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Mr John Sheppard
Principal
The Hereford Academy
Marlbrook Road
Redhill
Hereford
HR2 7NG

Dear Mr Sheppard

Special measures monitoring inspection of The Hereford Academy

Following my visit with Timothy McGuire, Additional Inspector, to your school on 8–9 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 school's previous monitoring inspection.

The inspection was the second monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures following the inspection which took place in November 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 school is making reasonable progress towards the removal of special measures.

Having considered all the evidence I strongly recommend that the academy does not seek to appoint newly qualified teachers (NQTs) in the mathematics and English departments.

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 Education Funding Agency and the Department for Education Academies Advisers' Unit.

Yours sincerely

Ian Hodgkinson
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

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

- Improve teaching so that it is at least good, particularly in English and mathematics, by ensuring that:
 - teachers provide lesson activities that cater for different ability levels, so that all groups of students make good progress
 - marking of students' books shows them clearly what they need to do to improve their work
 - teachers use questioning well to check students' understanding and provide support and challenge where they are most needed
 - leaders of subjects raise teachers' expectations and secure improvements
 - senior leaders provide support and training to enable subject leaders to more effectively identify, monitor, support and challenge weak practice.

- Improve the achievement of all students, particularly in English and mathematics, so that it is at least in line with national levels by ensuring that:
 - students' progress is assessed accurately
 - the resulting information is used by all leaders, managers and teachers to identify when groups, classes or year groups are not making good progress, and to plan for improvements in teaching and achievement in a focused way
 - the spending of the pupil premium funding results in the attainment gap between students eligible for the funding and other students in the academy being narrowed.

- Those responsible for governance and leaders at all levels should develop a highly focused development plan which:
 - is founded on an accurate analysis of current performance
 - includes specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time-limited targets
 - makes it clear what key individuals must do to drive improvements at a much faster rate.

Ofsted has made recommendations for action on governance to the authority responsible for the school. An external review of the school's use of the pupil premium should be undertaken in order to assess how this aspect of leadership and governance may be improved.

Report on the second monitoring inspection on 8–9 July 2014

Evidence

Inspectors observed the academy's work, scrutinised documents and met with the Principal, academy leaders, members of staff, groups of students, the Chair and Vice-Chair of the Governing Body, and the director of education for the sponsor. Students in Year 11 and Year 13 were not present during the inspection, having completed their final examinations.

Context

Since the last monitoring inspection, the review of the academy's leadership has been completed and a restructuring process undertaken. This process will reduce the size of the senior leadership team from September 2014, and has redefined key responsibilities and accountabilities. A review of governance has also been completed. The head of science continues to lead both the science and mathematics curriculum areas. Within the English, mathematics and science curriculum areas, staff have been appointed to take charge of key stages to build leadership capacity.

Achievement of pupils at the school

GCSE results for students currently in Year 11 are anticipated to continue the upward trend of recent years. School data indicate that overall the proportions of students making the progress expected of them in English and mathematics will be broadly in line with the national averages. This represents an improving picture in both subjects, and particularly so in mathematics. Progress for lower attaining groups compares particularly favourably. However, progress for higher attaining and middle attaining students remains generally below national averages: as in 2013, relatively few students in these groups are expected to exceed the expected rate of progress.

The very weak progress still made by students in Years 9 and 10 in both English and mathematics reflects the poor provision they received across Key Stage 3 and the previous lack of reliable systems to monitor and promote better achievement. It also reflects the considerable weaknesses in the literacy of many students which present significant barriers to their comprehension, confidence, and their ability to articulate their ideas orally and on paper. There is evidence of improvement in all of these areas. Information on student attainment and progress is now collected regularly and systematically used to produce detailed 'context sheets' for each class. These sheets identify graphically how many and which students are achieving well or underachieving, and factors constraining their achievement. As a result, teachers and students themselves have a clear understanding of each student's attainment and progress, and are more clearly diagnosing where improvements are needed. Students' books show that they generally respond well to this more detailed

guidance and make accelerated progress where it is given. While there remains a variability in the accuracy of teachers' assessments at Key Stage 3, teachers in curriculum areas are now working more collaboratively to moderate and agree their judgements.

Initiatives to promote students' literacy are already having a marked impact where they are used. Inspectors saw striking evidence of significant gains in students' progress in those subjects, including art, humanities, science and sport, where literacy was promoted as a priority and expectations were high. In work seen in these subjects, teachers made it a 'non-negotiable' that students would apply good and improving spelling, punctuation, grammar, presentation and vocabulary in each piece of work. The academy's literacy team have now devised a comprehensive framework to promote reading and writing (in the first instance) across all subjects from September 2014. Regular reading tests are showing that students' reading skills are improving across all year groups in response to specific programmes, including silent reading in form time. The literacy team recognise the potential further gains that might arise from a more structured approach in leading students to progressively more challenging texts.

