

Ofsted
Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 1231
www.gov.uk/ofsted



4 December 2019

Mrs Adele Howson
Acting Headteacher
Water Hall Primary School
Fern Grove
Bletchley
Milton Keynes
Buckinghamshire
MK2 3QF

Dear Mrs Howson

Special measures monitoring inspection of Water Hall Primary School

Following my visit with Sarah Varnom, Ofsted Inspector, to your school on 19 and 20 November 2019, 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 previous monitoring inspection.

The inspection was the second monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures following the inspection that took place in February 2019. 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 not taking effective action towards the removal of special measures.

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 board of trustees, the chief executive

officer of the multi-academy trust, the regional schools commissioner and the Director of Children's Services for Milton Keynes. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Lucy English

Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection that took place in February 2019

- Raise expectations across the school of how hard pupils should work, how well they should behave and the standards they should achieve in their work.
- Strengthen leadership capacity, including the effectiveness of trustees, by ensuring that:
 - trustees have a more in-depth knowledge of the school and use it to hold the local governing board and school leaders to account for how well pupils achieve and behave
 - any improvements, including new approaches to teaching, are stringently monitored and evaluated
 - assessment processes are accurate and leaders across the school have a clear overview of pupils' progress
 - pupils with SEND are suitably overseen and monitored so that they receive the additional support they need from teachers and assistants
 - pupil premium funding has a more positive impact on the learning and progress of disadvantaged pupils
 - the curriculum in a range of subjects, including in science, enables pupils to acquire subject-specific knowledge and skills, as well as broaden their vocabularies.
- Implement an approach to developing teaching so that:
 - teachers' subject knowledge improves, including their understanding of pupils' misconceptions and how to tackle them
 - the teaching of reading across the school, including phonics, is more effective
 - work is more appropriately pitched so that most-able pupils are challenged.
- Improve pupils' behaviour and the overall culture of the school by:
 - ensuring that pupils do not disrupt the learning of others through their behaviour in class
 - strengthening leaders' oversight of behaviour and developing teachers' skills in managing challenging behaviour
 - making sure that incidents of bullying are dealt with more effectively so that they do not recur
 - implementing a whole-school approach to improving the language

pupils use when communicating with each other.

- Improve pupils' outcomes by ensuring that:
 - teaching and the curriculum enable pupils to make strong progress across a range of subjects
 - pupils with SEND make better progress from their starting points
 - disadvantaged pupils make strong progress so that they can fulfil their academic potential and catch up with others nationally
 - most-able pupils make the progress of which they are capable, so that they achieve at a higher standard.

An external review of the school's use of the pupil premium funding should be undertaken in order to improve this aspect of leadership and management.

An external review of governance should be undertaken in order to improve this aspect of leadership and management.

Report on the second monitoring inspection on 19 November 2019 to 20 November 2019

Evidence

Inspectors met with the acting headteacher, the substantive headteacher, the assistant headteachers, the designated safeguarding lead (DSL) and the special educational needs coordinator (SENCo). They also met with groups of teachers and teaching assistants, parents and carers, and pupils. The lead inspector met with three trustees of Lakes Academies Trust, including the chair of trustees. Inspectors also visited lessons, scrutinised documents and looked at records relating to safeguarding and behaviour.

Context

This was the second monitoring visit since the school's section 5 inspection in February 2019. The first monitoring visit took place in July 2019. Since then, there have been many staffing and organisational changes, especially at trust level.

Following the review of governance, the trust dissolved the local governing board of the school and expanded the number of trustees. Many of the volunteers who were part of the local governing board became trustees. The chief executive officer (CEO) and director of education for the trust (who are both also trustees) have both had periods of absence since the first monitoring visit. Neither took part in this inspection. Several of the other paid officers of the trust have left or are leaving shortly.

Seven teachers left the school in the summer and one of the replacements has already left. Other teachers are due to leave at Christmas.

