

Ofsted
Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 4234
www.gov.uk/ofsted



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Mrs Davina Sumner
Headteacher
Willow Academy
Alston Road
Bessacarr
Doncaster
South Yorkshire
DN4 7EZ

Dear Mrs Sumner

Special measures monitoring inspection of Willow Academy

Following my visit with Lynne Selkirk, Ofsted Inspector, to your school on 16–17 May 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 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 November 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 trust's statement of action is fit for purpose.

The school's improvement plan is fit for purpose.

Having considered all the evidence I strongly recommend that the school does not seek to appoint newly qualified teachers.

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

Yours sincerely

Mark Evans
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

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

- Rapidly improve the quality of teaching so that it is at least consistently good and enables all groups of pupils, including the most able pupils, disadvantaged pupils and those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities, to achieve well by ensuring that:
 - staff have high expectations of what pupils can achieve
 - assessment information is used skilfully to plan challenging work for pupils
 - teachers guide pupils appropriately to take on challenging tasks that match their needs and abilities
 - explanations of what pupils are to do and learn are concise and clear so that pupils know precisely what is expected of them
 - skilful questioning engages pupils well and deepens their understanding of what is being learned
 - increasing opportunities for pupils to apply their mathematical skills and write at length across a wide range of subjects
 - checking regularly pupils' understanding of what they are reading to strengthen comprehension.
- Improve pupils' personal development, behaviour and welfare by ensuring that:
 - adults manage pupils' behaviour consistently well to promote good attitudes to learning
 - pupils behave considerately to others, particularly when playing at breaktimes and lunchtimes
 - records of behaviour and accidents are analysed accurately and leaders take effective actions to minimise incidents.
- Improve the provision in early years by:
 - securing substantive leadership to ensure consistently good teaching
 - ensuring that challenging work is set and leads to most children making better than expected progress.
- Rapidly improve the impact of leadership at all levels, including governance, by making sure that:
 - senior leaders and middle leaders check the quality of teaching thoroughly and link it closely to the progress pupils are making to ensure that both are good

- the trust arranges high-quality training and support to ensure that teaching and leadership rapidly improve to be good
- the curriculum is well taught across a wide range of subjects and includes good opportunities for pupils to develop their understanding of other cultures
- pupils have a good understanding of fundamental British values so that they know what is required to be a good citizen
- teachers are sufficiently skilled to ensure that disadvantaged pupils and those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities have their needs identified and met and make good progress
- subject leaders are skilled in checking learning and supporting teaching and have sufficient time to ensure that both are good across a wide range of subjects, including reading, writing and mathematics
- governors ensure good, substantive leadership in all areas
- governors ensure that pupils have more consistency in teaching staff across the school to accelerate their progress
- governors hold leaders to account for their actions, including the effective use of additional government funding
- governors fulfil all of their statutory duties to ensure that the overall effectiveness of the school is at least good.

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 first monitoring inspection on 16–17 May 2017

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents, including the school's plans for improvement, and met with the headteacher, members of the leadership team, a senior officer of the Wakefield City Academies Trust and the chair of the interim executive committee (IEC). As well as observing and talking with pupils around the school in and out of lessons, inspectors also had more formal meetings with two groups of pupils to discuss their views on the school and learning. Inspectors also met with newly and recently qualified teachers, and with staff responsible for various aspects of the school's work. The lead inspector listened to pupils from across the school reading. He also spoke with the interim chief executive of the trust on the telephone.

Inspectors spoke with parents at the start and end of the day, and took account of their views set out in Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, and the school's own surveys.

Context

Since the previous inspection, the headteacher and the deputy headteacher, who was also responsible for the leadership of the provision for pupils who had special educational needs and/or disabilities, have left the school. The interim headteacher, who took up post immediately before the previous inspection took place, has been made permanent headteacher. A new deputy headteacher has been appointed. This colleague has taken on responsibility for the coordination of the provision for pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities pending a permanent appointment to this role.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

Leaders and governors are addressing the weaknesses of the school effectively. Variability in staff expectations of what pupils should and must achieve is being systematically addressed, and weaknesses in the quality, consistency and impact of teaching are being tackled. This is happening through carefully planned and implemented actions that are rigorously followed up. Although inspection evidence shows that there are clear signs of improvement, it is too early to say that these improvements are sustained.

The headteacher works effectively with parents. She sees this as a key aspect of ensuring that the school improves. The headteacher seeks the views of parents regularly. Parents recognise and welcome this. They told inspectors that they like the accessibility of the headteacher and staff at the school and the imaginative ways in which the school keeps in touch with parents. Parents reported that the school has improved significantly since the headteacher's appointment.

