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23 April 2015

Mrs Beverley Scott-Herron
Headteacher
Sir Thomas Boteler Church of England High School
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Warrington
Cheshire
WA4 1JL

Dear Mrs Scott-Herron

Special measures monitoring inspection of Sir Thomas Boteler Church of England High School

Following my visit with Andrew Henderson, additional inspector, to your school on 21 and 22 April 2015, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the findings. Thank you for the help you gave during the inspection and for the time you made available to discuss the actions which have been taken since the school's previous monitoring inspection.

The visit was the second monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures following the inspection which took place in September 2014. The full list of the areas for improvement which 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:

The school is making reasonable progress towards the removal of special measures.

As agreed with you on 2 April 2015, the school may consider applications from newly qualified teachers in order to recruit to vacancies in English and history. This decision will be routinely reviewed at each monitoring inspection.

This letter and monitoring inspection report will be published on the Ofsted website. I am copying this letter and the monitoring inspection report to the Secretary of State, the Chair of the Governing Body, the Director of Education for the Church of England Diocese of Chester, the Director of Education for the Church of England Diocese of Liverpool and the Executive Director Families & Wellbeing for Warrington.

Yours sincerely

Charles Lowry

Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection which took place in September 2014:

- Take urgent steps to improve the quality of teaching so that it is at least good in all subjects, particularly in English and mathematics, in order that the progress of all groups of students accelerates rapidly and they achieve well by:
 - ensuring that teachers' assessments of how well students are learning are accurate, and that they use this information to set work which enables all abilities of students to make at least good progress
 - raising teachers' expectations of what students can achieve, so that they provide more appropriate levels of challenge and ask probing questions to check students' understanding and to stimulate their interest
 - ensuring that all marking and feedback to students gives them very clear guidance about what they need to do to improve their work, particularly in their literacy development, and that students respond to the advice
 - ensuring that all teachers have good subject knowledge and that they use this effectively to explain to students what they should be learning in lessons and what they must do to be successful
 - ensuring that, in English, students have sufficient guidance to help them to structure their writing and develop their communication and extended writing skills across the curriculum
 - ensuring that students have plenty of opportunities in mathematics to solve problems so that they can develop and apply their understanding of key mathematical concepts
 - providing activities which are interesting, exciting and challenging enough so that students are encouraged to settle quickly to tasks, are keen and motivated to work hard and to do their best.
- Improve students' attendance in order that it is at least in line with the national average by using data about the attendance of particular groups of students to analyse patterns in their absence and target support more effectively.
- Improve the effectiveness of leaders and managers at all levels, including governance, in bringing about improvements, by:
 - ensuring that middle leaders have a clear understanding of their accountability for their areas of responsibility and that they have sufficient training to enable them to be successful
 - ensuring that senior and middle leaders check that data about how well students are learning are accurate and that they use them to hold teachers to account for the progress of students in their classes
 - ensuring that action plans have clear ways of measuring their success and that monitoring activities to check on the impact of actions aimed at improving teaching and achievement are robust

- ensuring that performance management targets for teachers are challenging and that individuals are provided with appropriate support to help them to improve their practice
- ensuring that governors hold the school to account effectively for its performance, including the impact of the pupil premium
- taking steps to share and embed the good teaching practice which already exists within the school.

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 second monitoring inspection on 21 -22 April 2015

Evidence

During the visit, my colleague and I observed the school in operation, scrutinised documents and examined students' work in a sample of their books. We held meetings with senior leaders responsible for teaching and learning, achievement and attendance. We also met with groups of teachers, including those teachers with leadership responsibility for the English Baccalaureate subject areas, and groups of students of different ages. Inspectors also held separate telephone conversations with the Chair of the Governing Body, a representative of the Church of England Diocese of Chester and a representative of the local authority. The focus of this inspection was to consider the progress that the school has made against each of the areas for improvement from the previous inspection.

Context

Since my previous monitoring inspection to the school there have been a number of staff changes. The acting deputy headteacher, in post at that time, has now been appointed to the permanent position. The head of English and second in English, although new appointments, have both been recruited from the existing English staff. The head of design technology is new to the school. You have also appointed a whole-school literacy coordinator. You have successfully recruited two new heads of department. These are a head of mathematics and a head of geography. The head of mathematics will be joining the staff in September. The head of geography will commence duty after the summer half-term break. A member of the religious education department and a member of the history department will be leaving the school at the end of this academic year. The vacancy in religious education has been filled for September. You are currently advertising to fill the post in history and, in addition, two vacancies in the English department; with the intention that all three positions will be held by permanent members of staff at the start of the new academic year. The attendance officer, site manager and school caretaker are recent appointments.

