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Martin Lonergan
Interim Headteacher
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Dear Mr Lonergan

Special measures monitoring inspection of Northern Counties School

This letter sets out the findings from the monitoring inspection of your school that took place on 13 and 14 March 2023, on behalf of His Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills. The monitoring inspection was carried out under section 8(2) of the Education Act 2005 and was the second monitoring inspection since the school was judged to require special measures following the graded (section 5) inspection that took place in May 2022.

During the inspection, I discussed with you and other senior leaders, the chief executive officer of The Percy Hedley Foundation, other staff, trustees and governors the actions that have been taken to improve the school since the most recent graded inspection. We discussed the ongoing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. I also considered leaders' actions to improve site security and ongoing improvements to the Hillcrest environment, examined safeguarding systems, visited lessons, held meetings with other staff, met a range of pupils, both informally and formally, and completed a document scrutiny. I reviewed the comments made by parents on Ofsted Parent View and responses to the staff survey. I have considered all this in coming to my judgement.

Northern Counties School remains inadequate and requires special measures. Leaders have made progress to improve the school, but more work is necessary for the category of concern to be removed.

I strongly recommend that the school does not seek to appoint early career teachers.

The progress made towards the removal of special measures

Since the previous monitoring inspection, school leadership capacity has increased. Leadership is much less fragile. You are supported by a recently appointed chief executive officer. A new chair of trustees has also been appointed. You have recruited an experienced chair of governors who is working to strengthen school governance. Though some vacancies remain, governors are better placed to offer focused challenge and support. You understand what further developments are needed to improve school leadership. This includes appointing a substantive headteacher and developing effective curriculum leaders.

You and your team have rightly focused on developing the curriculum. You have implemented a new curriculum that has been developed for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities. This is being adapted to meet the different needs of pupils in your school. You have prioritised becoming an examination centre. Pupils are now able to access a variety of qualifications.

You have launched a new phonics programme. Teachers, including most teaching support staff, are trained to consistently deliver this programme. Pupils have daily phonics lessons in timetabled slots. This enables you and other leaders to visit lessons and check that pupils are learning more effectively. You and your team have ensured teaching routines are consistent. Pupils know what to expect in their reading and phonics lessons. They engage well as a result. The quality of phonics provision continues to improve.

You continue to improve the effectiveness of safeguarding systems. Checks on contractors who access the school site have been further developed. You have a clear picture of which contractors have undergone appropriate safeguarding checks so they can work on the school premises without additional supervision. With the support of leaders from the Percy Hedley Foundation, you are sensitively working to resolve inspectors' safeguarding concerns around the adult living services on the school site for the benefit of all stakeholders.

You provide positive direction for the school leadership team. New leaders are developing their skills and confidence, with your guidance. You have ensured each member of the leadership team has well-defined responsibilities. You have developed subject leadership since the previous monitoring inspection. Most curriculum leader positions are established. Others are in the process of being finalised, with permanent members of staff taking up posts.

You are improving the environment within the Hillcrest premises. The improvements are supported by the estates team of the Percy Hedley Foundation. Hillcrest is much cleaner and less cluttered. Roof repairs ensure there are no leaks. The building is warmer and more inviting. You have implemented sensible cleaning routines that limit the likelihood of vermin. During the monitoring inspection, some learning was disrupted by a music lesson in a nearby classroom. You have extensive building plans to further develop the learning environment over the summer term. This includes outdoor spaces for younger children.

You and your team are now addressing the concerns identified in the graded inspection at pace. You have also demonstrated urgency in tackling the inadequacies identified at the previous monitoring inspection. Your school improvement plans are appropriate and align closely to the next steps identified in the graded inspection and subsequent monitoring visit. Therefore, sufficient progress has been made.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the governing body and the chief executive officer of The Percy Hedley Foundation, the Department for Education's regional director and the director of children's services for Newcastle upon Tyne. This letter will be published on the Ofsted reports website.

Yours sincerely

David Mills
His Majesty's Inspector