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Mrs Julie James
Headteacher
St Anthony's Free School
93 Belle Vue Road
Cinderford
Gloucestershire
GL14 2AA

Dear Mrs James

Special measures monitoring inspection of St Anthony's Free School

Following my visit to your school on 15–16 December 2015, 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 recent section 5 inspection.

The inspection was the first monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures following the inspection which took place in May 2015.

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

Leaders and managers are not taking effective action towards the removal of special measures.

The trust's statement of action is not fit for purpose.

The school's improvement plan is not fit for purpose.

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

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Governing Body, the Director of Children's Services for Gloucestershire and the Department for Education. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Lorna Brackstone
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection which took place in May 2015

- Rapidly improve the quality of teaching and learning so that it is consistently good or better by:
 - planning lessons which inspire and challenge pupils to achieve high standards and which build on what pupils already know and understand
 - ensuring pupils improve their work as a result of teachers' marking
 - checking that pupils understand the guidance they have been given and are learning from this advice
 - ensuring all teachers have high expectations of what pupils can achieve
 - ensuring that children in the early years are fully supported to develop their learning in mathematics and writing.
- Improve pupils' progress and raise attainment in reading, writing and mathematics throughout the school by:
 - rapidly improving the quality of teaching of these subjects
 - ensuring that pupils are able to apply mathematical skills to develop their thinking and reasoning across the curriculum.
- Improve leadership and management by:
 - ensuring that all teachers respond to training and advice by improving their practice
 - providing training to develop leaders' skills so that leaders play a leading role in driving improvements in teaching and learning, including by challenging weak practice
 - making sure leaders are skilled in using assessment information to set work which enables all pupils to make good progress
 - ensuring parents receive appropriate information about their child's achievement and progress
 - ensuring governors hold leaders to account for improving the school by checking the quality and accuracy of the information they receive about the school's performance.

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 first monitoring inspection on 15–16 December 2015

Evidence

I observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the headteacher. I met with a group of pupils and spoke to others in and around the school. I held a discussion with five members of the governing body, including the Chair of the Governing Body. I also met with two leaders from the Gloucester Learning Alliance who are currently supporting the school. I had a telephone discussion with an education consultant from the Department for Education.

Context

Since the inspection, one teacher has left the school and another has joined the staff. One teacher is on maternity leave. One part-time teaching assistant has left and two full-time teaching assistants have been employed. A number of governors have left since the inspection and three have joined the governing body. The number on roll has decreased from 132 to 111. The governing body is in discussion with the Department for Education about the future of the school.

Outcomes for pupils

Recently published information on the outcomes of the tests taken by Year 6 in 2015 shows that standards were significantly below the national average for all groups of pupils. Given their strong starting points as eager and articulate young people, this further highlights the inadequate achievement noted at the time of the inspection. Pupils are still not making the progress they are capable of and standards remain low. Progress over time is poor because they are not given enough challenge in lessons. Pupils do not know how to solve problems by themselves. In some lessons, pupils make small amounts of progress when they are working with an adult. However, as soon as they are left on their own, they quickly become distracted and no further progress is made.

Children in the Reception class are not making enough progress because the activities they are provided with fail to challenge them. For example, when given a sheet of two-dimensional shapes to decorate, the names of which they already knew, it became a colouring-in task which did not extend their skills. Outcomes are weak because children do not receive precise teaching which is firmly grounded in strong early years practice. They are failing to thrive as learners because they are squashed inappropriately into a tiny room which is ill equipped. Children in both the Nursery and Reception classes do not make sufficient progress because they are not given opportunities to extend their learning into the outdoor area.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Despite individual coaching for each teacher from the support school, the quality of teaching remains a serious concern. Most teachers have worked hard to ensure that their classrooms represent an interesting teaching area. They display and value pupils' work. Examples of the skills that are being taught are displayed and support pupils in their learning. For example, key mathematical terms and vocabulary, linked with the theme of work pupils are learning, are displayed on classroom walls for them to refer to for guidance. Nevertheless, pupils are not making the progress they are capable of because lessons lack challenge and are unclear. Mentors from the support school have encouraged teachers to identify the focus for each lesson they teach. However, too many sessions lack purpose. This is because teachers do not have a clear understanding of the knowledge and skills they want their pupils to learn. At times, explanations are muddled and pupils are confused about what exactly they are learning. Teachers prepare tasks that do not help pupils to think for themselves or enable them to apply their skills. Although there is evidence of some pupils being given work to match their different needs, this is not consistently so. Too often teachers structure an activity in a way that pupils can only approach in a very limited manner.

The new system introduced to track and record pupils' progress highlights significant weaknesses in teachers' ability to assess pupils' learning. There is a clear indication that some teachers are over-generous in their assessments. For example, entries recently made stated that some pupils had made 18 months' worth of progress during one term. However, this is not reflected in their work nor in the quality of teaching seen over the same period of time. Other teachers record that their pupils have made no progress over a term and offer no explanation. Although teachers have adopted the school's policy to marking work, the comments made do not always help pupils know what they need to do next.

