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Mr Leo Gilbert
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Dear Mr Gilbert

Special measures monitoring inspection of Reading Girls' School

Following my visit with Patrick Harty, Ofsted Inspector, to your school on 29–30 June 2016, 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 December 2015.

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 and the school's action plan are fit for purpose.

The school may not 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 Reading. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Matthew Newberry
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection that took place in December 2015.

- Rapidly improve standards and progress of pupils, especially in English, by:
 - ensuring teachers use assessment information effectively to plan for pupils' different needs and starting points
 - challenging the most able pupils so that all work is sufficiently demanding and enables them to make good or better progress
 - developing whole school approaches that enable disadvantaged pupils and those who are falling behind to catch up rapidly.

- Improve the effectiveness of leadership and management by:
 - acting quickly to improve the administration of important procedures for safeguarding in the school
 - improving the leadership and management of teaching
 - developing a programme of work experience and other provision in order to meet the requirements of the 16-19 study programmes
 - ensuring that governors challenge leaders more urgently and more often on the progress of current pupils over time, and not relying on information that is only produced annually
 - addressing rapidly the lower attendance of some groups of pupils, especially those who are of White British heritage.

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.

The school may not appoint newly qualified teachers.

Report on the first monitoring inspection on 29–30 June 2016

Evidence

Inspectors visited 25 lessons in the school and looked at learning jointly with senior leaders. Inspectors scrutinised a wide range of pupils' work and had discussions with pupils in pre-arranged meetings, in lessons and around the school. Meetings were held with the interim headteacher, senior and middle leaders, teachers, governors (including the chair of the governing body) and a small group of parents. Documentary evidence, including safeguarding records, policies, strategic planning documents and analyses of pupils' achievements were evaluated. Inspectors also scrutinised documents relating to behaviour, attendance, records of governing body meetings and visits from local authority advisers. The lead inspector met with an education adviser from the local authority and held a telephone conversation with the executive headteacher of Baylis Court School, both of whom have been supporting the school.

Context

A total of 18 teachers and 13 support staff have left the school since the inspection; 13 teachers and two support staff have joined. The Department for Education, senior leaders and the local authority have begun the process of the school joining a multi-academy trust but no firm decisions have been made yet.

Significant changes have occurred which have impacted on the leadership of the school. Following the section 5 inspection, governors boosted the senior leadership team with the addition of an associate headteacher and a senior teacher. At Easter, the deputy headteacher left the school and more recently both the headteacher and associate headteacher have left. A new interim headteacher started on 21 June.

Leaders and governors have taken the decision to close the sixth form by the summer of 2017. While there will be no students joining Year 12 from September 2016, those currently in Year 12, together with some external students, will be supported to complete their courses at the Northumberland Training Academy.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

Although leaders and governors have accepted the inspection judgements, significant changes in leadership have meant that many of their subsequent actions have been relatively recent or have lacked the necessary rigor and impact. Following the inspection, the local authority and leaders worked together to create an effective action plan and to communicate the school's priorities to both staff and parents. However, the implementation of this plan has been too slow and leaders are not yet able to demonstrate a pathway of effective improvements. The many changes in leadership meant that the school had two different versions of this improvement plan

at the time of this monitoring inspection. Governors, the local authority and current leaders are now agreed that the original version that was judged fit for purpose is the one that they are following. However, the school's assessment information is still unreliable and leaders do not yet have an accurate view of how well the school is doing.

Governors are dedicated and committed to the school. They acted quickly to challenge leaders following the inspection and have worked hard to ensure that leadership is maintained during a time of considerable staffing turbulence. The chair acted swiftly to hold discussions with a multi-academy trust and to engage with the local authority to ensure that the school receives support. However, governors received conflicting advice from leaders and the local authority resulting in them not acting with appropriate speed and urgency to review the way they work. They have not yet commissioned the external review of governance required by the section 5 inspection and this needs to be given immediate priority.

