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Leanne Dandridge
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Dear Ms Dandridge

Special measures monitoring inspection of The Downley School

This letter sets out the findings from the monitoring inspection of your school that took place on 13 and 14 June 2023, on behalf of His Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills. The monitoring inspection was carried out under section 8(2) of the Education Act 2005 and was the first monitoring inspection since the school was judged to require special measures following the graded (section 5) inspection that took place in March 2022.

During the inspection, I discussed with you and other senior leaders, the chair of the interim executive board (IEB) and the local authority the actions that have been taken to improve the school since the most recent graded inspection. We discussed the ongoing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. I also visited lessons, spoke to a wide range of pupils, looked at pupils' work and observed pupils' behaviour. I scrutinised school documents, talked to staff and took into account the responses to the staff and parent surveys. I have considered all this in coming to my judgement.

The Downley School remains inadequate and requires special measures. Leaders have made progress to improve the school, but more work is necessary for the category of concern to be removed.

The school may appoint early career teachers before the next monitoring inspection. I would recommend that no more than two early career teachers are appointed before the next monitoring visit.

The progress made towards the removal of special measures

Since the previous inspection, there have been significant changes to the leadership and staffing structure of the school. Just under half of the current staff were at the school when it was last inspected. There have been several interim headteachers prior to your appointment at Easter 2023. A number of other leadership appointments have increased the school's capacity to improve. The Department for Education is seeking a multi-academy trust to sponsor the school.

The lack of continuity in leadership and continued turbulence in staffing have meant that the vital improvements needed for the quality of education have not happened as quickly as they should. However, with improved stability in leadership and staffing, you and other leaders are now making some of the essential improvements to the curriculum. Crucially, leaders have focused on improving some critical subjects first.

Leaders have successfully launched a new systematic synthetic phonics scheme. Staff are trained in its implementation. However, further professional development is required to ensure that all staff deliver this precisely and consistently. Leaders have rightly identified the legacy of weaker reading throughout the school. Many pupils read less well than you expected, in part due to the disruption of the pandemic and the turbulence caused by staffing changes at the school. Leaders must ensure that effective support is put into place to help older pupils catch up with reading skills as a matter of urgency.

The early years provision is improving. Leaders have raised the expectations for what children can achieve. Leaders have made a start to improving the curriculum. Some activities are meaningful and purposeful. However, staff do not always make the most of learning opportunities. Sometimes, staff focus on what a child does rather than engaging them in learning. Once the curriculum redesign is complete, leaders need to focus on quality assurance of delivery to ensure that children flourish and are sufficiently well prepared for learning in Year 1.

The provision for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) has been a focus for leaders. While leaders have benefited from appropriate and purposeful support from the local authority, the provision remains a concern. The recent appointment of a temporary special educational needs and disabilities coordinator (SENDCo) is improving engagement with parents. However, further support and essential training is required for the SENDCo. While staff are aware of pupils' specific needs, teachers are not trained effectively enough in how to adapt the curriculum for these pupils. As a result, pupils with SEND do not achieve as well as they should. Support plans are not precise enough and do not relate to pupils' specific needs. Leaders must continue to focus their efforts on improving the provision for pupils with SEND.

Pupils' achievement, particularly in writing and mathematics, at the end of Year 2 was low in 2022. Similarly, phonics attainment was poor. Leaders are aware that future targets need to be much more aspirational. Improvements in pupils' achievement this year are

evident in pupils' current work. However, leaders have not yet ensured that teachers check pupils' learning of the curriculum effectively enough.

Staff and pupils recognise that behaviour in the school has improved, and relationships between pupils and staff are blossoming. Lessons are calm and purposeful. Pupils play well together in beautiful surroundings. Most pupils feel that unkind comments or hurtful behaviours are very rare at their school. However, there is a small amount of rough play outside of lessons, which leaders are aware of. Most pupils are confident that staff would help to support them to deal with worries or concerns without hesitation. Concerningly, though, a small number of older pupils do not report unwanted or inappropriate comments or physical contact. Leaders must address this by implementing a consistent behaviour management policy.

Leaders have rightly focused on the areas for improvement highlighted by the previous inspection. Leaders and staff are aware of where their energies and efforts need to remain focused, moving forwards. The emerging stability in leadership and staffing is particularly significant. Staff report feeling happier and more positive about the future. Pupils and parents share this optimism. The IEB has been crucial in supporting the school on its improvement journey. The experienced chair and other members of the IEB have diligently and patiently provided appropriate support and robust challenge to the school community. The local authority has commissioned interim staff to fulfil leadership positions, who have also made significant contributions to school improvement. You, as the new interim headteacher, have been pivotal in bringing further stability and vibrancy to the role.

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective. Trained staff know the signs to look out for to identify potential abuse or neglect. Leaders of safeguarding are persistent and diligent in following up concerns for the most vulnerable pupils. There are minor improvements needed to sharpen processes further. For example, the recording and subsequent follow-up actions relating to incidents of physical restraint need to be tighter.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the IEB, the Department for Education's regional director and the director of children's services for Buckinghamshire. This letter will be published on the Ofsted reports website.

Yours sincerely

Linda Culling
His Majesty's Inspector