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Joanna Manson
The High Arcal School
High Arcal Drive
Sedgley
Dudley
DY3 1BP

Dear Mrs Manson

Special measures monitoring inspection of The High Arcal School

Following my visit with Suha Ahmad and Joseph Skivington, Additional Inspectors, to your school on 30 September–1 October 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 December 2013. The full list of the areas for improvement 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 governing body's statement of action is fit for purpose.
- I strongly recommend that the academy does not seek to 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 Dudley.

Yours sincerely

Mel Ford
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

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

- Improve the quality and consistency of teaching, so that it is good or better, in order to raise students' achievement, by:
 - making sure that teachers use lesson time effectively and that planned activities challenge and interest all students
 - providing regular opportunities in lessons for students to explore what they are learning about in greater depth
 - ensuring teachers check students' understanding during the course of the lesson and adjust teaching to challenge or support appropriately.

- Increase the rate of students' progress in English and make it consistently good in mathematics, by:
 - checking students' progress in these subjects to identify any underachievement, particularly by students supported by the pupil premium, disabled students and those with special educational needs, and taking swift and effective action where this is needed
 - improving the quality and range of students' work in English ensuring writing tasks set in lessons are always imaginative and well-resourced and hold the attention of boys in particular
 - reviewing the use of time in mathematics by students entered early for GCSE once they have completed their examinations.

- Improve the leadership and management of the academy, including that of the governing body, by making sure that:
 - the leadership of weaker subjects, particularly English, is urgently improved
 - all leaders, including those in charge of subjects, have an accurate understanding of the performance of the academy and the steps required to raise standards
 - all leaders accurately and rigorously use information about students' progress in order to hold staff to account where students are underachieving
 - the pupil premium is used effectively to close remaining gaps between students eligible for the additional support and other students
 - improvement planning is rigorous and includes precise targets so that leaders know whether improvements are being made
 - governors develop the knowledge and skills required to ask questions of the academy's leaders so that they can systematically identify and seek explanations for any underperformance.

Report on the second monitoring inspection on 30 September–1 October 2014

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the headteacher, other senior and middle leaders, groups of pupils, the Chair of the Governing Body and two other governors and a representative from the local authority who has been supporting the academy. Although the inspection took account of all areas for improvement laid out in the annex, the main focus was on those linked to the quality of leadership and management and achievement in English.

Context

Since my last visit you have appointed a new head of English, and three newly qualified teachers who trained at the school were appointed from July 2014.

Achievement of pupils at the school

Rates of progress have improved. Although the percentage of students who achieved five A* to C GCSE grades including English and mathematics went down very slightly this year, students made more progress from their starting points than has previously been the case. This is largely due to the significant improvements in English, where rates of progress increased by 20 percentage points to meet the national average for 2013.

The much improved monitoring systems and processes show that the progress of significant groups within the academy has improved. For instance, more students supported by pupil premium, which is additional government funding for disadvantaged students, are now making expected progress and gaps between these students and others in the academy are closing. You and your leaders are aware that this remains an area for further action and have made realistic plans to ensure the pace of improvement is maintained.

Similarly, the progress of students who are disabled or have special educational needs has also improved. Although their rates of progress remain below national averages, the academy has significantly reduced the gap between these pupils and others in the academy. Consequently the proportion making three levels of progress in English increased from 7% in 2013 to 56% in 2014. In mathematics the increase has been less significant, moving from 34% to 37%. This reflects the achievement picture overall in the academy as mathematics has not improved at the same speed as English since 2013.

The quality of teaching

Teaching over time is improving. There is no inadequate teaching, and it is now good in most subject areas. This is because teachers have had effective training that has focused on the academy's overarching priorities for improvement. There has also been more targeted support for individual staff. All those spoken to during the inspection expressed their appreciation of the training provided.

The academy's new marking policy is now being consistently applied. However, there is substantial variation in the quality of advice provided by teachers. As a result, not all students know what they need to do to improve their work or to meet their targets. This is not the case in English, where marking is consistently good. Consequently, in this subject, marking is having a growing positive impact on the progress of students. We agreed that this effective practice will be shared across the school.

