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Adrian Ball
Executive Principal
The Thetford Academy
Croxton Road
Thetford
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Dear Mr Ball

Special measures monitoring inspection of The Thetford Academy

Following my visit with Ian Starling and Rachel Hobson, Additional Inspectors, to your school on 1–2 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 fourth 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 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 newly qualified teachers.

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 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 fourth monitoring inspection on 1–2 July 2014

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and held conversations with the principal and other key members of the academy's staff, groups of students, parents, the Chair and additional representatives of the Governing Body, and the academy's sponsor.

Context

Since the last visit, an additional appointment has been made to the leadership team to be in charge of teaching and learning.

Achievement of pupils at the school

The rise in standards evident at the last monitoring visit has continued and is now more securely established. Since the last visit, there is more evidence that the proportion of students gaining five or more good passes in their GCSE examinations this year, including mathematics and English, will be the best ever. Subjects that performed poorly last year in the examinations, such as geography and physical education, are set to improve their results this year. A major improvement is in the achievement of boys in English. Teachers have given a huge amount of additional support to students in many subjects through Saturday and after-school revision sessions. This, together with adjustments to the curriculum and better teaching, is leading to rapid and, in some cases, substantial improvements in the progress of all groups of students.

Raising Achievement managers have been appointed to support individual students, including a significant number of students eligible for additional funding through the pupil premium. The academy has analysed the impact of this initiative and found that not only are the students being supported predicted to gain higher grades in their examinations, but also they have a much more positive attitude to their learning. The academy's data shows that the attainment gap for students supported by the additional funding is closing, but they are still not achieving standards that compare well with those of all students nationally.

Since the second monitoring visit, where it was found to be weak, the academy has developed the support for students for whom English is an additional language. That support is now good and, as a result, these students are making much better progress. The progress is still uneven across different year groups, but they make good progress in the sixth form.

Disabled students and those who have special educational needs receive good support. The systems to ensure they are safe and making good progress are securely in place. They are supported well in class by additional adults and through work that is often, although not yet consistently, adjusted to cater for their individual needs. The personal support they receive is very well coordinated. Parents of students with a statement of educational needs speak exceptionally highly of the regular communication they receive and the quick responses to their enquiries. Individual case studies show some outstanding examination success and progress to higher education. A much higher proportion of Year 11 students who are supported at school action and school action plus are on track to gain five good GCSE passes including mathematics and English at grade C or above than last year.

In the sixth form, improvements are also evident, although success rates are likely to be below average again this year. The standards attained in A-level examinations are likely to be below average but those in AS-level examinations appear to have improved more securely and are set to be above average, according to the academy's own data.

In Key Stage 3, the students' progress is carefully tracked and recorded. The systems for this require adjustment to allow better use of the information, both by teachers in planning their lessons and by leaders in holding teachers and subject leaders to account.

In lessons and in books, some good progress is evident, but also some evidence of poor literacy, poor presentation and handwriting, and incomplete work. This indicates that, whilst expectations are higher and students' attitudes have improved, there is a need for further improvement if the academy is to meet its aim to be good by the next monitoring visit. Reading is being encouraged and students have better attitudes to a love of reading. Students do not receive enough opportunities to improve their oral communication skills. In all key stages, teachers provide insufficient opportunities for students to give extended answers to questions, paraphrase what they have heard or pose questions themselves.

The quality of teaching

The quality of teaching is improving but it varies in its effectiveness. Actions by the leaders of the academy, including subject leaders, are increasing the impact of teaching, as seen in the improved progress students are making. The new leader of teaching has developed the focus on effective teaching strategies and, where these are identified through the regular monitoring that takes place, they are shared. Ineffective practice is tackled through training and support, followed by decisive action if improvements do not occur. Less use is being made of supply teachers because staff absence has declined.

Teachers have good subject knowledge and their explanations are therefore clear and quickly understood. The most effective teachers have high expectations, but this is not consistently the case. Sometimes, teachers do not expect or make clear to students that a good quantity of work must be completed each lesson in order for them to achieve as well as they can. Sometimes, unremarkable work gains too high praise.

