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Mrs Beverley Scott-Herron
Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Scott-Herron

Special measures monitoring inspection of Sir Thomas Boteler Church of England High School

Following my visit with Mrs Janet Peckett, Ofsted Inspector, to your school on 20 and 21 January 2016, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the 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.

This visit was the fourth monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures following the inspection which took place in September 2014. 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:

Leaders and managers are taking effective action towards the removal of special measures.

As agreed with you and members of the interim executive committee (IEC), the school may consider applications from newly qualified teachers when recruiting staff. However, the school must ensure that any newly qualified teachers appointed must receive high-quality support and be able to observe good and outstanding practice in order to further their professional development. There are no restrictions in relation to the subject departments that newly qualified teachers can be appointed to.

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 Committee (IEC), the Director of Education for the Church of England Diocese of Chester, the Director of Education for the Church of England Diocese of Liverpool and the Executive Director for Families and Wellbeing Services for Warrington.

Yours sincerely

Charles Lowry
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection which took place in September 2014

- Take urgent steps to improve the quality of teaching so that it is at least good in all subjects, particularly in English and mathematics, in order that the progress of all groups of students accelerates rapidly and they achieve well by:
 - ensuring that teachers' assessments of how well students are learning are accurate, and that they use this information to set work which enables all abilities of students to make at least good progress
 - raising teachers' expectations of what students can achieve, so that they provide more appropriate levels of challenge and ask probing questions to check students' understanding and to stimulate their interest
 - ensuring that all marking and feedback to students gives them very clear guidance about what they need to do to improve their work, particularly in their literacy development, and that students respond to the advice
 - ensuring that all teachers have good subject knowledge and that they use this effectively to explain to students what they should be learning in lessons and what they must do to be successful
 - ensuring that, in English, students have sufficient guidance to help them to structure their writing and develop their communication and extended writing skills across the curriculum
 - ensuring that students have plenty of opportunities in mathematics to solve problems so that they can develop and apply their understanding of key mathematical concepts
 - providing activities which are interesting, exciting and challenging enough so that students are encouraged to settle quickly to tasks, are keen and motivated to work hard and to do their best.

- Improve students' attendance in order that it is at least in line with the national average by using data about the attendance of particular groups of students to analyse patterns in their absence and target support more effectively.

- Improve the effectiveness of leaders and managers at all levels, including governance, in bringing about improvements, by:
 - ensuring that middle leaders have a clear understanding of their accountability for their areas of responsibility and that they have sufficient training to enable them to be successful
 - ensuring that senior and middle leaders check that data about how well students are learning are accurate and that they use them to hold teachers to account for the progress of students in their classes
 - ensuring that action plans have clear ways of measuring their success and that monitoring activities to check on the impact of actions aimed at improving teaching and achievement are robust

- ensuring that performance management targets for teachers are challenging and that individuals are provided with appropriate support to help them to improve their practice
- ensuring that governors hold the school to account effectively for its performance, including the impact of the pupil premium
- taking steps to share and embed the good teaching practice which already exists within the school.

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 20 and 21 January 2016

Evidence

Inspectors observed teachers' classroom practice, examined the work in pupils' books and scrutinised school documents and policies. Members of the inspection team met with the headteacher and, separately, with the senior leaders responsible for pupils' achievement, the quality of teaching, attendance and behaviour. Inspectors held meetings with members of the IEC, groups of pupils, the heads of department with responsibility for the English Baccalaureate subjects, a group of class teachers and the special educational needs coordinator. The lead inspector had a telephone conversation with a representative of the Church of England Diocese of Chester and met with a representative of the local authority. Inspectors evaluated the school's arrangements for safeguarding. They took into account the 20 responses to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View.

The focus of this monitoring visit was to determine the school's progress against each of the areas for improvement identified by inspectors in September 2014.

Context

Since the previous monitoring inspection, a teacher with subject responsibility for art has joined the staff. One teacher has been promoted to the position of second in science and another science teacher has left the school. One member of staff is temporarily absent on maternity leave. All the resulting vacancies have been filled by qualified teachers.

