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30 January 2014

Mr J Kane
Executive Headteacher
Walton Hall School
Stafford Road
Eccleshall
Stafford
ST21 6JR

Dear Mr Kane

Special measures monitoring inspection of Walton Hall School

Following my visit with Morag Kophamel, Her Majesty's Inspector, to your school on 28–29 January 2014, 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 which have been taken since the school's previous monitoring inspection.

The inspection was the third monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures following the inspection which took place in March 2013. The full list of the areas for improvement which 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:

The school is making reasonable progress towards the removal of special measures.

Newly qualified teachers may be appointed only after consultation with HMI.

This letter and monitoring inspection report will be published on the Ofsted website. I am copying this letter and the monitoring inspection report to the Secretary of State, the Chair of the Interim Executive Board and the Director of Children's Services for Staffordshire.

Yours sincerely

Sue Morris-King
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection which took place in March 2013

- Improve teaching by making sure that:
 - teachers receive training and individual feedback on their teaching so that they understand how to make learning in their lessons good or better
 - teachers have a clear understanding of the levels that pupils are working at and know how to use this information to set work at the right level of difficulty for pupils
 - teachers have clear targets for improvement with timescales which reflect the urgency of the school's situation and that these are reviewed regularly for impact on pupils' achievement
 - the outstanding teachers in the school are used to coach and model best practice for other teachers so that all aspire to provide high quality teaching.

- Improve achievement by making sure that:
 - systems for monitoring the progress made by pupils are fully developed so that the school's data is always compared to national data and the school can assess whether pupils are making required progress
 - daily reading sessions continue to be embedded to help pupils improve their reading skills.

- Improve the impact of leaders in the school, by:
 - reviewing the current management structure and establishing a leadership team which meets the needs of the school, including the reintroduction of subject leaders so that all subject areas can be developed fully
 - establishing a system to check pupils' progress accurately over time so that teachers can use the information to ensure that their teaching meets the needs of all pupils
 - reviewing the curriculum at Key Stages 3 and 4 to ensure that the needs of all pupils are being met effectively through suitable courses in school or, where appropriate, from external providers
 - ensuring that the members of the new governing body understand their role in holding school leaders to account for their work and set leaders clear targets for improving the education provided in the school.

Report on the third monitoring inspection on 28-29 January 2014

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with senior leaders, the Chair of the Interim Executive Board and two other Board members and a representative from the local authority. A group of students took an inspector on a tour of the school and talked to her about their views and experiences.

Context

Since the previous inspection one teacher has left the school and two new teachers have joined. There are several teachers on short term contracts who are covering for staff absence. The Executive Headteacher has been appointed to the position on a permanent basis.

Achievement of pupils at the school

Students in Key Stages 4 and 5 are now being taught at a level more suitable to their needs as a result of the changes in the curriculum in each of these areas. This is allowing them to make better progress than in recent years and to take more suitable qualifications to accredit their achievements. In Year 10, many students are now making steady progress towards their targets and are on track to gain a range of qualifications where appropriate. In Year 11, students have more gaps in their learning, and progress is patchier. This picture was evident both in lessons and through the school's assessment information.

At Key Stage 3, progress in reading is improving as a result of better strategies being used to teach reading and more suitable books for the students to read. Students are reading daily and are becoming better at using a range of strategies to read unfamiliar words and to understand what they are reading. Progress in writing for those at the early stages of learning to write is insecure because they are not being systematically taught to write or given opportunities to practise their emerging skills.

Assessment of the progress being made by students with the more complex needs has begun to improve but does not give a clear picture of their progress across the curriculum. There is some evidence of these students improving their communication, concentration, and aspects of mathematics. In lessons, their progress was closely linked to the suitability of the tasks for the students' needs, and the quality of questioning and guidance from staff.

The quality of teaching

The majority of teaching observed during the inspection had some positive features. Teachers had generally planned the lesson to meet the needs of the range of learners, and had thought about different approaches and support that students might need. The content of lessons was usually interesting and followed logically from what had been taught during the previous lesson. Teachers and teaching assistants worked as a team, and teaching assistants focused closely on supporting students with their learning. Students often had the opportunity to work with others, either alongside them or collaboratively. Staff noticed and praised students' efforts and commented when they were making progress. Where students became distracted staff quickly and calmly brought them back on track. Many, though not all, classroom environments have improved; students' work is displayed and there are useful prompts, such as key words, to support learning.

Weaker features of some lessons included a lack of questioning to check students' understanding, resulting in students not learning enough, and tasks that were not related closely enough to the desired learning, so that students did not extend their knowledge or understanding of the topic being taught.

