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Mr T Ashley
Headteacher
Willenhall E-ACT Academy
Furzebank Way
Willenhall
Walsall
WV12 4BD

Dear Mr Ashley

Special measures monitoring inspection of Willenhall E-ACT Academy

Following my visit with Charlotte Evers and Sheila Boyle, Additional Inspectors, to your academy on 5-6 March 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 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 in September 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 academy is making reasonable progress towards the removal of special measures.

Having considered all the evidence, I am of the opinion that the academy may appoint up to six 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 and the Director of Children's Services for Walsall

Yours sincerely

Deborah James
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection which took place in September 2013

- Improve the quality of teaching to at least good in order to raise achievement for students by ensuring that all teachers:
 - use the available information about students to plan and teach lessons that provide suitable challenge for all the students across the academy, including the sixth form
 - frequently evaluate the rate of progress being made by individuals and groups of students during each lesson, so that students move on to more challenging work when they are ready or receive support if they need it
 - use questioning more effectively to probe, challenge and deepen students' knowledge and understanding
 - give clear direction to teaching assistants and other adults in the class to ensure they provide support to those students who need it the most
 - consistently give students written feedback that clearly shows them what they need to do to reach higher levels and corrects errors in understanding, spelling, punctuation and grammar
 - give students opportunities to reflect on, and respond to, comments about their work and check that the improvements have been made.

- Improve leadership, management and governance at all levels by:
 - ensuring that the checks made on teaching, including in the sixth form, focus on the quality of learning and students' progress, and that leaders are suitably trained to support teachers to improve their practice
 - providing opportunities for teachers to see and learn from the best teaching, in order that they can improve their own practice
 - ensuring that the assessment information to support teaching and learning is easily accessible, clear and well used to plan activities which promote good progress for all students
 - checking on the implementation and impact of whole-academy policies, especially the quality of marking and lesson planning
 - ensuring that the pupil premium funding is used effectively to close the gaps between disadvantaged pupils and others
 - ensuring that governors hold leaders fully to account for the rates of improvement in teaching and students' achievement.

An external review of governance should be undertaken, to include a specific focus on the school's use of the pupil premium, in order to assess how this aspect of leadership and governance may be improved.

Report on the second monitoring inspection on 5-6 March 2014

Evidence

Inspectors observed parts of 28 lessons, almost all of them jointly with senior and middle leaders. They also made brief visits to a number of other lessons to look at specific aspects of the academy's work. Inspectors scrutinised documents, including the updated action plans, analysis of the quality of teaching and records of students' achievement. Meetings were held with the Principal and other senior and middle leaders, a group of NQTs, students, the Chair of the Governing Body and a representative from the sponsor.

Context

Since the first monitoring visit, there have been significant changes to staffing. Three senior leaders have left the academy and a further four will leave at the end of this term. A new senior leadership structure has been developed and interim appointments have been made to increase the leadership capacity until new staff are in place. A new Chair of Governors has been appointed this term.

Achievement of pupils at the school

The academy's records indicate that students are on track to meet the academy's target of 55% of students gaining five or more GCSE passes at A* to C, including English and mathematics. This is still below the national average, but a considerable improvement on last year's results. This forecast includes results predicted for students who have already had an earlier attempt at GCSE English or mathematics. New rules mean that their improved performance will not be included in formal statistics at the end of the year so as a result, reported academy results may dip.

Students are making better progress across key subjects as a result of improved teaching and more careful monitoring of their progress. The academy has introduced a new student tracking system and increased the expectation of student performance through more challenging targets.

The academy recognises that despite improvements in recent months, the legacy of weaker teaching and underachievement in previous years means that students in Year 11 are not making enough progress from their starting points, particularly in mathematics. The most able students are not being stretched to reach the highest levels. The gap between students supported by pupil premium funding and other students is slowly closing as a result of targeted use of academic coaches but this remains a priority for further improvement work.

The quality of teaching

Teaching has improved since the last inspection; inadequate teaching is rare and more teaching is good. However, senior leaders are aware there is still too much teaching that does not help students make good progress and there is considerable variation in the way that teachers plan and deliver their lessons.

