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Joanne McKinney
Acting Headteacher
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Dear Miss McKinney

Special measures monitoring inspection of Portland School and Specialist College

Following my visit with Helen Forrest, Her Majesty's Inspector (HMI), to your school on 5 and 6 July 2022, 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 December 2021. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005. The monitoring inspection report is attached.

This was the second routine inspection the school received since the COVID-19 pandemic began. We discussed the ongoing 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:

The school continues to be inadequate. Leaders and those responsible for governance are not taking effective action towards the removal of special measures.

The school's improvement plan is fit for purpose.

The school may not appoint early career teachers before the next monitoring inspection.

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 Stoke-on-Trent. This letter will be published on the Ofsted reports website.

Yours sincerely

Chris Pollitt
Her Majesty's Inspector

Report on the first monitoring inspection on 5 and 6 July 2022

Context

The school is split across two sites. At the Trent Vale site, most pupils are of primary age. Pupils in Years 7 to 11 attend the Blythe Bridge Site. A few Year 7 pupils attend the primary site to meet specific special educational needs and/or disabilities.

Since the last inspection, there have been considerable changes in leadership at the school. The current acting headteacher is the third since the section 5 inspection in December 2021. Two curriculum leaders have been appointed, one for Trent Vale and one for Blythe Bridge. These two recent appointments are now members of the middle leadership team.

An interim executive board (IEB) is now responsible for governance. The IEB took over from the previous governing body in May 2022.

There continues to be a high level of staff absence across both sites. This includes members of the leadership team. To manage this, the acting head of school responsible for the primary site has taken over the acting headteacher role for both sites.

The progress made towards the removal of special measures

Instability in leadership and staff absence have had a negative impact on the school's ability to address the areas for improvement that were identified at the last inspection. While leaders' plans for improvement are fit for purpose, this instability has limited opportunities to implement these plans. Consequently, the much-needed improvement in the quality of education has not yet begun to be achieved. The current acting headteacher, supported by a highly skilled IEB, clearly understands the school's weaknesses. Her initial actions have gone a long way to stem the decline in standards in some areas of the school. Supported by the IEB and other senior leaders, she has prioritised making sure that, in the future, there is a more consistent staff group around the pupils.

Leaders have not yet established a systematic approach to improving the curriculum. There remain too many subjects without clear leadership. While there is evidence of long-term plans for all subjects in primary, there remains inconsistency in how well these are implemented. At secondary, very few subjects have long- or medium-term plans. This means that some teachers have started to create their own lessons, unaware of what learning has happened previously or what will come next. Consequently, many of the issues at the last inspection remain. In some cases, most notably in secondary, the quality of education has worsened. Pupils in secondary still do not access a broad and balanced curriculum. This remains the case, as other subjects such as history, geography and modern foreign languages are not well planned or taught. Secure subject knowledge in some curriculum areas remains an area in need of development. Except for mathematics and English, teachers do not yet have the subject knowledge to teach all curriculum

areas. Two teachers have now been appointed to lead on the curriculum, but they have not yet had sufficient time to evaluate the quality of the curriculum across both sites.

Since the last inspection, reading has been a focus at the Trent Vale primary site. Phonics is taught daily to all pupils who need it. The school has invested in a new phonics programme that will be implemented in September 2022. However, the training for this programme has only recently happened, and the programme is not yet implemented. Consequently, there remains variability in these aspects of the phonics provision. Not all books accurately match the sounds being taught, and the books contain too many words that pupils cannot decode using their phonics. In secondary, the provision for pupils who are not yet confident readers is not in place.

Since the last inspection, there has been a clear focus on developing how the school meets pupils' social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) needs. Leaders are now ensuring that the often high-quality provision that exists for SEMH needs in the primary phase is replicated in secondary. Whole-school staff training has been provided on understanding SEMH. In some cases, this training is well utilised by staff, such as those responsible for safeguarding or intervention. In these cases, what is put in place for pupils is often co-produced with parents. When needed, the school provides access to specialist services such as social care or child and adolescent mental health services. However, there remains inconsistency in how well teachers understand SEMH needs and adapt their classroom provisions accordingly. Too often, staff do not implement the training they have had in analysing and understanding the impact that SEMH can have on a pupil.

Since the last inspection, a new behaviour policy has been written, but due to the changes in governance this new policy has not yet been agreed by the IEB. While training has been provided for all staff, there remains too much variability in managing behaviour in secondary. For example, in some lessons visited during the inspection, and most noticeably mathematics, pupils were calm, focused and challenged to learn. However, inspectors visited classes where the overfocus on keeping pupils calm and behaving well meant that lessons were being taught poorly or not at all. In these cases, the need to help pupils to learn and remember more was not urgent enough.

There remains a lack of capacity in the leadership team both to run the school on a day-to-day basis and to improve it. Due to instability in staff absence, this has worsened since the last inspection. At the time of this inspection, only one of the three senior leaders employed by the school was in attendance. This lack of capacity has meant that, in primary, things have not improved, and in some areas in secondary, things have got worse. The local authority and IEB are committed to securing a consistent leadership team as soon as possible. As an interim measure, two education consultants have been brought into the school to support the acting headteacher. However, at the point of the inspection, it was unclear what the leadership team would look like at the start of the next academic year.

At the last inspection, too many pupils attended part time on a rota basis due to staff absence. This meant that they did not have access to their entitlement to a full-time

curriculum. While attendance remains a concern for the school, and a significant number of pupils do not attend regularly, all pupils are now rightly expected to attend full time. The IEB and current senior leaders have prioritised making sure that these pupils get the right support to attend more often.

Additional support

Since the last inspection, and due to the leadership capacity issues, the local authority and IEB have provided support by bringing education consultants into the school. This has been well received and appreciated by the acting headteacher. The original intent of this work was to help leaders develop the curriculum, but due to instability around staff absence, the focus has been to provide additional capacity more generally to the leadership team. A national multi-academy trust (MAT) has provided informal support for whole-school policy development.

The local authority has also supported the school in reducing pupils' absence and identifying appropriate provision in other schools when needed. Middle leaders have also received support from the virtual school to develop provisions for children looked after. Consequently, additional funding has now been secured to provide additional vocational opportunities, such as hair and beauty courses for these pupils.

Evidence

Inspectors met with the interim headteacher, other middle leaders, staff, a group of pupils, the chief executive officer of the MAT currently supporting the school, parents, taxi drivers and taxi escorts, two members and the chair of the IEB and two local authority officers.

Inspectors also made brief visits to lessons, spoke informally and formally with pupils and looked at attendance records, behaviour records and curriculum documents in a range of subjects.