

Serco Inspections
20 Colmore Circus Queensway
Birmingham
B4 6AT

T 0300 123 1231
Text Phone: 0161 618 8524
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.ofsted.gov.uk

Direct T: 0121 679 9161
Direct email: ann.morris@serco.com

19 September 2013

Mr Dave Allen
Associate headteacher
The Links Education Support Centre
1 Hixberry Lane
St Albans
Hertfordshire
AL4 0TZ

Dear Mr Allen

Special measures monitoring inspection of The Links Education Support Centre

Following my visit to your academy on 18 September 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 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 in May 2013.

Evidence

During this inspection, both sites were visited and meetings were held with the associate headteacher, acting headteacher, staff and the Chair of the Governing Body. The governing body's statement of action and the academy's action plan were evaluated.

Context

The headteacher, an assistant headteacher, the head of science, two teachers and two support workers left the academy last term. The headteacher from a local pupil referral unit led the academy for two days a week until the end of July. The deputy headteacher of a local secondary school currently leads the academy as associate

headteacher for three days a week as an interim arrangement until a permanent headteacher is appointed.

The quality of leadership and management at the school

There was very little dispute from staff, and none from the governing body, about the judgement that the academy requires special measures. This helped the journey towards improvement to start straight away, to focus staff on the most important priorities, and has already made a positive difference to students and staff.

Interim leaders and the governing body acted quickly to prioritise students' safety. Illegal exclusions stopped immediately and there is now a clear protocol for informing parents when fixed-term exclusions take place. Staff now know the whereabouts of students at all times because there is a clear procedure for following up any non-attendance within ten minutes of the start of the day and during each lesson. Within a week of the inspection, students were taught for 25 hours a week and were expected to attend full time. Home-based study is now only used in exceptional circumstances. A new behaviour policy with a new reward system was put in place for the beginning of this term and each student now has a staff mentor to act on their behalf and to check on their well-being. Staff report that students and parents have responded positively to the changes. Attendance has improved and students now stay in lessons for most of the time.

High expectations and an urgency to get on with the job that needs to be done have been made clear to staff and students. The Chair and Vice Chair of the Governing Body met with each member of staff to set high expectations for improvements in teaching, and students' learning and behaviour. Similarly, staff met with each student to discuss the subjects that they want to take and the part that they have to play in attending lessons and behaving appropriately. These things have helped the new term start well. Staff, parents and visitors report a positive change in the atmosphere around the academy. Staff say that the changes provide a clear understanding of what is expected, clear guidelines for managing students' behaviour and consistency from senior leaders.

Extending the range of subjects taught at Key Stage 4 was made possible by staff (qualified and unqualified teachers) offering subjects that they felt confident to teach. This, together with 25 hours teaching time each week and all subjects having some form of accreditation, mean that students have better opportunities to achieve well. However, the relevance of the accreditations, the quality of staff's subject knowledge and their effectiveness in teaching the subjects, and the sufficiency of what is on offer are yet to be reviewed or evaluated. Establishing a full and accurate set of assessments for students' current levels of attainment is now well underway

and teachers are beginning to use these in their plans. Opportunities for students to improve their reading are now in place.

Permanent leadership of the academy is not yet resolved. The temporary and part-time nature of the current arrangement is not sustainable or suitable in the long term for taking the academy out of special measures. Mindful of the need to speed things up last term, and because they have much relevant leadership expertise, members of the governing body stepped in to take on some of the work normally undertaken by a leadership team. This too is unsustainable and blurs the relationships and responsibilities between academy leaders and governors that are necessary to provide challenge and ensure accountability.

Action plans and the statement of action from the governing body are not detailed enough to make sure that all necessary actions are planned or that they are measured carefully enough. Nevertheless, this has not prevented urgent and effective action taking place to get things started. The governing body has established an action group to evaluate the impact of actions and this group has just had their first meeting. The governing body has very sensibly bought the services of a senior officer from the local authority to provide external challenge their work.

Following the monitoring inspection the following judgements were made:

The governing body's statement of action is not fit for purpose.

The academy's action plan is not fit for purpose.

Having considered all the evidence I strongly recommend that the academy does not seek to appoint NQTs (newly qualified teachers).

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the Chair of the Governing Body, Hertfordshire local authority and the Academies Advisers Unit at the Department for Education. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Heather Yaxley
Her Majesty's Inspector