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Adrian Ball
Principal
The Thetford Academy
Croxtton Road
Thetford
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Dear Mr Ball

Special measures monitoring inspection of The Thetford Academy

Following my visit with Rachel Hobson and Timothy McGuire, Additional Inspectors, to your academy on 11–12 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 school's previous monitoring inspection.

The inspection was the third monitoring inspection since the academy became subject to special measures following the inspection which took place in February 2013. The full list of the areas for improvement 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 may appoint newly qualified teachers after consultation with Her Majesty's Inspector, and subject to submitting the plans for the support the academy's sponsors will provide for these teachers to Her Majesty's Inspector before the appointments are made.

This letter and monitoring inspection report will be published on the Ofsted website. I am copying them to the Secretary of State, the Chair of the Governing Body and the Director of Children's Services for Norfolk.

Yours sincerely

Elaine Taylor
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

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

- Improve the quality of teaching by:
 - taking decisive action to eradicate teaching that is regularly less than good
 - setting basic rules about what is expected of students in all lessons and gaining the commitment of every teacher that these agreed rules will be applied consistently
 - gaining greater consistency in how teachers use assessment data to plan lessons that meet the needs and interests of all students and make all learning stimulating, interesting and enjoyable
 - deploying classroom assistants effectively in lessons to accelerate the progress made by all students in need of additional help
 - stabilising the teaching staff to reduce the reliance upon temporary supply teachers
 - using the best teachers in the academy to illustrate highly effective practice and show how this contributes to raising students' achievement.

- Raise the achievement of all students, in all key stages and subjects by:
 - adding greater urgency to ensuring that all students engage fully in learning in lessons and revision classes, particularly those taking examinations later this year
 - using assessment data more rigorously in lessons to check that all students make accelerated progress, especially students supported through additional funding, disabled students and those who have special educational needs
 - getting a much higher proportion of students attending the academy and remaining in lessons regularly to improve their progress
 - increasing the number and rigour of the checks of students' progress and welfare in the sixth form.

- Improve students' behaviour and reduce the numbers excluded from learning by:
 - ensuring that every teacher and classroom assistant takes full responsibility for managing students' behaviour effectively in all lessons
 - seeking the views of students about what else needs to be done to help them manage their own behaviour and meet the academy's expectations of them
 - providing different, stimulating activities and regular breaks to retain students' interest and attention during longer lessons
 - ensuring that all pupils feel safe and free from bullying, and have confidence in staff that issues they raise will be fully resolved.

- Improve leadership and management by:
 - providing additional external support to resolve long-standing staffing issues and give the principal more time to focus on raising achievement across the academy
 - ensuring that the efforts of senior leaders in securing improvements are clearly illustrated by much better teaching, rapid improvements to behaviour and attendance and higher standards achieved by all students
 - clarifying the roles and responsibilities of middle leaders and managers, and ensuring that they are held fully to account for raising achievement in their subject areas and across all key stages
 - convincing all stakeholders of the opportunity presented by the new academy to transform the educational opportunities for all young people so that they are well prepared for the next stage of their training, employment or further education
 - providing a clear, strategic direction for the sixth form and using the planned opening of new facilities to re-launch it as a centre for academic and vocational learning
 - arranging external training for the governing board on using performance data so they can hold senior leaders to account for the achievement, behaviour and attendance of all students.

- An external review of governance should be undertaken in order to assess how this aspect of leadership and governance may be improved.

- Inspectors strongly recommend that the academy should not seek to appoint newly qualified teachers.

Report on the third monitoring inspection on 11–12 March 2014

Evidence

Inspectors observed the academy's work, scrutinised documents and met with the principal and other leaders, groups of students and the Chair of the Governing Body. Inspectors focused on the areas for improvement identified at the previous inspection and the impact of improvements made to the support for students who speak English as an additional language, as agreed at the last monitoring visit.

Context

There have been no significant changes to the context of the academy since the last monitoring visit.

Achievement of pupils at the school

Standards are rising. The convincing data for the current Year 11 students show that the proportion of students gaining five or more GCSE passes at grade C or above, including mathematics and English, will be the highest since the academy opened. It is now much closer to, though still below, the national average. The data for Year 10 indicate that this trend is set to continue. Both of these year groups started their secondary schooling at levels well below the national average.

Improved provision and support for students who speak English as an additional language have resulted in significant improvements in their achievement. This is particularly evident in mathematics. Students eligible for the additional pupil premium funding are making better progress this year. Their progress is now in line with similar students in other schools nationally, but still slower when compared with all students. In the sixth form, the impact of improvements in teaching is starting to show in rising standards attained in examinations. This is more evident in Year 12 than in Year 13.

