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19 June 2024

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Dear Ms Gardner

Special measures monitoring inspection of Lotus School

This letter sets out the findings from the monitoring inspection that took place on 15 May 2024, 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 second monitoring inspection since the school was judged to require special measures following the graded (section 5) inspection that took place in December 2022.

The purpose of a monitoring inspection is not to grade the school's overall effectiveness, but to identify and report on the school's progress. It is to highlight to the school and parents any improvements that school leaders have made since the school's previous graded inspection.

During the inspection, I discussed with you and other senior leaders, trustees, members of the local governing board and of the local authority the actions that have been taken to improve the school since the most recent graded inspection. I also met with the chief executive officer (CEO) designate of Champion Education Trust and the CEO of Synergy Education Trust. We discussed the ongoing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. I focused on checking the school's work to improve the quality of education and the support for pupils at the early stages of reading. I also evaluated the school's ongoing work to ensure that pupils are kept safe and that their behaviour does not disrupt the learning of others. I have considered all this in coming to my judgement.

Leaders have made progress to improve the school, but more work is necessary for the school to be no longer judged as requiring special measures.

I strongly recommend that the school does not seek to appoint early career teachers.

The progress made towards the removal of special measures

Lotus School is in the midst of a considerable period of change in terms of its strategic leadership. Champion Education Trust will cease to operate at the end of August 2024. In the absence of a substantive CEO, the trust has acted pragmatically to put interim leadership arrangements in place. The CEO of Oak Learning Partnership has designated responsibility for running Lotus School, as well as the other two schools in Champion Education Trust. Plans are well underway for all three schools to be re-brokered to two different multi-academy trusts. The CEO for Synergy Education Trust is working closely with the school to support the re-brokering process and to help the leadership team to pick up the pace of improvement.

In addition to changes at trust level, there have been very recent changes to the school's leadership team. The CEO of Synergy Education Trust is currently acting as the interim executive headteacher. The deputy headteacher is acting as the head of school. The CEO for Synergy Education Trust has overseen the successful appointment of a substantive headteacher, who will take up their post from September 2024. Despite these changes and the uncertainties that they have inevitably brought, staff are proud of all that has been achieved so far. They are enthusiastic and optimistic about the next chapter of the school's development.

At the time of the first monitoring inspection, the school's work to support those pupils who find reading more difficult was in its infancy. This work has gathered pace in the period between the monitoring inspections. The school has checked pupils' reading ability. This activity has highlighted a sizeable proportion of pupils who are not confident readers. The school has pinpointed that, for some pupils, this is owing to gaps in their phonics knowledge, while other pupils struggle to make sense of what they have read. In response, the school has acted effectively to improve the teaching of early reading and to develop pupils' comprehension of text.

The introduction of a systematic phonics programme is having a positive impact on pupils' development as fluent, accurate readers. Staff have been trained to deliver the phonics programme, and they do so successfully. Pupils respond well to the daily phonics sessions. They now read from books that match the sounds that they know. Pupils who benefit from these sessions are clearly proud of their achievements as emerging readers. In addition, pupils enjoy their daily reading sessions after lunch. These are helping to cement the love of reading evident at the time of the first monitoring inspection. These sessions are also supporting pupils to read with a greater degree of understanding. However, the school lacks a systematic approach to checking the impact of these new approaches to teaching pupils to read. Consequently, the school does not know what is going well and where changes may need to be made to bring about further improvements in this area of its work.

The school has continued to harness the support from the trust to build leadership capacity and to assist in the development of subject curriculums. Subject leadership has improved in some curriculum areas. There are now clear and well-constructed curriculums in place for some subjects as a result. This means that the school is further along in its journey of identifying the important knowledge that pupils will learn in these subjects. It has also started to consider how subject knowledge will be ordered. Pupils are now better equipped to build more easily on what they already know.

The school's ambitions for some other subjects have not been realised. In these subjects, curriculums have not been thought about carefully enough to ensure that they meet the needs of pupils. This is particularly significant given the specific nature of the special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) that all pupils at this school have. This means that, despite considerable work to improve the identification of pupils' SEND, these pupils continue to have a variable experience. Some pupils continue to struggle to access learning.

There are stronger processes in place than at the time of the first monitoring inspection to establish pupils' starting points, when they begin at the school or move into a new year group. In some subjects, this allows staff to design new learning that builds well on pupils' prior knowledge. However, the school's approaches to checking pupils' learning remain underdeveloped. Consequently, gaps in pupils' knowledge often go unnoticed and unchecked.

The school has been more successful in assuring itself that the curriculum for pupils who attend alternative provisions is of a sufficiently high quality. The school works closely with alternative providers. It ensures that these providers make a positive contribution to pupils' preparation for their next stages of education, employment and training. For some pupils, accessing some of their education at an alternative provider has been truly transformational.

It is recognised by leaders at all levels, including those in interim positions, that curriculum development in all subjects is an essential priority moving forwards. This includes work to develop careers education, information, advice and guidance, which has not moved on with sufficient pace since the first monitoring inspection and remains at an embryonic stage.

The marked improvements in pupils' behaviour celebrated at the time of the first monitoring inspection have been strengthened further. Pupils know how they are expected to behave. They said that the school rules have been changed to reflect the importance of regulating their emotions so that they are ready to learn. The school continues to be a calm environment with smooth transitions between activities. However, persistent absence is a considerable concern. The school stringently follows up absences and endeavours to engage non-attenders in school life. It continues to promote the importance of regular attendance. However, far too many pupils do not attend school regularly.

The school has continued to strengthen the culture of safeguarding since the first monitoring inspection. The safeguarding team ensures that keeping pupils and staff safe remains a high priority. Staff receive suitable training. This includes frequent reminders about the potential risks to pupils and how to report and act on safeguarding concerns. The school takes appropriate action to make sure that pupils who attend alternative provision, or who are persistently absent from school, are safe and well. The ongoing improvements in pupils' behaviour have helped more pupils to feel safe in school. All of the pupils who shared their views said that they feel safe. They value the warm and trusting relationships that they enjoy with staff.

A range of external reports and 'health checks' have provided the school with objective advice to support with improvement planning. This includes a SEND review carried out by the local authority in December 2023 and a more recent externally commissioned safeguarding audit. However, the school's relationship with the local authority is not as effective as it could be. This hinders how well the school and the local authority engage together in the interests of current and prospective pupils.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the local governing board, chair of the board of trustees and the CEO designate of the Champion Education Trust, the Department for Education's regional director and the director of children's services for Blackpool. This letter will be published on the Ofsted reports website.

Yours sincerely

Jackie Stillings
His Majesty's Inspector