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17 January 2014

Mr Dave Allen  
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 school on 15–16 January 2014, 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 school's previous monitoring inspection.

The inspection was the second monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures following the inspection which took place on 30 April–1 May 2013. 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 school is making reasonable progress towards the removal of special measures.

The governing body's statement of action and action plan are fit for purpose.

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

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 Chair of the Governing Body, the Director of Children's Services for Hertfordshire and the Academies Advisers Unit at the Department for Education.

Yours sincerely

Heather Yaxley  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**

## Annex

### **The areas for improvement identified during the inspection which took place on 30 April–1 May 2013**

- Improve safeguarding by:
  - ensuring attendance registers are accurate and up-to-date
  - following exclusion procedures correctly when it is decided that a student should not be on the academy's site
  - making sure that, as far as is reasonable and as quickly as possible, parents know when their child is not at the academy
  - monitoring frequently when students have home-based study.
  
- Improve the quality of teaching, accelerate progress and raise attainment, especially in English, mathematics and science, by:
  - making sure that lesson planning is thorough and based on accurate assessments of each student's skills, knowledge and understanding
  - providing interesting activities that motivate and challenge students to do well
  - increasing students' independence by not providing support too soon or helping them with things that they can do for themselves
  - increasing the number of students taking relevant qualifications at the end of Year 11
  - ensuring that home-based learning is only used where, and for as long as, necessary to meet a student's needs and that its effectiveness is monitored rigorously.
  
- Raise reading standards by:
  - making sure that there is daily teaching of reading based on a thorough understanding of the students' skills and a firm knowledge of effective teaching methods
  - providing frequent opportunities to practise reading in lessons.
  
- Improve students' behaviour and their attendance by:
  - ensuring that the management of behaviour is consistent in all lessons
  - making sure information about behaviour incidents is accurately recorded
  - using the information about behaviour incidents to evaluate improvement strategies so as to identify effective approaches and improve aspects that are unsuccessful
  - providing further training for staff to improve the effectiveness of behaviour management strategies
  - maintaining a very firm stance on the importance of full-time attendance, and rigorously and immediately following up whenever this is not achieved.
  
- Improve the effectiveness of leadership and management by:
  - ensuring that all information about students' attendance, progress, attainment and behaviour is up to date and accurate
  - evaluating rigorously the effectiveness of the provision and using this

understanding to improve students' behaviour and increase their progress so that they reach the standards that they are capable of given their starting points

- making sure that leaders' evaluation of the quality of teaching takes into account students' achievements and progress in improving their behaviour.
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- Improve governance by:
    - ensuring governors use a full, detailed and accurate picture of students' performance and the quality of the provision to hold the academy to account for how well they prepare students for when they leave
    - using performance management of staff, including the headteacher, to improve the quality of teaching and students' outcomes.

## **Report on the second monitoring inspection on 15–16 January 2014**

### **Evidence**

The inspector observed the academy's work, scrutinised documents and met with the headteacher and the deputy headteacher, three groups of staff, staff with responsibility for attendance and assessment, students, and the Chair and Vice-Chair of the Governing Body. Teaching was observed on both sites. Parts of eight lessons were observed jointly with either the headteacher or deputy headteacher.

### **Context**

The associate headteacher leading the academy part-time at the time of the first monitoring inspection is now the permanent headteacher. Four supply teachers joined the staff at the beginning of this term. An assistant headteacher and a teacher have left the academy since the previous visit. One member of staff is currently on long-term sick leave. In December 2013, a period of consultation for a proposed reorganisation of the staff team began.

### **Achievement of pupils at the school**

The tracking of students' attainments across a range of subjects has improved. This is because the assessment leader has made sure that there are baseline assessments for each student. These, together with other information about students' previous achievements, are used to set targets for the end of Key Stages 3 or 4. Assessments continue to be made by teachers half termly and the tracking sheet shows whether or not each student is on track to meet the targets. Reading ages and National Curriculum levels for reading are tracked separately.

The range and frequency of assessments provide teachers, tutors, senior leaders and the governors' action group with information about students' attainments. However, this information is not yet pulled together to evaluate whether students achieve well enough. Therefore, it is not yet possible to judge how well students achieve, how suitable the curriculum is in raising their attainment, or whether additional support helps them to make up for lost learning and to grasp the things that they find difficult to learn. There is some evidence to suggest that the reading programme is helping to reduce the gaps between students' reading ages and their chronological ages. It is not yet clear if these improvements transfer well enough to reading, spelling and writing in English, and in other lessons.

### **The quality of teaching**

Changes this term, with new staff and reorganised responsibilities, mean that more lessons are taught by qualified teachers and subject specialists. More needs to be done so that this is the norm, as well as less reliance on supply teachers.

Nevertheless, these changes, together with increasing the range of subjects taught and extending the length of the day, give students opportunities to achieve more than before.

The quality of students' work in books indicates weaknesses in teaching and students' learning last term. Unlike students' work in science, for example, work is generally poorly presented and not a good enough record of their learning. Teachers' marking is not precise enough to help students improve their work. In some subjects, extensive use of worksheets means that students have had to do very little writing or thinking for themselves. The quality of display, especially for Key Stage 4 students, is poor because it does not give examples or prompts that could help students to be independent and active in lessons.

