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28 September 2017

Mr Mark Jordan
Executive Headteacher
INSPIRE Free Special School
Churchill Avenue
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Dear Mr Jordan

Special measures monitoring inspection of INSPIRE Free Special School

Following my visit to your school on 19 September 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 January 2016. 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 not appoint newly qualified teachers before the next monitoring inspection.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the advisory board, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Medway. This letter will be

published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Janet Pearce
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection that took place in January 2016

- Improve leadership and management at all levels so that essential improvements are made by:
 - implementing rigorous and effective systems for monitoring all aspects of the school's work
 - ensuring that self-evaluations are accurate
 - sharpening leaders' plans for improvement so that they are more focused on the key issues
 - developing middle leaders so that they can help to raise standards more quickly
 - ensuring that senior and middle leaders improve the quality of teaching and its impact on learning
 - securing high-quality external support for leaders as a matter of urgency
 - implementing improvements to the curriculum so that it fully meets the needs of all pupils, including learners in the sixth form
 - ensuring that procedures for managing teachers' performance are effective and staff are held to account for their impact on pupils' achievement.

- Significantly improve teaching to raise the achievement of all groups of pupils in all subjects, but particularly in English, by:
 - raising teachers' expectations for all pupils and groups of pupils so that work has the appropriate challenge and builds on what pupils already know and can do
 - tightening teachers' use of assessment so that work set in lessons is more closely linked to the needs of pupils with differing abilities
 - developing teachers' subject knowledge
 - ensuring that lessons more consistently capture the interest and enthusiasm of pupils.

- Improve pupils' behaviour through:
 - making better use of behaviour plans and how they link to the curriculum to reduce the number of exclusions
 - improving levels of attendance for all pupils.

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 19 September 2017

Evidence

Her Majesty's Inspector observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the executive headteacher of the Parallel Learning Trust, the headteacher and the chair of the advisory board. Meetings were held with leaders, staff and two parents. Her Majesty's Inspector observed teaching and learning in lessons, a therapy session and intervention programmes for reading and mathematics. She met with a local authority officer who is also a member of the advisory board. Information about pupils' progress was reviewed.

Context

Since the previous monitoring inspection, the acting headteacher has left the school. There have been a number of other staff departures and new appointments. A new headteacher took up his post in July 2017. An assistant headteacher and specialist teachers in mathematics and science have been appointed. Two teaching assistants have been appointed to lead on improving reading and writing across the school. Some existing staff have been promoted as middle leaders.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

Leaders and managers are disappointed but realistic about the pace of improvement. Delays and setbacks related to the school's building programme, unexpected staff changes and recruitment difficulties have proved to be challenging since the previous monitoring inspection. Nevertheless, in the face of an unsettled period in the summer term of 2017, leaders and managers deserve credit for maintaining their focus on ensuring that the school continues to improve. Following the resignation of the previous acting headteacher, trust leaders were determined not to lose any momentum or lessen the impact of the strong improvements she had made. The trust wasted no time in appointing a new headteacher who took up his post in July 2017. He has quickly earned the respect of staff and pupils. They appreciate his considerable experience and the time he takes to listen and reflect upon the key priorities for the school's development.

The senior team has been further strengthened by the appointment of a skilful and experienced assistant headteacher responsible for behaviour and vocational programmes. Strong leaders for mathematics and science have been appointed and are already having an impact on the quality of teaching and the breadth of the curriculum. Some existing staff have stepped up to take on leadership roles and are enjoying the opportunity to take more responsibility for driving the school's improvement. Unfortunately, the planned appointment of a specialist teacher in English has not worked out, leaving a vacancy in this area. Leaders have ensured that there is sufficient cover for English across the school and have made effective use of advisory support from the trust. Nevertheless, English remains a key priority

for improvement in the school.

While it is not ideal for the pupils in the school to have so many changes in staff in such a short time, the new appointments have brought stability, experience and a sense of determination. Leaders are seen to be a team, and enjoy working cohesively, which is of benefit to pupils. Pupils are developing more trust in staff, notwithstanding increased expectations and the undoubted pressure of being in a building that is still not yet fully refurbished. Established staff are relieved and positive about having specialist teachers in the school and are looking forward to working together to raise standards. Their confidence and resilience have increased over time.

Leaders review the quality of teaching, learning and assessment regularly. As a result, expectations are higher. Not only do teachers and support staff expect pupils to achieve more, but pupils expect more of themselves. Pupils' curiosity about their targets and how well they are doing had been awakened at the time of the last monitoring inspection. During this visit it is clear that pupils are more ambitious, with many speaking with true feeling about wanting to achieve GCSEs and continuing their education beyond school.

The assessment system introduced at the time of the previous monitoring inspection has been enhanced. It now provides a useful way of recording, tracking and analysing pupils' attainment and progress throughout the school. Leaders are carefully considering the way they assess pupils' progress and personal development. They are also reviewing the curriculum on offer to pupils. Leaders are aiming to establish appropriate vocational courses to prepare pupils well for future employment and education. At the same time, leaders are rightly mindful of ensuring that pupils make sufficient progress to gain accredited academic qualifications.

The range and depth of subjects on offer for study has improved. Pupils now have the opportunity to study science in a properly designed laboratory with the necessary equipment. During the inspection, pupils were seen to be enjoying having apparatus with which to explore and discuss key concepts. Pupils are also benefiting from studying subjects that are new to them, such as photography, in which they learn effectively from theory and practical activities. In this way, pupils who previously may have struggled to express their ideas are able to shine and show off their knowledge and new understanding.

The pupil passport, which was in development at the time of the previous visit, now provides a useful summary of pupils' needs and behaviours, together with helpful strategies to support them. However, staff are not yet making the most of these passports to support day-to-day planning and target-setting.