Teachers' planning, although improving, does not yet ensure that work is matched to the needs of all students. Teachers have detailed information about students' prior learning available to them but there are still lessons in which the work is too easy or occasionally too demanding.

When teaching is most effective, teachers check the students' progress regularly during the lesson, by questioning, checking written work or discussion with individual students. They then move students onto the next stage if appropriate. However, this is not happening in all lessons and some teachers assume students have understood the work when in fact they have not.

Some teachers make good use of use questioning to check learning and extend students' understanding; other teachers simply take answers from volunteers and accept brief, undemanding answers. Helping teachers find more ways to effectively question students remains a priority for professional development this year

A new marking policy has been agreed, with staff setting out clear actions to be taken by all staff. The implementation of the policy has begun and there are good examples of where it is helping students improve their work through the feedback given. However, there are still a number of staff who are not marking work regularly or providing students with sufficient feedback about how to improve their work.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

In the majority of lessons, students' attitudes to learning and behaviour are improving. Students usually behave well and are enthusiastic learners when given suitably engaging activities. In a few lessons, students' unwillingness to participate fully in lesson activities leads to slow progress. Behaviour around the academy is also improving, partly as a result of a higher number of staff on duty at break times. Movement within the academy is usually orderly although, at times, can be too boisterous, with some students rushing along corridors at lesson changeover. Suitable strategies are in place for dealing with incidences of poor behaviour and the number of fixed term exclusions has reduced this year.

Attendance has improved from 92.8% last year to 93.2% so far this year but it is still below the national level and academy targets. Punctuality is a concern; a number of students are persistently late to the academy in the morning and others are late to lessons during the day.

The academy has suitable procedures for safeguarding and protecting students. The students interviewed during this inspection told us they feel safe in the academy.

The quality of leadership in and management of the school

Staff and students all report the academy is improving. Students note that teachers now 'push you harder' and staff describe higher expectations in all areas of their work. The Principal has sustained a sharp focus on improving the quality of teaching and has made good use of interim senior leaders to reinforce that priority. The Principal has implemented a process of training staff to become licensed observers to ensure rigour and consistency in lesson observations. The evaluation of the quality of teaching is based on a broad collection of evidence, including frequent lesson observations, assessment information and marking reviews. Lesson observations identify areas for further development and staff are provided with targeted support. Currently 24 teachers are involved in extensive courses aimed at improving the quality of teaching.

There has been considerable improvement in the availability and accessibility of assessment information. Senior leaders have prioritised improving the rigour and consistency of teachers' assessment, making good use of external support to enhance this work. Middle leaders now have a much clearer understanding of the performance of different groups of students within their departments and are beginning to make use of this to target appropriate intervention and support for students.

Leaders now rigorously monitor marking following the introduction of the new marking policy. There is a well-structured programme of marking reviews that are carried out by subject leaders, making them accountable for the quality of marking in their areas. However, gaps remain in how weak marking is addressed, and variation in the quality of marking is still evident in students' books.

The academy is aware that planning needs improvement, particularly in planning for different student abilities and providing more challenge. Currently, much planning describes what students will do rather than what they will learn. There is still considerable variability in planning and there is no academy guidance on how teachers should organise their day-to-day planning.

The governing body has undergone an external review. The review found that governance overall was weak but the review process has supported governors in carefully examining their practice and identifying areas where improvement is needed. Governors understood that they had been too ready to accept what they had been told rather than seeking external validation or finding out for themselves. A new Chair of the Governing Body brings considerable experience to the team and has already put in place seven of the ten actions identified in the review.

The academy improvement plan is effectively evaluated and updated half-termly and monitored through the Raising Achievement Board consisting of academy and E-ACT representatives. It gives an accurate view of the current status of improvement activities but it does not include any actions after the end of this academic year.

External support

The academy values the support it has received through E-ACT. Its advisor has been a frequent visitor to the academy, offering professional support to the Principal and working alongside senior and middle leaders in leading improvement activities. E-ACT has provided considerable support to the academy in dealing with the necessary staffing changes and helping them find short- and long-term solutions to vacancies. They have also worked closely with the Principal to broker a range of support for subject areas and to help improve teaching, from other local schools and academies.