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Mrs Tina Bissett
Headteacher
The Holmesdale School
Malling Road
Snodland
Kent
ME6 5HS

Dear Mrs Bissett

Special measures monitoring inspection of The Holmesdale School

Following my visit, accompanied by Dylan Davies, Her Majesty's Inspector, to your school on 17 to 18 July 2018, 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 February 2018.

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 local authority's statement of action, which includes the school's improvement plan, is fit for purpose. However, given the fact that support is no longer being provided by the multi-academy trust named in the plan, some areas of the plan would benefit from being updated.

The school may not appoint newly qualified teachers before the next monitoring inspection.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the interim executive board, the regional schools commissioner, and the director of children's services for Kent. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Sarah Hubbard
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection that took place in February 2018

- As a matter of urgency, ensure that all aspects of safeguarding are effective by:
 - checking that staff accurately record pupils' attendance and quickly follow up on any pupil missing from education
 - ensuring that staff responsible for safeguarding swiftly report concerns and pass issues on to the relative bodies.

- Improve the quality of teaching so that pupils in all year groups, especially pupils who are disadvantaged and most-able pupils, make good progress by ensuring that:
 - teachers have high enough expectations of what pupils can achieve and plan activities that are well matched to their abilities
 - teachers understand what effective teaching looks like and thus improve their own practice
 - teachers' assessments are accurate and used to target support where it is most needed.

- Improve the effectiveness of leadership and management by ensuring that:
 - leaders implement sharply focused plans and evaluate the impact of their actions to improve the quality of provision
 - all subject leaders are fully accountable and develop the necessary skills to enable them to raise standards and improve the quality of teaching in their subjects
 - all pastoral leaders contribute to improving attendance and reducing incidents of poor behaviour
 - governors have the skills and understanding to hold school leaders to account for the school's performance
 - pupil premium funding has a positive impact on the attendance, progress and attainment of disadvantaged pupils.

- Improve attendance and reduce the persistent absence of pupils by:
 - carefully evaluating the impact of the school's strategies for improving attendance to determine which strategies are effective and which are not
 - challenging and supporting parents of pupils with high levels of absence to ensure that their children's attendance improves.

- Improve the quality of provision in the sixth form by ensuring that students are provided with the full range of opportunities identified in the requirements of the

16 to 19 study programmes.

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.

An external review of governance should be undertaken.

The school may not appoint newly qualified teachers.

Report on the first monitoring inspection on 17 to 18 July 2018

Evidence

Inspectors made visits to observe learning across the school. On most occasions they were accompanied by a senior member of staff. Inspectors also undertook short, unaccompanied visits to classes to check pupils' behaviour. Inspectors scrutinised documents relating to safeguarding, the checks made before staff are employed, improvement planning, pupils' progress, and the school's evaluation of its progress to date. Inspectors also met separately with the headteacher, senior leaders, subject leaders, student support managers, a group of staff, a group of parents, a group of pupils, the designated safeguarding leader and the leader responsible for supporting pupils attending alternative provision. Meetings were held with the associate leader responsible for developing teaching, the associate leader responsible for raising attainment, a group of leaders responsible for supporting disadvantaged pupils and looked after pupils, and two members of the newly formed interim executive board (IEB), including the chair. Inspectors made one phone call to the multi-academy trust that had been providing support to the school until recently, and three phone calls to providers of off-site education.

This inspection focused primarily, but not exclusively, on those areas of improvement that related to safety, including pupils' attendance.

Context

Since the previous inspection, one deputy headteacher has left, one has stood down from his post but remains as a class teacher and one has resigned from August 2018. Two community leaders will also leave at this time. The governing body was replaced by an IEB about a month before this monitoring visit. A new deputy headteacher has been appointed who will join the school in September 2018. Two members of staff, who currently have roles as associate senior leaders, have both been appointed as assistant headteachers from the start of next academic term.

The multi-academy trust (MAT) that had been supporting the school until recently is no longer providing support. The local authority is in the process of commissioning new support for the school.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

The headteacher has a clear view of what needs to be done to improve the school. She has not shied away from making difficult decisions and challenging some staff about their performance. The headteacher also has an accurate understanding of where the school is on its journey out of special measures, rightly recognising that some areas have not developed quickly enough. Despite the headteacher's clarity, honesty and commitment, overall the school's progress since the previous inspection has been too slow. The primary reason for this is weak capacity in the leadership of

the school at middle and senior leadership levels. Three new senior leaders with potential have been appointed for September 2018. However, some of these new senior leaders are inexperienced and require further development. In order to plug emerging gaps in leadership there have been successive changes to the areas for which leaders are responsible, and the headteacher has also taken on too many additional areas of responsibility. There are consequently omissions in leaders' oversight of key areas. Weaknesses in capacity have also meant that some important first steps on the journey out of special measures have not been taken. Some new initiatives that had a promising start have now stalled.

The actions of the designated safeguarding leader have led to some improvements. For example, staff are kept up to date about current safeguarding guidance and any issues relevant to pupils at the school. However, other important aspects have not received sufficient attention, even though the previous inspection report recommended urgent action. Some ancillary staff, such as kitchen staff, have not been given statutory training in safeguarding. There is not a joined-up approach to different aspects of safeguarding. The oversight of some pupils who are particularly vulnerable, and who also attend alternative provision, has not been sufficient. Information about pupils attending alternative provision about whom there are safeguarding concerns is not always passed on to the designated safeguarding leader. As a result, the designated leader's overview of what has been done to support each pupil, and when it has been done, is incomplete. Similarly, communication between the designated safeguarding leader and the member of staff responsible for children looked after is too informal. This means that responsible leaders do not have a detailed enough picture of all the barriers that each pupil faces, the range of support provided, and how well it is meeting each pupil's individual needs.