Some good teaching was seen during this inspection. Students achieved well when teachers skilfully encouraged students to talk about what they were learning, what they were finding difficult and to give their views. For example, Key Stage 3 students produced some good work in food technology, English, and design and technology because they confidently asked interesting questions about what they were doing and the teachers used these to help students learn more.

A new lesson-planning sheet expects teachers to consider students' individual needs and abilities, but work is not pitched well enough to help each student overcome their learning needs or to give enough opportunities to meet their targets. In the teaching observed, staff did not use the reward system or individual targets for learning and behaviour well enough. Similarly, support staff generally contributed little to students' learning.

### **Behaviour and safety of pupils**

Too many students are excluded from the academy. The recent introduction of longer days, changes to the curriculum and significant changes in staffing have created instability and anxiety for some students, and their behaviour has deteriorated. Although the changes are appropriate and need to happen in order to provide students with the education that they are entitled to, students are unhappy with the changes and would prefer the old ways. They do not agree that things have to change and do not feel involved in the decisions. This is because their views are neither formally collected nor discussed. However, those who spoke with the inspector are keen to learn and have very clear views about the quality of teaching. They say that the teachers who help them most are those who make learning fun and active, and explain things clearly when they start to struggle with the learning.

Some staff, particularly those working with Key Stage 4 students, are concerned that students' behaviour has deteriorated since the inspection and that incidents are not followed through well enough by senior staff. It is true that exclusions have increased and that some students find it difficult to comply with higher expectations

to attend for longer days, to stay in class, to stay on site at breaktimes, to wear uniform and not to call staff by their first names. It is also true that senior staff and the governing body now have high expectations that staff will play an active part in managing students' behaviour before expecting senior staff to intervene. This is entirely appropriate.

Incidents of inappropriate behaviour are not recorded or tracked well enough. There is not enough detail to show what happened or how things were followed up with staff, students and parents. In addition, students' behaviour is not tracked well enough to provide the information needed for leaders and the governing body to evaluate how well the behaviour policy is being implemented or how well staff help students to manage their behaviour over time. Good behaviour was seen in some lessons and on no occasion during this inspection was students' behaviour inadequate, in class or around the academy.

The good, determined work to improve students' attendance is beginning to pay off. Although attendance rates remain too low for most students, more students now attend for more of the time and, although early days, this includes the change to longer days. The use of fixed penalty notices and warning letters to parents has improved the attendance for some students dramatically.

### **The quality of leadership in and management of the school**

The new headteacher and the governing body are methodically and appropriately driving the improvements that must happen quickly. As a result, the academy now presents an appropriate learning environment and ethos. Some difficult decisions have been made in teaching and the curriculum, but not all staff or students are on-board with the changes. Nevertheless, significant changes have taken place. The length of the day and the range of subjects on the timetable are now appropriate to give students a broader curriculum and sufficient time for learning. Appropriate plans are in place to improve the curriculum further and to make sure that more subjects are taught by specialists. The use of alternative off-site courses is being reviewed.

Following the first monitoring inspection, the action plan was revised by the headteacher and the governing body and is now generally fit for purpose. But it still lacks precision about how the impact of actions taken will be evaluated the success measures that will be used. Currently, there is the danger that the action plan could be used as a tick list rather than an evaluation tool. Nevertheless, there is now an increasing amount of information about the quality of teaching, learning and attendance that could be used to make clear judgements about whether standards are good enough. This is the next important piece of work to be done so that strengths, weaknesses and priorities are identified and used to set future plans.

Improving the provision for students' behavioural, emotional, social and learning needs, as well as preparing them for the next stage in their education, do not feature prominently enough in action plans. Similarly, students' individual special educational needs do not feature prominently enough in support plans or lesson plans. This is partly because, although interim arrangements are in place to cover the role of the special educational needs coordinator (SENCo), this role has not been carried out effectively for too long. There is much work to do to make sure that additional support is provided appropriately and evaluated thoroughly. More generally, although assessments show where students are not making the progress that they should, additional support for students of all abilities to quickly fill gaps in their learning is not coordinated or tracked carefully enough.

Some staff say that communication from senior staff and the governing body is not helping them to be clear about some of the changes. Some acknowledge that this is because so much has happened and appreciate the need for urgent action. Their concerns are not unreasonable because weaknesses in the action plan mean that staff cannot see clearly enough the part that they can, and must, plan in the academy's improvement.

The leadership of special educational needs, literacy and mathematics is not yet finalised. This needs to happen as a matter of urgency so that strategic responsibilities are not solely with the headteacher and deputy headteacher.

### **External support**

The governing body has a clear focus on improving the provision. Its members support senior staff well in the difficult task of challenging and changing the academy's ethos and culture. This includes tackling underperformance of staff and students. Governors are not yet well enough informed about how well students achieve because information, although available, is not yet used rigorously enough by leaders to evaluate the quality of teaching, and students' learning and behaviour.

Support from the local authority's human resources department is helping the governing body to tackle the complex personnel issues. Importantly, this helps senior staff to concentrate on improving the quality of the provision.

Senior staff and the governing body are very positive about the support from an external adviser, who has undertaken reviews of the arrangements to safeguard students, special educational needs and Key Stage 3 provision. These reports provide useful information about the quality, strengths and weaknesses of these aspects of the academy's work.

Arrangements for leaders of learning at local academies to support the work of subject leaders and the special educational needs coordinator are in place. This now needs to gain momentum, with clear plans and protocols to drive improvements in the areas prioritised in the action plan.