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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 Joseph Skivington and Sheila Boyle, additional inspectors, to your academy on 1 and 2 July 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 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.

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 with 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 third monitoring inspection on 1 and 2 July 2014

Evidence

Inspectors observed parts of 28 lessons, almost all of them jointly with senior and middle leaders. Inspectors scrutinised documents including the updated action plans, records of students' achievement and the provision plans for disabled students and those with special educational needs. Inspectors also reviewed the books of students in Year 8. Meetings were held with the Principal and other senior and middle leaders, a group of newly qualified teachers, students, the Chair of the Governing Body, a representative from the sponsor and an E-ACT system leader who is providing support to the school.

Context

Since the last visit, there have been further significant changes to staffing in the academy; 32 teaching staff will be leaving at the end of this term, including some senior and middle leaders. A new Vice-Principal has taken up his post to lead on teaching and learning, and a second new Vice-Principal joins the academy in September. E-ACT have put in place a Principal from another academy as a system leader to provide additional support two days a week.

Achievement of pupils at the school

Since the last monitoring inspection, there has been a slight increase in the proportion of Year 11 students that are on track to gain five or more GCSE passes at A* to C, including English and mathematics. Although this is still below the national average, it does represent a considerable improvement on results in the previous year. Senior staff recognise that progress for many of these students was hampered by a legacy of weak teaching and low expectations.

A scrutiny of students' work and a review of current tracking data indicate that most students in Key Stage 3 are making better progress as a result of improved teaching, more careful monitoring of their progress and targeted intervention where necessary. In Year 10, there are still groups of students who are not making the expected levels of progress. These groups include the most able, students eligible for the pupil premium, and disabled students and those with special educational needs.

The academy continues to improve its monitoring of students' progress. Regular progress checks for students in all year groups have greater rigour. Year 10 students have recently undergone a series of assessments that will be externally marked to check the reliability of the academy's own assessments.

The quality of teaching

Teaching has continued to improve since the last monitoring visit. Teachers have made good use of a range of training programmes and coaching opportunities to help improve aspects of their teaching.

In particular, senior leaders have responded rapidly to concerns identified at the last visit about the quality of planning. Following negotiation with staff, an 'everyday planning system' has been put in place. The majority of staff are using this system effectively to ensure that they plan activities that meet the different needs of learners within their classes. The impact of better planning was particularly evident in mathematics where teachers gave students activities that were pitched at different levels, ensuring the most-able students attempted more complex problems and were challenged by the work. However, some teachers are still giving students work that does not take into account things they have learnt before; students find themselves repeating easy work and so make little progress. Planning for disabled students and those with special educational needs is less effective. The education plans that have been used to support these students are not regularly used by teachers in planning lessons and the targets in the plans are not sharply focused on how the teacher can best help the student to succeed.

Questioning has been a major focus of staff development programmes this year. Teachers are now using a number of different questioning strategies to involve students in the lesson. However, in some lessons, too many questions only require a brief answer and teachers do not take up opportunities to explore ideas in more detail. Where learning is most effective, teachers use questioning well to make sure students understand the work and have to think hard to answer more challenging questions.

A new marking policy is in place across the academy. Marking is taking place on a regular basis and is often very detailed. Targets are set to help students improve their work. Good examples were seen of carefully focused targets and students completing a follow-up task that demonstrated they now understood a new learning point. However, targets are sometimes too vague, such as 'work faster' or 'complete your work', to be of much use in helping students progress. A focus on improving literacy was evident in some marking where teachers marked for punctuation and spelling, but this was not consistent across departments or the wider academy.

Teachers encouraged students to assess the work of their peers. This took various forms. In PE, music and drama, students gave each other helpful oral feedback about the strengths and weaknesses of a performance or activity. In a Year 9 English class, students marked each other's work and then the teacher added further useful comments.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

There was a calm, orderly atmosphere in the academy. Students were polite and well mannered, opening doors and greeting inspectors positively. There were good relationships between students and staff. Students told inspectors they felt safe and they were proud of how their school is improving.

In the majority of lessons, students behave well. They are committed and hard-working when interested and challenged by their learning. They engage fully with activities and are keen to answer teachers' questions. When teaching is less engaging, student behaviour deteriorates. Academy records show that a significant number of students are removed from lessons for poor behaviour. Although the number of students excluded for poor behaviour has fallen since last year, a significant number of those excluded are disabled students and those with special educational needs. Senior leaders are aware of this and are working with staff to improve the quality of provision and support for these students.

There are still a considerable number of students who are late to the academy in the morning; too many students showed no sign of hurrying to lessons even though they had arrived at the academy after the start bell. The academy's analysis shows that punctuality gets worse as the students get older. Teachers do not regularly challenge lateness or consistently apply the agreed sanctions. As a result, students do not build an understanding of the importance of arriving at the academy on time.

Attendance remains below the national level and academy targets but continues to show improvement as a result of increased support for those students with the poorest attendance.

The quality of leadership in and management of the school

Senior leaders have continued to drive forward a programme of rapid improvement at the academy. Improving teaching and learning remains the key priority. Senior leaders have a good understanding of the quality of teaching within the academy and have put in place targeted training and support when teachers needed help. Students are also aware of the changes taking place. They report that teachers are 'more demanding' and 'stricter' but they also acknowledge that there are more rewards and encouragement for doing well.

Staff are responding positively to the rapid pace of change. They describe how they feel a greater involvement and engagement in decision making. They are consulted on key changes and they feel their views are listened to. There are more opportunities for staff to share good practice. Newly qualified teachers were very grateful for the considerable support they had received as they developed their own teaching strategies. All staff vacancies for September have been filled.

Senior leaders are also continuing to work on improving the reliability of assessment information, ensuring it accurately reflects the current attainment of students. They are developing systems to ensure that collated assessment information is returned more rapidly to middle leaders so they can use it to target appropriate interventions and catch-up activities.

New marking and planning policies are in place and understood by all staff, but there is considerable variation in the quality of marking and planning. Senior leaders have put in place additional training and support to help heads of department to monitor the effective implementation of these policies.

A new curriculum is in place for students in Years 7, 8 and 9 from September. It moves away from the current themed curriculum and reintroduces separate subjects. There is an increased level of challenge for all students and a stronger emphasis on developing literacy and numeracy skills. Key Stage 4 options include a greater number of academic courses alongside a range of vocational subjects.

The governing body has now addressed all the key areas from the review of governance. They have reorganised their committee structure and put in place a number of focused governors who are assigned to key areas. They have changed the way that the Principal reports to governors so that they get information that is more closely matched to Ofsted criteria and they have raised their expectation of how well the academy should perform.

The academy improvement plan continues to be effectively evaluated and monitored through the Raising Achievement Board consisting of academy and E-ACT representatives. It has now been extended to include actions planned in the next academic year.

External support

E-ACT has changed its model of academy support. Support now comes through a system leader, an experienced Principal from another E-ACT academy. Willenhall is receiving two days a week of support from its system leader. He has brought additional capacity to the leadership team and is currently developing a behaviour for learning policy for the academy. Further support is provided through E-ACT lead practitioners in mathematics and science. The impact of this support is already seen in improved teaching quality in the identified subject areas.