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Gill Laird
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Dear Gill Laird

Special measures monitoring inspection of Stephenson Studio School

Following my visit to your school on 15-16 June 2016, 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 recent section 5 inspection.

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

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 trust's statement of action is fit for purpose.

The school's improvement plan is fit for purpose.

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

I am copying this letter to the chair of the executive board, 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 taken in order to assess how this aspect of leadership and management may be improved.

Report on the first monitoring inspection on 15 June 2016 to 16 June 2016

Evidence

The inspector met with the headteacher and deputy headteacher, subject leaders, the special educational needs coordinator, leaders who manage pupils' work placements and six trustees. He also met with the school improvement partner, and spoke with the headteacher of a partner secondary school that senior leaders have been working closely with. The inspector observed pupils' learning in four lessons. The deputy headteacher accompanied him in these observations. The inspector met formally and informally with a range of pupils across Year 10. He also looked at pupils' books, both within lessons and as a separate activity. The inspector scrutinised a wide range of documents relating to the school's work, including the school improvement plan and the school's own self-evaluation of its performance. The inspector looked at documentation relating to pupils' achievement, the school's curriculum, the quality of teaching and the impact of governance. He took into account reports from the school improvement partner and the headteacher of the partner school. The inspector scrutinised the external reviews that the senior leaders and trustees have commissioned on governance and on the school's use of the pupil premium. The inspector evaluated the impact of the school's actions since the last inspection on leadership and management, the quality of teaching, learning and assessment, outcomes for pupils and 16 to 19 study programmes.

Context

The school's leadership has recently appointed a senior leader with responsibility for literacy and numeracy. There will also be new subject leaders of mathematics and of English. These leaders will commence in post in September 2016. Senior leaders have also appointed two new leaders who manage pupils' work placements. These leaders took up their posts following the inspection. The school has a new school improvement partner, which has begun to work with the school since the inspection.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

Senior leaders have been quick to take appropriate action to remedy those areas for improvement the inspectors identified at the previous inspection. They have engaged with a range of external organisations to ensure that their procedures for monitoring the effectiveness of the school's provision are rigorous. For example, senior leaders have worked closely with both the headteacher of a partner school and their own school improvement partner to ensure that their evaluation of the quality of teaching is accurate. They have also worked closely with external consultants in English, mathematics and science to ensure that the quality of teaching and the accuracy of teachers' assessment of pupils' work improves. Consequently, senior leaders now have a more precise understanding of the

effectiveness of the school's overall provision, and are able to identify more quickly those actions they need to undertake to secure the necessary improvements.

Senior leaders have developed a more rigorous system by which they monitor pupils' achievement. This new system enables them to monitor the achievement of different groups of pupils more effectively. Furthermore, this system enables them to identify where pupils have fallen behind and put into place appropriate support. Senior leaders work closely with subject leaders to evaluate the impact of the support these pupils receive.

Senior leaders, working in conjunction with subject leaders, have reviewed the curriculum and the opportunities pupils receive to develop their reading, writing and mathematical skills. Because of this, pupils now have improved chances to develop their communication and numeracy skills across a curriculum that is more appropriate to their needs and aspirations. Subject leaders rightly recognise that they need to refine further their understanding as to where subjects other than English and mathematics develop communication and numeracy skills. This is to ensure that pupils can develop these skills fully through such opportunities.

Teachers have received a wide range of training opportunities to develop their teaching practice. Senior leaders have run these training sessions in conjunction with leaders from the partner school. For example, teachers have undertaken training on effective questioning and on planning engaging learning activities. The school's own monitoring of the quality of teaching indicates that there has been an improvement in the quality of teaching since the previous inspection. Senior leaders have conducted this monitoring with the headteacher of the partner school, to ensure that their evaluation is secure.

The leaders who manage pupils' work placements have begun to sharpen their analysis of the impact of such placements on the development of pupils' learning and personal skills. These leaders, for example, have improved the system by which they receive feedback from both the pupil and the employer at the end of a pupil's work placement. These leaders recognise, however, that they need to use this information more effectively when matching pupils to future work placements.

The special educational needs coordinator has taken swift action to sharpen how she monitors the achievement of those pupils who have special educational needs or disability. The school now identifies pupils' learning needs more quickly and, as a result, is able to provide increasingly precise and timely support. The special educational needs coordinator has also developed systems by which she is able to evaluate the support adults provide these pupils. Because of this, these pupils are now beginning to make more rapid progress in those areas where they have a specific need.

Senior leaders have been quick to commission an external review of the school's use of the pupil premium. They have acted immediately on the recommendations of

this comprehensive review. The recommendations have included ensuring that there are sufficient levels of challenge and support within lessons so that disadvantaged pupils engage with their learning and make progress. The school's own performance information indicates that the achievement of disadvantaged pupils has improved since the previous inspection, particularly for those pupils in Year 11.

The trustees have engaged in a thorough review of their own effectiveness. They have engaged a retired chair of governors from a local secondary school to review their work. They have also commissioned an independent review of the effectiveness of governance. They have been quick to take on board the recommendations of the review. Trustees have also carefully considered actions they can undertake to ensure that the information they receive from senior leaders is accurate. By engaging in this rigorous review of their efficiency and effectiveness, trustees now have a more secure and accurate view of the quality of the school's provision. They have a precise understanding of those areas where rapid improvement is necessary.

