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24 January 2019

Mr Ben Sale
Principal
Sandye Place Academy
Park Road
Sandy
Bedfordshire
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Dear Mr Sale,

Special measures monitoring inspection of Sandye Place Academy

Following my visit with Adrian Lyons, Her Majesty's Inspector, to your school on 8 and 9 January 2019, 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 to me and for the time you made available to discuss the actions taken since the school's section 5 inspection.

This was the first monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures following the inspection that took place in December 2017.

Having considered all the evidence I am of the opinion that at this time:

Leaders and managers are taking effective action to address the areas for improvement identified at the previous inspection.

The trust's statement of action is fit for purpose.

The school's improvement plan is fit for purpose.

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

Yours sincerely

Christine Dick

Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection that took place in December 2017.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Improve the effectiveness of leadership and management in improving outcomes and raising achievement by:
 - securing the external support and challenge the school needs to have a realistic view of how well it is doing
 - making sure that leaders accurately assess the quality of pupils' learning by focusing on exactly what pupils know, understand and can do in lessons
 - ensuring that school leaders analyse assessment information effectively and present their findings clearly to enable other leaders and governors to understand the main issues in performance
 - ensuring that the support provided both for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) and for disadvantaged pupils is evaluated to check its impact on pupils' learning.
- Improve the quality of teaching, learning and assessment by ensuring that all teachers:
 - plan precisely what pupils are expected to know, understand and be able to do
 - focus just as much on the quality of what pupils write as they do on improving punctuation
 - make more use of high-quality texts in lessons to help develop pupils' reading skills in more depth
 - use the school's behaviour code consistently well to ensure a greater focus on learning in lessons.

An external review of governance should be undertaken 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 to assess how this aspect of leadership and management may be improved. Inspectors recommend that the school may appoint newly qualified teachers.

Report on the first monitoring inspection 8 and 9 January 2019

Evidence

We observed the school's work and looked at a range of documentation linked to the school's performance, safeguarding and child protection. We met with you, other senior leaders and two members of the governing body, including the vice-chair of governors. We looked at the difference made by the actions you have taken to improve teaching, learning and assessment and pupils' outcomes, including for disadvantaged pupils and pupils with SEND. We observed 28 lessons/parts of lessons jointly with you and other members of the leadership team. We also met with a group of middle leaders, teachers, support staff and pupils from Year 8. During our observations of teaching and learning, we spoke with pupils and looked at their work. We also spoke with pupils as they moved around the school, between lessons and at breaktimes and lunchtimes.

Context

The school is due to close in August 2019 following a local authority review of provision in the area. The previous executive principal left in the summer term 2018. You were appointed in September 2018 on promotion from another senior leadership post in the school. Since the December 2017 inspection, and in the light of impending closure, the number of pupils on the school's roll has declined from 472 to 180. Current pupils are taught across Years 6, 7 and 8.

The number of teachers employed has reduced from 30 to 15. An executive board has been appointed to replace the governors' standards committee. This group is known as the Target Intervention Board (TIB), consisting of three executive governors and the school's improvement partner. The board holds senior leaders to account for implementation of the school's improvement plan and reports directly to the full governing body.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

After a period of considerable uncertainty, significant leadership and staffing changes, senior leaders have begun to implement a planned programme of improvement. New systems are designed to ensure that the school operates more effectively and that pupils make consistently strong progress this year.

The school's development plan actions are appropriately linked to the areas for improvement identified at the previous inspection. However, it would benefit from greater clarity in defining measurable targets against appropriate milestones to support effective monitoring in line with TIB priorities.

You explained to me how the external review of governance led to further training

for governors, alongside some structural changes, including the development of the executive board and the TIB. Because of their training, governors now have a better understanding of national measures of attainment and progress. The quality of information presented to them has improved.

Governors told me they recognised that they had 'taken their eye of the ball' following the previous inspection because, as they described to me, they were 'fighting for survival.' This was due to local authority proposals to extend the age range of pupils attending other schools in the area and the consultations on the potential closure of Sandye Place. Leaders' progress in bringing about rapid improvement immediately after the inspection was also hindered by staffing changes in the school and long-term sickness.

Nevertheless, despite the impending closure, you have now established a cohesive and committed group of staff with a determination to succeed. Your relatively new leadership team's vision for improvement is clear and widely shared. Working closely together with governors, you have won the hearts and minds of most colleagues. Parents of current pupils are typically positive about the quality of education that the school now provides.

You are required to report regularly on the school's performance to the executive board. The high level of challenge you receive is clear from our discussions and in recent meeting minutes. Revised expectations of staff and pupils' performance are non-negotiable. Middle leaders feel more involved in the decisions taken. They say that there is greater clarity underpinning roles and responsibilities. Consequently, they understand what is needed and they are committed to supporting the school's urgent journey towards further improvement.

While many of the planned changes are at an early stage of implementation, our observations and your records show that the quality of teaching, including teachers' planning for learning, has improved. The school's assessment information and work in pupils' books suggest some stronger progress than in the previous year.

Checks on the quality of teaching are now more frequent and rigorous. While teachers understand what is expected of them, your raised expectations are not yet applied consistently across subjects and year groups. You shared with me your concern about the variations in how effectively staff apply the school's marking policy. This concern was reflected in the variable practice that we noted in some of the books that we looked at during our observations.

You are working closely with your school improvement partner to ensure that your reviews of teaching quality are accurate. The new systems are helping you and other leaders to understand better the strengths and weaknesses across subjects and year groups. The information gathered is starting to be used effectively to provide individual support for staff and to share the good practice that exists. You

are taking steps to ensure that feedback to teachers is focused routinely on the difference that teaching is making to pupils' learning, both in lessons and over time.

