

21 December 2017

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Dear Mr Hobbs

Special measures monitoring inspection of Stephenson Studio School

Following my visit with Annabel Bolt, Ofsted Inspector, to your school on 13–14 December 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 fourth monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures following the inspection that took place in September 2015. 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.

The school may appoint newly qualified teachers before the next monitoring inspection.

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

Yours sincerely

Simon Hollingsworth
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection that took place in September 2015.

- Improve the quality of teaching by making sure that:
 - all teachers use information about pupils' starting points to plan lessons that enable all pupils to make good progress
 - teachers use questioning equally well to check what pupils know and can do, and use this information to help pupils speed up their learning
 - all teachers ensure that pupils act on the advice they give them to improve their work
 - there are more opportunities in all subjects to develop pupils' reading, writing and mathematical skills.
- Improve outcomes for pupils by ensuring that:
 - least-able pupils, especially in mathematics at key stage 4, rapidly receive the support and help they need to do well in their courses
 - the progress of groups is monitored more closely so that any underachievement is quickly identified and tackled.
- Improve leadership and management, including governance, by:
 - urgently reviewing the suitability of sixth form courses to ensure that they build upon pupils' prior attainment and enable all pupils to succeed
 - ensuring that the curriculum at both key stages allows pupils to develop the reading, writing and mathematical skills they need to do well in the next stage of their education, training or employment, and is suited to their needs and aspirations
 - reviewing the process of monitoring and evaluation of teaching to ensure that leaders have an accurate view of the quality of teaching and use this information to target improvements more closely
 - urgently reviewing the effectiveness of governance and external support to ensure that the school makes rapid improvements and that standards rise more quickly
 - building on the newly established links with partner schools to improve the quality of teaching and leadership in the school.

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

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.

Report on the fourth monitoring inspection on 13 December 2017 to 14 December 2017

Evidence

Inspectors held meetings with: the headteacher; senior leaders; leaders responsible for reviewing the school's use of additional government funding; the subject leader for mathematics; the designated safeguarding lead; the leader who manages pupils' work placements; the personal mentor and five trustees. Inspectors observed pupils' learning in 16 lessons and a form period, during which they spoke with pupils and looked at their books. Inspectors conducted four of these observations jointly with the headteacher and with the senior leader who leads the English department. Inspectors also looked at pupils' books as a separate activity, including with a senior leader. Inspectors met formally and informally with a range of pupils in Years 10 and 11, and with pupils who are studying towards the school's 'Step into' programme. Inspectors scrutinised a range of documents relating to the school's work, including the school's own self-evaluation and documentation relating to attendance, safeguarding and pupils' achievement. The lead inspector spoke by telephone with the school's improvement partner and a senior leader of the school which provides support. The lead inspector checked the school's single central record.

Context

Since the last monitoring inspection, five of the school's seven teachers have left. Five new teachers started at the school in September.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

Leaders have been quick to consider the reasons for the underachievement of pupils who completed their GCSEs in the last academic year. They have been prompt to take action to resolve these issues for current pupils, particularly regarding their achievement in English and science.

In English, leaders have ensured that there is increasingly well-matched support to help current pupils to become more secure in their communication skills. Teachers of English have also begun to develop pupils' analytical skills and their ability to respond well to examination questions. These changes, however, are yet to have impact on current pupils' progress in this subject.

In science, leaders have taken swift action to resolve their concerns about the accuracy of teachers' assessment of pupils' learning. The school improvement partner has undertaken a thorough review of the provision in this subject. Leaders have quickly implemented the review's recommendations, including working with another school to check on the accuracy of teachers' assessment. Because of this,

leaders now have a more precise understanding of the quality of provision in science, and of pupils' achievement.

Despite these actions, leaders rightly recognise that there is still much to do to ensure that all pupils make the necessary progress to ensure that they achieve the highest grades of which they are capable in their GCSEs. This is particularly the case for middle prior-attaining pupils.

Since the previous monitoring inspection, there has been significant change to senior leaders' responsibilities. Much of this was in response to circumstances that were beyond leaders' own control. The senior leader responsible for overseeing teaching and learning now has oversight of pupils' welfare, including being the leader responsible for safeguarding. Another senior leader has taken on the additional responsibility of leading English. Senior leaders have acted promptly to limit the effect that such changes have on their drive to improve the quality of the school's provision.

