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Mark Ruffett
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Dear Mr Ruffett

Special measures monitoring inspection of Courtlands School

This letter sets out the findings from the monitoring inspection that took place on 16 and 17 December 2024, 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 first monitoring inspection since the school was judged to require special measures following the graded (section 5) inspection that took place in March 2024.

The purpose of a monitoring inspection is not to grade the school's key and (where applicable) provision judgements, 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, the head of school, the chief executive officer (CEO) of the trust (interim) and other senior trust staff, the chair of the board of trustees, the chair and other members of the interim academy board 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 visited lessons and held discussions with pupils and staff, including curriculum leaders and members of the school's senior leadership team. 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 no longer be judged as requiring special measures.

HMCI strongly recommends that the school does not seek to appoint early career teachers.

The position regarding the appointment of early career teachers will be considered again during any monitoring inspection we carry out.

The school should take further action to:

- ensure that leaders' actions to support behaviour are informed by an incisive evaluation of the experiences of pupils and staff.

The progress made towards the removal of special measures

Since the previous inspection, there have been several changes to the leadership of the school. The executive headteacher joined the school in April 2024 and the head of school in September 2024. In the same period, two other senior leaders, including the special educational needs coordinator, joined the school. The chair of the board of trustees and the CEO (interim) were each appointed in September 2024.

Leaders have begun to develop the curriculum to meet the needs of pupils with severe learning difficulties more effectively. It is intended that the curriculum will support pupils to communicate and interact with increasing success. The school has arranged for staff to develop their teaching by working in partnership with speech and language therapists. Staff have a better understanding of pupils' communication needs as a result. However, there remains a need to develop expertise in the school across a breadth of communication methods and to establish the effective the use of these. There are appropriate plans in place to bring about the necessary improvements.

Reading is a regular feature of the curriculum for each pupil. Staff read to pupils, encouraging discussion and checking for understanding. In a few classes, phonics is taught effectively and pupils read with increasing accuracy and fluency. Over time, however, leaders have allowed staff training to lapse. Consequently, many staff lack the expertise and confidence to teach phonics successfully. Pupils' reading is not checked regularly enough. Consequently, teaching is not informed by an accurate picture of what pupils know and can do. Many pupils follow a curriculum that does not take account of their different starting points. The school plans to develop this area as part of the next phase of improvement.

Leaders have taken steps to ensure that there is sufficient leadership capacity in the school to support sustained improvement in the curriculum for reading and communication. However, these developments are in their infancy. Among staff, there is an appetite for engaging with the growing number of professional development opportunities that the school provides.

The trust has begun to strengthen the school's arrangements for local governance. An interim academy board has been appointed to provide challenge and support to the school. The board has rightly focused on supporting the school to improve the culture of safeguarding, with the aim of addressing the excessive use of physical restraint identified

at the previous inspection. In this respect, the board provides valuable challenge. However, leaders at all levels do not yet hold an accurate view of the quality of education provided by the school.

At the previous inspection, inspectors found that the arrangements for safeguarding were ineffective. Pupils were not safe from physical and emotional harm due to ineffective behaviour management, including the inappropriate use of restraint. Since then, leaders have worked with staff and provided training, which has led to a dramatic reduction in the use of restraint. Nonetheless, too often staff are injured when supporting pupils who struggle to manage their behaviour. Leaders do not have a full picture of the patterns in pupils' behaviour and the experiences of staff. This is currently a barrier to further improvement in the culture of safeguarding.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the board of trustees, and the CEO of the Transforming Futures trust, the Department for Education's regional director and the director of children's services for Plymouth. This letter will be published on the Ofsted reports website.

Yours sincerely

Lydia Pride
His Majesty's Inspector