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Keith Douglas (executive headteacher)
Jonathan Kemp (associate headteacher)
Falconer School
Falconer Road
Bushey
Hertfordshire
WD23 3AT

Dear Mr Douglas and Mr Kemp

Special measures monitoring inspection of Falconer School

Following my visit to your school with Sandra Jacobs-Walls, social care inspector, on 7–8 November 2013, 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 and the previous inspection of the boarding provision.

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

The school may not appoint newly qualified teachers before the next monitoring inspection.

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 Governing Body and the Director of Children's Services for Hertfordshire.

Yours sincerely

Heather Yaxley
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

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

- Improve the quality of teaching by:
 - ensuring that lesson planning matches the learning needs of individual pupils
 - preparing pupils better for when they leave school by teaching them to work effectively with each other
 - making sure that the monitoring of teaching focuses on whether pupils are making good progress over time.

- Improve pupils' achievement so that they make at least the progress expected for their age and starting points by:
 - working with other schools to check the accuracy of teachers' assessment of pupils' attainment
 - setting ambitious yet realistic targets for pupils' progress based on their starting points and with reference to available national comparative data
 - rigorously monitoring the progress towards these targets and amending teaching strategies or providing additional support if pupils are not on track
 - making sure that progress towards targets are discussed with pupils and their parents.

- Improve pupils' attendance at Key Stage 4 by:
 - making sure that each pupil follows a curriculum matched to their interests and aspirations
 - working closely with the local authority and other agencies to eliminate persistent absence.

- Improve leadership and management by:
 - evaluating pupils' progress and attainment in each subject at a whole-school level and for the different groups of pupils within the school
 - making sure that leaders' assessments of the school's effectiveness and school improvement plans are focused on improving pupils' progress and attainment.

- Improve governance by:
 - ensuring governors rigorously challenge the school regarding pupils' attainment, based on the progress they should make
 - ensuring that the performance management of staff takes into account the impact of teaching over time on pupils' progress.

- The school must meet the following national minimum standards for residential special schools:
 - The school identifies at least one person other than a parent, outside the residential and teaching staff, who children may contact directly about personal problems or concerns at the school. The school ensures that children know who this person is and how to contact them. Children are also provided with one or more appropriate helpline(s) or outside contact numbers, including the Children's Rights Director, to ring in case of problems or distress. (NMS 2.2)
 - The records specified in Appendix 2 (Residential Special Schools National Minimum Standards) are maintained and monitored by the school and action taken as appropriate. (NMS 13.3)
 - All existing care staff have attained a relevant minimum level 3 qualification or have qualifications which demonstrate the same competencies. All new staff engaged from the commencement of these Standards hold these qualifications or begin working towards them within three months of confirmation of employment. (NMS 19.2)
 - Most monitoring visits are carried out unannounced. They include: checks on the school's records of attendance, complaints, sanctions, use of physical interventions, risk assessments, and where they exist, individual care plans for children; assessment of the physical condition of the building, furniture and equipment of the school; and opportunities for any child or member of staff who wishes to meet the visitor (in private if they wish). (NMS 20.2)

Special measures: monitoring of Falconer School

Report on the second monitoring inspection on 7–8 November 2013

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work and reviewed documents. Meetings were held with residential and non-residential students, senior leaders, teachers, support staff, care staff who work in the residential provision, the Chair and Vice-Chair of the Governing Body, and the school effectiveness adviser from the local authority. Parts of 14 lessons were observed, and 13 of these were observed jointly with the executive headteacher or the associate headteacher. Inspectors considered the 20 responses to the staff questionnaire. Inspection of the residential provision included visits to School House before and after school time.

Context

Since September, leadership has been shared between the headteacher of Bushey Meads School (as at the first monitoring inspection) and an associate headteacher from a residential special school. The associate headteacher has been appointed as the permanent headteacher for January 2014. The governing body appointed a new Chair and Vice Chair soon after the first monitoring inspection.

Achievement of pupils at the school

Students' achievements in GCSEs at the end of Key Stage 4 in 2013 were an improvement on those for 2012. This demonstrates that, with a broader curriculum and better teaching, students can achieve the grades predicted from their individual starting points. Students' achievements were stronger in English than in mathematics, and this is also the case for current students.

The tracking system now gives staff a clear and accurate picture of current students' performance across the full range of courses. It includes targets that challenge staff and students to aim for higher grades that are realistic as well as aspirational. Students and their parents know what the target grades are. Now that the tracking system provides accurate measures and useful analysis of the data, senior staff are beginning to use the information to check that the right students are identified for additional support and to make sure that teachers set work at the right level. Assessments of students' attainments so far this term are complete, but it is too soon to have a comprehensive view about their rates of progress.