Since the previous monitoring inspection the school has focused more closely on using signing across the school, to support those students who need it. Although not yet used consistently, many more staff were observed signing than on previous monitoring visits, and students were also signing with more confidence and accuracy. Symbols to support reading and visual timetables for those who need them are also being used more frequently.

A scrutiny of students' work showed that early literacy is not being taught well to the younger students. Strategies being used to support students whose writing is at an early stage of development are unsuitable. The teaching of reading is improving as staff become more confident and knowledgeable.

Teachers are now using an assessment system which enables them to track students' achievements in small steps. This information is being used more effectively to plan courses and lessons. Leaders have identified that assessment is not always accurate, and can depend on teachers' subject knowledge.

Too much teaching for the students with the most complex needs is still being planned and led by teaching assistants. Senior leaders are well aware of this. Recent staffing appointments have been made with the intention of improving this situation and giving better support to the teaching assistants as well as giving the students more time with a qualified teacher.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

Students who met with inspectors said that the school has continued to improve. They explained that they enjoy their lessons, even though they now have to 'work harder'. Students said that they are reading more often and are able to read harder books. They told inspectors that they feel safe in school and know that they can talk to adults who will help them when they 'have worries'. They also felt that behaviour keeps getting better and that incidents of bullying, including the use of name calling and inappropriate language, are less frequent. Students were confident that if bullying does occur, or when they have problems with friendships, staff quickly 'get things sorted out'.

During the inspection, students moved around the school building and grounds calmly and sensibly. They interacted positively with each other and clearly enjoyed social times such as lunchtime and breaks. In lessons the students were keen to do well and responded very positively to encouragement from adults. In several lessons, inspectors observed students showing good levels of perseverance when their work was challenging.

The school's arrangements to keep students safe are good. Any concerns about students' safety and welfare are followed up promptly and appropriately. Case studies provided good examples of the way that the school responds to safeguarding concerns and works with other agencies in order to provide support for students. Detailed written records provide an account of all the actions taken by the school and identify what needs to happen next.

Attendance remains below the national average overall, but many students attend very well and the number of students who are persistently absent has reduced. The school is working more closely with parents and students to improve attendance. Since September, two students have received fixed term exclusions and one student has been permanently excluded.

The quality of leadership in and management of the school

The two seconded senior leaders, well supported by the deputy headteacher, have maintained a clear focus on improving the quality of teaching and learning at the same time as managing a range of challenging issues related to buildings, safeguarding, the budget and staffing. As a result of this strong focus on improvement, staff are clearer about what is expected of them and the school is improving overall.

Senior leaders have carried out a range of lesson observations, with and without external partners. Leaders have also carried out other monitoring activities such as short visits to classrooms and scrutiny of students' work. Although these activities have given them a range of useful information, this has not yet been brought

together and analysed in order to form a clear picture of the training and development needed by each staff member to improve teaching further.

A clear tracking system is now in place and gives a useful termly overview of the progress being made by each student in Key Stages 3 and 4 in English, mathematics and science. Where students are not on track to meet their targets, intervention plans are being put in place for them, which involve targeted teaching in small groups. Individual tracking sheets have been developed for Key Stage 5 students, indicating how well they are progressing in each of their accredited courses.

The head of school has introduced an appropriate performance management system for teachers and teaching assistants, leadership and teaching. Importantly, targets are set for the different aspects of staff's work, for example for their teaching role and their leadership role.

Good attention has been paid to improving the personal, social and health education curriculum and sex and relationships education for students in Key Stage 3, building on good practice that already exists in Key Stages 4 and 5. Crucially, students receive regular teaching about e-safety, including the dangers of grooming and the implications of the use of social media.

The Interim Executive Board continues to meet fortnightly and all members, particularly the Chair and the lead for the residential provision, are frequently in school to have discussions with senior leaders and to look at the school's work. The Board receive detailed reports from the Executive Headteacher, which usefully inform their discussions. They take safeguarding issues very seriously and ask detailed questions about the action that has been taken, and maintain a clear focus on teaching and learning. They have been closely involved in the discussions about future plans for the school.

External support

The local authority has continued to provide or broker a good level of support for the school, particularly for the development of curriculum areas, and to improve teaching. This support is responsive to the school's needs, for example support for to improve the teaching and curriculum for the students with more complex needs has recently been put in place and is proving to be valuable. The school has also particularly appreciated the advice on developing sex and relationships education. The local authority adviser knows the school well and has provided good support to the residential aspect of the school as well as the main school.

The school continues to benefit from the support from other special schools, particularly the two federated schools for which the seconded senior leaders work. Support for developing the data tracking and assessment system has continued to be very valuable.