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Dr Rory Fox
Principal
The Basildon Lower Academy
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Dear Dr Fox

Special measures monitoring inspection of The Basildon Lower Academy

Following my visit with Ann Short and Andrew Lyons, Additional Inspectors, to your academy on 26 and 27 September 2012, 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 academy's recent section 5 inspection.

The inspection was the first monitoring inspection since the academy became subject to special measures following the inspection which took place on 14 March 2012. 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 academy is making reasonable progress towards the removal of special measures.

The academy is not permitted to appoint newly qualified teachers, although this decision will be reviewed at subsequent monitoring visits.

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 Academies Advisers Unit of the DfE and the Chair of the Governing Body.

Yours sincerely

Paul Brooker
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection which took place in March 2012

- Raise achievement across the academy by:
 - implementing a systematic programme to teach literacy and numeracy skills to those students who have significant shortfalls in their reading, writing and mathematics attainment
 - increasing managers' and teachers' understanding of how to use assessment data to plan learning and raise achievement
 - ensuring that day-to-day assessments and regular verbal and written feedback on their progress inform students of how well they are doing
 - setting clear personal targets for students and ensuring they are understood and used to raise aspirations and track their progress.

- Improve the quality of teaching, especially that of basic skills, so that it is good by:
 - implementing a clear, coherent plan for improving teaching, based on high expectations and the steadfast commitment of all staff to raise the achievement of all learners
 - providing students with activities that stimulate their interest and enjoyment
 - ensuring teachers' planning includes activities suited to students' different abilities and which enable students to work independently, in pairs and in groups
 - using the information gained from lesson monitoring to tailor specific training and support for teachers, and measuring the impact this has on the quality of provision and students' learning
 - enabling the best teachers to show others what good teaching is and mentor teachers to increase their effectiveness.

- Improve behaviour and attendance by:
 - checking that all teachers apply behaviour management procedures consistently in all lessons
 - ensuring that progressively fewer students are removed from lessons and those that are receive appropriate and timely support which meets their needs and secures their progress
 - ensuring that the new procedures to improve attendance and reduce persistent absence focus closely on disabled students and those who have special educational needs
 - significantly reducing the number of students excluded from the academy.

- Improve the quality of leadership and management by:
 - articulating a clear vision for the academy and sharing it with all teachers, leaders and managers, students, and their parents and carers to gain their full support and commitment to securing long-term improvements
 - holding all staff to account by measuring the impact of teaching and the actions to improve it on students' learning
 - clearly defining the roles and expectations of all pastoral and academic leaders and managers in raising achievement and regularly checking that they are demonstrating the capacity to secure improvements
 - requiring governors to set the highest expectations of senior leaders and managers, and rigorously managing their performance to raise students' achievement
 - improving the effectiveness of communication systems within the academy and between staff, parents and carers so that important information is shared efficiently and in a timely fashion
 - strengthening the Academy Trust's capacity for educational leadership.

Report on the first monitoring inspection on 26-27 September 2012

Evidence

Inspectors observed the academy's work, including 28 lesson observations, scrutinised documents and held meetings with the Principal, nominated staff, groups of pupils, parents and the Chair of the Governing Body.

Context

There have been significant staff changes since the last inspection. A large number of teachers, including senior leaders, left at the end of the summer term, although three compulsory redundancies were also necessary to reduce staffing levels. Less of the teaching is delivered by inexperienced teachers, and the academy has not recruited any newly qualified teachers. The senior and middle leadership has been reorganised. The vice principal and assistant vice principals formally took up post in September. A swathe of middle leadership roles has been instated in each of the Lower Academy's two schools in order to develop more effective leadership and management at all levels.

Achievement of pupils at the school

The academy met or exceeded most of its ambitious end-of-Key Stage 3 targets last year. Its own assessment information indicates that standards are rising securely in English and mathematics and that progress is accelerating. Achievement in mathematics, in particular, has shown marked improvement over the last 12 months. The academy is confident that these increases will be sustained, but recognises that improvements are not equally impressive across all subjects. Achievement in science, for example, is poor, and tracking information in many subjects is still being developed and is not yet sufficiently rigorous to evaluate pupils' progress and the achievement of different groups.

Improved rates of progress reflect better teaching, the pupils' more positive attitudes and a more settled climate for learning. However, inspection evidence from lesson observations indicates that the quality of learning is very uneven. Pupils made impressive progress in almost half of lessons observed, but in too many other lessons the learning was not good enough, and at times inadequate.

The academy has taken steps to improve the accuracy of assessment data and extend its application, particularly in the core subjects of English, mathematics and science. Teachers use assessment information to set individual targets for pupils, to track their progress and evaluate performance. These developments are encouraging to see, although the use of assessment in most subjects is underdeveloped, and the analysis of data for departmental self-evaluation is embryonic. Teachers are much more aware of the levels that pupils should achieve and often refer to these in their teaching, but assessment information is not consistently well used to set suitably ambitious outcomes for individual pupils.

The quality of teaching

The quality of teaching has improved. Senior leaders have worked hard to raise teachers' expectations and establish common routines and requirements, for example in regard to planning, behaviour management and assessment. However, although much of the poor teaching observed during the last inspection has been eradicated, and fewer lessons are taught by supply teachers, significant weaknesses remain. More than half the lessons observed during the visit required improvement because the pace of learning was too pedestrian or uneven.

