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Mr Ben Stitchman
Headteacher
The Dormston School
Mill Bank
Sedgley
Dudley
DY3 1SN

Dear Mr Stitchman

Special measures monitoring inspection of The Dormston School

Following my visit with Elizabeth (Jane) Gaffney and Dot Bond, Additional Inspectors, to your school on 8–9 July 2014, 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 which 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 which took place in June 2013. 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.

The school may appoint newly qualified teachers before the next monitoring inspection in consultation with me.

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 and the Director of Children's Services for Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council.

Yours sincerely

James McNeillie
Her Majesty's Inspector
Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection which took place in June 2013

- Improve the quality of teaching to raise standards and students' achievement by ensuring that teachers:
 - consistently plan and deliver lessons that provide suitable challenge for all the students by using all available data about students' progress
 - encourage students to take responsibility for their learning through greater opportunities for group work and problem-solving activities
 - use the students' own good responses to problems or provide models of good practice so that students can assess their own progress against the best
 - use questioning more effectively to probe and deepen students' understanding
 - use their marking to correct basic errors in spelling, punctuation and grammar and then check that students improve their work as directed
 - consistently give students written feedback that shows them what they need to do to reach the higher levels
 - give students time to reflect on, and respond to, comments about their work.

- Improve leadership, management and governance at all levels by:
 - ensuring that the checks made on teaching focus on the quality of learning and the progress made by students rather than the activities they undertake
 - making sure that the leaders and managers who check on the quality of teaching are properly trained and can make accurate judgements
 - providing guidance and support to teachers to help them improve their practice, including the chance to see the best teachers teaching
 - checking on the implementation and impact of whole-school policies, especially the marking policy
 - undertaking an external review of governance in order to assess how this aspect of leadership and management may be improved
 - taking rapid action following the review to improve governance so that governors are able to ask challenging questions and hold the school to account for improvements in teaching and students' achievement.

Report on the third monitoring inspection on 8–9 July 2014

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and students' work, and met with the headteacher, other leaders of the school and a group of students. I had discussions with the Chair and one other member of the Governing Body, and with two representatives of the local authority.

Context

Since my last visit, school leaders have made a number of posts redundant, and nine members of staff are due to leave at the end of this academic year.

Achievement of pupils at the school

The school's forensic data tracking system shows that students' achievement across year groups is continuing to rise. Records show that more Year 11 students than has been the case previously are likely to achieve five GCSEs including English and mathematics at grades C or above, and make at least nationally expected progress in English and mathematics. These figures are predicted to rise from well below the national average in 2013 to broadly average in 2014. Not enough students are expected to make better than average progress in English and mathematics and weaknesses are likely to remain in how much progress the most-able students will have made. The school's records also highlight concerns about the achievement of some students who have special educational needs, particularly in mathematics. Like their classmates, students in this year group supported by the pupil premium funding (additional money from the government to support students known to be eligible for free school meals and those in the care of the local authority) are also making better progress than in previous years. However, the school's records show that gaps in attainment and progress between these students and their classmates remain wide.

Students in Year 10, and those in Key Stage 3, are achieving much better now than in the past. For the older students, there is still catching up to do but the school's records are showing much quicker progress in English and mathematics for almost all groups of students than has been the case previously. These records still highlight some concerns about the progress of some Year 10 students who have special educational needs, again in mathematics. Leaders have taken action to address this with the recent appointment of a member of staff. The more-able pupils are now beginning to achieve better in Year 10 and in the younger years, and the gaps in the

attainment and rates of progress of students supported by the pupil premium funding and their classmates are also narrowing. Many aspects of these improvements were also evident during inspectors' observations of learning in classes and in checking students' books. This provides evidence that improvements to students' achievement are starting to be sustained.

There have been some improvements to how well weaknesses in students' use of reading and writing skills in subjects other than English are being tackled. Inspectors observed some very good examples of students' extended writing that was well structured and technically accurate in subjects such as citizenship and science. However, this aspect of the school's work still needs improvement to be consistently good; senior leaders are tackling this.