Outcomes for pupils

Since the previous monitoring inspection, senior leaders have reviewed the school's GCSE performance in 2015. The proportion of pupils who achieved five higher grade GCSEs, including English and mathematics, increased by six percentage points in comparison with the previous year. This improvement in performance was due, mainly, to the boys, whose attainment improved by 13%. However, this measure was still below the government's minimum expectation for attainment. Senior

leaders' effective use of the pupil premium resulted in an improvement in the attainment of disadvantaged pupils, which increased by 17 percentage points to 29%. Although disadvantaged pupils left the school approximately one GCSE grade behind their peers nationally in English and mathematics, this was an improvement on the previous year and, as a result, the attainment gap between this group of pupils and their peers across the country narrowed. The attainment of middle-ability pupils, disabled pupils and those with special educational needs improved in comparison with the previous year. However, senior leaders are aware that these improvements, although reversing the downward trend in results at GCSE from 2013 to 2014, are from a low base. Furthermore, they are aware of the urgency to drive up standards even further. This is particularly the case for girls and higher-ability pupils, whose rates of attainment in 2015 were low.

As a result of better-quality teaching, particularly in mathematics, science and modern languages, pupils' progress from Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 4 improved in 2015. As encouraging as these increased rates of pupils' progress are, in mathematics, progress remained below the national average. This was particularly the case for the most-able pupils. Instability in the staffing of the English department last year led to inconsistencies in the quality of teaching. As a result, almost all groups of pupils made weak progress from their different starting points.

The work in pupils' books and the school's own assessment information show that the progress of current Year 11 pupils is beginning to accelerate, particularly in English and mathematics. Senior leaders report that the proportion of pupils on track to attain five or more A*–C grades at GCSE, including English and mathematics, has risen considerably in comparison with a similar period last year. Furthermore, the school reports that the attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils and their peers is continuing to close. The underachievement of girls and higher-ability pupils, evident in last year's results, is being addressed. Senior leaders report that the progress of both groups of pupils is speeding up.

The school's Key Stage 3 data indicate that pupils are making progress in each of their core subjects. In Year 7, disadvantaged pupils are achieving as well as other pupils. However, in Years 8 and 9, disadvantaged pupils make slower progress than their peers, but are catching up. Across Key Stage 3, girls, pupils of lower ability and the most able are making the most rapid progress. However, senior leaders are aware of the relative underperformance of middle-ability pupils and the urgent need to take effective action to address this.

Those parents who responded to Parent View are of the opinion that their children make good progress.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Since the previous monitoring visit, senior leaders have been implementing their plans to improve the quality of teaching. This has led to teachers using a range of strategies in lessons to capture pupils' interests, raise expectations and improve outcomes.

Where learning is most effective, teachers ensure that the needs of the different groups of pupils are catered for, with the most able suitably challenged and support provided for weaker learners. Teachers select activities which build on the foundation of what pupils already know, can do and understand in order to deepen their learning. Teaching assistants are effectively used to enrich pupils' learning experience and help them make progress. However, not all teaching is yet of this quality as inconsistencies remain and there are pockets of weaker practice. For example, some teachers place too much emphasis on the techniques they use in lessons without giving enough consideration as to how these techniques impact on pupils' learning. When this happens, pupils make slow progress.

The quality of teachers' marking has continued to improve since the previous monitoring inspection. Pupils' work scrutinised by inspectors shows that teachers' marking is compliant with school policy, which, at its most effective, affords pupils the opportunity to learn from their mistakes and move their learning on. Marking of this quality was seen in some English, mathematics and science books. However, there is some variability both within and between subjects on the impact that teachers' marking has on pupils' progress. For example, in some books, pupils repeat errors and some marking is unhelpful.

Senior leaders have made the development of pupils' literacy skills across the curriculum a priority. Inspectors observed a number of lessons where pupils were given the opportunity to read aloud to their peers. Moreover, teachers consistently introduce pupils to subject-specific vocabulary and correct pupils' spelling mistakes when marking books. In these ways, literacy is given due prominence in pupils' learning, enabling them to hone their reading skills and broaden their vocabulary. However, teachers sometimes miss opportunities to explore with pupils the meanings of unfamiliar words in written texts.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

The high standards of pupils' behaviour, noted by inspectors at the previous monitoring inspection, have been maintained. Where teaching captures their imaginations, pupils are industrious, keen to learn and eager to get on. The work in the sample of pupils' books examined by inspectors is generally well presented and activities are complete and up to date. This demonstrates the pride that pupils take in their studies. Relationships between members of the school community are characteristically warm and friendly.