Stickers are being used when teachers mark students' work. This is making the quality and effectiveness of marking more consistent. The best examples require a response from students to the detailed and helpful guidance the teacher has given on how to improve. More teachers need to adopt this practice. In some books, mistakes or incomplete work is commented on by the teacher but allowed to continue.

Some of the teaching strategies that were seen to be effective in promoting good learning were:

- using the information about what each student needs to plan activities to meet those needs that could be easily incorporated into the lesson
- applying good subject knowledge to make connections for students to other aspects of the subject or showing how the current topic links with past learning
- changing course in the lesson if the teacher's checking showed what was planned was not having the desired impact
- devising and creating good quality resources to enliven the learning and engage the students, including making good use of video clips and new technology.

In the majority of lessons, teachers are missing opportunities to enhance students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

Students feel that behaviour has been improving steadily, especially in the last year. They say that when teachers apply the behaviour policy with its staged sanctions, then behaviour is good and they can learn without being distracted. This is not yet consistent, especially when lessons are being covered by a supply teacher or teachers do not make clear exactly how students need to behave in order to gain the most benefit from an activity. For example, some opportunities to work with a partner or in groups lead to students needing a lot of redirection because the teacher has not modelled for them how to conduct these discussions.

Those students who need support to manage their own behaviour have a range of places and people they can go to for that help. This is keeping far more of the students in school, with attendance up and exclusions down. The academy tracks patterns of all incidents and takes action with frequent offenders. Their number is

reducing. The good support provided for all students means they feel safe. The anti-bullying mentors have become more established than at the last visit and are proving an invaluable resource; they are promoting social harmony. Their commitment is commendable. They feel comfortable and confident in their role because they have been well trained. One of them said: 'We are driven by passion not obligation.'

The quality of leadership in and management of the school

Leaders at all levels aspire for the academy to be graded as a good school at the earliest opportunity. Just having special measures removed is not enough for them, and this ambition is being translated into thorough improvement work. This is not at the expense of their duty of care, so staff are supported well and their morale is high. Staff absence has reduced; staff are keen for feedback on how to improve and engaged readily in group feedback sessions following inspectors' visits to their lessons. One subject leader requested that an inspector observe her giving feedback to a colleague in order to improve her practice. Professional development is tailored to individual needs.

Promoting good relationships and links with parents is a continuing success for the academy. The principal listens to concerns and acts on them. In some cases, the solutions are imaginative and result in the active involvement of the complainant in improving the academy. Many of those spoken to referred to the highly committed and caring staff.

The curriculum is meeting students' needs more effectively, especially in the sixth form. Tutor periods at the start of the day are planned to include good opportunities to support students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. This now needs to have a stronger focus across the curriculum and in lessons.

The sixth form is being led well and students in the sixth form are increasingly making a good contribution to the general running of the school; some acting as supervisors at lunchtime and some as assistants in classrooms.

Self-evaluation is accurate and based on an expanding range of sources of evidence. The academy now needs to ensure that the various sets of evidence are compared to ensure that improvements continue at the same pace.

The principal leads by example, and he and his senior team are highly visible around the academy. Students confirmed that this is usually the case. The principal, supported by leaders and governors, has successfully tackled a budget deficit whilst ensuring that provision continues to improve and standards continue to rise.

Governors provide good challenge and support. The minutes of their meetings record the challenging questions asked of leaders and others who present evidence

to them of the impact of their work. They take opportunities to visit the academy regularly and talk to students. They use their wide range of expertise to support improvements. The academy is continuing to lead aspects of improvement work across the other schools in the trust. Recently, the trust has won a bid to become a hub for the teaching of mathematics. The academy will receive additional resources and will share the responsibility for raising attainment in mathematics, increasing participation in mathematics for post-16 students and bringing Chinese and Shanghai mathematics methodologies to the eastern region of the United Kingdom.

External support

The academy's sponsor is continuing to both support and challenge the leaders and governors. In addition, the academy is continuing to benefit from the wider opportunities which membership of the Trust allows. This has recently included the Trust-wide programme of outside speakers to address students, which is due to bring people from all walks of life to inspire students. It will be launched to sixth form students at Thetford Academy.