Achievement of pupils at the school

The validated examination data for the end of Key Stage 4, published in March 2015, confirms the findings of inspectors at the previous inspection that GCSE examination results in 2014 were below the government's minimum expectations. In light of this, senior leaders have taken the pragmatic decision to concentrate their efforts towards improving outcomes for Year 11. This is understandable, in view of the fact that this year group have the most to catch up. Senior leaders' introduction of regular, formal assessment points throughout the year, using published assessment materials, in each GCSE subject is giving senior leaders and governors much greater confidence in the reliability of teacher assessment than was the case in the past. The school

reports that the current data for Year 11 are showing a marked improvement on the final outcomes for 2014. For example, 40% of students are currently attaining five higher grade GCSEs, including English and mathematics. This is an improvement of 14 percentage points when compared to the results for 2014 and is at the government's minimum expectation for last year. The school also reports substantial improvements in the proportions of Year 11 students making the progress expected of them in English and mathematics. In mathematics this is 52% of the cohort and in English 53%. This is an improvement of 12 and 15 percentage points respectively on the data for 2014. Although this performance information is encouraging and has been subject to reliability checks by specialist leaders of education working with the school, it needs to be treated with caution as it has not been subject to national validation. Further, the data for expected progress in English and mathematics are still below 2014 minimum expectations. Consequently, much work remains to be done to continue this upward trend of improvement so that students' GCSE outcomes match the school's ambitious targets. Nevertheless, there are encouraging signs in the school data that in-school attainment gaps between boys, girls and disadvantaged students and their peers are closing.

Students' GCSE targets in Year 11 are based on students' attainment at the end of Key Stage 2. Students' progress against these targets is checked by senior leaders at each assessment point. This enables them to identify which students are underachieving and put in place extra help in order to get them back on track. This is enabling senior leaders to hold middle leaders to account for department results, and middle leaders to hold subject teachers to account for students' progress. Although this strategy provides leaders and managers with an overview of students' performance, the legacy of weak teaching over time has meant that, although improving, students' attainment and progress remain well below the 2014 national averages. Consequently, the hard work being undertaken by you and your colleagues, to improve the quality of teaching, needs to be sustained in order to maximise its impact so that the school's students achieve, at least in line with their peers across the country, and quickly.

Although students in Key Stage 3 have end-of-year targets for each of their subjects and their progress against these targets is monitored, this monitoring lacks the rigour of that at Key Stage 4. For example there is no formal mechanism for regularly checking the progress of individual students in Key Stage 3 and following up any identified underperformance, as there is for students in Year 11. Consequently, senior leaders do not have a clear enough picture of how well students are progressing lower down the school, which is affecting their ability to measure the impact of their work to improve teaching at Key Stage 3.

The quality of teaching

Senior leaders have clearly established an understanding among members of staff that improving the quality of teaching and learning is the foundation upon which

their school improvement strategy is built. Senior leaders have introduced a programme to monitor the quality of classroom practice. They have identified where teaching is strongest and, as a result, having the greatest impact on students' progress. This has led to stronger practitioners sharing their ideas about what works best in the classroom with their colleagues and appropriate training for those teachers who need further development to improve their professional skills. While it is relatively early days, senior leaders report that the quality of teaching across the school is improving and is better than it was at the previous inspection. However, they are under no illusions that improvements in the quality of teaching need to continue on this upward trajectory if students are to achieve at their best.

Evidence from inspectors' observations of teaching and learning and the work in students' books indicates that students make the most rapid progress where teachers plan suitably challenging activities that interest the students and arouse their curiosity. There is evidence in students' books that some departments are consistently implementing the school's cross-curricular literacy policy. For example, marking to improve students' spelling of subject specific terms is evident in geography and science. In addition, students are being given opportunities, in English and the humanities subjects, to write extended answers to questions. As a result, students are able to hone their literacy skills and develop their understanding.

However, practice such as this is not yet consistent. In a number of lessons teachers adopt a one-size-fits-all approach to planning with all students being given the same activity. Consequently, the most able students find the work easy and can become bored while weaker students can find the work too hard. In either case, the progress of both groups slows. Teachers' questioning of students is often undemanding with students expected to provide short answers to recall information rather than being challenged to give extended answers and so deepen their learning.

The scrutiny of students' exercise books carried out by inspectors revealed that students take pride in their work. Written activities are well presented and largely complete. Homework is set regularly and used to reinforce students' learning. Students' work is marked regularly. Where marking is most effective, students are given information about what they have done well and what they need to do to improve their work, which students then act on; however, inconsistencies remain. For example, in the mathematics books examined by inspectors, teachers' marking, although regular, is periodic. Teachers mark students' work and provide detailed feedback at each assessment point with students largely marking their own work during the periods of time in between. Consequently, students' misconceptions are not picked up quickly enough and addressed.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

As was the case at the previous inspection, relationships between students and their teachers and students and their peers are characteristically warm and friendly. This makes for a generally calm atmosphere around the school.