The departure of five teachers at the end of last academic year has inevitably interrupted leaders' work to improve the quality of teaching. While leaders have been successful in replacing all five teachers, the arrival of new teaching staff across all subjects has seen a fall in current Year 11 pupils' progress. This is because it has taken time, both for the teachers and for the pupils, to adapt to the new circumstances in which they find themselves. As a result, current pupils, particularly those in Year 11, are not making the necessary progress across all subjects, including English and science.

However, leaders have taken effective action to manage this comprehensive change in teaching staff. They have provided intensive training to ensure that teachers understand the welfare and learning needs of the pupils. Leaders have also been quick to check on the quality of the new teachers' classroom practice, putting into place well-targeted support where it is appropriate. This support has included teachers receiving training from another school, to learn from the best practice of others. It is too early to measure the full impact of this support, particularly in ensuring that teaching across all subjects is of a quality such that pupils make rapid progress and achieve the highest grades of which they are capable. However, the teachers appreciate the support that they are receiving, particularly the opportunities to work with professionals from another school. The new teachers are fully committed to ensuring that all pupils achieve as highly as they should.

The new head of mathematics has continued to provide support for teachers to ensure that they are secure in teaching pupils numeracy skills. Mathematics teachers also provide support by teaching pupils the numeracy skills they will require when studying mathematics-related topics in other subjects. For example, mathematics teachers have taught pupils how to interpret scatter graphs in preparation for their learning in science. They have also taught pupils about finance

to help them with their learning in business studies. Such support has enabled pupils to use their numeracy skills more effectively in other subjects.

However, strategies to promote pupils' use of their communication skills are not as thorough. Consequently, pupils' confidence in using these skills across a range of subjects is not developing quickly enough. This is partly due to the fact the English department does not currently have a leader whose sole responsibility is to lead the department and promote communication skills across the curriculum.

Leaders have recently reviewed their use of the pupil premium, which is additional government funding to support disadvantaged pupils. Leaders have held this review as a result of the below average achievement of disadvantaged pupils in 2017.

Leaders recognise that, previously, the strategies that they put into place using this funding were not sufficiently effective to secure these pupils' rapid progress. In part, this was because leaders' review of the impact of these strategies was neither sharp nor timely enough. Their inability to measure accurately the effectiveness of each strategy meant leaders were unable to adjust any they deemed not to be working adequately.

Leaders' current plans for their use of additional funding are now much sharper. The strategies they are using are based on those that have been used successfully in other schools. Each strategy now has a measurable outcome. This allows leaders to review with greater precision the impact that each strategy has on disadvantaged pupils' progress. Because of this, leaders are now in a much stronger position to establish how well they are using the pupil premium to support eligible pupils. However, it is too early to measure how the changes to the school's use of pupil premium are affecting current disadvantaged pupils' achievement.

Leaders continue to take action to ensure that pupils' attendance increases, including by undertaking home visits to check on pupils' welfare and to encourage them to attend regularly. Leaders also work with the local authority to ensure that parents understand their responsibility to make sure their children attend school. Despite this, overall absence, including the proportion of pupils who are regularly absent from school, remains too high. Leaders recognise that ensuring pupils attend regularly is a key priority for the school.

The work-placement coordinator now completes regular checks on the welfare and achievement of pupils who undertake weekly work placements. These checks provide her with a precise understanding of any gaps in pupils' communication or numeracy skills that employers have identified. This allows her to ensure that teachers provide pupils with appropriate support. This is helping these pupils to become more secure in the appropriate skill and to prepare more effectively for the world of work. Pupils appreciate this support.

The member of staff who mentors pupils regularly checks on their welfare and academic progress. In so doing, she sets pupils targets to ensure that they catch up

where they have fallen behind. Pupils speak highly of this support, particularly in preparing them for their next steps when they have completed Year 11.

Governors continue to have a precise understanding of the quality of the school's provision. They provide robust levels of challenge to senior leaders. For example, governors have comprehensively checked that senior leaders are taking effective action to resolve the causes of pupils' underachievement last academic year. Governors have undertaken their own checks to ensure that senior leaders' evaluation of the quality of teaching of the new staff is accurate.