An external review of the use of additional funding to improve the progress of disadvantaged pupils was completed. In line with the recommended changes, the timing of interventions has been revised to ensure that all pupils who need support attend the timetabled sessions regularly. A pupil premium coordinator has been appointed. The new role of pupil premium mentor has recently been approved and staff training completed. Mentors are beginning to provide important links with pupils and their parents. Focused discussions are aimed at identifying and reducing any potential barriers to learning.

While these strategies are new, there are some initial signs of early improvement. You and your team have a clearer understanding of the interventions taking place and the difference this is making to the progress of pupils who are eligible for support. Leaders are now able to determine more effectively which strategies are working and those which need to be changed. Further reviews are underway to evaluate the impact of interventions for pupils with SEND.

Safeguarding is effective. The school's safeguarding arrangements meet statutory requirements and are up to date. Governors and school staff are vigilant and appropriately trained. They are very clear about their responsibilities to keep pupils safe. The culture of safeguarding is well established across the school. Governors make regular checks to ensure that all safeguarding requirements are met.

Your preparations for closure and the transition of pupils to other schools are well-managed. You, governors and the executive board are supported efficiently by your business manager. Your working relationships and links with other schools have been appropriately strengthened to ensure the smooth transfer of pupils to the next stage in their education.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Working together with other senior leaders and your school improvement partner, you have established a much clearer vision for enhancing the quality of teaching and learning, across subjects and for all pupils. Middle leaders say that they are supported effectively in monitoring the performance of their teams.

There is more to do to ensure that teachers have consistently high expectations. Consequently, you and other leaders are reinforcing the need to focus on ensuring that all pupils are challenged to do as well as they can. Some teachers do not check on pupils' learning quickly enough to see if work is set is at the right level so that no time is wasted.

Teachers' use of assessment information in planning for learning was an area for

improvement identified at the previous inspection. The revised programme of regular assessment aims to give teachers a clearer view of how well pupils are doing. This is beginning to help them to plan more effectively and to sequence learning to meet the needs of pupils from their different starting points.

You are continuing actions to improve the reliability of teachers' assessments through shared moderation of the judgements made about the quality of pupils' work. This aims to increase teachers' confidence in setting targets for further improvement. The school's marking and feedback policy has been revised. Systems are in place to check on the effectiveness of the new model and on the difference it is making to pupils' learning and progress over time.

Together with your teaching teams, you are ensuring that the range and quality of pupils' writing is improving. Although some pupils still lack the resilience they need to write more extensively, they are beginning to take greater pride in the way they present their work. However, teachers do not provide sufficient opportunities for pupils to write at length in subjects beyond English.

Provision for pupils with SEND is under review. The review aims to improve the way information about pupils' needs is shared with subject teachers across the school. It also aims to highlight effective strategies for working with this group.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

All the staff and pupils I spoke with during the monitoring inspection said that they felt that behaviour in the school had improved. These improvements were reflected in our findings during our time on the school site.

Pupils attend regularly and say that they enjoy school. Working relationships between staff and pupils are mutually respectful. Lunchtimes and breaktimes are typically sociable, well supervised, calm and orderly events.

Pupils told us that they trust their teachers because 'they have stood by us' during difficult times. They said that they feel safe in school and know who to go to if they have a concern.

Your records suggest that teachers are now more consistent than they were in applying the schools' behaviour policy in their lessons. The rare incidents of off-task behaviour that we noted during the teaching we observed together were usually linked to the appropriateness of the tasks set. In one case, the work set was too easy and so some time was wasted as a few pupils waited for something else to do. In another, the task was too difficult. This was not picked up quickly enough and so the pupil lost interest.

You are determined to continue to improve pupils' attitudes to learning so that they

are well prepared for progression to the next stage in their education. Working together with the school council, you have recently produced a tracking document to record individual pupils' progress in developing the skills they need to demonstrate improvements in this aspect of their personal development.

Outcomes for pupils

In 2017, pupils did not make sufficient progress in reading, writing and mathematics. Despite some small improvements in 2018, pupils' outcomes remained well below the national average by the end of key stage 2, and especially so in writing.

Given the priorities identified at the previous inspection and in your own evaluations of the school's performance, you have focused your attention on English and mathematics. You have taken steps to ensure that teachers' assessments of pupils' progress are accurate through shared moderation events.

Observations of pupils' learning and the work in their books suggest that they are making stronger progress in English and mathematics across year groups. This is mostly because of better teaching. However, some inconsistencies in teaching quality remain. The variations we saw in teaching quality were typically linked to the appropriateness of the work set against pupils' different starting points.

Year 7 and 8 pupils read to me with confidence. They were able to explain how the additional support that they receive has helped them to catch up. They told me about the encouragement that their teachers give them to read regularly in school and at home.

In-school assessment information indicates that disadvantaged pupils' progress and the progress of pupils with SEND are improving in line with other pupils. Recently introduced strategies are showing some early signs of potential to make a difference.

Despite these steps forward, the pace of improvement across the school needs to accelerate further to achieve the challenging targets that leaders have set for pupils' outcomes in the summer term 2019.

External support

You and other leaders have made effective use of external expertise through the appointment of your current school improvement partner. The recommendations of the external evaluations completed, including the review of governance and pupil premium, have been implemented.

Working relationships with schools across the local community have been strengthened to ensure a smooth transition for pupils leaving at the end of the

summer term. The local authority has committed to providing further support for staff seeking employment when the school closes in August 2019. It is also checking to ensure that parents have made timely applications for places for their children in other schools for next year.