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Martin Lonergan
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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 that took place on 6 and 7 December 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 fourth monitoring inspection since the school was judged to require special measures following the graded (section 5) inspection that took place in May 2022.

The purpose of a monitoring inspection is not to grade the school's overall effectiveness, but to identify and report on the school's progress. It is to highlight to the school and parents any improvements that school leaders have made since the school's previous graded inspection.

During the inspection, I discussed with you and other senior leaders, the chief executive officer (CEO) of The Percy Hedley Foundation, the director of education, the school improvement partner, curriculum leaders, other staff and the chair of 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 the curriculum, and ongoing improvements to the school's environment, closely scrutinised the effectiveness of the school's risk assessment to manage adults that live on the school site, visited lessons, held meetings with other staff, met a range of pupils informally and completed a document scrutiny. I have considered all this in coming to my judgement.

Leaders have made progress to improve the school, but more work is necessary for the school to be no longer judged as requiring special measures.

I am of the opinion that the school may appoint early career teachers.

The progress made towards the removal of special measures

Since the previous monitoring inspection, you have continued to provide focused leadership. You have ensured that the school's attention has remained on strengthening the school's safeguarding arrangements and further developing the curriculum experienced by pupils. You also continue to improve the environment in which pupils learn. Staffing remains stable at the school. Leaders have clearer responsibilities. The newly appointed director of education from The Percy Hedley Foundation supports you and your team well. This has increased the capacity of the school to improve.

You are supported by a proactive chair of governors. They continue to develop governance practice in the school. You have yet to recruit a local authority governor representative as outlined in your scheme of delegation. However, the school has sufficient governing body members with appropriate educational experience. The school's governors provide challenge and support to ensure that the school maintains its momentum of improvement. You and your team are successfully addressing the areas identified at the previous graded inspection and subsequent monitoring visits.

You continue to refine and embed the curriculum. It follows a pathway model that is designed to meet pupils' special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). It is further adapted to meet pupils' individual ages and stages of learning. You and your team ensure the lessons that pupils experience are engaging. Staff use positive behaviour management effectively to motivate pupils to learn well. During my visits to lessons, I noted highly secure relationships between staff and pupils. Most pupils behave extremely well in the school as a result.

You prioritise reading and the development of pupils' phonics knowledge. The school has invested in new library areas and resources to raise the profile of reading further. You have redeveloped different areas of the school as designated reading and learning spaces. These areas are bright and engaging, with themes that include 'The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe' and popular children's games. They are well stocked with a range of books. These include texts relating to pupils' class work, reading for pleasure and books to read at home.

The school has invested in improvements to the learning environment. The improvements demonstrate careful thought to the learning and developmental needs of pupils with complex SEND. The building and decorative work is proceeding rapidly. During my visit, I observed newly refurbished classrooms and outside spaces. The school has installed access ramps for wheelchair users that enable all pupils to use facilities equally. You have ensured younger children's play areas and outside spaces are appropriate to their needs with rubberised flooring, shelters and markings. Classrooms in the Hillcrest building are much more engaging. They are warmer, brighter and more purposeful learning environments.

You and your team continue to strengthen and embed safeguarding systems in the school. Checks on adults prior to their employment are rigorous. You ensure pupils' safeguarding records are detailed and any concerns are followed up promptly by dedicated safeguarding staff. They seek advice from external partners when complex safeguarding matters arise. With the support of leaders from the Percy Hedley Foundation, you have successfully resolved inspectors' questions about adults that live on the school site. You have an effective risk assessment to manage adults when they move from residences to their day placements. You ensure staff enact the agreed systems and processes outlined in the risk assessment. During my visit, I observed the swift movement of adults from the residences to their transport for the day ahead. These activities took place before pupils arrived to start their school day. Adults that live on the school site return to residences after pupils leave school later in the day. These practices are embedded.

You continue to be supported by an independent school improvement partner. They provide an impartial educational perspective. You value this support. Your improvement plans clearly address the actions necessary to further improve the school. You have maintained the pace of progress evidenced during recent monitoring visits.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the governing body and the CEO 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