Governors provide senior leaders with effective support as part of their commitment to improve the quality of the school's provision. This includes ensuring that leaders receive support from the sponsor college. Governors recognise the value of providing senior leaders with the opportunity to learn from the best practice of leaders in other schools.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

The quality of teaching continues to be variable. As a result, pupils, including middle prior-attaining pupils, do not make rapid progress in their learning to secure the highest grades of which they are capable at the end of Year 11.

Where teaching promotes effective learning, teachers have high expectations of the quality and quantity of the work pupils can complete. They carefully set activities which meet pupils' individual needs. These tasks have sufficient levels of challenge to help pupils to become secure in their learning. Teachers use questioning well to check pupils' understanding, and to resolve any misconceptions. They provide regular support and guidance to ensure that pupils are able to become secure in their knowledge and understanding. As a result, pupils engage well with their learning and make rapid progress.

In mathematics, for example, teachers regularly assess pupils' knowledge and understanding to identify gaps in their learning. They provide pupils with well-targeted work to ensure that they become secure in their learning, particularly when they practise key mathematical skills. Pupils who are secure in their learning receive more challenging tasks to help them make further progress.

However, not all teachers' expectations are high enough. Some teachers do not set work that is at the right level. They do not ensure that they provide well-targeted support to help pupils to catch up where they have fallen behind. Where this is the case, pupils do not engage well with their work, and do not make rapid progress.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Overall attendance is currently well below average, as it was last academic year. Furthermore, the proportion of pupils, including disadvantaged pupils, who are

regularly absent from school remains too high. This is despite leaders' work to encourage pupils to attend more regularly. The high rate of absence severely restricts pupils' chances of achieving well. Leaders are committed to ensuring that both parents and pupils understand the importance of attending school.

Outcomes for pupils

Pupils' achievement in their GCSEs in 2017 was too low. This was particularly the case in English and in science, where pupils' achievement was well below average. Pupils did not make the rapid progress in these subjects that was essential to enable them to achieve as highly as they should in their GCSEs.

This was not the case in mathematics, where pupils were able to catch up quickly and made broadly average progress in their GCSE in 2017. This was due to the well-targeted, wide-ranging support pupils received, including through one-to-one tuition. Such support was not as comprehensive nor as effective in English. Leaders have recently taken action to resolve this. However, current progress in English is too low.

In 2017, for the second consecutive year, the least able pupils made broadly average progress in their GCSE studies, including in English, mathematics, history, and their work-related subjects. This is because these pupils received close support from their teachers and other adults.

The achievement of middle prior-attaining pupils, who made up the majority of the year group, was well below average in a range of subjects, including in English and science. This was the case for the second consecutive year. Teachers did not set these pupils work at the right level and did not provide effective support. Current middle prior-attaining pupils' progress is too low.

The gaps between the achievement at GCSE of the disadvantaged pupils and other pupils widened significantly in 2017. Current performance information indicates that disadvantaged pupils are not making sufficient progress.

16 to 19 study programmes

There are 10 pupils who have started the school's new 'Step into' programme this academic year. This year-long programme is designed to enable pupils to become secure in their numeracy and communication skills and to prepare them for their next steps, either in further education or in employment with training. Pupils who met inspectors recognised how the programme is helping them to prepare for when they leave the school. It is too early to measure the programme's effectiveness.

External support

Senior leaders and teachers engage well with external support, including from a local school that has been providing assistance for the past two years. This support offers senior leaders and teachers effective opportunities to learn from the best practice of other professionals. For the new teachers, this support is helping them to adapt quickly to the demands of teaching at Stephenson Studio School.

The school improvement partner has supported the headteacher well to review the provision in science and the school's use of the pupil premium. He supports the headteacher in refining the school's improvement plan, so it focuses sharply on the actions leaders must take to ensure that the quality of teaching allows pupils to achieve well. This support is helping senior leaders to improve those aspects of the school's provision that continue to not be fully effective.

Additional areas for improvement

- Rapidly increase the attendance of all pupils, particularly the disadvantaged pupils, so they are at school more regularly to engage with their learning and make progress.
- Ensure that middle prior-attaining pupils, including disadvantaged pupils, make rapid progress, particularly in English and science.
- Ensure that all teachers:
 - have consistently high expectations of the quality and quantity of work all pupils can complete
 - set all pupils, particularly middle prior-attaining pupils, suitably challenging work
 - provide all pupils with well-targeted support to allow them to become secure in their communication skills.