Individual tuition sessions to improve students' reading often develop their confidence and skills during these sessions. However, the skills do not transfer well

to other lessons because they are not built upon systematically or frequently enough.

Students usually present their work carefully, although some have a poor handwriting style. As a record of their learning, the work in books often lacks sufficient detail to show how students worked out answers or how their skills improved as a result of better understanding of their learning.

Students who spoke with an inspector notice the difference since the February inspection and say that they have to work hard all the time now. They know that they have a better chance of gaining more GCSEs, and at better grades, because there are more subjects on offer at higher levels and they are taught better than before.

The quality of teaching

Teaching has improved since the inspection in February. This has happened because some teachers left and others have improved their skills as a result of explicitly high expectations and frequent checks by senior leaders of what students must achieve in lessons and over time. Increasingly, students make good progress in lessons because more of the teaching is good.

When teachers use assessments and targets to set work at the right level for each student in each lesson, students usually rise to the challenge and achieve well. This is not yet a sufficiently common feature in lessons. When teachers give students enough time to show what they know as a result of what they have been taught, their discussions and written work show that they move on well with their learning. This does not happen often enough in some lessons.

Similarly, not all teachers make good enough use of marking or display to give students the guidance they need to play a sufficiently active part in their learning. However, teachers now give students more opportunities to sit together and actively collaborate on ideas and tasks. As a result, students not only learn how to be good learners, but also the reliance on students working individually as a method of controlling their behaviour is no longer the issue that it was at the February inspection.

Teachers' subject knowledge is often good and students say that they enjoy learning when lessons are interesting.

The introduction of homework has been well received by students and parents. School bags, 'prep club' at lunchtimes and an established routine for setting and receiving homework makes sure that homework is valued and expected. Residential staff play an active part to support homework for boarders.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

Students' social behaviour remains good and an emphasis is now placed on developing their behaviour as learners. Improving students' academic achievements alongside their emotional and social behaviour is now well understood by staff as a priority. Relationships between students are generally positive, and they are good between students and staff. Students and staff like the new arrangements for each member of staff to mentor a small group of students.

New privileges for students to go off-site at lunchtimes and take responsibility for recording their reward points are welcomed and taken very seriously by students. The use of points to support students' learning and participation in lessons is not consistent enough, not linked clearly enough to individual targets and not given a sufficiently high profile. As a result, students do not always work hard enough to get points, or get points that they do not deserve.

Students' attendance has improved and is, with the exception of a few persistent absentees, increasingly in line with national averages. The improvements come as a result of good work between school staff, local authority advisers and parents. Students arrive in the morning and to each lesson on time and ready to learn.

The quality of leadership in and management of the school

The period between the February inspection and the end of the summer term was a tough one for staff. Expectations to change the school's ethos were high and uncompromising. The executive headteacher took a direct, strategic approach to what had to be done and staff made the changes they were asked to make. Staff recognised that things needed to change and the right things were in place for the start of the autumn term. The momentum has been maintained this term, staff performance has improved and students' achievements are beginning to rise.

Professional discussions about students' achievements alongside their personal development are now commonplace. Collaboration with colleagues in other schools is now well established. This helps staff to reflect on their practice and makes sure that their assessments are accurate. Senior leaders, staff and the governing body acknowledge that there is still more to do to make a lasting and sustainable difference to all students, but staff say that they are confident that they can do what is needed. Staff who spoke to an inspector would welcome the opportunity to contribute to the next action plan and to discuss the vision for the future.

The governing body has come a long way in improving its effectiveness. Governors are much more confident than at the previous inspection and provide increasing challenge to leaders. They focus on improving students' achievements and ask for information and explanations so that they are better informed. Governors visit frequently. This is helping them to find out for themselves what happens in school

and to make useful links with members of staff, but their work is not yet focused sharply enough on checking how well the action plan is implemented or whether the actions make the right difference to students' achievements.

Senior leaders have conscientiously taken on responsibilities and levels of accountability that they were not previously used to. Their actions have made a difference through improved lesson plans, implementation of a revised curriculum and effective monitoring of the English department that has led to improvements in literacy.

Filling the remaining gaps in senior leadership should be given a high priority. The very recent arrangements to provide effective leadership of special educational needs are not yet making a difference to the quality of teaching, the curriculum or students' learning. Strategic leadership of the boarding provision does not have a sufficiently high profile within the senior team, and the effectiveness of this important aspect of the school's work is not monitored or evaluated well enough by leaders or the governing body.

A revised curriculum was implemented from September. Current students have better opportunities to succeed. For example, almost all courses now lead to Level 2 qualifications and opportunities to benefit from after-school activities in the boarding provision are open to non-residential students as well as the boarders.

