. There now exists a strong culture of keeping pupils safe in the school. Staff have been trained well and are alert to the signs that pupils might need extra support. Leaders deal with concerns quickly, involving outside agencies when needed. Records relating to child protection are detailed and organised well. Pupils are well cared for by staff.

Behaviour has improved since March 2020. Relationships between staff and pupils are positive and respectful. However, high levels of staff absence mean that the school often employs supply staff. This makes managing behaviour more challenging because many pupils find such change difficult. They thrive on routine and structure.

Leaders have revised the school's approach to behaviour management, with a focus on encouraging positive behaviour. The use of exclusion as a sanction has decreased considerably as a result. Staff manage incidents of inappropriate behaviour calmly and appropriately. Pupils who need time out of class are supervised closely to ensure they are safe. Pupils are encouraged to return to lessons when ready. The school does not make any use of seclusion or isolation.

The early years and key stage 1 provision have improved since the section 5 inspection, although there is room for further improvement. Leaders have moved these classes to a more appropriate area of the school site. The buildings have the potential to provide a high-quality learning environment. Building works are planned to take place over the summer holidays.

The IEB has been in operation for six months. Its members possess considerable expertise. They provide effective support and strong challenge to leaders. Because of COVID-19, most have not yet visited the site. However, even after a relatively short time, the IEB is contributing well to the school's improvement.

The school's improvement plan addresses all of the weaknesses identified during the section 5 inspection. It sets out how these are to be addressed. However, it has not been updated recently and so does not set out future actions and timescales as helpfully as it should. Leaders and members of the IEB are poised to write a revised improvement plan in the near future.

Leaders have rightly made improving pupils' reading one of their top priorities. They have adopted a phonics scheme and have trained all staff in its use. Although still at a relatively early stage of implementation, the scheme is being followed faithfully and staff are putting their training into practice effectively. It is beginning to show a positive impact in improving pupils' reading.

This area is well led by a leader who is passionate and knowledgeable. The programme is highly structured and appropriately resourced, with all books being fully decodable. Plans for its future development are clear. For example, pupils will take the books they have been reading in class, and similarly decodable books, home.

Pupils are grouped by ability, following a detailed assessment of their phonic ability. Regular assessments then ensure that staff know how much progress pupils are making and where gaps in their knowledge remain. Pupils are responding well to phonics teaching and are benefiting from working with other pupils and adults.

Leaders have begun to develop the mathematics curriculum, but its implementation is some way behind that for phonics and reading. The curriculum leader has constructed a work scheme that sets out what pupils should learn in each year. It is based on commercial schemes but has been adapted with the needs of the school's pupils in mind. Pupils are taught in class groups based on their age, often with a wide variation in ability and additional needs. Teachers currently use the section of the mathematics scheme they feel is most appropriate for the pupils in their class. Because this judgement is not based on accurate assessment information, teachers cannot be sure that pupils are learning the mathematics they need to learn based on their ability and prior knowledge.

Teachers and teaching assistants have appropriate mathematical subject knowledge. Relationships are strong and so pupils typically work productively in mathematics lessons.

Leaders are currently carrying out baseline assessments of all pupils in the school. These aim to identify what pupils already know, gaps in their knowledge and also their level of academic ability. Leaders intend to use this information to place pupils in more appropriate teaching groups and to determine accurately what they should be learning, for example in mathematics.

The curriculum beyond reading and mathematics remains weak. Leaders have bought commercial primary school schemes of work in all subjects. However, they have not considered how these schemes should be used for Springfield House's pupils. They have yet to set out what they want pupils to learn in each subject. Leaders' work to develop teachers' general teaching skills through training has proved successful. However, other than in phonics, leaders have not yet set out what it means to teach each subject effectively.

Additional support

School leaders very much value the support that the MAT has provided to the school. They believe it has been instrumental in supporting the school's journey of improvement.

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the headteacher, other senior leaders, pupils, staff, the chair of the IEB, the chief executive officer of the MAT supporting the school and a representative of the local authority. Inspectors considered 12 responses to Ofsted's online staff survey.