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David Allen
Headteacher
The Links AP Academy
1 Hixberry Lane
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Hertfordshire
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Dear Mr Allen

Special measures monitoring inspection of The Links AP Academy

Following my visit with Wendy Varney, Her Majesty's Inspector, to your academy on 7–8 May 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 third monitoring inspection since the academy 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 academy is making reasonable progress towards the removal of special measures.

I strongly recommend that the academy does not seek to appoint 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.

- 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 third monitoring inspection on 7–8 May 2014.

Evidence

Inspectors observed the academy's work on both sites and scrutinised documents. Most of the lessons were observed jointly with the headteacher. Students' behaviour in class and around the sites was observed. Meetings took place with the headteacher, one of the deputy headteachers, staff, students, and the Chair and Vice Chair of the Governing Body. An inspector spoke on the phone with the improvement adviser.

Context

Since the previous monitoring inspection, nine staff left the academy and 12 joined. The six new teachers are qualified teachers; two are permanent and four are supply staff. Staff absence is high and includes some long periods of sickness. A second deputy headteacher was appointed in February for two days each week, on a temporary secondment from a local academy. Following a period of consultation, the reorganisation of the staff team will take place from September.

Achievement of pupils at the school

Year 11 students are likely to leave the academy with attainment that is lower than expected because they have had so much disruption to their learning at The Links and, until recently, they have not studied for enough GCSEs. They have not responded well to expectations to attend lessons all day and to work hard. However, since the previous visit, there has been an improvement because two important things have happened to help them make the most of their time left. First, many now see the value of participating in learning and want to do well so that they can go to college in September. Second, staff give well-targeted additional support to make sure that course work is completed and externally examined.

Now that students' attainment is tracked more thoroughly, teachers, the senior leadership team and the governing body can check and challenge how well all students are doing. It is too early to judge sustained progress but the data show that, although still below expectations, more students are likely to make expected progress this year. This is supported by some of the work in students' books, but not consistently so in all subjects. As noted in the previous report, presentation is sloppy, too many worksheets limit what students have to do, not enough work is completed and tasks are not suitable for ensuring that all do their best.

The quality of teaching

The quality of teaching has improved, as evidenced in students' work, their views and those of the staff, and the monitoring of learning in lessons. High expectations

for students to focus on learning are now well established. When work is tailored to each student's ability, they do well and this also reduces their frustration, anxiety and poor behaviour. The contribution made to students' learning by support staff varies too much, linked to how well they help students to focus on the teachers' expectations and instructions.

New staff bring renewed enthusiasm and additional skills. Teachers' subject knowledge remains good but there is a shortage of specialists, partly because of staff absence. This limits students' opportunities to study some subjects in enough depth, such as food technology, art, and personal, social and health education. Although systematic teaching of reading and spelling ceased because of staff absence, there are some good opportunities for students to practise their literacy skills in a range of subjects, and they do so with confidence.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

Staff and students say that behaviour has improved. They also say that there is more to be done to make sure that expectations are always high and sanctions are applied consistently. Students now accept that the new rules and higher expectations are here to stay.

Staff have started to record incidents of inappropriate behaviour and examples of good behaviour on an electronic system. Some staff already find this information very useful in discussions with students and parents. It is too soon to check the quality of the recording or how well the information is used to inform future plans and individual programmes. There are plans to review the information soon; for example, as part of the developing roles for the special educational needs coordinator and the new home-school learning leaders.

Temporary exclusions have reduced but remain too high. Alternative sanctions, together with better teaching, work well to reduce inappropriate behaviour. Students' attendance has increased but remains too low for them to achieve as well as they should.

Alterations to the accommodation and outside areas have improved security and safety. These improvements mean that students have to think twice about making poor decisions such as leaving the site without permission.

The quality of leadership in and management of the school

The headteacher and the governing body continue to make the difficult decisions needed to put the right things in place for students' achievements and teaching to improve. They provide the appropriate strategic direction. It is now a year since the academy was judged to require special measures and it has taken a long time to make all the necessary changes. But now, most staff are fully on-board with the

changes and understand their responsibilities. They are much more positive compared to the previous monitoring inspection. All say that, since then, there have been some very difficult times, particularly when so many staff are absent and the detrimental effect this has on students' attitudes and anxieties. Many staff go the extra mile and new staff feel well supported.

At times, absence of senior leaders meant that the headteacher was left with too much to do. Nevertheless, the temporary appointment of a second deputy headteacher, increased delegation to others and good support from the governing body, have kept the academy's development on track. Staff continue to be held to account and the new action plan has suitable arrangements to make sure that this remains the case.

The curriculum continues to develop. Current work includes making sure that new schemes of work are ready for next term. Interim arrangements for a special educational needs coordinator mean that the required assessments have started to happen and some individual education plans are in place.

The senior team know the views of students; for example, about the behaviour management policy. However, the views of parents have not been sought formally. Similarly, the views of local academies and schools about how well prepared the students are to return to mainstream education are not known. Improvements in the tracking of students' achievements mean that the governing body are better informed, which helps them to give greater challenge to senior leaders.

External support

The headteacher and governing body continue to value the support of the local authority's human resources team and an improvement adviser. The local authority has provided some funds to support the academy with its staffing issues.

Although teachers are linked with colleagues in local academies for support, subject leadership has not developed fast enough. This is largely due to staff absence at The Link but partly because of a lack of formality to the arrangements.