Since the first monitoring visit, the deputy headteacher has been appointed as acting headteacher to cover the substantive headteacher's maternity leave. The SENCo has joined the school.

The regional schools commissioner (RSC) has issued a notice to terminate the trust's leadership of the school and is seeking to re-broker the school to a different trust. The chair of trustees and school leaders are working closely with the RSC to make this as smooth as possible for staff and pupils.

The progress made by the school in tackling the key areas for improvement identified at the section 5 inspection

School leaders have put together a well-considered improvement plan to improve the quality of education, but little has been achieved. Senior leaders in school have provided training for staff and used staff meeting time to try to raise teachers' and teaching assistants' expectations of how hard pupils should work and the standards

that they should achieve. They have given teachers time to plan in teams so that they can help each other and try to implement the training ideas. The SENCo also provides useful advice, including that from external specialists, and has suggested strategies staff can use to support pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). However, these actions have not been enough and not all staff have taken the training and advice on board. Too often, there is a difference between what has been planned and what is implemented in the classroom. Leaders know that what they need to do is work alongside staff to support and challenge them, but they have not had the time to do this. Consequently, there remains inconsistency in the belief that pupils can achieve more, especially pupils with SEND. Some of the work given to pupils is designed to fill their time and keep them quiet rather than help them to learn.

The situation in the early years provision is much more positive. Here, the changes implemented by the new early years leader are taking shape effectively. Staff plan children's learning well and have implemented a broad and ambitious curriculum. They make sure that children re-visit ideas until they are secure with their new knowledge. Leaders have successfully strengthened the teaching of reading in early years. Children are taught phonics from the word go. They are keen to show their learning and also love listening to the stories staff read to them.

The teaching of reading in key stage 1 is not as effective. Staff teach phonics daily, but it is not systematic. Pupils do not show the love of reading that is being developed so well in the Nursery and Reception Years. Often, the books they read are not at the right level. This is off-putting for pupils and hinders the development of their reading skills. There is a beautiful library in the school, but the boxes of books that pupils have to choose from are shabby and uninspiring.

School leaders have mapped out a suitable curriculum for pupils in key stages 1 and 2, but it is not being delivered. They have purchased commercial schemes of work in writing and mathematics to help teachers to plan and deliver lessons. This has helped a bit, but the improvement is not swift or secure enough, especially in key stage 1. The planned-for subject leaders have not been appointed and financial issues have prevented leaders from buying further resources or appointing staff who can fill the current knowledge gaps at the school. Therefore, despite leaders' ambitions to cover the full range of national curriculum subjects, pupils' learning is limited because they do not study computing or a language.

Staff are frustrated that their plans to offer pupils experiences that will enrich their learning, such as trips, have been cancelled due to financial pressures. Despite this, leaders are trying to widen pupils' learning. For example, they have changed assemblies so that they promote the school values and develop pupils' understanding of the world around them. Recent work has helped pupils to consider how their actions can affect others in and out of school. Parents and carers recognise the efforts leaders are making, but a group are still concerned that the school can be insular and does not make the most of national and cultural events.

They are correct in thinking that this limits pupils' wider development.

Behaviour is better overall than at the time of the inspection in February 2019, but in key stages 1 and 2, it is edgy and there is still much work to do. The improved consistency seen at the first monitoring visit has not been sustained. The staffing turbulence, especially in key stage 1, has prevented staff from establishing class routines. This has unsettled pupils, especially those with SEND. In some classrooms, learning is disrupted by poor behaviour. Staff cajole pupils to follow instructions, often to little effect.

Some staff feel powerless to improve pupils' behaviour and feel that the sanctions in the behaviour policy do not work. The acting headteacher has well-considered plans to change the school's approach to managing behaviour and was due to start this work with staff at the time of the inspection. Behaviour in early years is much better than in the main school because there are clear systems and routines consistently in place. Children here work and play well together.