The IEC has worked effectively with the new headteacher and her team to support and challenge leaders' actions in order to ensure rapid and assured progress. The headteacher reports regularly and effectively to this committee. The IEC's records of meetings show that it holds the headteacher to account. However, records also show that there is insufficient focus on the performance of groups of children within the school in the headteacher's reports. In the reporting and analysis of patterns of pupils' attendance and behaviour, for example, there is insufficient detail about the relative performance of groups of pupils, such as that of those who are disadvantaged. As a result, members of the IEC do not always have a full enough picture of what needs to improve and how leaders will ensure that this improvement takes place.

Leaders are working effectively to address some pupils' poor behaviour and attitudes to learning. The headteacher and her team are employing a range of strategies, which are rooted in high expectations and clear boundaries for all, to tackle the legacy of poor behaviour that exists in a small group of, especially, boys at the school. There are clear signs that this insistence on the highest standards of behaviour and respectful attitudes to others is having a positive impact on learning at the school. However, it is too early to see if this improvement is sustained. Her Majesty's Inspector, (HMI) will examine the impact of the whole school's actions to improve behaviour and attitudes to learning during his next inspection visit.

Supported by the trust, leaders have now put in place robust systems, externally validated, for checking pupils' progress so that teaching can be more effective and learning more enjoyable and assured. Historically, the assessment of pupils' progress has been weak and its mapping unsystematic. Structures are now in place to track the progress of every child in order to identify gaps in skills and knowledge and to celebrate success. This information is beginning to be used by staff to focus and improve the impact of their teaching. Again, although there are signs of this having a positive impact on the quality of teaching, it is too early to judge whether this impact is sustained.

The headteacher has taken effective steps to address the weaknesses in the structure, robustness and focus of leadership in the school. She has extended the leadership team so that more staff are involved in and responsible for the school's work in key areas such as the curriculum, the success of disadvantaged pupils and reading. It is too early to judge the impact of these initiatives. HMI will scrutinise this key area of leadership during his next inspection.

The leadership of the early years foundation stage has not yet been resolved. However, plans to appoint a substantive leader are well advanced. In the meanwhile, this key role is being undertaken by the headteacher. It is clear from inspection evidence that this area of the school is increasingly effective.

The leadership of the provision for pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities is increasingly effective. The special educational needs lead and her team have worked meticulously to identify these pupils' needs and then develop clear, robust and humane systems to track their progress. Effectively supported by officers of the trust and Doncaster local authority, they have worked carefully to support and advise the whole staff to ensure that these pupils receive increasingly skilled support in the classroom. Leaders are aware, however, that there is still much to do.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Improvements in teaching, learning and assessment are more evident in the early years foundation stage and key stage 1 than in key stage 2. In the early years and key stage 1, teachers' expectations are higher and children and pupils are challenged with appropriate and interesting work. Writing in the early years is a particular strength. Children are encouraged to write at length with a growing awareness of their audience. The presence of eggs and then chicks in the early years area has had a particularly positive and stimulating impact on children's creativity and growing skills in writing.

In key stage 2, improvement is less consistent. This is because staff expectations are not consistently high and they do not communicate clearly to pupils the purpose of their learning. Work in key stage 2 is not yet consistently challenging enough to stretch and engage pupils. This is particularly the case for most-able pupils.

In key stage 2, although there is clear evidence that pupils are following a balanced programme of English and mathematics, learning in other subjects in the curriculum, such as science and religious education, is not as assured. Inspection evidence shows that opportunities for joint planning are being missed by staff where the teaching of a particular year group is shared. As a result, there is inconsistency in the amount and quality of work being covered by pupils in the same year group.

Across the school, but particularly in key stage 2, inspection evidence shows that the requirements of the national curriculum are not being fulfilled in each year group. As a result, pupils are not being fully prepared for their next stage in learning as they move through the school. Also, as a result of this lack of 'coverage' of the full curriculum, pupils are not getting a sufficiently wide variety of opportunities to write in a range of styles to suit the particular needs of subjects.

As a result of leaders' actions, teachers across the school are now using assessments of how well pupils are doing to plan next steps in their learning. While there is still much to do to develop this key aspect, inspection evidence shows that the regular and systematic analysis of pupils' progress is being used to focus teaching on what pupils need to do to develop their skills, knowledge and understanding.

There is still more to be done to develop the questioning skills of staff so that pupils are more challenged and thrilled by their learning. Opportunities to deepen understanding by staff moving from questions that ask the mere 'what', rather than the 'why' and 'how', are not taken.

Teaching assistants are generally well deployed across the school. They contribute to both the assessment of pupils' progress and to the consequent planning of next steps.

