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17 July 2014

Mrs Lynne Wise

Headteacher

The Hawthorne's Free School

Fernhill Road

Bootle

Merseyside

L20 6AQ

Dear Mrs Wise

### **Special measures monitoring inspection of The Hawthorne's Free School**

Following my visit to your school on 16 July 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 visit and for the time you made available to discuss the actions which have been taken since the school's recent section 5 inspection.

This visit was the first monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures in February 2014.

### **Evidence**

During this inspection, meetings were held with you, the interim executive Principal, the Chair of the Governing Body and another member of the governing body. I also met with senior leaders responsible for attendance, the quality of teaching and learning, students' achievement and the pupil premium. The pupil premium is extra funding the school receives to help support students known to be eligible for free school meals or who are looked after by the local authority. I also spoke with the school's designated adviser from the Department for Education (DfE) and held a meeting with a group of eight Year 10 students to determine their opinions of how the school has changed since the previous inspection. I made a number of short visits to lessons which allowed me to form an impression of students' attitudes to learning, look at the quality of the marking in their books and determine how well

work is matched to students' capability. I also evaluated the school's combined statement of action and post Ofsted action plan and I also considered the school's current evaluation of how well it is doing.

## **Context**

Since the school's previous inspection the governors, in partnership with the DfE, have brokered the services of an interim executive Principal to provide essential support and help boost senior leadership. In addition, governors have agreed a link with a successful free school whose leadership and management were judged outstanding at its most recent Ofsted inspection. The teacher responsible for the leadership of the mathematics department, at the time of the previous inspection, has left the school.

## **The quality of leadership and management at the school**

There is unanimous agreement among the school's key stakeholders that the judgements of inspectors at the school's recent inspection, although disappointing, were correct in the light of the evidence. They agree that the areas for improvement, as written in the report, are the right ones for the school and provide much needed clarity on the work that needs to be done, and quickly, to improve the school. Concerns with senior leadership, identified by the adviser from the DfE, led to the governors agreeing to broker support from a successful free school and bring in an interim executive Principal. His appointment has led to a much sharper focus on school development and the implementation of much needed management systems in order to monitor and evaluate the work of the school and provide governors with information to hold staff to account for the quality of their work.

Concerns raised by inspectors at the previous inspection about the clarity and accuracy of students' progress data are being addressed. The interim executive Principal has introduced a strategy for monitoring students' achievement which is enabling leaders, managers and class teachers to keep a close eye on how well students and groups of students are doing across a range of subjects. This strategy is also helping them spot those students who are off target and identify the extra help these students need to get them back on track. However, this strategy is in its infancy and consequently, it is too early to assess its impact.

Governors welcome the greater clarity of the data they are provided with by senior leaders. This is allowing them to form objective judgements on students' achievement and increasingly hold staff to account. However, from a position of not having enough data on students' achievement at the time of the inspection, they are now being given a great deal, leaving some governors feeling swamped. This is

leading to governors having to use valuable time identifying the key messages from within the plethora of information they are given.

Although yet to be externally validated, the school's data are indicating that for current Year 11, the proportion of students expected to leave The Hawthorne's with five high grade GCSEs, including English and mathematics, is set to rise this year. In addition, measures of expected progress in English and mathematics are also projected to improve. Whilst these increases are welcome, it needs to be tempered with the knowledge that boys and students supported by the pupil premium continue to underachieve.

Deficiencies in the leadership of mathematics have been addressed with a new subject leader in post since the start of the summer term. Senior leaders' monitoring records indicate that the quality of teaching in mathematics is improving and students' progress, particularly the girls, is beginning to speed up. However, senior leaders are aware that gaps in attainment between boys and girls and between those students supported by the pupil premium and their peers remain too wide. Although there is evidence that the teaching of mathematics is leading to improved students' outcomes, the work in students' mathematics books indicates that mathematics teaching over-emphasises the mastery of techniques, with too little prominence being given to challenging students to apply what they have learned to solve problems and carry out investigations, so deepening their understanding of key mathematical ideas. In order to increase leadership capacity in mathematics, the interim executive Principal is providing effective support to the subject leader as he settles into his new role.