Leaders acted quickly to address the shortfalls in safeguarding identified at the last inspection. The arrangements for safeguarding are now effective. Leaders liaise well with external agencies if there are any safeguarding concerns about pupils. Regular and appropriate training for all staff is provided by the school on safeguarding matters and careful records are maintained. As a result, staff understand and apply the school's policy and procedures well, ensuring a caring culture. Pupils told inspectors that they feel safe in the school and feel well looked after, and parents confirmed this view during their meeting with the lead inspector.

In the short time that he was at the school, the associate headteacher introduced new systems to improve the leadership of teaching and assessment. and this aspect of his role has very recently been taken over by members of the senior leadership team. Together, these leaders have introduced a tracking system designed to monitor pupils' progress more frequently which they have shared with staff. However, this system is not yet fit for purpose as the teachers' assessment information that it relies on is neither consistent nor reliable. While leaders sought to improve the reliability of GCSE assessments in English by using external partners to moderate teachers' judgements of Year 11 pupils' work, this level of support has not been made available to other subjects or other year groups. Consequently, the quality of assessment information across the school has not improved sufficiently since the inspection. This means that leaders are not yet able to accurately predict current Year 11 GCSE results or track the progress that different groups of pupils make in each year group. Senior leaders and governors agree that this lack of reliable assessment information is inhibiting their ability to challenge improvements to the quality of teaching and to ensure robust and reliable performance management of staff. Establishing accurate and reliable assessment information for all groups of pupils in all year groups is an urgent priority.

Subject leaders have recently become more involved in school improvement, mostly through observing lessons more regularly and providing focused support for

teachers. Subject leaders are aware that there is much work to do to improve the quality of their subject planning and assessments. There is some evidence that some pupils, particularly the most able, are making more progress in some mathematics and science lessons than previously. However, a lack of leadership in English and staffing instability in geography and history continue to hold back pupils' progress in these subjects, and the quality of teaching and learning across the school is still too variable. Subject leaders are clear about the standards that they are expected to meet and, where there is capacity and stability, there is evidence that leaders are beginning to make a difference to pupils' engagement and learning by ensuring consistency of use of the school's marking and feedback system. However, in some subjects, leaders have not yet established rigorous systems to check that all staff are following school expectations.

Senior leaders who have responsibility for the use of additional funding for disadvantaged pupils have not yet commissioned the required review of the spending of the pupil premium grant and this needs to be done immediately. While some of these pupils have received additional support before or after school, there is not yet sufficient evidence of the impact of these interventions. Although leaders have introduced regular monitoring of the quality of teaching, the progress of disadvantaged pupils is not incorporated into this routine. Inaccurate assessments mean that the progress of this group, and other groups of pupils, cannot be reliably monitored.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

The quality of teaching was judged to be inadequate in the inspection in December 2015. Leaders judge that much teaching still requires improvement or remains inadequate. This is especially the case in English, which at the time of this inspection had two vacancies in the department, in humanities subjects and in some science lessons. Leaders are committed to improving the quality of teaching, learning and assessment across the school. They have introduced a consistent approach to planning lessons and refined teachers' feedback so that pupils are clear about how to improve their work. Pupils welcome this more focused feedback but rightly recognise that it is not always as regular or as helpful as it should be.

Teachers' expectations are not consistently high enough and there are still wide variations in the level of challenge that they offer pupils in lessons and over time. Too often teachers' questioning in class lacks the rigour to challenge pupils' ideas and promote engagement, thinking and problem solving. Consequently, many pupils lack the confidence to offer answers, ask the teacher further questions or to explain their work. There are some pockets of good practice: for example, in a Year 7 mathematics lesson, good relationships between the teacher and pupils promoted confident discussion around different techniques used to solve a problem, resulting in engagement and clear progress being made. Leaders are not sharing this type of good practice widely enough within subjects or across the school.

Leaders recognise that more work needs to be done to improve the accuracy and reliability of teachers' assessment across the curriculum. There is some initial work on developing new approaches to planning for pupils with different starting points but this is not yet fully implemented. In some mathematics and science lessons, teachers are more confident in challenging the most able but this is not the case throughout the school.

