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Mr Keith Hobbs
Stephenson Studio School
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Dear Mr Hobbs

Special measures monitoring inspection of Stephenson Studio School

Following my visit to your school on 15 March 2017, 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 previous monitoring inspection.

The inspection was the third monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures following the inspection that took place in September 2015. The full list of the areas for improvement that 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.

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

I am copying this letter to the chair of the governing body, 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 undertaken in order to assess how this aspect of leadership and management may be improved.

Report on the third monitoring inspection on 15 March 2017

Evidence

The inspector held meetings with: the headteacher; senior leaders; the subject leaders of English and mathematics; the designated safeguarding lead; the leader who manages pupils' work placements; and five trustees. The inspector observed pupils' learning in six lessons, during which he spoke with pupils and looked at their books. The inspector conducted four of these observations jointly with the headteacher and the senior leader responsible for teaching and learning. The inspector met formally and informally with a range of pupils in Years 10 and 11. He also looked at Year 10 and Year 11 pupils' science books with the subject leader. The inspector scrutinised a range of documents relating to the school's work. These included the school's own self-evaluation as well as documentation relating to attendance, pupils' achievement, the quality of teaching and the training staff receive. The inspector checked the school's single central record.

Context

A full-time work-placement coordinator has recently taken up her post at the school.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

The senior leaders have taken decisive and timely action to resolve the issues that the inspector identified at the last monitoring inspection, including the additional area for improvement concerning the pupils' attendance at the school. The actions that the senior leaders have taken have helped to improve the quality of teaching and have raised the profile of the teaching of communication and numeracy skills across the curriculum. These developments have led to some improvement in pupils' achievement in Years 10 and 11, particularly in English and mathematics, including for disadvantaged pupils. In these subjects, pupils have made more rapid progress since the last monitoring inspection. However, the proportion of pupils who are making the progress that they should is too low. Too few pupils in Years 10 and 11 are currently on track to achieve the highest grades of which they are capable.

The leader responsible for teaching and learning now has more dedicated time to be able to fulfil her responsibilities. Both she and the headteacher visit lessons regularly to observe the quality of teaching and to identify where teachers require further support. They are quick to share with staff those occasions when they identify effective classroom practice.

They are also able to provide effective support to those teachers whose practice

does not meet the leaders' expectations. The training that teachers receive focuses much more sharply on the areas for development that the senior leaders have identified through their visits to lessons. Their more regular checks on the quality of teaching have led to the senior leaders having a more precise understanding of where improvement in teaching has occurred, and where further improvements are necessary.

The subject leaders of English and mathematics have taken wide-ranging action to raise the profile of communication and numeracy skills across the curriculum. They have provided the staff with training to ensure that the staff have a sufficient understanding of how to teach these skills effectively within their subjects. The subject leaders also work more closely with teachers in all subject areas to identify the occasions when pupils will study a topic that will require them to practise key communication or numeracy skills. Subject leaders now ensure that the pupils study these skills in their discrete mathematics or English lessons before encountering the topic in their other subject studies. For example, the mathematics teachers have spent time ensuring that the pupils understand the concept of averages before encountering this concept in their science lessons. The subject leaders undertake regular visits to lessons to check that teachers are teaching communication and numeracy skills effectively. The subject leaders are quick to provide further support to the teachers where this is necessary.

The subject leaders of English and mathematics have also led the drive to provide pupils with opportunities during form time to improve their communication and numeracy skills. The subject leaders have designed activities that pupils regularly complete during form time, to improve their ability to respond to mathematical questions and to analyse the content and meaning of key texts. For example, pupils regularly complete activities that sharpen their use of multiplication and division. They also regularly read texts and answer comprehension questions to demonstrate their understanding of what they have read. The subject leaders have provided the form tutors with appropriate training to ensure that they support the pupils effectively in completing these activities. The pupils whom the inspector met recognised the value of these occasions to develop their communication and numeracy skills through increased practice.

