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Mr Mark Trusson
The Headteacher
The Taunton Academy
Cheddon Road
Taunton
Somerset
TA2 7QP

Dear Mr Trusson

Serious weaknesses monitoring inspection of The Taunton Academy

Following my visit to your academy on 30 April 2014 with Mary Massey, Additional Inspector, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the outcome and findings of the inspection. 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 was judged to have serious weaknesses following the section 5 inspection which took place in February 2013. 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 the serious weakness designation.

This letter and monitoring inspection report will be published on the Ofsted website. I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the Chair of the Governing Body, the Education Funding Agency, the Director of Children's Services for Somerset and the Academies Advisors Unit at the Department for Education.

Yours sincerely

Marcia Headon
Additional Inspector

Annex

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

- Improve the quality of teaching by:
 - eradicating any that is inadequate
 - ensuring all lessons include a range of interesting activities that challenge the full ability range
 - including regular reviews of learning in lessons that inspire students to work harder and clarify what is needed to excel
 - including more challenging questioning that requires all students to think more deeply and provide more extended responses
 - ensuring students have the time to respond fully to marking and other feedback
 - ensuring teaching assistants are able to provide effective support to named individuals in lessons
 - ensuring students appreciate how individual lessons relate to their longer term targets
 - ensuring all staff consistently apply the academy's behaviour management policy.

- Accelerate students' achievement by:
 - enhancing middle leaders' abilities to evaluate performance in their areas of responsibility, hold staff to account and learn from the good practice that exists in the academy and beyond at all levels within the academy
 - ensuring the progress made by different groups, particularly those eligible for the pupil premium, is given a higher priority
 - ensuring all improvement plans contain more details of the progress to be made by all groups of students, thereby making the regular checking by the governing body more straightforward
 - developing more interventions for younger students, particularly related to reading, so they learn the skills and knowledge required to succeed in Year 9 and onwards
 - improving the level of engagement with parents, particularly of those students eligible for support through the pupil premium.

Report on the third monitoring inspection on 30 April 2014

Evidence

The inspectors held meetings with the Principal and members of the senior leadership team, the special educational needs coordinator, a group of middle leaders and two members of the governing body. They held discussions with a group of students from Years 7 and 8. The inspectors, jointly with members of the leadership team, visited 16 lessons where they observed the teaching, talked to students and viewed their work. Inspectors scrutinised documentation to show evidence of the work taken to improve standards. These included external reports provided to the academy and the latest academy development plans. The single central register, which contains checks on the appointment of staff, was reviewed.

Context

Since the monitoring visit in November 2013, there have been a number of significant changes in staffing. The academy has recruited a head of English, an advanced skills teacher in English and a tutor to work in the English department. A member of staff has been promoted temporarily as a second leader in the English department. A second leader in the science department, a temporary science teacher and a lead science technician have also taken up posts. Further new appointments include a temporary teacher of history, a dancer-in-residence, a mentor who works with students supported by the pupil premium (funding allocated to provide extra support for pupils who are known to be eligible for free school meals, are in care or who have a parent in the armed services) and six graduate teaching assistants.

A new sponsor for the academy is currently being considered for approval by the Department for Education.

The quality of leadership and management at the academy

A renewed sense of urgency and drive among the senior leadership team has resulted in a greater shared vision for improvement. There is a desire to ensure that systems are consistently applied and that the developments, which are now evident, are embedded across the whole academy.

New appointments have strengthened substantially the capacity for improvement among the senior leadership team. They monitor the work of the academy closely and a new departmental review system is in place which is much more effective. Underperformance is tackled robustly. The judgements of the Principal and senior team on the teaching observed during the visit and on the quality of the work completed over time agreed with those of the inspectors. New programmes have been introduced and training given to staff to address the low levels of students' literacy and to help close the gap between the progress of pupil-premium students

and others. Although not yet fully implemented across the whole academy, these systems are well understood by staff. The leadership team is fully aware of further changes which need to be made, especially to improve literacy levels across the academy and to support students with special educational needs.

The senior team describes middle leaders as 'the engine room of change' and their role as a catalyst is apparent. Middle leaders who were observed during the visit modelled high quality teaching and this was particularly evident in the lessons taught by these members of staff in English, mathematics and science.