Evidence from lesson observations reveals that students' attitudes to learning are, in the main, positive where students find activities engaging and appropriately challenging. However, where teaching is less than inspiring and work poorly matched to students' capabilities a minority become bored, switch off and are distracted; as a consequence, their progress is slow.

The school's focus on support for Year 11 students has seen a welcome rise in their rate of attendance of over two and a half percentage points compared to Year 11 last year. A much smaller, but nevertheless welcome, rise is also evident in Year 10. However, attendance in the other three year groups is lower than it was for a similar period last year. Consequently, attendance across the school remains significantly below the 2014 national average. Senior leaders and governors recognise the challenges of improving rates of attendance and have taken positive steps to strengthen the school's provision for promoting good attendance and supporting those students who find coming to school challenging. These include the recent appointment of an attendance officer and the restructuring of mixed-age 'House' groups to single-age form groups. The intention being that this will enable senior leaders to monitor students' attendance better and deal more effectively with identified attendance issues. The senior leader responsible for attendance collates attendance and persistent absence information diligently. However, the evaluation of this data is not sharp enough to enable the school to direct effective support to those students whose attendance gives cause for concern. The school is working closely with external agencies to try and address the school's continuing problems with attendance and persistent absence. However, their efforts to improve the attendance of targeted groups, for example Year 9 girls who are eligible for free school meals, are yet to bear fruit.

The quality of leadership in and management of the school

You and your colleagues are passionate about the school. Your drive and determination is evident in the work that you are doing to bring about essential improvements to improve the life chances of students.

The deputy headteacher with responsibility for teaching and learning has devised and facilitated, with a colleague from one of your partner schools, a tailored programme of training for middle leaders in evaluating the work of their departments. Those middle leaders who spoke with inspectors said how much they value the training they have received. They said that it had enabled them, with increasing confidence, to judge the quality of teaching in their subject departments

using a range of evidence. This evidence includes observing their colleagues' classroom practice, evaluating the work in students' books and identifying the key messages from analysing the data on students' performance. However, the impact of this training has been inconsistent; with some, but not all, middle leaders grasping the opportunity to take greater responsibility for leading and managing their subject areas with a consequent improvement in the quality of teaching and students' progress, for example in English, science and the humanities.

Senior and middle leaders are continuing to be supported in their work to improve the school by a national leader of education and specialist leaders of education from local successful schools and external consultants. These professionals have been instrumental in working with a number of subject departments in enabling the sharing of good practice about effective teaching and to provide an external validation of teachers' assessment of students' attainment and progress. However, the full impact of their work has yet to be felt, as students' achievement, although getting better, has yet to improve sufficiently.

Senior leaders know the school well and they are under no illusions about the magnitude of the task they face as they drive forward their agenda to improve the school. Senior leaders' evaluation of how well the school is doing is detailed and they collect a great deal of information on the various facets of the school's operation. However, not all this information is being analysed with sufficient rigour for leaders and managers to evaluate the impact of all their actions to improve the school. Consequently, the school's progress on its journey to good is, at times, not as rapid as it could be.

Senior leaders have strengthened the school's systems for managing teachers' performance. They are using a computer package that links teachers' appraisal targets and evidence of teachers' professional practice, to identify training needs. Those teachers spoken to by inspectors said that they value this system and the increased opportunities it affords them to develop their skills.

Governors are ambitious for the school and are supportive of the work of senior leaders. However, they remain too reliant on you and your senior colleagues for information about the school's operation and the progress being made against each of the priorities in the school development plan. Consequently, their ability to provide sufficient challenge to senior leaders and hold them to account for the rate of school improvement is not secure.

Although a recommendation of inspectors at the previous inspection, the external review of the school's use of the pupil premium (extra government funding) has yet to be completed. Consequently, governors are unclear about the impact that this funding is having on improving outcomes for disadvantaged students.

External support

The local authority continues to provide effective and targeted support to senior leaders and governors in their drive to improve the school. The local authority has engaged the services of a national leader of governance to evaluate the effectiveness of the school's governing body. The intention of this evaluation being to determine the strengths of the governing body and identify where it needs further support to maximise its impact on school improvement. The local authority has also engaged the services of a national leader of education and a deputy headteacher from a neighbouring successful school to work with you and your senior leadership team to help deliver the priorities in the school development plan.

The local authority has brokered the support of a number of specialist leaders of education, from local successful schools, to work with the middle leaders responsible for: English; science; mathematics; information technology and special educational needs. However, some of these links have been in place for a relatively short period of time and it is too early to assess their impact on the quality of teaching and students' outcomes. Effective partnerships have also been forged between consultants from the Church of England Diocese of Chester and teachers of geography and religious education.