The quality of teaching

The positive aspects referred to in my previous monitoring visit letter continue to be features of the most effective teaching observed during the inspection and noted in the school's comprehensive monitoring files; for example, the teachers who are enthusiastic and combine this enthusiasm with good subject knowledge to then plan learning activities that engage students' interest from the start of lessons. Other positive features include work set that provides a level of challenge that links well to students' skills, abilities and potential. Successful teaching provided prompts and structures for students which were not restrictive and which allowed them to produce extended pieces of written work. As a result of these strengths, and both oral and written feedback to students that makes clear what they need to do to improve, students are making quick progress. Inspectors also saw some excellent examples of where students had responded to and acted on the good-quality advice from their teachers.

Weaker teaching continues to be characterised by the issues I referred to in my previous letter: planning that does not take enough account of what students already know and can do, particularly for the most able; marking and feedback that does not give students clear steps for improvement, and with little evidence that students are acting on the advice; and, too few planned opportunities for students to use and develop accurate literacy skills, particularly writing skills. However, the frequency of these weaknesses is reducing as teaching is improving.

During my next visit, I will be exploring further to what extent these weaknesses are continuing to be addressed so that improvements are being sustained. I will also be considering in more detail whether or not teaching for disabled students and those who have special educational needs is sufficiently accelerating these students' progress.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

There was much good behaviour observed during the two days of the inspection, with some that was outstanding. In lessons, we observed very little need for teachers to manage poor behaviour or tackle low-level disruption because students had good attitudes to learning and were willing and able to settle and focus on the work set. During this inspection, behaviour around the school was also generally good, and students and staff described this as now more typical.

One of the inspectors spoke in detail to a group of students whose behaviour and attitudes had been improved this year. These students described how leaders and other staff had supported them in doing so. Exclusion rates are declining as students respond positively to the high expectations of them and the better and more consistent experiences they have in school.

Students we spoke to said that more had been done to tackle and reduce the instances of name-calling that were reported to inspectors during my last visit, to the extent that they did not see this as a particular concern. School leaders keep records of instances of bullying but this record-keeping is not of a consistently good quality. Students describe feeling safe in school and those we spoke to had an understanding of how to keep themselves safe when not in school.

Students are now attending school much more regularly than they have done in the past; the number of students who are frequently absent from school has reduced considerably. Students supported by the pupil premium funding are also attending school more regularly but there is still work to do to make sure that their attendance matches that of their classmates.

The quality of leadership in and management of the school

The continued improvements being made to students' achievement and behaviour, and to the quality of teaching, show that the capacity of leaders to make a difference is developing well from an inadequate starting point. Some, but not all improvements, are beginning to be sustained.

Subject leaders and those responsible for other aspects of the school's work not only share the headteacher's vision for the school but are increasingly making a difference. This can be seen, for example, in better teaching in a range of subjects. Improvements to teaching are also as a result of the continuing good opportunities for teacher training and support. Teachers have received further training on how to help students develop their literacy skills in a range of subjects and there has been some checking of the impact of this. However, in this aspect of the school's work, there is much still to do.

Leaders have made changes to the courses and qualifications on offer to students in Key Stage 4 and I will evaluate these and other aspects of the school's curriculum in more detail during the next monitoring inspection.

Careful consideration is being given to the spending of the pupil premium funding. There continue to be some wide gaps in a number of aspects between these students and other students in the school but these gaps are beginning to narrow.

The Chair of the Governing Body has a good understanding of the school's strengths and weaknesses and has used his considerable experience to embed challenge into the ways in which governors hold the school to account, particularly through the School Improvement Committee. Governors are beginning to take a lead on checking for themselves how well policies are being implemented in practice; for example, by spending time in school to look at how behaviour has improved and by planning to undertake a review of the school's approaches to keeping students safe. They have a better understanding of their role in managing the performance of teachers and leaders, and have refused salary increases for teachers when teaching has not made a good enough difference to students' achievement.

External support

The local authority has provided effective support to the school in a number of ways which both the headteacher and the Chair of Governors have valued. A two-day review of the school's progress was commissioned in June and an evaluative and robust written report was produced. Local authority officers hold the school to account well at regular review meetings. The local authority will continue to partly fund the school's formal partnership with Balcarras School.