The introduction of a creative approach to the curriculum is helping most of the teachers to make links between the different subjects they teach. This has started to help pupils to have a better understanding of what they are learning. Nevertheless, the lack of opportunities for pupils to write at length and depth about the topics they are learning is having a negative impact on their progress.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Pupils are polite and courteous to adults and to each other. They have a real zest for life and articulate their views and opinions with clarity and purpose. Pupils are pleased with some of the changes that have been made since the inspection. They particularly note the interesting topics they are learning about and the displays in their classrooms which help them with their work. However, some pupils explained that some of the new approaches to teaching are confusing. This is because they are not explained clearly to pupils and teachers appear to lack confidence in using them.

Despite their enthusiasm, pupils do not behave as well as they could in lessons. Although they work well sitting alongside an adult, when left to work on their own they become distracted and disengaged in their learning. This is because they are not sure of what they are supposed to be doing and do not know how to proceed further on their own. Children in the Reception class do not behave well and tend to squabble with each other. This is because they are bored and unstimulated.

Not all pupils are clear about safe practices because adults do not explain them to them. Pupils do not always have a clear understanding of what constitutes bullying and inappropriate behaviour.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

The leadership and management of the school remain extremely weak. You have failed to tackle the weaknesses which were noted at the time of the inspection. You have relied too heavily on the input provided by the support school, particularly in relation to the monitoring and evaluation of the quality of teaching and learning. Inadequate teaching has not been dealt with quickly enough. Your evaluations of learning in lessons do not accurately pinpoint the weaknesses in teaching and you have not been sufficiently forceful in putting these right.

There are serious safeguarding issues and pupils' safety is being compromised. For example, the information and communication suite is unsafe and pupils are not protected sufficiently well when using the internet. Inappropriate remarks made by some teachers to pupils have been tolerated for too long. This means that decisive action has not been taken to ensure that pupils are kept safe from abuse and prejudiced behaviour. There are numerous other issues within the school building which constitute a risk to pupils' health, safety and equality of opportunity. Examples of these include trip hazards on thread-bare or poorly fitted carpets and unhygienic equipment in the Nursery and Reception children's outdoor area, which is unfit for young children to use. Policy and practice remain poor, which means that pupils are at risk.

Despite being redrafted a number of times, the school action plan, which also serves as the statement of action, remains unfit for purpose. Although all areas requiring improvement are noted in the statement of action, references to the proposed impact on pupils' learning are scarce. The success and impact of any improvements to be made lack clarity and precision, and you find it difficult to understand what is required. Individuals responsible for carrying out improvements are also inappropriately identified as the evaluators of the progress being made. Any evaluations made are over-generous and inaccurate.

The newly created group of subject leaders have acted wisely on the advice given by their mentors and have started to look at pupils' books and observe learning through the school. By creating examples of the skills that pupils are expected to learn in each of their subject areas, they are steadily developing a shared knowledge and understanding of key learning concepts.

Although parents have noted some improvement in the way the classrooms are presented, and the manner in which a number of teachers are working hard to improve pupils' learning, many of the parents spoken to during the monitoring visit still remain unhappy about the leadership of the school. A parent council, chaired by a governor, provides opportunities for concerns to be shared within the school community. However, given your absence at these meetings, some parents feel frustrated that their views are not being heard sufficiently well and that actions are not taken quickly enough.

The recent external review of governance paints a very bleak picture of the effectiveness of the governing body. It clearly emphasises that current governors are committed to the school. However, it points out that they have limited governance knowledge and experience. It notes that individual governors have taken on considerable operational responsibilities. Nevertheless, there is a lack of clarity about their roles and responsibilities. This means that they cannot carry them out effectively and have no strategic plans in place to do so. Most concerning is that governors have not been holding you to account for the inadequate teaching and learning. At the time of my visit, I noted that governors had recently received some helpful training from the local authority and a local school partnership. They have also received guidance from your support school. However, the external review highlights that the 'scale of the challenge ahead is considerable and as such governance must constitute a risk to the school'.

External support

Since September 2015, the school has been receiving high-quality support from the Gloucestershire Learning Alliance. Every member of the teaching staff at St Anthony's has been allocated a mentor from Bishop Cleeve School. There have been informative visits to this school and mentors have also supported the teachers at St Anthony's. The Gloucestershire Learning Alliance has helped them plan their new creative curriculum and supported lesson planning. Two national leaders in education have been providing you and your governors with sound advice and accurate guidance. Teachers from Gloucestershire Learning Alliance have worked alongside teachers to support them carry out lesson observations and look for learning when they do 'book looks'. However, you, your governors and your teaching staff are not in a strong enough position to work on improvement without relying on this external support.