Pupils' standards of uniform continue to be high and they respect their learning environment. This is reflected in the condition of the school site, which is clean, tidy and well maintained. Pupils who met with inspectors agreed that behaviour continues to improve. This is because pupils are clear about what is expected of them and the consistent application of the school's behaviour policy by the staff. Taken together, these factors have also led to a reduction in the numbers of pupils excluded from the school.

Those pupils spoken to by inspectors have a secure understanding of the different forms that bullying can take, including cyber-bullying, racism, homophobia and other types of prejudiced-based behaviour. Pupils say that bullying is not an issue in the school; however, should it occur, they are confident that the adults who work with them will sort it out. Wall displays act as reminders for pupils that tolerance and understanding of others are key elements of the school's ethos.

Senior leaders' work to improve pupils' attendance and reduce persistent absence continues to bear fruit. Rigorous monitoring of attendance by pastoral staff and form tutors, immediate contact with parents should a pupil fail to register, and home visits by the attendance officer have become established practice since the previous monitoring inspection. This has led to greater parental engagement and improved rates of attendance for all groups of pupils, which are now in line with the national average. Furthermore, the school reports a substantial decline in the proportion of pupils who are persistently absent.

The IEC's work to keep pupils safe is effective. The single central record of the checks made on the suitability of adults to work with children meets statutory requirements. Prior to a successful applicant being offered a post at the school, senior staff ensure that pre-employment checks are carried out and references are collected and retained. The school's safeguarding policy is up to date and reflects the latest guidance from the Secretary of State for Education. All staff have received training in keeping children safe in school settings. Those parents who made a response to Ofsted's online questionnaire agree that their children feel safe in school.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

The headteacher has had to make some difficult decisions in order to improve the quality of teaching and drive up standards. However, her positive approach has united staff and pupils behind her vision for improving the school. As a result, ably supported by her senior team, she has raised the expectations of both staff and pupils of what can be achieved, and is unswerving in her desire to move the school forward.

Senior leaders know the school well. They are clear about the school's strengths and have correctly identified priorities for further development, which are directing leaders' and managers' work to improve the school. Led by the deputy headteacher, a comprehensive programme of training has been put in place to improve staff expertise and increase their effectiveness in the classroom. Records of leaders' and managers' monitoring of the quality of teaching provide evidence of the increasingly positive impact of this training on teachers' practice and pupils' outcomes.

Every half-term, senior leaders collect data on pupils' performance. They analyse the data to determine how well pupils are achieving and hold staff to account. However, the results of this analysis are presented as a series of headline figures. This makes it difficult for leaders and managers to determine the progress pupils are making from their starting points and gives an incomplete picture of how well pupils are achieving.

The team of heads of department is becoming more secure in leading developments in their respective subject areas and in monitoring and evaluating the work of their colleagues. However, the team has yet to show sufficient impact on pupils' outcomes.

The strengths of the IEC, noted at the previous monitoring visit, have been maintained. Members bring an eclectic mix of experience, skills and knowledge to school governance from the fields of education and commerce. As a result, they are able to provide an effective balance of support and challenge to the headteacher in her work to improve the school.

Senior leaders are using the Year 7 catch-up premium (extra government funding) to support the learning of pupils with weak literacy and numeracy skills. The school's monitoring information shows that pupils supported by this funding are making progress. However, it is not clear from senior leaders' analysis of the data whether this rate of progress is rapid enough.

External support

Senior leaders have welcomed the effective support provided by professionals from local successful schools. The latter have helped with developments in a number of subjects, including English, mathematics, the humanities and foreign languages. Consultants have successfully delivered training to staff in effective teaching techniques. A subject specialist in English has moderated teachers' assessments at Key Stage 4 in order to ensure their reliability.

The local authority has begun to reduce the level of support to the school as it believes senior leaders are demonstrating their ability to manage change independently.

Teachers from Sir Thomas Boteler are working with colleagues in other schools to share expertise in mathematics teaching and strategies for improving the quality of teaching and learning across the curriculum.