External support

Stability and well-timed support from local authority advisers has provided teachers, leaders and the governing body with the challenge and good-quality advice that they needed following the February inspection. Staff have taken on board the advice given by advisers for English, mathematics, science, attendance and assessment, and by the school effectiveness adviser. Local authority advisers recently conducted a review of the school's progress. These things have helped set a clear direction for improvement.

Staff welcome support from staff at two local secondary schools, Bushey Meads School and The Bushey Academy. This has helped subject leaders to reflect on their work and to make sure that assessments of students' work are accurate. Interim leadership by the headteacher at Bushey Meads School has provided stability and good strategic leadership to move the school forward at the pace that was necessary.

Outcomes for residential pupils	are good
Quality of residential provision and care	is good
Residential pupils' safety	is good
Leadership and management of the residential provision	are inadequate

The overall effectiveness of the residential provision, School House, is adequate. The residential provision has a positive impact on residential students and their outcomes are good. Residential students develop their confidence, self-esteem, and social skills. Their behaviour shows significant improvement the longer they attend the boarding provision. Residential students enjoy immensely their residential experience and are highly appreciative of the efforts of the staff group. School House promotes effective consultation with residential students; they feel well listened to and know their views are taken seriously. They have a good influence on the running and operation of School House. Residential students are well prepared for moving on from the residential experience and this is enhanced by the newly developed life-skills programme.

The quality of the residential provision and care is good. There are effective links between pastoral and academic staff that promote and support students' academic and social development. Care plans are individualised, relevant and effectively implemented. Target setting appropriately reflects the identified needs of residential students. There are adequate arrangements in place to address students' physical, psychological and emotional well-being and they have access to a diverse range of recreational activities that further enhance their social development and learning. Residential students enjoy a healthy and nutritious diet, which meets their dietary, religious and cultural needs well. The residential premises are comfortable, well furnished and safely maintained, and students are appreciative of their surroundings. They enjoy good access to their families and friends while they are away from home; these arrangements are flexible to meet individual needs.

Residential students feel safe. Robust safeguarding systems ensure that concerns are swiftly identified and resolved. Effective school-wide procedures are in place and residential staff know how to raise concerns about the safety or welfare of residential students. The physical environment is safe, secure and appropriately maintained. All required employment checks are in place to ensure only suitable staff work with residential students. There have been no complaints, missing persons, or child protection concerns in the residence since the previous inspection. Physical intervention rarely takes place and when needed is used appropriately.

The leadership and management of the residential provision is cause for concern and is inadequate. Three of the four shortfalls identified at the previous inspection have been successfully resolved. The exception to this is the conduct of unannounced monitoring visits by the designated governor. These visits do not routinely review, as

required, important issues such as checks on complaints, sanctions, risk assessments and care plans.

Shortfalls are also identified in a number of other areas relating to leadership and management. Neither the headteacher nor the governing body have, as required, reviewed or reported annually on the operation and resourcing of the residential provision. School senior leaders have not conducted formal, annual reviews for residential staff as required, to make sure that the performance of individual staff is evaluated and that their needs can be addressed effectively. The head of care does not receive regular, formal supervision to assist and promote the management of the residential provision. There is no formal staff training programme in place to make sure that staff have access to high quality training to develop and enhance their knowledge and skills in order to provide high quality care.

Residential students' case records do not consistently evidence key work sessions. This is important to ensure that there are adequate written records that accurately reflect key discussions and interaction of residential students while staying at School House.

This inspection finds that not all national minimum standards are judged to be met; there are six identified areas for further improvement. This will support the residential provision to develop and improve the service provided to residential students:

- Conduct monitoring visits on an unannounced basis. Visits include: checks on the school's records of attendance, complaints, sanctions, use of physical intervention, risk assessments, and where they exist, individual care plans for children; assessment of the physical condition of the building, furniture and equipment of the school; and opportunities for any child or member of staff who wishes to meet the visitor. (NMS 20.2)
- Complete by the headteacher (or school equivalent), governing body, trustees, partnership, or organisation responsible for carrying on the school carries out and records in writing, once a year; a review of the operation and resourcing of the school's welfare provision for boarding pupils, in relation to; its Statement of Purpose; its staffing policy; the placement plans for individual children; and an internal assessment of its compliance with the national minimum standards. (NMS 20.4)
- Develop a staff learning and development programme, which is evaluated for effectiveness at least annually and is updated if necessary. (NMS 19.4)
- Provide all staff with a formal annual appraisal of their performance. (NMS19.6)
- Provide the head of care with regular supervision. (NMS19.6)

- Include on every child's case file an accurate, permanent record of their history and progress, in particular records of key work sessions. (NMS22.1)