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20 October 2014

Miss Sylvia Thomas
The Headteacher
West Walsall E-ACT Academy
Primley Avenue
Walsall
WS2 9UA

Dear Miss Thomas

Special measures monitoring inspection of West Walsall E-ACT Academy

Following my visit with Helen Reeves and Chris Chapman, Additional Inspectors, to your school on 16 and 17 October, 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 second monitoring inspection since the academy became subject to special measures following the inspection which took place in January 2014. 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 not making enough 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.

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 Director of Children's Services for Walsall, the Education Funding Agency and the Academies Advisers Unit at the Department for Education.

Yours sincerely
Deborah James

Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection which took place in January 2014

- Improve teaching so that all is good or better, particularly in English and in mathematics, by:
 - insisting that teachers set high standards for behaviour in lessons so that all students know what is expected of them and no lessons are disturbed through chatter
 - making sure that teachers make accurate assessments of the levels students are working at
 - making sure that all teachers use the information they have on students to identify gaps in their learning and tailor their teaching to effectively fill these gaps
 - making sure that teachers' marking of students' work states clearly what students need to do to improve their work and that teachers check that this has been done.
- Give students a better chance of succeeding in the next stage of their education or training by making sure they leave the academy able to read well and to use their skills in mathematics by:
 - improving students' reading ages so that they are closer to, or above, their actual age
 - providing students with opportunities to practise using their skills in mathematics to solve numerical problems.
- Close the attainment gap between those students who are eligible for the pupil premium and their peers by making sure that all teachers and leaders use the information they have about students' achievement to notice when students are not doing as well as they should and help them to catch up.
- Improve the impact of academy leaders at all levels by:
 - ensuring that leaders, including governors, develop an accurate understanding of the academy, based on effective use of accurate data
 - ensuring that subject leaders are held to account by senior leaders and governors for the quality of teaching in their areas.

Ofsted will make recommendations for action on governance to the authority responsible for the academy. An external review of governance, to include a specific focus on the academy'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 16 and 17 October 2014

Evidence

Inspectors observed the academy's work and scrutinised documents including the academy's records of students' progress and external reviews that had been carried out on the quality of governance and the use of the pupil premium funding. Inspectors met with the Principal, senior and middle leaders, groups of pupils and teachers, the Chair of the Governing Body and a representative from the sponsor.

Context

A new Principal and Vice-Principal began work in September, replacing the interim arrangement that had been in place since the last inspection.

Achievement of pupils at the school

The academy's analysis of examination results in 2014 points to an improvement in the percentage of students gaining five or more GCSE passes at grades A* to C including English and mathematics. This improvement, although welcome, was below the academy's predicted performance and means that too many students did not make the expected amount of progress. The academy's results remain below floor standards.

English results did improve and more students reached the benchmark of a grade C. However the most-able students, who entered the academy with the highest Key Stage 2 scores in English, did not make enough progress. Half of these students did not reach their expected grade.

Results in mathematics were broadly the same this year as the very disappointing results achieved in mathematics in 2013. Only 48% of students made the expected levels of progress from their starting points, well below the performance of students nationally.

Students eligible for the pupil premium (students for whom the academy receives additional funding, including those known to be eligible for free school meals) achieved better than they did in 2013, but the gap between these students and their peers is still unacceptable large, particularly in mathematics.

Student underachievement, evident in the 2014 results, was reflected in lessons observed during this inspection. In too many lessons students were not making the rapid progress required to catch up with their peers nationally.

School tracking information for current students does indicate some improvement in achievement over previous years. For example, the current Year 11 students are reaching higher levels in mathematics than in previous years. However, worrying

gaps remain between students eligible for the pupil premium and other students, and progress is not rapid enough to bring students in line with national standards in the foreseeable future.

The quality of teaching

It is pleasing to note the improvements in the marking of students' work in the academy. There are more consistent approaches being used across subject areas, with students being given recognition for what they have done well and guidance on how they could improve their work. The quality of teachers' targets varies, and they are sometimes too vague to be helpful to students. In some lessons students spend a lot of time evaluating their own work. This was not always useful as many students do not have the skills required to reflect on their own learning and understand what they need to do to improve.

Teachers now receive more information about their students from senior leaders. However, too few teachers are able to use this information to plan their lessons to meet the different needs of their students effectively. Although much needed training to address this issue is scheduled for December, the academy has made little progress on this area for improvement.

Teachers' assessments are not accurate enough. Internal moderation and standardisation procedures have improved the reliability of some assessments, but planned external moderation meetings have not yet taken place for all subjects. Inspectors' scrutiny of students' work reveals that some inaccuracies persist and assessment materials are not always suitable to enable teachers to make robust judgements about students' performance.