All staff now have access to training, support and other opportunities to develop their skills. Leaders have put in place rigorous structures to ensure that this training and support focuses on the needs of the school. It is too early to assess clear evidence that these opportunities are having a positive impact on the quality of teaching and learning at the school. However, the impact on staff morale and enthusiasm is already clear.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

The introduction of the new school-wide approach to behaviour earlier this year has been welcomed by pupils. They say they like the clear rewards system. Generally pupils are kind, polite and considerate, and show clear understanding of the link between good behaviour, happiness and success in learning. Inspectors saw many examples of children and pupils working collaboratively and considerately together, especially in the early years and key stage 1 classes.

The school's records show, however, that there are still examples of poor behaviour from small groups of pupils, mostly boys, in key stage 2. Inspectors saw examples of calling out in lessons and disrespect for others in the corridors. Although behaviour is improving, the poorer behaviour in key stage 2 is having an adverse impact on progress and well-being.

The introduction of 'family dining', where pupils of different ages sit down together to eat, has been welcomed by all. Pupils report that lunchtimes are now much calmer and less rushed. Lunchtime supervisors also report that they have noticed a significant improvement in pupils' behaviour since the new dining arrangements were introduced.

The school's work to keep pupils safe is effective. Pupils say that they feel and are safe in school. They know the risks of the internet and how to minimise them. They know about the different forms that bullying can take and are confident that, if it should occur, it would be dealt with promptly and effectively by staff. They are very complimentary about the levels of care they receive from staff at the school.

The school's work to prepare pupils for life in modern Britain is increasingly effective. The curriculum, for example, contains opportunities to explore and learn about government and democracy. Pupils also have chances to take on roles of responsibility. For example, the recently introduced 'Active leaders' scheme enables pupils to work with and supervise younger pupils at break and lunchtimes.

Pupils' attendance is very carefully monitored and is close to national averages. Leaders work hard to support those pupils and their families who, from time to time, find regular attendance challenging.

Pupils' attitudes to learning are generally positive and enthusiastic. They take pride in their work and the way it is presented. A review of pupils' books and folders undertaken by inspectors showed clear improvements in presentation over recent months. However, inspectors did see some poor presentation in books which had not been picked up by teachers. For example, rulers were not being routinely used to draw graphs and diagrams in mathematics, geography and science.

Outcomes for pupils

There have been no external test results since the previous inspection in November 2016.

Inspection evidence and the school's own information shows that there has been some improvement in pupils' progress. However, there is still variability across the school.

In the early years foundation stage, there is clear evidence of sustained progress resulting from high expectations and stimulating teaching and independent learning. Staff records show a detailed picture and assessment of each child's development. The accuracy of teachers' assessments have been confirmed through joint meetings with other early years staff from across the trust and the local authority.

Phonics is effectively taught. Inspection evidence shows that in both the early years and through key stage 1, pupils are using their phonics skills to read new and increasingly challenging words. Children in the early years were particularly keen to share and talk about their reading books with the inspectors.

Staff have worked effectively to raise the profile of reading since the previous inspection. There is clear evidence that this is having a positive impact on pupils' love and experience of reading. Pupils, including those who are the most able, now have many more opportunities to read and discuss their reading both at school and at home with their parents. Pupils report that the recent relaunch of a book club that allows pupils to have access to books online is particularly successful.

The school's own information suggests that outcomes for pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities are beginning to improve. The school reports that this is because the teaching these pupils experience is increasingly more skilled and focused.

Disadvantaged pupils are not making sustained progress and achieving as they should. The inconsistencies in the quality and impact of teaching that are still clearly present across the school are having an adverse impact on this group of pupils. Leaders have taken steps to address the poorer performance of these pupils. However, it is too early to say whether these steps are having a sustained impact. HMI will examine the impact of the school's actions to improve outcomes for disadvantaged pupils during his next inspection visit.

Overall, as a result of sound leadership, most staff have higher expectations of their pupils. However, this is not consistently the case, especially in key stage 2. In this key stage, expectations of what pupils can and should do are less high and behaviour is more variable. This results in weaker outcomes.

External support

The school is receiving effective support from the Wakefield City Academies Trust. The trust has provided support for the work of the early years. It has advised on and checked the accuracy of teachers' assessments of how well children are progressing in the Reception classes. The trust has also supported the leadership of the school, working with the IEC to appoint a permanent headteacher. Officers of the trust visit the school regularly to check on its progress. Trust officers follow up their visits with detailed written reports that identify progress and next steps.

The school is also receiving effective support from the local authority. Officers of the local authority have provided the school with extended and detailed advice to help it rapidly improve the quality of its work with pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities.

The school has also been supported by Doncaster's Partners in Learning teaching school alliance to develop its whole-school approach to reading.