The actions that the subject leaders of mathematics and English have taken to raise the profile of communication and numeracy skills across the curriculum are now leading to pupils having greater confidence when using these skills. For example, pupils are now able to complete extended pieces of writing, particularly in their English lessons. Pupils are also able to understand how they can use the skills they are learning in English and mathematics in other lessons. The science books that the inspector looked at demonstrated the pupils practising their mathematical skills with greater confidence. Because of this, the pupils now demonstrate a more secure level of understanding in their science lessons than that seen in the previous monitoring inspection.

The leader who oversees the school's use of additional government funding to

support the learning of the disadvantaged pupils closely monitors the support that these pupils receive, including the effectiveness of this support. She has ensured that, where disadvantaged pupils are falling behind, they receive appropriate support, including individual support in mathematics. She regularly checks on the progress that these pupils make as a result of the support that they receive. The support that the disadvantaged pupils receive is helping them to catch up where previously they have fallen behind. However, too few disadvantaged pupils are currently making the progress that they should from their different starting points, including in English and in mathematics.

The senior leaders have recently introduced a system of mentoring for all of the pupils to support the pupils in their learning. Although this strategy is new, the pupils whom the inspector met said that the support they are receiving from their mentor has been effective. They said that it is helping them to reflect upon their learning and to identify where they are not making sufficient progress. The pupils also said that this mentoring is providing them with effective support as they prepare for their next steps after they leave the school. The senior leaders regularly review this system of support to ensure that it is effective in supporting the pupils in their learning.

In the short time that the work-placement coordinator has been at the school, she has reviewed the systems by which the school monitors pupils' progress at their work placements. In so doing, she has placed appropriate emphasis on ensuring that the employer and the school work closely to identify the occasions when the pupils' command of their communication or numeracy skills is not strong enough. The coordinator's new monitoring systems encourage timely communication between the employer and the school, and provide regular opportunities for the pupils to review their own progress with their school mentor. These systems help the teachers to work more closely with the pupils to develop the skills that the employers have identified as being insufficiently developed. The adoption of these systems is recent and it is currently not possible to evaluate their impact on developing the pupils' use of these skills in their work placements.

The senior leaders have undertaken a range of actions to encourage pupils to attend the school more regularly. The senior leaders rightly recognise how absence affects the progress that the pupils can make and have made this clear to the pupils and their parents. There is now a greater presence of the senior leaders at the school gate in the morning, before school. Through this, the senior leaders are able to challenge the pupils who arrive late to school.

The senior leaders also have a more timely understanding of who is absent and are then able to contact the pupils' parents to check on the pupils' whereabouts. Senior

leaders communicate effectively with parents when they have concerns about a pupil's absence, particularly where a pupil is regularly absent from the school. Because of these actions, the overall attendance of pupils, including that of disadvantaged pupils, is beginning to improve. The levels of attendance, however, remain below the national level for all pupils.

The governing body continues to have a precise understanding of the quality of the school's provision, including those areas that require further improvement. Governors undertake their own visits to the school to check on the accuracy of the information that they receive from the senior leaders. During these visits, they speak with the pupils and the staff. This helps the governors to ensure that they are secure in their judgement of the quality of the school's provision.

The governors have developed further the levels of support and challenge that they provide the senior leaders with in their drive to improve the quality of teaching and raise pupils' achievement. For example, the governors have ensured that they are secure in their oversight of the progress that the pupils in Year 10 are making. They have also supported the senior leaders to put into place higher expectations in relation to the quality of teaching. The governors have explored more thoroughly occasions when the sponsor college can provide support to the school. Consequently, the links between the school and its sponsor remain strong.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

The actions that the senior leaders have taken to improve the quality of teaching have led to improvements in this aspect of the school's provision since the last monitoring inspection.

Most teachers now have higher expectations of the quantity of work that the pupils can complete in the lesson. These teachers provide activities that more accurately meet the needs of the pupils and ask effective questions to explore the pupils' understanding. The teachers also provide the pupils with more precise feedback on the work that they have completed, including identifying where the pupils have demonstrated a misconception. The pupils now receive allocated time to respond to the feedback that they have received. This is allowing the pupils to reflect upon their understanding more effectively and to resolve any misconceptions that they may previously have had.

Pupils are now completing their work in greater detail, including through completing extended written responses to examination questions. In an English lesson, for example, pupils in Year 11 were responding to questions about the author's use of language to portray evil in 'Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde'.

