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24 November 2017

Mr Michael Sidebottom
Interim Principal
Smithills School
Smithills Dean Road
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Lancashire
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Dear Mr Sidebottom

Special measures monitoring inspection of Smithills School

Following my visit with Elaine Parkinson, Ofsted Inspector, and Alyson Middlemass, Ofsted Inspector, to your school on 7 and 8 November 2017, 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 previous monitoring inspection.

The inspection was the second monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures following the inspection that took place in November 2016. The full list of the areas for improvement that were identified during that inspection is set out in the annex to this letter. The monitoring inspection report is attached.

Having considered all the evidence I am of the opinion that at this time:

Leaders and managers are taking effective action towards the removal of special measures.

Having considered all the evidence I am of the opinion that the school may appoint newly qualified teachers.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the joint executive board, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Bolton. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Anne Seneviratne
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection that took place in November 2016.

- Improve outcomes for pupils by:
 - reviewing the targets set for pupils in all year groups and all subjects to ensure that they offer sufficient challenge to raise achievement significantly
 - taking urgent action to identify and remedy underachievement in key groups of pupils, especially the most able, the most able disadvantaged and pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities
 - taking urgent action to improve pupils' progress in English and mathematics.
- Improve the quality of teaching by:
 - ensuring that teachers use assessment information accurately and effectively to better meet the needs of all pupils and groups of pupils in their classes
 - ensuring that all teachers have high expectations of what pupils can and should achieve
 - ensuring that where weaknesses are identified in teaching these are addressed promptly and rigorously through additional support and challenge.
- Improve pupils' personal development, behaviour and welfare by:
 - improving the attendance of pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities
 - ensuring that teachers use agreed behaviour systems consistently to manage any poor behaviour in their lessons
 - taking action to improve the commitment of the minority of pupils whose attitudes to learning hinder their progress.
- Improve the effectiveness of leadership and management by:
 - ensuring that improvement planning and school self-evaluation focus on the impact of actions and priorities to improve the school.

An external review of the school's use of the pupil premium should be undertaken in order to assess how this aspect of leadership and management may be improved.

An external review of governance should be undertaken in order to assess how this aspect of leadership and management may be improved.

Report on the second monitoring inspection on 7 November 2017 to 8 November 2017

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the interim principal; senior leaders; groups of pupils; a group of teachers; and the chair of the joint executive board and the chair of the trust. They observed teaching and learning and spoke with teachers. They also talked informally to pupils, and observed how they behaved around the school.

Context

In September, the new heads of English and mathematics joined the leadership team as assistant vice-principals. The head of mathematics is leading on achievement data across the whole school. A third newly appointed assistant vice-principal is leading on teaching and learning and literacy and has line management responsibility for special educational needs (SEN). Other changes in the leadership team include temporary promotions to the posts of vice-principal and assistant vice-principal. The trust has also employed an experienced senior leader on a part-time basis to support the work of the new leadership team. Six new English teachers and one new science teacher have also taken up their posts in September. Discussions continue between the trust and the regional schools commissioner in relation to the future of the school.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

The joint executive board (JEB) has continued to play a significant part in driving improvements across the school. The chair, ably supported by other members of the board, provides very effective strategic leadership and direction for the school. As the capacity of senior leaders in the school has developed, the JEB has been able to reduce the frequency of meetings from fortnightly to monthly. However, minutes of these meetings show that members of the board are no less thorough and astute in the way that they challenge leaders on the actions that they are taking to improve outcomes for pupils. These minutes also demonstrate the board's strategic vision in the way that it is looking to ensure that improvements are sustained.

The chair of the JEB quite rightly understands that it will have been truly successful when it is no longer required. To this end, members of the board have ensured that there is a shift in who is driving the pace of improvement. This now sits firmly with senior leaders in the school but members of the board still work alongside them as and when appropriate. For example, during the inspection, the chair of the JEB carried out a joint scrutiny of a selection of Year 11 most-able pupils' work with three leaders. During this activity, she was able to see for herself where teachers were having a positive impact on the progress that these pupils were making. She

could also work with the leaders to identify where further development was required and discuss what actions were required to bring this about.

There is a much greater clarity about the roles and responsibilities of the trust and local governing body, and the relationship of both with the JEB. The trust recognises the excellent work that the JEB is doing to drive improvements. The trust and the JEB share the same vision for the long-term future of the school. Inspectors agree with their assessment that what the school needs now is continuity and stability to embed the strategies that have brought about the recent significant improvements. The local governing body has now become the local advisory board and has a very clear operational remit.

The chairs of the trust and the JEB speak very highly of the strong leadership skills of the interim principal. This view is echoed by the staff, who feel that he leads by example. They value how supportive he is and the clear sense of direction that his leadership has brought. As one teacher said: 'We are not trying to spin as many plates and do too many things.' This reflects the focus he has brought to what really matters, that is, ensuring that all pupils make the best possible progress. To this end, he has very high expectations of all of his staff but also supports and values them. As a result, there is a very strong team spirit throughout the school.

Year 11 pupils who spoke with an inspector are in no doubt that the interim principal is responsible for what they describe as the recent 'massive improvements' in the school. They feel that he genuinely cares about them and wants the best for them. They welcome the stricter rules he has introduced relating to uniform and equipment, which have contributed to more positive attitudes to learning. Pupils in other year groups who spoke with inspectors also expressed very positive views about the quality of teaching and behaviour in their school.