You have introduced a new lesson planning format across the academy. This is paying dividends because all teachers are now required to show how students will make progress within a lesson. The implementation, as part of this, of 'tasks on entry' is ensuring that students are engaged in their learning as soon as they enter a classroom. Plans now clearly show how teachers will address the needs of different groups, including those who are disabled or have special educational needs, those supported by the pupil premium and the most able. Currently, most teachers are approaching this through their expectations of different outcomes for different groups. We agreed that the next step will be the development of learning activities with different levels of challenge based on students' starting points.

Although subject teaching has improved, tutor time is not currently being used to good effect. We agreed that this aspect of the academy's provision should be addressed alongside the need to further develop the cultural understanding and experience of students.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

Around the academy, behaviour is usually good. Students are polite to each other, to staff and to visitors. Where students are engaged and interested by the lesson content, their attitudes to learning are good. Where this is not yet the case there is sometimes low-level disruption, particularly where the level of challenge in lessons is too low or too high. Nevertheless, students and staff agree that behaviour has improved as a result of the new behaviour policy. Students report that they understand the sanctions and rewards and know exactly which behaviours will be rewarded, which will be met with sanctions and how and when they will be applied. They say that all teachers apply the policy in all lessons and they appreciate the improvement in behaviour, particularly in lessons, as a result. Inspectors also noted

that behaviour management was consistent around the academy. Consequently the number of incidents of poor behaviour and of bullying have decreased, as reflected in the academy's own records.

You have recently developed a Personalised Learning Centre and this is having a very positive impact on the behaviour and attendance of those students who struggle to comply with the academy's expectations. This is because, following referral, students are provided with individual support and mentoring together with a personalised approach to their learning with the aim of reintegrating them into mainstream lessons when and where possible. As a result, exclusions have decreased.

The quality of leadership in and management of the school

The senior leadership team has been restructured and this has created greater capacity to secure the improvements required. Roles and responsibilities are now very clear and you and your leaders have successfully strengthened processes and systems, including those for monitoring the quality of teaching, so that all staff are held to account for the progress of students.

There has been a significant improvement in the way in which leaders gather, analyse and use information about students' progress. Consequently you have a much clearer and more accurate view of achievement overall, so that actions and support are more targeted to identified needs and staff are held to account for their impact.

Training has been provided to ensure that subject leaders are able to effectively monitor the quality of provision in their own areas of responsibility. This is beginning to have an impact on the progress of students, particularly in English. All subject leaders are now required to review and report on the performance of their subject areas every six weeks. In addition, the introduction of weekly meetings for the leaders of English and mathematics has been helpful in improving this aspect of leadership, particularly in enabling the sharing of good practice as it develops.

You have identified that teachers' assessment in some subjects is not always as accurate as required. To address this you have increased the rigour of monitoring through regular reviews of subject areas, the use of learning walks, classroom observations, and scrutiny of students' workbooks. You have also identified regular opportunities for moderation and external verification. We agreed that this should continue so that estimated end-of-key-stage outcomes are more precise.

The introduction of aspirational targets and 'flight paths' for all students is beginning to have a positive impact on raising the expectations among both staff and students of what they can achieve. Many students spoke of their targets with pride and made it clear that they found the higher expectations motivational.

The use of the pupil premium funding has been reviewed. One-to-one mentoring and a range of specific projects to boost rates of progress are now in place. As a result, these students are making better progress and gaps are beginning to narrow, although you recognise that there is more work to be done.

You and your leaders are assessing your progress against the improvement plan targets accurately. You know where performance has improved but also where further improvements are required.

The review of governance has now been completed and governors are currently developing their own action plan. Much has been done in the interim, and members of the governing body now ensure that information is presented to them in formats that they understand. As a result of the training they have attended, they are now more skilled in asking questions and ensuring that leaders explain information provided. Consequently they are becoming more effective at identifying those aspects they need to challenge.

External support

The academy has commissioned support and training from a range of high performing schools, both locally and further afield. In addition, support has been purchased from an independent consultant and an adviser from the local authority. The training provided has been effective in helping the academy to improve leadership and the quality of teaching.

Following the judgement at the first monitoring inspection, the academy has now taken appropriate steps to ensure that the statement of action is fit for purpose.