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Mrs Bev Bell
Interim Principal
The Basildon Lower Academy
Timberlog Close
Timberlog Lane
Basildon
SS14 1UX

Dear Mrs Bell

Special measures monitoring inspection of The Basildon Lower Academy

Following my visit with Helen Bailey and George Rayner, Additional Inspectors, to your academy on 23 and 24 January 2013, 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 previous monitoring inspection.

The inspection was the second 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.

I am of the opinion that the academy is able to support the appointment of up to four NQTs at this time.

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 second monitoring inspection on 23 and 24 January 2013

Evidence

Inspectors observed the academy's work, including 20 lesson observations, scrutinised documents and held meetings with the interim Principal, nominated staff, groups of pupils, and two representatives of the governing body.

Context

Shortly after the last monitoring inspection the Principal resigned. The interim Principal started work in late November. A senior leader at the academy has been on long-term absence since the last visit.

Achievement of pupils at the school

The academy's regular assessments indicate that the pupils' improved rates of progress noted at the last visit have been sustained in English and mathematics, and that their progress has accelerated in science. The biggest increases have been achieved in Year 9, although the picture is rather more patchy across Years 7 and 8. On the whole, different groups of pupils make equally good progress, although the most-able pupils tend not to make such impressive gains. Importantly, the academy makes use of its assessment information to target specific interventions and support, both for individual pupils and for groups. For example, one initiative, involving external providers, uses additional government funding provided through the pupil premium to provide extra support in English and mathematics. The impact of this development has yet to be evaluated.

Evidence from lesson observations and work in pupils' books shows that some of the unevenness seen previously has been eradicated. The quality of learning was good in the majority of lessons, and occasionally outstanding. In most lessons, teachers use assessment information to pitch work at the right level and set tasks that are challenging and interesting. The pace of learning still varies widely between lessons, but pupils aspire to higher achievement because they know their working levels, their targets and what they should achieve.

The quality of teaching

Senior and middle leaders have worked hard to improve the climate for learning. Staff training on building relationships has had a perceptible impact on the general climate for learning in lessons. Staff say that they feel more confident in managing difficult situations and diffusing confrontational behaviour so that incidents are less likely to escalate. In the best lessons, teachers and other adults nurture positive relationships so that pupils work hard and have the self-assurance to tackle new and challenging work. In a 'learning to learn' lesson, for example, high quality modelling

by the teacher enabled pupils put into practice a whole range of new skills in preparing their food. Year 8 girls made excellent progress in their physical education (PE lesson) because the supportive peer-coaching gave them confidence to 'have a go' and improve their performance.

Although the quality of teaching remains variable, it has strengthened since the last visit. A majority of lessons observed during the visit were either good or outstanding. Fewer lessons are covered by temporary staff, and teachers have improved key aspects of their planning and management. The coaching programme has, for example, improved the quality of lesson planning, the management of behaviour and teachers' use of assessment in lessons. Inspectors observed, first-hand, the beneficial impact of much of this one-to-one support for individual teachers. However, the pace of learning was too slow in some lessons, either because the teacher was not ambitious enough, or because low-level disruption was not tackled effectively. When lessons started slowly, or unimaginatively, most pupils listened patiently, but they were not sufficiently challenged, particularly if they already understood the topic being taught.

Team work between staff and within subject departments is developing well. Staff, including teaching assistants, are more readily sharing lesson planning so that interesting ideas are pooled and work is more closely matched to the different needs of the pupils. Clever lesson starters, for example, using mathematics puzzles (in a humanities lesson) or French (in a mathematics lesson) immediately engaged the pupils and took them seamlessly into their work.

There is no evidence that marking has improved since the last visit because, although some marking is of high quality, too much is still weak or ineffective. Teachers are seldom specific enough about what has been done successfully or what pupils need to do to improve. Moreover, pupils too rarely respond to the guidance given, and when they do this is not always acknowledged by the teacher.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

Behaviour continues to improve. The academy was calm and orderly throughout the two days of the inspection. Pupils are, at times, lively and boisterous, but in general they are considerate and respectful towards visitors and also with one another. Behaviour was good in most lessons. Off-task chatter was usually 'nipped in the bud', and most pupils followed instructions and sustained their concentration well. Pupils say that a few teachers still have difficulty managing challenging behaviour, and that this affects their progress and enjoyment in some subjects, but that disruptions are less frequent.

Although figures remain high, incidents of internal isolation and fixed-term exclusion are reducing. One key factor in this reduction is the successful expansion of the 'learning to learn' programme. Pupils who have struggled with a traditional

curriculum say that they enjoy the additional support provided by this course. This is reflected in their improved engagement and attendance, and their much more positive attitudes to learning.

Work to improve attendance continues to have a positive impact as the various initiatives, providing both incentives and sanctions, are embedded. The academy has exceeded its targets to date: in the autumn term attendance stood at 91.4%, almost three percentage points above the same period last year. There has been a concomitant reduction in levels of persistent absenteeism, although like attendance, the figures do not yet approach the national average.

The quality of leadership in and management of the school

Following the Principal's resignation in October 2012, the governing body acted swiftly to make a new appointment, and the interim Principal started at the academy two weeks later. Despite this short leadership interlude and the extensive press coverage, everyday life at the academy continued as normal because senior and middle leaders maintained their focus on improving teaching and raising standards. Moreover, they have implemented a range of successful initiatives to enhance the pupils' learning and widen their experiences and ambitions, such as the mathematics and science day, the end-of-term carol service and the 'aspiration tree'. Morale among staff and pupils has remained surprisingly buoyant, which is a tribute to the composed leadership of the Vice Principal and his team.

Governors meet regularly and, in some respects, provide a suitable level of challenge, for example when questioning senior leaders about pupil progress and achievement. The Chair of the Governing Body regularly visits the academy, but other governors are rarely seen. Apart from information provided for their regular meetings, governors have not been well enough informed about the academy's work and plans because they do not have ways of checking the work of the academy for themselves. The circumstances of the previous Principal's resignation highlighted weaknesses in the flow of information to governors and the failure of the governing body to hold the academy to account or to effectively steer its strategic development. The interim Principal is working closely with the governing body to strengthen the strategic leadership of the academy.

The new Principal has settled quickly into her role. She has worked quickly to build relationships with staff, pupils and the wider community and provides measured guidance for the academy. She has undertaken a curriculum review, which sensibly looks at provision across both Lower and Upper Academies, with the intention that, in future, pupils will better prepared for Key Stage 4. The proposals will shortly be taken to the governing body, with implementation planned for September 2013.

The academy continues to develop its systems for self-review, but does not make full use of its plentiful data because summary analysis does not focus sharply

enough on the impact, for example on particular groups. Senior and middle leaders routinely check the quality of teaching, and recent work to review the effectiveness of different subjects has started with departmental reviews of mathematics and modern foreign languages. Staff are increasingly open to this monitoring, because it is increasingly seen as constructive and supportive. The management of teachers' performance is developing well. Formal procedures are in place to measure the effectiveness of staff, based on clearly defined roles and assessments of pupil performance.

External support

The academy continues to draw on external support and guidance wherever it is necessary, including from the local authority, in order to build its leadership and management capacity. For example, helpful work has been undertaken, in conjunction with an aspiring advanced skills teacher, to strengthen teaching in modern foreign languages. Teaching assistants have also received specific training, and subject leaders have been given guidance on departmental self-review.