All groups of students are making better progress in lessons. Better teaching in English has led to a marked acceleration of progress across the academy.

The quality of teaching

Staffing is more stable than at the time of the section 5 inspection and the academy does not need to use supply teachers as often. The quality of teaching is more consistent because of better monitoring by both senior and subject leaders.

Increasingly, students are benefiting from teaching that successfully supports them to improve their skills, deepen their understanding or extend their knowledge. Their progress is supported in the following ways. Teachers plan where students will sit, so they can learn from and support each other and work on suitably challenging tasks. They plan series of activities that steer students to their goals in the lesson and create

interesting resources, sometimes using new technology, to make the learning interesting and engaging. Where this is most successful, the aims of the lesson are clearly expressed in terms of what the students will learn and how it will build on what they already know or can do.

The impact of teaching is less positive in lessons where the teacher plans what students will do with too little regard for their learning. Students do not work hard enough at the tasks because they do not fully understand their relevance.

Teachers check if students are gaining from the activities and have understood new concepts. The effectiveness of this checking varies. Sometimes it is less successful. When teachers rely on students volunteering answers, too many others do not participate in discussions and it is not clear how much they understand. Teachers often jump in with the right or best answer too quickly, rather than developing students' ability to paraphrase or try to improve each other's contributions. Some good learning was seen in a drama lesson where the students sensitively and helpfully evaluated each other's performances. They were very clear about what constituted success at the highest levels and so could suggest suitable improvements. The teacher, by listening to their suggestions, could monitor a wide range of aspects of their progress in a very effective way.

Learning support assistants make a good contribution to the progress students make. They challenge and support effectively because they know the aims of the lessons and notice when a student needs extra help or guidance.

Teachers are following the marking policy in the majority of classes. A new system to increase consistency is starting to improve further the helpfulness of the feedback students receive.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

Fixed-term exclusions have continued to reduce and attendance has improved, particularly in the sixth form, where there are higher expectations that students attend at all times and where prompt action is taken should their attendance fall. The academy uses a wider range of strategies to intervene when students are not attending or when their behaviour is poor. Students are removed from lessons on far fewer occasions. Teachers still do not all use the behaviour policy consistently, but behaviour is much better than at the time of the inspection. Around the academy, behaviour is orderly. Inspectors noticed students helping each other in lessons, being polite and helpful to visitors, and in one instance stopping to pick up litter in the corridor with no prompting.

Students say they feel safe and that although there is still some bullying, it is usually dealt with swiftly and effectively. The new anti-bullying mentoring group is a welcome addition to the support available to students. Students have a greater say in the plans to improve the academy. The student council ensures information is shared well through the academy newspaper, the daily bulletin board and by helping to plan assemblies.

The quality of leadership in and management of the school

The academy has restructured the leadership team and this is already providing better lines of communication and clearer accountability for the progress students are making. Expectations have been raised and all leaders share the vision for improving the academy so it becomes at least good as quickly as possible. These positive attitudes ensure high commitment to the improvement strategies. All teachers seen during the inspection were keen to engage in discussions with inspectors about what had gone well and how teaching might have been better. All teachers and learning support assistants are benefiting from good training opportunities and effective challenge through the performance management system.

A new appointment to the senior leadership team has been made, to start after the Easter holidays. This leader will be responsible for embedding and extending the work already undertaken to improve the quality of teaching. Already leaders use a wider range of strategies to monitor and evaluate the quality of teaching. Decisive action has been taken where the quality of teaching has been less than good. Subject leaders have more opportunities to see how well teachers in their areas of responsibility are planning and teaching their lessons. Parents are increasingly supportive of the academy. The responses on Ofsted's Parent View website are now predominately positive, and 80% say they would recommend the academy to others. They are supporting the academy by volunteering to serve on the governing body.

Stable leadership of the sixth form is starting to have an impact that can be seen most clearly in the rising number of students gaining places at universities. There were eight in 2012, 19 in 2013 and currently 30 students have places on offer.

Governors support the principal well by dealing effectively with practical matters such as finance, thereby ensuring there are no distractions to his focus on improving the quality of teaching and raising achievement. As a result, the academy is improving steadily under his strong and effective leadership.

External support

The academy's sponsors continue to support its work well, both financially and through the opportunities for collaboration the Trust provides. Increasingly, the academy is used by other schools in the Trust as a model of good practice in the emerging strong areas.