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Mr M Murphy
Interim Executive Principal
Park Hall Academy
Water Orton Road
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Birmingham
B36 9HF

Dear Mr Murphy

Special measures monitoring inspection of Park Hall Academy

Following my visit with Robert Steed and Martin Spoor, Additional Inspectors, to your academy on 4–5 November 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 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 academy is making reasonable progress towards the removal of special measures.

I am of the opinion that the academy may appoint newly qualified teachers, in a joint agreement with the partner school.

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 Solihull, the Education Funding Agency and the DfE Academies Advisors Unit.

Yours sincerely

Denah Jones
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

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

- Improve teaching so that a higher proportion is consistently good or better by all teachers:
 - using accurate assessment information to plan interesting work for students so the level of challenge is matched to their ability and enables all students to make good progress
 - making lessons more interactive and enjoyable so students develop their skills in working independently or in groups
 - giving students clearer feedback during lessons and in marking so they know how to improve their work
 - developing their use of probing questions to stimulate students' greater involvement in discussions and to deepen their understanding.

- Improve behaviour in lessons and around the school by:
 - staff having higher expectations of how students conduct themselves and ensuring that low-level disruption in lessons is eradicated
 - students improving their punctuality to lessons and developing more positive attitudes to learning.

- Develop the effectiveness of leadership and management by ensuring that:
 - a simple, accurate system, understood by all staff and governors, is used to check on students' progress and identify where extra help is needed to support students making slow progress
 - monitoring and evaluation by senior and subject leaders is more rigorous so that all policies are implemented consistently throughout the academy
 - judgements on the quality of teaching are accurate and take account of the amount of progress students make
 - teachers are given clear next steps for improvement after leaders observe lessons, and that these are followed up to make sure that they have made a difference
 - the governing body checks that there are clear actions in the school development plan that will improve teaching and students' achievement, and that these are monitored regularly so that academy leaders are held to account.

Report on the third monitoring inspection on 4–5 November 2014

Evidence

Inspectors observed the academy's work, scrutinised documents and met with the Interim Executive Principal, Interim Principal and other members of the senior leadership team and two governors. A telephone conversation was held with the academy's improvement partner. Twenty four lessons were observed, including nine that were observed jointly with subject leaders. Inspectors spoke with students during lessons and at break and lunchtime. Inspectors also met formally with groups of students from Years 9, 11 and the sixth form.

Context

Since the second monitoring inspection in July, there have been a large number of changes to staffing, with 24 new teachers joining the academy in September. This includes the new director of mathematics and a subject leader of mathematics; and new subject leaders in English and humanities. There is a newly appointed director of progress, who leads a number of interventions to raise achievement across the academy; and a newly appointed coordinator for disabled students and those who have special educational needs. Other structural changes include the combining of physical education and performing arts within a new 'PEPA' faculty. Academy leaders were hoping that the proposed transition to a multi-academy trust would have been completed by the start of this term. However, this transition has been slow and the delays are proving to be a source of frustration for leaders and governors.

Achievement of pupils at the school

There is very little noticeable improvement in the outcomes for students. Provisional 2014 performance information at GCSE indicates that the academy is likely to be below floor standards for the second consecutive year.

As indicated by academy leaders at the last visit, outcomes have remained broadly similar to those of 2013. However, a change in the rules for qualifications to be included in published performance information has resulted in an apparent decline in the proportion of students attaining five or more GCSEs at grades A* to C, and a fall in the progress being made by students in English and mathematics. Some of this apparent decline could have been avoided and has been the result of poor decisions made by previous school leaders to place students on inappropriate courses and qualification pathways which have focused on multiple attempts at examinations. Information provided by academy leaders on students currently in Year 11 suggests this apparent decline is set to continue as students had already started on these inappropriate pathways prior to the current academy leaders taking up post.

Gaps in attainment and progress for groups of students, including disadvantaged students and those who are disabled or who have special educational needs, continue to widen compared with others in the academy, and with other students nationally. However, there are early signs of improvement in the proportion of students making the progress they should in English. This includes disadvantaged students, who are now making better progress.

Attainment of students in the sixth form is improving, both at AS and A level, as a result of better teaching. Vocational courses continue to be a strength and students attain well at Level 3 in the sixth form and also at Level 2 in Key Stage 4.

Achievement seen in students' work in books is variable. Detailed marking in English is continuing to support students in making better progress. Marking is improving in mathematics but is not yet of a consistently high enough quality across the department to ensure that all students benefit. Teachers' comments are sometimes too general to enable students to quickly act on the advice given. Students seen in science are now starting to make better progress because they are responding to marking which is encouraging them to improve their work.

The quality of teaching

There has been a high turnover of teachers which has slowed the pace of improvements to teaching as new teachers require further time to embed the standards expected by academy leaders into their teaching. There are pockets of good practice across the academy but good practice is not yet consistent within departments.