The academy's current data, which track students' attainment and progress, are comprehensive and used widely to inform teaching. They indicate that results are likely to improve in this summer's GCSE examinations. The current data show that in all year groups students are making more rapid progress. In Year 11, students are on track to meet the academy predictions for an increase in the proportion of students likely to gain five or more higher level GCSE passes, including English and mathematics, than in 2013. Data and students' work also show that the proportion of students who are making at least reasonable progress in English and mathematics is rising. However, the proportion of students making better than reasonable progress is below national averages. The current data also demonstrate that the gap between the achievement of students who are supported by the pupil premium and other students is closing.

The governing body maintains a good oversight of the progress which the academy is making and holds it tightly to account. Governors have a good understanding of the academy's achievement data, especially that related to students who are supported by pupil premium funding. They have been heavily involved in the revision of the academy development plan, which is now more tightly focused. However, not enough of the criteria by which they will measure success are sufficiently precise. Governors have paid careful attention to their own training needs, attending courses and seminars provided by the local authority and Ofsted. The governing body is frustrated by delays in the resolution of issues over the sponsorship of the academy and is acutely aware of the impact of this upon the morale of the staff.

Strengths in the academy's approaches to securing improvement:

- The introduction of further training, along with the modelling of good practice and the strong role models provided by senior and middle leaders, has resulted in more lessons where students make at least good progress. As a result of this support, the quality of teaching has improved and inadequate teaching has now been eradicated.
- The new system of marking, which includes both peer and teacher feedback, has resulted in students and staff having a stronger understanding of how much progress is being made in lessons and over time. In those lessons where it is used well it has had a significant impact on students' understanding of what they need to do to improve further and is accelerating progress rapidly. Time for

reviewing and making corrections is seen as very valuable by the students. However, not all students do this.

- Involvement in the new departmental review process has helped middle manager development as well as encouraging the sharing of good practice and identifying steps which need to be taken to improve performance further.
- The introduction of much stronger tracking data means most teachers are ensuring work is more closely matched to the ability of the students. In an English lesson where students made outstanding progress, for example, the teacher required certain students to focus on different aspects of analysing a poem, openly telling them that they needed to practise this particular skill.
- Teachers regularly check for understanding during lessons and adjust their teaching accordingly. Training on lesson planning and the work on revising the curriculum have meant that lessons are now more engaging for students. However, some more-able students are not always sufficiently challenged by the work which is set and learning is sometimes too slow for all students in a class, as they are allowed too much time to complete work.
- The emphasis which has been placed on training teachers to ask more challenging questions has encouraged students to think more deeply. In high quality teaching in a science lesson, for example, there was a relentless demand from the teacher for students to expand on their answers on the carbon cycle and to explain themselves further.
- The behaviour policy is now more established amongst staff. Relationships between students and staff are good and there is a calm working atmosphere around the academy.
- Effective work has been done to engage parents more closely. The introduction of the half-termly celebrations, to which parents are invited, together with workshops and other events, often organised by the chaplaincy, has had a noticeable impact on communication.
- Further training in the use of technology through hand-held computer tablets means they are used more appropriately than before. These provide effective support where used well.

Weaknesses in the academy's approaches to securing improvement:

- Although new systems are in place to identify and support students with special educational needs, the impact of these changes is not yet fully evident. Systems for monitoring the implementation of strategies to support these students in classrooms are not yet secure.
- Although the academy has started to train teachers in ways to improve students' literacy skills this is at an early stage of implementation. Teachers of all subjects are not yet sufficiently aware of how to support weak readers and writers. The academy is aware of this and has plans to address it.
- Some students still do not take enough pride in their work as some teachers do not pay sufficient attention to students' handwriting and presentation when they are marking work.

External support

The diocese, as current sponsor, is supportive of the academy and has provided additional funding for extra school improvement partner time and to support leadership development. This has been very helpful. The academy has purchased additional external support from its own resources which has given a useful external perspective on the work of the academy. The Specialist Schools and Academies Trust has also provided some further support to improve the quality of teaching and learning.