Teachers' planning identifies that they now know who the disadvantaged pupils are within their classes. However, these pupils are not routinely getting the extra help that they need in lessons to accelerate their progress. The strategies that some teachers have adopted to offer these pupils more support and challenge are too recent to demonstrate any real impact on their progress. The disadvantaged pupils who inspectors spoke to during this visit reported their frustration at the number of staffing changes and the lack of progress that they feel they are making in some of their subjects, particularly mathematics, computing and geography. Inspectors' observations of lessons and scrutiny of their work across the curriculum demonstrate that many of these pupils have made less progress since December than their peers.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Pupils are generally smart, polite and conduct themselves well. They say behaviour is improving in the school since the previous inspection and they feel that staff care for them well. In assembly, they listened attentively and remained focused. Most pupils move calmly around the site and arrive to lessons on time.

Despite a tightening-up on rules about pupils' behaviour, some low-level disruption and disrespect towards teachers remains. Too many pupils lack confidence in talking about their work and what they need to do to improve it. As a result, they do not take enough care with the presentation of their work, which means that it is sometimes inaccurate, disorganised or incomplete. This occurs where teachers' challenge to learning and expectations of behaviour are too low.

Although overall attendance figures are starting to rise, the attendance of key groups of pupils such as those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities, disadvantaged pupils and White British pupils has not improved. Gaps between the attendance of these groups and that of their peers have generally widened during the course of the academic year. Although monitoring attendance of the White British and the disadvantaged pupils, leaders are not routinely monitoring the attendance of pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities: inspection evidence demonstrates that they should be. Leaders have not introduced new strategies for improving attendance since the time of the previous inspection and need to do so in order to reduce these gaps.

Outcomes for pupils

Leaders and governors acknowledge that the school's own performance information is inaccurate and currently it is not possible for the school to accurately know the progress of the pupils particularly in key stage 3. During this monitoring inspection, different leaders presented different overall forecasts for the attainment and progress of current Year 11 to inspectors. However, what these forecasts have in common is that there are wide gaps in the achievement of different groups of pupils and their peers. School forecasts indicate that disadvantaged pupils, those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities, White British and the most able will all make significantly less progress than their peers this year.

Pupils' work demonstrates that many of the most able pupils respond well to the new style of feedback they receive from their teachers in lessons and use it to improve aspects of their work. However, many teachers' daily expectations of these pupils is too low or their feedback is not regular, precise or detailed enough to challenge them sufficiently. Consequently, very few of the most able pupils make the progress of which they are capable.

Lesson observations and pupils' books evidence that disadvantaged pupils and those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities are not making the same progress as their peers. Outcomes are weak in many subject areas. Not all teachers check pupils' learning regularly enough to provide effective support and guidance for any who lag behind. Inspectors' scrutiny of pupils' work indicates variable rates of progress, and a variable quality of work over time being produced in different subject areas. In lessons, too few teachers routinely plan activities which meet the needs of pupils who have special educational needs and teaching assistants are not always suitably deployed to challenge and support them.

Leaders have responded to the previous report to ensure that provision for suitable work experience for the small number of current sixth formers studying hair and beauty courses has improved. Observations of learning in the sixth form demonstrate that students are engaged and making suitable progress.

External support

Following the inspection, leaders and governors quickly sought support from the local authority. Rapid action was taken to strengthen the senior leadership team with the addition of two new posts. The local authority supported the leaders with the development of an action plan that was judged fit for purpose and with a review of safeguarding procedures. The school has also received support from an external consultant and teachers from Baylis Court School, which included providing practical leadership support in the period between the headteacher leaving and the appointment of the current interim headteacher.

The local authority has supported the leadership of the school through regular fortnightly monitoring visits but, due to staffing and leadership turbulence, these have had limited impact. There has been support for leaders of English to moderate their Year 11 GCSE coursework but no external support to improve the quality of assessment in other year groups or other subject areas. There remains an urgent need to provide subject-specific training across the curriculum as well as secure more long-term leadership support for the school.