In their responses, the pupils were able to demonstrate that they could engage well with the language contained within the text. They were able to identify correctly

words that the author had used to portray notions of evil. Some pupils were also able to consider the context of the society within which the author lived. They were able to recognise how this affected the language that the author used.

The pupils that the inspector met were clear that the quality of teaching has improved since the last monitoring inspection. They said that the teachers now ask challenging questions and provide the pupils with detailed feedback about their work to enable the pupils to improve their understanding. The pupils said that the teachers have higher expectations and that, as a result, the pupils engage more effectively with their learning.

The senior leaders have correctly identified where classroom practice continues not to be effective enough. They have ensured that appropriate training is in place to support these teachers.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Attendance is beginning to improve because of the increased focus that the senior leaders have placed on ensuring that the pupils attend more regularly. Of those pupils whose absence previously was below the national level for all pupils, the majority, including the disadvantaged pupils, have improved their attendance at the school since the last monitoring inspection. At the same time, the proportion of the pupils, including the disadvantaged pupils, who are regularly absent from the school has reduced significantly since the last monitoring inspection. The levels of absence, however, including the proportion of pupils who are regularly absent from the school, remain too high.

Outcomes for pupils

The improvements in the quality of teaching have led to some improvement in pupils' achievement. Since the last monitoring inspection, the pupils in Year 11, including the disadvantaged pupils, have made rapid progress in their learning in English and in mathematics. However, the overall progress that Year 11 pupils are making from their different starting points remains too low. Too few of these pupils, including the disadvantaged pupils, are on track to achieve the highest grade of which they are capable across a range of subjects.

The pupils in Year 10 have also made more rapid progress in their learning since the last monitoring inspection, particularly in English. While there has been an improvement in the progress that pupils are making in mathematics, this has not been as strong as that seen in English. Senior leaders have begun to take action to ensure that the pupils who have not made sufficient progress in mathematics receive further support.

However, too few Year 10 pupils are currently making rapid enough progress to ensure that they catch up where previously they have fallen behind. Consequently,

too few Year 10 pupils, including the disadvantaged pupils, are currently on track to make the progress that they should across a range of subjects, from their different starting points.

The strong focus on developing pupils' communication skills has led to an improvement in their ability to spell and to read. The school's assessment of the pupils' reading ages indicates that the pupils have made rapid progress in their reading ability. Because of this, the pupils are now beginning to catch up where they have previously fallen significantly behind before arriving at the school. Many pupils, however, remain behind in their reading skills. The senior leaders rightly recognise that further work is necessary to ensure that the pupils are sufficiently secure in this skill to ensure that they are able to make the progress that they should in their learning.

16 to 19 study programmes

The senior leaders have now drawn up a programme of study for the students who will be in Year 12 next academic year. The senior leaders have rightly recognised the need to provide a programme of study that meets the needs of the pupils, currently in Year 11, when they begin their studies in Year 12 and that prepares them effectively for their next steps. The senior leaders have worked closely with the governing body to design a programme of study that enables Year 12 students to complete work placements, while also continuing their mathematics and English studies at an appropriate level at the school. The senior leaders have ensured that these students will receive the pastoral support they require from the school. The Year 12 students will also be able to study work-related subjects through the further education college that sponsors the school. There are early signs that this programme of study is popular among the current Year 11 pupils.

External support

At the last monitoring inspection, the senior leaders, with the support of the governors, had submitted a bid to continue to work with a local school to improve the quality of teaching. Previously, the support from this local school had been effective.

This bid has been successful. The senior leaders and the teachers now work closely with colleagues from the local school to improve their practice. For example, the teachers receive opportunities to undertake training at the local school, which includes observing the best practice of the local school's teachers. The local school also provides the senior leaders with effective support. The headteacher, for example, has been able to adopt effective strategies to begin to resolve the aspects of the school's provision that require further improvement. He has been able to do this through his close work with the headteacher of the local school. Some of the pupils have visited the local school to be able to experience the curriculum, teaching and behaviour at that school. The pupils have been able to

report their findings back to the senior leaders of their own school. This strategy is enabling the pupils to have a greater role in improving the quality of provision at their school.