Senior leaders are passionate about improving standards of teaching and learning and use a range of strategies to assess teachers' classroom practice and hold them to account for its quality. These include lesson observations, scrutiny of the work in students' books and students' achievement data. They are taking effective steps to eliminate serious weaknesses in teaching quality and as a result, there have been a number of staff changes. However, senior leaders responsible for this aspect of the school are yet to articulate clearly the key characteristics of what they believe constitutes good to outstanding practice. As a result, their judgements on teaching standards can be too generous. Nevertheless, they are aware of the work that needs to be done to further improve the quality of teaching and are determined to rise to the challenge.

In those books seen by the inspector, teachers' marking was regular but inconsistent. Where marking is of high quality, teachers provide students with detailed feedback on what they have done well and provide pointers as to how the work could be improved, which students then act on. However, in some books, there

is evidence that marking is periodic, with teachers assessing work that has been done over a number of lessons. This means that some students' misunderstandings are not addressed in a timely fashion and as a result, this slows their progress.

As was the case at the recent inspection, students' behaviour in and around the school continues to be good. Their relationships with each other and their teachers are strong and characterised by mutual respect. Students' conduct in lessons is consistently positive and remains so even when the teaching is less than inspiring.

Strategies introduced since the inspection to address concerns with students' attendance have been effective. Rigorous monitoring of attendance and careful deployment of pastoral staff to deal with attendance issues have led to a reduction in the numbers of students' who are persistently absent and the gap in attendance between students known to be eligible for free school meals and their peers is closing. Students spoken to by the inspector, say that attendance and punctuality have become much higher profile in school since the inspection. They say that the school's rewards for good attendance and punctuality increase their motivation to come to school every day and on time.

The recent appointment of the interim executive Principal has given much needed drive and impetus to the work to improve the school. He has galvanised his colleagues into action. He brings with him a wealth of experience and has wasted no time in tackling weaknesses in the quality of teaching and establishing well-defined management systems, including one to rigorously monitor students' attainment and progress. His links with a successful free school are providing him with a valuable source of expertise from which teachers at The Hawthorne's are starting to benefit. This includes senior leaders working with staff from the partner school to help them secure reliable judgements on the quality of teaching. However, senior leaders' roles and responsibilities lack clarity and the structure for the leadership and management of subject departments is not well defined. Consequently, lines of accountability are blurred. The responsibility for driving forward the school's improvement agenda is heavily invested in the interim executive Principal, who is working hard to make up for the deficit in senior leadership capacity. Nevertheless, the school is making reasonable progress in addressing its areas for improvement. However, weak capacity and the absence of clear roles and responsibilities at senior and middle leader level are acting as barriers to accelerating the pace of change.

Governors have a much tighter grasp on the issues facing the school than was the case prior to the most recent inspection. They have a good understanding of what the quality of teaching is like currently and have welcomed improvements in the management information they receive including students' progress data. The progress the school is making against each of the school improvement priorities is

rigorously monitored, with individual governors being given responsibility for a specific development priority. This is enabling them to increasingly challenge senior leaders about the school's performance and hold them to account. However, they are aware that the copious amounts of data that they do receive, whilst being informative, are not always helpful in enabling them to form a fully rounded picture of the school's performance.

The governors' statement of action has been combined with the school's post Ofsted action plan. The combined plan is well structured providing the context for the school, school improvement targets and milestones, enabling governors to hold senior leaders to account for the progress being made against each of the improvement priorities. The key priorities from the previous inspection are each given a separate section in the plan and a detailed set of actions in order to achieve well-defined targets is described. Although time scales are ambitious, reflecting senior leaders' high expectations to come out of special measures as quickly as possible, they are not sharp enough. For example, it is not always clear when the set of actions designed to address a particular improvement priority will start and when they should all be completed, so providing a staging post for governors to evaluate their impact. Students' outcome targets also require further refinement. For example, there are no targets for low, middle and high ability groups which would enable senior leaders to monitor these students' progress and determine whether their needs are being met. The 2014 expected progress targets for English and mathematics are below the government's 2013 floor targets. Similarly, the targets for students supported by the pupil premium are lower than that of their peers who are not supported by this additional funding. Therefore, it is questionable if these targets are ambitious enough. Nevertheless, the plan provides an effective 'blue print' for school improvement that leaders and managers can follow as they work to improve the school.

Following the monitoring inspection the following judgements were made:

The proprietor's statement of action is fit for purpose

The school's action plan is fit for purpose

Having considered all the evidence I strongly recommend that the school does not seek to appoint newly qualified teachers.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the DfE – Academies Advisers Unit, the Chair of the Governing Body and the Director of Children's Services for Sefton. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Charles Lowry

**Her Majesty's Inspector**