The relationship and terms of reference between the school's advisory board and the trust are more clearly defined. Lines of accountability are unequivocal. Board

and trust members know what they are responsible for, including important decisions about staffing, curriculum and the strategic direction of the school. Board members challenge leaders and managers and are understandably focused on improving the school so that special measures can be removed. They are cautious and circumspect about the pace of change and are determined to see that improvements are long-term and sustainable.

The improved reputation of the school within the local authority and among parents has been maintained since the last inspection. The local authority is more confident about placing pupils at the school. Parents are positive and are beginning to be more involved in the life of the school, including attending celebration events.

Safeguarding is a strength in the school. Staff are kept up to date with the latest requirements. New staff are recruited in line with all statutory guidance. Leaders are not afraid to challenge the local authority's decisions if they feel that pupils and families are in need of more help. Leaders are responsive to unexpected concerns and wisely take the attitude that 'it could happen here'. While pupils often present risky behaviour and many are vulnerable because of their circumstances, staff do all that can be reasonably expected to ensure that they are protected from harm. Communication with parents, carers and other agencies is strong.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

The quality of teaching, learning and assessment is more secure. Pupils benefit from more consistent expectations from lesson to lesson. The atmosphere in classes is calm and focused on learning. Pupils are praised for their studies and effort rather than just for compliant behaviour.

A range of intervention programmes to help pupils with reading, writing and mathematics makes a real difference to pupils' self-belief and their small steps of progress. The use of therapies, including drama therapy, is helping to build up pupils' confidence and personal resilience. Dog mentoring has been introduced and is helping to contribute to the school's calmer ethos and pupils' ability to care for something other than themselves.

There are signs that teachers are adapting work to suit the needs and abilities of pupils. They are more confident about changing direction or introducing greater challenge where needed. Pupils demonstrate more trust in staff to help them to learn. It is pleasing to see that pupils are keeping up with the pace and challenge set by the teacher in the lesson and concentrating with more commitment. More pupils want to challenge themselves. Many ask for harder work, homework and more opportunities to try things for themselves.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Pupils' attendance has remained very much as it was at the time of the last inspection. As previously, leaders can point to major improvements for individual pupils' attendance. Overall, pupils attend better at the school than when they were at previous placements. However, there are still some pupils who do not attend as well as they should. Leaders are rightly reviewing their attendance procedures and communication with parents in order to support the updated regulations regarding penalty notices. For those pupils who are persistently absent, leaders take every reasonable step to check their whereabouts regularly. Strong communication and a positive relationship with parents are maintained. Pupils' safety and well-being are put first.

Pupils' behaviour continues to improve. In general, rates of serious incidents have reduced, including instances of restrictive physical intervention. However, there are still too many occasions when pupils leave lessons, or have to be removed, to calm down. During this monitoring inspection, a few pupils were clearly unsettled by a delayed start to the term and the ongoing and unfinished building works. Nevertheless, staff were effective in defusing conflicts and minimising disruption.

The new assistant headteacher for behaviour has ensured that staff have had training in de-escalation techniques and the appropriate and safe use of restrictive physical intervention. He has rightly noted that more work needs to be done to foster a positive atmosphere around the school. He has identified that when some pupils refuse to comply with requests from staff, it can sometimes deteriorate too quickly into conflicts. Not enough has been done by the school to work on pupils' own understanding of their behaviour. Many pupils who are capable of regulating their emotions and impulses more independently rely too much on staff to help to sort out problems. All in all, however, there have been notable improvements in pupils' general conduct and courtesy. Although some pupils use inappropriate language and swear on occasions, this is usually when they forget themselves or are frustrated with their own behaviour. Instances of pupils deliberately taunting each other or being directly offensive to staff are increasingly rare.

It is encouraging that the elected members of the school council are beginning to bring ideas about the school to the leaders and advisory board and that they take their responsibilities seriously. For example, during the last academic year pupils were fully involved in the selection of a new school uniform. In addition, more pupils and their parents are attending open days and celebration events. In this way, the school is beginning to feel more secure and settled for pupils and staff, and pupils work together more as a team.

Outcomes for pupils

For the small number of Year 11 pupils who left the school during the summer term, outcomes were mixed. Pupils did not meet their targets owing to a legacy of low expectations and inadequate teaching. However, school leaders made sure that all pupils went on to college places or apprenticeships. All pupils are in employment, education or training.

Now that assessment of pupils on entry to the school is more sophisticated, leaders have a much more accurate picture of pupils' ability, needs and gaps in their learning. Leaders have correctly noted that many pupils have much lower starting points than was first assumed. Although pupils' struggles with behaviour and mental health may be acute, many also have significant learning difficulties that are a factor in their low attainment. As teaching has improved and staff are more confident, gaps in pupils' knowledge and understanding are beginning to be filled and pupils are making more rapid progress. An example of this is seen in pupils' reading. Many pupils are reluctant to read. Some pupils do not have enough phonic knowledge to work out unfamiliar words and others have difficulties with comprehension. The school's focus on reading and the use of carefully selected programmes to support age-appropriate early reading are just beginning to build up pupils' confidence in and enjoyment of reading for its own sake. In addition, school leaders can point to overall improvements in pupils' reading ages.

External support

Leaders and staff have benefited from the opportunity to observe work at other schools in the Parallel Learning Trust and elsewhere. They have learned from different approaches to monitoring pupils' work and teachers' feedback. Some essential support for work in English has been provided by a specialist adviser. Developments in the curriculum have been well supported through teachers from across the trust. A local authority adviser on inclusion has joined the advisory board and is likely to provide a useful link between the local authority and the trust.