The most evident improvement is the more settled climate for learning. Although pupils say that some lessons are still disrupted, the expectation is that pupils arrive promptly and settle quickly. Most teachers foster positive relationships so that lessons are not interrupted by low-level interjections, and they use well the new 'employability credits' to affirm the positive behaviours that they require.

Teachers are helpfully prompted by the new lesson planning template to plan suitably demanding outcomes and progressively more challenging activities for the range of different abilities in each class. The best teachers do this very well by using their accurate assessments of pupils' individual capabilities to extend their learning by skilful questioning and cleverly devised activities. In a Year 7 English lesson, for example, the pupils roved around the classroom categorising examples of formal and informal language so that they were clear about the formal conventions they should use in their own writing. The best lessons are expertly managed and directed so that no time is wasted. Teachers modelled a wide variety of strategies for positive behaviour management and checking pupils' understanding, but the best teachers embed these seamlessly into their lessons so that they maintain a rapid pace.

Lessons that required improvement tended to have shortcomings in planning or in the management of pupils' learning. In some lessons teachers took too long to settle their class and explain the work, and their laboured management exacerbated any restless behaviour. In this regard, warm praise and a disapproving glance were generally more effective than the over-zealous awarding of credits or mechanistic reliance on 'consequences'. Furthermore, when work was inappropriately pitched, the pupils did not learn anything new. In too many lessons the planned learning outcomes lacked clear focus or challenge, while in others they were too theoretical or complicated. Although staff have worked hard to update schemes of work, much remains to be done to sharpen long-term planning.

Like teaching, the quality and impact of marking has improved but varies too widely. The most effective marking is regular, detailed and provides pupils with clear steps for improvement. There are good examples of peer-assessment that help pupils to understand how to improve. However, despite this, the pupils are not yet accustomed to responding to the guidance given.

The academy's regular monitoring of teaching informs targeted intervention that is beginning to strengthen classroom practice. Teachers who have had one-to-one support or coaching are more confidently delivering better lessons, and there is a shared understanding about what constitutes good teaching.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

Staff and pupils agree that there has been a marked improvement in behaviour. In lessons, the majority of pupils behave well. The climate for learning is more calm and orderly and, for the most part, pupils interact sensibly and respectfully as they move around the academy and at break periods. This more settled climate has reduced the number of unruly incidents that might previously have escalated into disruption or developed into bullying. Surveys undertaken at the start of the new school year indicate that significantly more pupils say that they feel safe and that steps to address bullying are having success.

The academy's greater emphasis on recognising and rewarding positive behaviour is reflected in the way that pupils have more pride in their appearance, are mindful of punctuality and take better care of their planners. Although there is inconsistency in the application of rewards and sanctions, most staff are quick to recognise and reward positive attitudes. However, in their interactions with pupils, some staff do not model respectful ways of speaking or are too quick to invoke 'consequences' instead of working hard to build positive relationships.

Exclusions and withdrawals from class have dropped dramatically since the previous inspection. This improvement reflects a systematic and well-organised approach to supporting and guiding pupils, alongside developments in the curriculum that secure their better engagement. Helpful initiatives, such as the GAP project, have been introduced that are central to meeting the specific needs of those pupils who have difficulties and require additional support in their learning, including developing their social and personal skills. There is a clear commitment to improving the curriculum for those at risk of exclusion, and the academy recognises the need for an improved re-integration strategy to ensure all pupils learn from their experience and are supported to manage their own behaviour.

Attendance has also shown significant improvement, although levels of absence and persistent absenteeism remain comparatively high. Overall, though, attendance has increased from well below average last year to 93% this term. The academy has become more rigorous in its attendance data analysis. It is more systematic and robust in engaging parents, for example in implementing first day phone calls, following up letters from home and involving the educational welfare officer.

The quality of leadership in and management of the school

Senior leaders and governors communicate a clear vision for the academy's improvement and unequivocal expectations of staff and pupils. Governors are sufficiently well informed to be able to support the academy's drive for rapid improvement. Changes in leadership have greatly strengthened the day-to-day

management of the Lower Academy. A more strategic approach to leadership is developing as key leaders and managers begin to implement their responsibilities. These improvements have only been made possible by the systematic overhaul of job descriptions and introduction of rigorous performance management criteria which are now in place and ready for implementation. Staff understand their responsibilities, accountabilities and line-management.

Self-evaluation is based on systematic monitoring and accurate analysis, but is not always incisive, and sometimes not sufficiently forensic, to be a useful tool for development planning. Subject self-evaluation, for example, which is central to driving improvements in standards and teaching, is underdeveloped.

Despite some fragility, the academy has been successful in establishing a more positive climate for learning and better provision. Most pupils respond positively to the new developments and opportunities, and enjoy their increased responsibility and role in decision-making. However, some pupils and their parents are not persuaded that the academy is significantly better. Despite much improved engagement with parents and carers, as reflected in the attendance at the recent Year 7 parents' evening, senior leaders need to work hard to ensure that the academy meets the needs and aspirations of the most hard-to-reach groups.

External support

Suitable amendments have been made to the governing body's development plan to ensure that it is now fit for purpose. The academy has sought guidance and has developed a range of productive partnerships to strengthen key aspects of provision. Senior leaders acknowledge the positive impact of this external guidance, such as the support from the local authority consultants and for mathematics from a local school. While it is evident that the academy is building its own leadership capacity, it remains in need of significant external support and validation, particularly in regard to strengthening teaching and self-evaluation.

Priorities for further improvement, as discussed:

- eradicate inadequate teaching and establish a core of teaching that is consistently good by further reviewing schemes of work and sharpening the focus of short-term planning.