In science, tasks are provided at different levels to challenge students, but sometimes it is not made clear enough which tasks they should tackle. Poor progress was seen in physical education where students not taking part in the lesson became spectators so learnt nothing; and in geography, where the work on settlements was not explained well enough so that students were confused and could not complete the task correctly. In mathematics, too much repetition of questions at a simple level means learning is not moved on quickly enough. However, teachers in history, especially in the sixth form, challenge students well by asking questions which encourage students to think deeper about their work.

Assessment information previously provided by teachers has been inaccurate, especially at Key Stage 3. Academy leaders have worked to improve this and there is now more rigorous assessment which has been driven by subject leaders' frequent checks on students' work and validation by external partners. Leaders now have confidence in the most recent teacher assessments, which will be used to track the progress made by all students at each subsequent assessment point. This will be analysed in detail and checked carefully at the next inspection.

Inspectors noted that students' books are now marked frequently and in far more detail than seen previously. This was confirmed by students, who told inspectors they now do not mind doing homework as they know it will be checked and feel their efforts are being recognised. In the past, 'There was just no point doing homework because hardly anyone ever bothered to mark it.'

Behaviour in lessons continues to improve and students told inspectors that disruptions to lessons are rare. As a result of significant improvements to staff attendance, there are now very few supply teachers. Teachers have high expectations of behaviour in lessons and students accept this. Students work well together in pairs or small groups and enjoy having the opportunity to talk in lessons about their ideas.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

Academy leaders are not doing enough to actively promote British values or to be certain that all students, including those in the sixth form, understand the risks posed by extremist views, radicalisation, gangs and knife crime. Students asked, knew little about these dangers. They also knew little about other faiths and cultures. Students told inspectors that their least favourite subject was personal, social and health education (PSHE). A new PSHE coordinator has very recently been appointed and this area of provision is to be reviewed shortly.

Staff continue to see it as a whole-academy responsibility to work together to improve behaviour and, because of this, behaviour continues to improve. Inspectors saw some boisterous behaviour along crowded corridors and stairs, and students rely on reminders for good conduct from the ever-vigilant and present teachers.

Students proudly wear their uniform and further demonstrate pride in their work, seen through neat presentation and consistency in standards of setting out.

Attendance continues to improve and is now just above the national average. During the inspection, 95.5% of the school were in attendance. A very small number of students arrive late to lessons, and their prompt movement at the end of break or lunchtime is encouraged by the many teachers on duty.

The quality of leadership in and management of the school

The Interim Principal, together with his senior leaders, continue to drive improvements by demonstrating high expectations in all they do. They are proactive in improving the academy and act quickly to address weaknesses as soon as they are identified. Following the last monitoring inspection when inadequacies were identified in the academy's approach to developing literacy, the whole of Year 7 and disadvantaged students in other year groups have now taken a reading test and a programme has been introduced to accelerate the reading skills of the weakest

readers. Academy leaders are currently exploring sponsorship through a large and successful international company, based locally, to provide funding to allow all students in all year groups to be supported in the same way and to further develop a passion for reading.

The sixth form study programme has not yet been fully embedded. More time is required for students to study English and mathematics to prepare them better for retaking GCSEs in these subjects. Sixth form students do not have enough opportunity to work with younger students in supporting them in their learning and not enough students take up the opportunity of work experience. They are therefore missing out on opportunities to develop fully their employability skills.

Academy self-evaluation processes are rigorous and leaders' own evaluations are validated by external partners and consultants. Leaders and governors are very aware of the weaknesses of the academy and the challenges they still face. This accurate view is provided through frequent work scrutinies, lesson observations and other shorter visits to lessons. It is vital that this work continues as it enables groups of underachieving students, and teachers who need further support, to be quickly identified and support plans put into place.

Academy leaders know where teaching is weak and have taken prompt and decisive action to improve this. The most recent cycle of monitoring of the performance of teachers has just been completed and only those teachers who have met their challenging targets have been successful in moving up the pay-scale.

The academy's approach to professional development through Wednesday morning teaching and learning sessions continues to be valued by teachers. New teachers who met with inspectors talked very favourably about the support they are receiving from academy leaders to help them to demonstrate the high-quality practice which is needed to ensure that students catch up quickly. New subject leaders benefit from separate sessions to support them in adding further rigour to monitoring across the academy, but they require further support in using assessment information.

Governors provide a good balance of support and challenge to academy leaders. They understand the reasons why progress is not yet good enough. Notes from governing body meetings do not reflect the rigour of their work as they are too descriptive and do not state clearly the challenging questions that have been asked, agreed actions that result, or the deadlines for follow-up under 'matters arising' at subsequent meetings. The governing body will shortly be undergoing further restructuring as the academy becomes part of a multi-academy trust and it is recommended that administrative support is reviewed as part of this.

External support

The quality of external support provided from a range of consultants and through the partner school continues to be of high quality and is effective in supporting senior leaders' evaluation processes and supporting them in driving better progress.