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Ms Ceri Hathaway
Interim Principal
Blackthorn Primary School
Waingrove
Blackthorn
Northampton
NN3 8EP

Dear Ms Hathaway

Special measures monitoring inspection of Blackthorn Primary School

Following my visit to your academy on 18 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 school's recent section 5 inspection.

The inspection was the first monitoring inspection since the academy became subject to special measures following the inspection which took place in July 2014.

Evidence

During this inspection, meetings were held with senior leaders, a member of the academy advisory board, and the Director of Education for the Education Fellowship Trust. A range of documentation was considered including: the academy's evaluations of the quality of teaching and learning; the most recent data on the achievement of pupils; information provided to families; information relating to the safeguarding of pupils; and the most recent data relating to the behaviour and attendance of pupils. A tour of the school was undertaken and pupils were spoken to

informally. Pupils' current and previous workbooks in a range of subjects were also considered.

The sponsor's statement of action and the school's improvement plans were evaluated.

Context

From the beginning of the autumn term 2014, the academy advisory board has appointed an interim principal to cover the maternity leave of the substantive principal. The Education Fellowship Trust has continued to deploy the executive principal, maintaining the levels of support (two and a half days per week) which he had provided to the school since January 2014. In addition, the academy advisory board has made a number of appointments from September 2014: a vice-principal and a director of learning; three new teachers including a newly qualified teacher to teach pupils in Key Stage 2; and a new teacher for the Early Years Foundation Stage. A new leader who is an existing member of staff, has responsibility for disabled pupils and those who have special educational needs also commenced her role in September 2014. Five other members of staff have indicated that they will be leaving the school at the end of the autumn term 2014.

The local authority has decommissioned the specially resourced provision for pupils with special educational needs. The former pupils have now been placed on the school's roll.

The quality of leadership and management at the school

The academy sponsor and academy advisory board have acted quickly to secure the leadership of the school following the absence of the substantive principal. The interim principal has already forged positive working relationships with the executive principal and other recently appointed senior and middle leaders. The team is beginning to get to grips with their clearly defined roles and responsibilities, and has started to tackle the areas identified for improvement at the most recent section 5 inspection.

Senior leaders have prioritised their work on addressing pupils' poor behaviour, both during lessons and break times. A new behaviour policy and code, which communicate clearly the systems for rewards and sanctions for pupils' behaviour, has been introduced. Although this initially resulted in the number of fixed-term exclusions rising, higher expectations allied to the consistent application of the code are helping to improve pupils' behaviour around the academy. Pupils say that the new uniform is helping them to feel proud to attend and it is clear that a sense of

shared ethos is beginning to develop across the academy. This is reflected in improved rates of pupils' attendance.

Senior leaders acknowledge that while a clear programme of monitoring activities has been identified across the academic year, not enough regular checks on teaching have taken place during the first half of the autumn term. This is partly due to instability in staffing arrangements as well as leaders needing to address longstanding issues relating to staff contracts. A more comprehensive programme of checks has very recently commenced, drawing upon information gathered from visits to lessons, scrutiny of pupils' work and looking at data on pupils' progress. This process has been supported by the introduction a new tracking system to check more closely on pupils' progress. Pupils have been assessed at the beginning of the autumn term so that senior leaders and teachers have a clear view of pupils' starting points. More regular and secure assessments of pupils' work are being undertaken and the information is being used to hold teachers to closer account for pupils' progress. This action is in line with the more rigorous approach which is being taken towards performance management, following a review of the policy.

Senior leaders have introduced a new approach to marking which is displayed throughout the school. Despite some inconsistencies in its implementation, the large majority of pupils are now being provided with detailed feedback. This is beginning to help them to improve the quality of their work more quickly.

The academy sponsor has established an academy advisory board to provide support and to check on and evaluate the rate of the academy's progress. Although there are only four members who make up the board, along with the Director of Education of the academy sponsor, they have a clear view of the academy's current position, strengths and areas for development. To guide the work of the academy, a statement of action has been produced. The statement is detailed and accurately reflects the priorities for improvement as identified at the previous inspection. It is clear who is responsible for leading specific development activities and those who gather information, which can be used to check on the rate of improvement. However, the statement is highly ambitious in relation to the timescales for improvement. As a result, senior leaders have not been able to address all of the initial actions identified for the first term of its implementation. A further weakness is the absence of specific targets and milestones linked to pupils' achievement inherent within the statement. As a result, members of the academy advisory board are limited in being able to check whether intended actions are having the desired impact on raising standards.

Senior leaders have not drawn together a school improvement plan to underpin the statement of action. Consequently, actions targeted at maintaining or building on the academy's strengths or tackling areas for improvement beyond the key issues, are not integrated into the academy's operational planning.

The academy sponsor intends to strengthen the academy advisory board by appointing additional members, including those drawn from the local community. As a result, the external review of governance and the academy's use of the pupil premium, which were recommendations at the most recent inspection, have yet not taken place.

Following the monitoring inspection the following judgements were made:

The sponsor's statement of action is not fit for purpose.

The academy's improvement plan is not fit for purpose.

Having considered all the evidence I strongly recommend that the academy does not seek to appoint NQTs.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the Chair of the Academy Advisory Board, the Director of Children's Services for Northamptonshire and the Director of Education for the Education Fellowship Trust. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

David Carter

Her Majesty's Inspector

The letter should be copied to the following:

- Appropriate authority - Chair of the Governing Body/Interim Executive Board
- Local authority – (including where a school is an academy)