Gaps between the attainment and progress of students eligible for support from the pupil premium and others are generally narrowing, but school data indicate that this is not consistently so across the school. Nonetheless, through the new 'context sheets' teachers are demonstrating a keen awareness of these students and the barriers they face. The intervention strategies identified to help the students, however, vary widely in precision; in some instances they are too generic.

The quality of teaching

Teaching has improved in important respects, but improvements have been slower to embed in some subjects than others. Inconsistencies remain in the effective implementation of strategies to improve literacy, assessment and marking. For example in English, while there are excellent examples of teacher- and peer-marking that appraises work against the criteria for the task at hand, there is too little marking to promote students' basic literacy and their technical accuracy in writing. As a result, while students in Year 9 demonstrate much keen interest in the stories they study, their written outcomes remain weak. The planning of programmes of work in some subjects, including English, has not given sufficient attention to the progressive development of students' knowledge and skills. Curriculum plans are due to be strengthened in this respect from September 2014. In mathematics, the interim subject leadership is working effectively to ensure that teachers, many of whom are non-specialists, follow coherent approaches and programmes of study. Students' books suggest that progress in mathematics has been accelerating as a consequence.

Teachers' marking has improved significantly in the detail it gives on how students are doing and how to improve, in many cases with a demonstrably direct impact on improvements in students' progress. Teachers are making much better use of assessment information to plan approaches and adapt work in support of less able students and those with special educational needs. Teachers' questioning skills were a particular strength during this inspection in drawing all students, including the less able, into discussions and getting students to think carefully about the answers they give. Teachers are less consistently effective in planning work which challenges the more able to deepen their understanding of the topics they study and to solve problems independently.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

Students continue to behave generally well and display positive attitudes to learning. They are increasingly punctual to school and to lessons. Students themselves note that behaviour has improved over time and that since the section 5 inspection in November 2013 teachers have been more consistently effective in using the school's behaviour policy to manage their classes. Students are kept safe in an academy where staff are highly visible and accessible if and when students need support.

The quality of leadership in and management of the school

The Principal has promoted much cohesion among the staff in recognising the academy's weaknesses and acknowledging the urgency of remedial action. The academy's action plan sets out a comprehensive set of strategies to address the main issues arising from the section 5 inspection and to prioritise other improvements, including in literacy provision. While there is room for further clarity and precision in some of its targets, the plan provides very clear direction to the improvement effort. Senior leaders are open and accurate in their evaluation of academy performance. They are assisted by much better data on the attainment and progress of individuals and groups of students in each subject and class. This allows senior leaders to increasingly hold subject leaders to account for progress, with a particular emphasis on addressing weaknesses in Key Stage 3. Subjects have reviewed their programmes to boost the progress of students in all years, although there remains the need to link new schemes of work more directly to assessment criteria in some cases. Subject leaders, including of English and mathematics, are playing an increasingly active and effective role in monitoring, evaluating and supporting improvement. Senior leaders have taken a robust line in tackling the underperformance of staff across the academy.

The review of governance reflected well on improvements already made by the governing body, under its new Chairman, since the section 5 inspection. The review highlighted areas in which governors could further sharpen their understanding of performance data and the performance management of staff, and strengthen their

questioning of academy leaders about the impact of initiatives and programmes. Governors nonetheless have shown strong commitment to playing their part in the improvement effort; for example, they have strengthened their links with and made visits to academy curriculum areas, and made a visit to another school in a similar context to consider successful approaches. The academy sponsor's director of education has continued to provide effective support and challenge to leaders and governors. However, the lengthy period of indecision over the level of incorporation of the academy within the new diocesan multi-academy trust is providing a very unhelpful distraction of the efforts of leaders and governors from the real business of academy improvement. Leaders and governors are, for example, spending too long getting agreements on contracts because of uncertainty about the extent of delegated authority. This matter needs to be resolved as a matter of urgency.

External support

The academy has made highly effective use of external support to drive and accelerate its improvement effort. The work of the independent school improvement advisor has been particularly effective in empowering leaders at all levels to link their monitoring and evaluation of teaching directly to its impact on the progress made by students. An incisive leadership review by a National Leader of Education has clarified leadership roles and responsibilities and strengthened accountability of the success of improvement action. Good use has been made of links with other schools to enable leaders and staff to see and share effective practice.