Strengths in the school's approaches to securing improvement

- Senior leaders have been quick to take effective action to remedy the weaknesses that the inspector identified at the previous inspection. They have engaged appropriately with external agencies to access the necessary support to secure their own leadership skills and improve the quality of teaching.
- Leaders have reviewed the curriculum at key stages 4 and 5 to ensure that it meets the needs of its pupils, and prepares them appropriately for the next steps in their education, training or employment.
- Teachers have received appropriate training to improve their practice. Senior leaders have ensured that this training focuses precisely on those weaknesses in teaching that inspectors identified at the previous inspection.
- Senior leaders are now using their secure evaluation of the quality of teaching to provide the necessary support and challenge to improve teachers' performance. The headteacher has rightly taken action in relation to teachers whose performance has not improved, despite the support they have received.
- The leaders who manage pupils' work placements have taken swift action to refine the processes by which they review the impact of such placements on the development of pupils' learning and personal skills.
- Support provided for pupils who have special educational needs or disability is now more effective.
- Trustees are now working more effectively and efficiently in supporting and challenging senior leaders in their work to improve the school's provision. Trustees have a more precise understanding of the school's strengths and weakness. They understand the work that all staff must undertake to improve the quality of teaching and raise pupils' achievement.

Weaknesses in the school's approaches to securing improvement

- On occasions, senior leaders' review of the impact of their work to improve the school's effectiveness is not as sharp as it could be. On these occasions, the conclusions they and trustees draw regarding future actions can lack the necessary precision. Senior leaders rightly recognise this issue. They have begun to take action to sharpen their review of the work they are undertaking.
- When planning future work placements for pupils, leaders do not sufficiently consider the progress pupils have made in their learning and personal skills in previous placements. Consequently, pupils' subsequent work placements do not always enable them to secure the necessary progression in their skills.
- Subject leaders in English and mathematics do not have a sufficiently secure understanding of those occasions when teachers in subjects other than English and mathematics deliver lessons that involve pupils using their communication and numeracy skills. Consequently, English and mathematics teachers are not able to support pupils effectively enough to develop these skills in advance.
- The improvements in pupils' achievement since the previous inspection is not consistent across both Years 10 and 11. Proportions of Year 10 pupils who are making the progress expected of them in English and mathematics are particularly weak.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Senior leaders have taken appropriate action to improve the quality of teaching at the school. They have worked closely with senior leaders from the partner school to provide teachers with appropriate training to improve their practice in the classroom. This has included developing teachers' questioning skills and improving their recognition of pupils' prior learning when planning lessons.

Senior leaders have worked closely with the headteacher of the partner school to evaluate the impact of the training on the quality of teaching. This evaluation indicates that there has been an improvement in the quality of teaching at the school. In those lessons that the inspector observed, teachers had planned activities that were suitable to the prior learning and attainment of pupils, and were asking questions to check pupils' learning and clarify misconceptions. In a business studies lesson, for example, the teacher's questions enabled pupils to consider in detail the relationship between the cost of a product and its quality.

However, there were occasions where pupils did not receive the challenge necessary to deepen and secure their understanding. Furthermore, there were occasions where teachers did not check sufficiently pupils' understanding of the key communication or numeracy skills that underpinned the topics they were studying.

There is now an increased focus on developing pupils' reading skills. Senior leaders, working closely with the subject leader in English, have increased pupils' access to appropriate reading materials through their online library. Pupils also receive more

opportunities to read within lessons through the 'Drop Everything And Read' (DEAR) initiative. Pupils told the inspector they recognised how these occasions help to develop their reading skills and prepare them for their examinations.

The 'Comment Action Rework' (CAR) initiative provides pupils with opportunities to reflect and act upon the feedback they receive from their teachers. Those pupils the inspector met valued this new initiative. The books the inspector looked at demonstrated that pupils take advantage of the feedback they receive to improve their understanding.

Outcomes for pupils

Due to the increased rigour with which senior leaders now monitor pupils' achievement, all leaders and teachers have a more secure understanding of the progress pupils are making. They are also able to identify more quickly pupils who are falling behind in their learning. Because of this, teachers are able to provide pupils with more effective support to enable them to catch up. This is particularly the case for the least able pupils. The school's own performance information indicates that the progress of these pupils in Years 10 and 11 has improved since the previous inspection. Books demonstrated rapid progress by these pupils, particularly in developing their writing and presentation skills, often from very low starting points. Leaders rightly recognise that this progress, however, is not consistent across all groups of pupils, or across both years at key stage 4.

16 to 19 study programmes

Senior leaders have taken immediate action to review the school's sixth-form provision. They have rightly recognised that their current provision does not serve their sixth-form students well enough. Consequently, senior leaders have made the decision to reduce their sixth-form provision for the next academic year. For students new to the sixth form, the school will deliver only those courses in which, previously, standards have been higher. Senior leaders will analyse the needs and aspirations of the pupils currently in Year 10, to ensure that the sixth-form curriculum they offer from September 2017 is appropriate. Senior leaders will also work with local businesses to ensure that the sixth-form provision takes advantage of the expertise such employers offer. This is in keeping with the school's strong focus on developing in their students those skills relevant to the workplace.

External support

Leaders at all levels have embraced the opportunities to work with a wide range of external organisations to improve their leadership of the school and the quality of the teaching pupils receive. This external support includes working with a partner secondary school and engaging with external consultants in English, mathematics and science. Senior leaders are also working closely with the school improvement partner. Because of this work, leaders at all levels have a sharper understanding of

the strengths and weaknesses of the school. They are also adopting appropriate initiatives to bring about the necessary improvements to the school's provision.

In working with these external agencies, senior leaders are mindful of their own responsibility to secure the necessary improvements to the school's provision. To this end, both the senior leaders and the headteacher of the partner school are keen to continue with this support, but on a reduced level. This is to ensure that there is a smooth transition between the use of external support and senior leaders within the school leading the school's improvement themselves.