Weaknesses in the way some middle leaders are managed, including too many line management changes, have hampered rates of improvement. Some middle leaders have not been held to account as stringently as others. These variations mean that while some aspects of the school have improved, others have not. For example, the impact that community leaders have had on improving attendance and outcomes is limited. However, the positive changes made by the head of the sixth form have started to improve the 16 to 19 study programmes. Further development is required to ensure that the work-experience programme supports pupils well in their next steps.

Prior to the formation of the IEB, governance was not effective. This was because governors were not focused enough on moving the school out of special measures. The IEB met for the first time at the start of June, so is still in its early days. Minutes from the meeting show that their checks on how well the school is implementing the areas for improvement are thorough. IEB members ask challenging questions that require leaders to account for the pace of change. They recognise the need for urgency and have scheduled the review of pupil premium funding to take place during the final week of the summer term. IEB members have considerable experience of supporting schools in challenging circumstances that they can bring to bear in their

current roles. The current IEB and the previous governing body have both, rightly, raised concerns about capacity in leadership.

The process of academisation is in its early stages. The name of the MAT that will be overseeing the school when it becomes an academy has been recently announced. Leaders and governors are keen that the process is completed as speedily as possible, given the current lack in leadership capacity. However, they are concerned that the current funding arrangements in place at the school may make the process of academisation lengthy.

The statement of action includes the school improvement plan. The statement of action was ratified as fit for purpose by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors. However, since then there have been some significant changes, and some aspects of the plan are, therefore, now out of date. For example, the MAT that was named in the plan as providing support for the school is no longer doing so. When the local authority has finished the process of commissioning new support for the school, the plan will need to be updated so that it accurately references the provider that will support the school in the future.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Improvements to teaching and learning have focused on basic classroom management and ensuring that pupils receive helpful feedback about their work. Although in some classes these aspects of teachers' practice are improving, in others they are not. The headteacher rightly identifies improvements in teaching as being paramount to the school moving forward. However, she agrees that there is still a long way to go. The work set, and approaches to learning, do not meet pupils' needs. For instance, in several classes the work pupils are given is too easy and in some classes it is too hard. Teachers' questioning is not yet probing enough. In particular, most-able pupils are not provided with sufficiently stretching tasks and questions.

The associate leader responsible for improving teaching has collaborated effectively with the local authority adviser to develop sustainable new approaches to teaching. These new approaches are ready to be implemented next term and a number of staff have been trained so that they can pilot them.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

The school's work to improve personal development, behaviour and welfare has not got off to a strong start. There have been too many successive changes at all levels in the leadership of behaviour and attendance. For instance, student managers were responsible for improving attendance. This responsibility was passed to community leaders for a time and it is now back with student managers. The headteacher has recently taken over the strategic leadership of behaviour and attendance and is ably assisted in this by the attendance officer. The headteacher has a clear view of what needs to be done to improve attendance and behaviour from now on.

Figures provided by the school show that over this academic year attendance has not improved and persistent absence has increased. There has been an overall decrease in persistent absence rates for disadvantaged pupils. However, disadvantaged pupils account for almost half of all pupils with very low attendance. The headteacher has not had the capacity to identify and analyse some patterns in pupils' absences suggested by recent attendance figures. She does not have a clear enough overview of where strengths and weaknesses lie. Similarly, due to only recently taking over the leadership of behaviour, the headteacher has not analysed the school's information about the sanctions pupils have received. The headteacher recognises that although the oversight of attendance and behaviour is better than it was, it is still not sharp enough.

The school has introduced some new approaches to the way it works with individual parents and pupils where attendance is a concern. Some parents commented favourably on the support that student-support managers had provided for their youngsters who struggle with attending school every day. However, a number of new systems need refinement. For example, when form tutors make phone calls to parents they do not record what follow-up action they take when they cannot get through to the parents. Similarly, there are no records kept over time of which parents have been contacted by the attendance officer and what the outcome of that contact was. It is therefore not possible to evaluate whether making a phone call to parents on the first day of absence is an effective strategy. Both these new initiatives started well but their impact has plateaued because they are not being overseen effectively enough.

Outcomes for pupils

According to the school's own information, since the previous inspection, there have been improvements in the progress pupils are making. However, the school has not yet done enough to shore up assessment processes, so they are unreliable. In particular, the school has not worked closely enough with other schools to check the accuracy of assessment information. The school's own information indicates that results for the current Year 11 will be better than last year's GCSE results.

Information collected by the school on pupils' progress towards their end-of-year targets in key stage 3 indicates that pupils in Year 7 are making better progress than Year 9 pupils. Year 9 pupils have particularly weak attendance, which is contributing to slower progress. Across key stages 3 and 4, progress made by most-able pupils is too slow. They are not achieving well enough. Leaders have rightly identified this group as a focus for improvement next academic term.

External support

The impact of external support has been variable. Some aspects have been more effective than others. After the school was placed in special measures, the headteacher received personal support and assistance from MAT leaders, which she valued. However, other aspects of support provided by the MAT did not work as well

as had been anticipated. The local authority is currently in the process of commissioning new support for the next academic year. At the time of the monitoring visit the school did not know which collaboration of schools would be providing them with support in the future. Some planned improvements outlined in the improvement plan will, therefore, need amending when a decision is made about the provider for external support. The current shortfall in external support has led to the pace of improvement slowing down in some areas. In the interim period, assistance has been provided by the local authority adviser. His regular and frequent visits have helped associate leaders in preparing new approaches to teaching which will be ready to launch at the start of the next academic year.