It is evident that although the new members of the leadership team have only been in post for half a term, they are already making a positive impact. This is particularly the case in the areas relating to teaching and learning and achievement data. Staff appreciate that these new leaders are visible, approachable and lead by example.

One of the new assistant vice-principals has brought strong strategic leadership to the area of SEN. She recognises the significant impact that high-quality classroom teaching has on the progress of pupils who have SEN. The SEN coordinator has recently delivered training to all staff on this. The assistant vice-principal understands the importance of evaluating the impact of intervention strategies to inform decisions about future actions.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

The leadership of teaching and learning continues to be strong. A rigorous quality assurance cycle is now in place. As part of this process, leaders systematically scrutinise pupils' work to evaluate the progress that they are making over time.

Leaders have an accurate understanding of what is typically happening in classrooms on a daily basis.

Staff describe the professional development sessions as 'tailored, focused and relevant'. Leaders have developed a six-week coaching programme for staff who need more personalised support to improve their classroom practice.

There is now a full complement of permanent teaching staff which means that many more pupils are benefiting from consistently high-quality teaching across a range of subjects. Year 11 pupils commented on how much the improved quality of teaching is making a difference to their learning. A consistent way of planning learning is now embedded across the school. This has created a shared language in the way that staff and pupils talk about learning. This consistent model for planning the learning has contributed significantly to improvements in the quality of teaching across the school. However, leaders are aware that the challenge now is to make sure that this structure does not limit the depth and breadth of learning in each lesson.

The majority of teachers have high expectations of what their pupils can achieve. Pupils really value the positive relationships that they have with their teachers and the support that they receive from them. This is particularly evident in the performing arts department. In drama and dance, teachers use their expertise and passion for their subjects, coupled with their knowledge of their pupils, to enthuse and involve them in their learning. Consequently, the pupils make excellent progress in these subjects, often achieving very high outcomes.

Leaders, including the new head of department, are aware that the overall quality of teaching in mathematics is not good enough. Not all teachers ensure that the level of work is appropriate to meet pupils' needs. Opportunities are missed to stretch and challenge pupils. The curriculum does not provide enough focus on developing pupils' reasoning and problem-solving skills. Teachers do not routinely encourage their pupils to be resilient in their learning. Consequently, pupils are unwilling to challenge themselves. The new head of mathematics has brought strong leadership to the department and has already started to tackle some of these weaknesses.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Pupils demonstrate very positive attitudes to learning. Lessons are very rarely disrupted by poor behaviour. When required, teachers use the behaviour management system consistently and effectively. Teachers know their pupils well and the very strong relationships that they have with them contribute significantly to the positive learning environments in classrooms.

A closer inspection of the school's inclusion unit, 'Pathways', gives cause for concern about the quality of provision for the small number of pupils who are educated

there. The accommodation at present is not fit for purpose and does not provide an appropriate environment to engage pupils in their learning. Staff who work in the unit have very positive relationships with the pupils. However, there is no clear vision for, or effective strategic leadership of, this facility. Consequently, there are concerns about whether the curriculum is appropriate to provide for the social and emotional needs of the pupils, and to help them to get back on track with their studies. It is therefore not surprising that the attendance of these pupils is very low, which has a detrimental impact on their progress. Senior leaders acknowledge these issues and understand that addressing them must be an immediate priority.

Leaders now monitor the attendance of specific groups of pupils. This enables them to target their actions to improve pupils' attendance more effectively. The impact of this can be seen particularly in the improved attendance of pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities, which is now broadly in line with the national average. Not as much improvement has been made in the attendance of disadvantaged pupils and too many of these pupils do not attend school regularly.

Leaders now also monitor the number of fixed-term exclusions by pupil group. This information shows that disadvantaged pupils and those who have SEN and/or disabilities make up a high proportion of pupils who have received fixed-term exclusions this term.

Outcomes for pupils

The actions that leaders took last term to help Year 11 pupils overcome the effects of previous poor leadership and teaching had a positive impact. These actions enabled many Year 11 pupils to make rapid progress in the final few months leading up to their examinations. Consequently, despite concerns that this would not be the case, the unvalidated results for 2017 show that the school has met the government's floor standards.

The current Year 11 are now the top priority for all staff. They started the year from a stronger position than their peers in 2016 and the most recent assessment information shows that they have already made good progress since September.

Leaders use pupils' performance information very effectively to inform their future decisions and actions. The strategic leadership of this area is very strong and leaders understand how to use this information systematically to drive improvements across the school.

The 'Routes to Success' system ensures that all pupils have challenging targets. Pupils like the clarity of this system and can talk confidently about their targets and what they need to do to achieve them. Leaders have taken action to ensure that the assessment information that teachers enter into the system is accurate.

The new leader of literacy has a very clear strategic vision for developing this important aspect of pupils' education. The actions that she has already taken, and her future plans, are not superficial 'quick fixes', but put literacy at the heart of high-quality teaching. A scrutiny of pupils' books shows that the literacy marking policy has led to some improvements in the quality of pupils' written work. However, leaders know that there is still work to be done in this area.

External support

The school continues to benefit from the support and expertise of members of the JEB. The interim principal values the professional dialogue that he has with board members. It is clear that this relationship has contributed significantly to his own leadership development. The JEB works closely with the local authority, and together they ensure that effective external partnerships with other schools are brokered as required.