The weaknesses in teaching identified at the time of the previous inspection still persist. In lessons where students are not making enough progress teachers:

- have low expectations of how students should behave, accepting off-task chatter and slow pace in the completion of work
- do not check that students have understood the key concepts in their learning
- do not use information about what learners already know and can do to plan and adapt working tasks to meet needs
- do not ensure that resources and materials used in lessons match students' reading ability.

However, inspectors also observed lessons where teachers skilfully used questioning to deepen students' understanding, structured lessons well and used a variety of tasks to interest learners. In these lessons students were able to make good progress.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

Students' behaviour and attitudes to learning in lessons vary too much. Although teachers and students commented that behaviour has improved over time, inspectors found that low level disruption persists and goes unchallenged in some lessons. This is particularly the case where the work is not well matched to students' needs and the pace of learning is too slow to sustain students' interest.

The academy is just beginning to keep records that will allow senior leaders to monitor whether behaviour in lessons is improving. There is no effective system to explore the relationship between those occasions when duty behaviour specialists are called out to deal with poor behaviour in a lesson and the quality of teaching.

Too many students were late to lessons. Teachers do not challenge this consistently. Likewise, poor standards of uniform and boisterous behaviour in corridors go unchallenged by passing staff. As a result, students are aware that they can 'get away with' varying standards of punctuality, behaviour and uniform.

The quality of leadership in and management of the school

There was a lack of clarity on the roles and responsibilities of some senior leaders and the impact they are having on improvement priorities. For example, there has been little progress in improving reading. There is a lack of a strategic policy and a confusion over who leads this area. There is little evidence that staff, outside of the English department, believe they have any responsibility for improving reading.

The external governing body review was undertaken in July. It found that governors have a limited understanding of data and do not have a culture of challenging and questioning school leaders. The review identified that the work of governors was fragmented, with much work done at committee level. The Chair of the Governing Body confirmed that a restructure was underway and governors had begun to receive training on better use of data. Governors were also reviewing how to improve communication with staff, students and parents.

Systems and processes are now in place to collect information about students' performance. Data are analysed and provided in forms accessible to different audiences. A summary is provided for senior leaders and there is an expectation that middle leaders will interact with this information to identify support for underachieving students. It is still too early to assess the impact of these interventions.

Insufficient progress has been made in addressing the weaknesses in teaching identified at the previous inspection. This is because leaders have been over-generous in their judgements about the quality of teaching and have not adopted a suitable improvement strategy based on an accurate of evaluation of the strengths

and weaknesses of teaching. Their feedback to teachers does not always identify clearly enough what teachers need to do to secure improvements in their practice. Since September a more thorough and accurate evaluation of teaching has been produced and the staff training programme has been refocused on fewer priorities. Staff are positive about changes so far, but these are too early to have an impact on the quality of teaching. Despite these improvements, weaknesses in subject leadership currently jeopardise the academy's ability to implement swift improvements. Subject leaders see their roles as supportive and non-judgemental and they lack the confidence to challenge and have difficult conversations with their team to secure improvement.

The academy has begun to gather a range of data on students eligible for the pupil premium. However, this information is not being used to make changes to the academy's actions. For example, the academy has collected information about the number of parents of pupil premium students who attend parents' evenings, but no targeted action to improve this figure has taken place. An external review of the impact of pupil premium spending, carried out earlier this term, found low teacher expectations and lessons that are not well planned for the different needs of students were key elements of the poor progress made by many students.

The academy development plan identifies the right areas for improvement and has set out systems and processes to monitor the impact of the academy's actions. However, the plan is not sufficiently clear on how some of these very challenging targets will be achieved. Action plans broken down into step-by-step approaches would help all staff, particularly middle leaders, understand how to improve the quality of teaching.

Teachers are positive about the arrival of the new Principal and understand her vision for improvement, including the simplification of systems and a focus on improving teaching and learning. They are optimistic that changes to training will be better matched to their needs.

External support

The sponsor acted quickly, following the last inspection, to put in place an interim Principal until a substantive appointment was made. E-ACT continues to provide a range of support for the academy. A lead practitioner from an outstanding local school has worked with the academy on improving science and is now focusing on teaching and learning. E-ACT offers subject leaders in English and mathematics the opportunity to meet regularly in national subject leader forums. Staff value these opportunities. They have also carried out a number of subject reviews alongside senior leaders. These have been effective in identifying concerns, but have not led to sharply focused actions to address those concerns. As a result, there has been little impact from these reviews

Plans are in place for the new Principal to receive regular support from an E-ACT system leader from November. She has had support from the Raising Achievement Board and from the interim Principal during the first months of her leadership.