The long-established whole-school practice of escorting pupils around the school and managing pupils' time at breaktimes limits opportunities for pupils to learn how to self-regulate their behaviour. Leaders have introduced a choice of activities at breaktimes, but these are still overly managed. Pupils have to do one of the choices. Both headteachers are worried about the impact of this practice on pupils and the lack of trust it implies. They report that senior officers in the trust have not allowed them to change it. Anecdotal evidence suggests that former pupils found transfer to secondary school challenging because they were not used to having to be responsible.

An aspect that has improved is pupils' perceptions of how well staff deal with bullying. Pupils were much more positive about this in the first monitoring visit. In fact, they do not see it as an issue at the school anymore and couldn't think of much to say about it, whereas last time they were clear that teachers' responses were not strong enough.

Leaders persist in their work with families to improve attendance. There are signs of improvement, although there is still much to do.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

School leaders have not been able to make headway with their plans for improvement because they have to spend their time dealing with day-to-day issues. They are essentially firefighting rather than improving the school.

At the first monitoring visit, the CEO gave an undertaking to ensure that school leaders had the time, resources and support to make their planned improvements. There were plans to appoint subject leaders to help develop staff knowledge and their skills in different subject areas. These actions have not been followed through.

This has stalled improvement, and leaders are very frustrated. They feel let down by the trust.

School leaders and the chair of trustees are all, rightly, concerned about a lack of clarity around school and trust finances. The chair of trustees is working with the RSC and the officers of the trust to get clarity about the whole-school budget. Meanwhile, uncertainty about finances is having an adverse impact on the school's work. School leaders who should be working on school improvement are teaching classes full time and so are not available to support their colleagues to improve. They have not been able to purchase resources to support staff. For example, the reason pupils do not learn a language is because there are no staff with the expertise to plan or teach one. The acting headteacher wanted to purchase a commercial scheme to support staff's planning and delivery, but the money is not available.

The review of the use of pupil premium funding has now been completed. Once again, there is a question about money. The impact of the spending cannot be worked out as it is not clear how the money has been spent or how much leaders still have to spend.

The trustees who participated in this inspection share school leaders' frustrations and concerns about the lack of progress in improving the school. They understand their role and express determination to change things, but they have been too slow to get going in their new roles. They welcome the support from the RSC to find a new sponsor for the school. They recognise that in the meantime, they have to increase their efforts because currently pupils at the school are not receiving an adequate education.

School leaders have maintained core functions for pupils. They have ensured that there is a strong culture of safeguarding and that the arrangements for safeguarding pupils are effective. Despite the trustees not approving an up-to-date safeguarding policy at the start of the school year, school leaders made sure that all staff are fully trained and understand the changes that were introduced to national guidance in September.

Strengths in the school's approaches to securing improvement:

- The acting and substantive headteachers know what needs to be done to improve the quality of education.
- Leaders' changes to the early years provision have been effective. Children enjoy purposeful learning in a safe and stimulating environment.
- Pupils with SEND have a leader who advocates for them. She provides useful and specific advice based on their learning needs.
- The chair of trustees is working closely with the RSC to ensure a swift and

smooth re-brokering to another trust. School leaders and trustees are supporting her well with this.

Weaknesses in the school's approaches to securing improvement:

- A lack of clarity about the finances available to improve the school has stalled the implementation of leaders' plans.
- It is difficult to see what positive difference the trust has made. School leaders feel that they have been prevented from making the improvements that they identify as necessary. Trustees find the culture at senior level in the trust 'stifling' and 'controlling'.
- Staff have differing levels of subject expertise and have not fully taken on board the key messages from the mathematics and writing training.
- The teaching of reading is not effective enough. There is no sense of a love of reading and the potential it offers pupils.
- The management of pupils' behaviour is inconsistent. It veers from highly controlling to ignoring misbehaviour.

External support

The chair of trustees has recently identified someone external to the trust to provide support to school leaders, but this arrangement has not yet started.