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5 December 2014

Mrs L Fidock, Principal
Tree Tops Academy
Brishing Lane
Park Wood
Maidstone
Kent
ME15 9EZ

Dear Mrs Fidock

Special measures monitoring inspection of Tree Tops Academy

Following my visit to your academy on 3 and 4 December 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 third 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 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 strongly recommend that the academy does not seek to appoint newly qualified teachers (NQTs).

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 Management Board, the Director of Children's Services for Kent and the Academies Advisors Unit at the Department for Education.

Yours sincerely

Sheena MacDonald
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

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

- Rapidly improve the quality of teaching so it is consistently good and improve pupils' attitudes to learning by:
 - raising teachers' expectations of what pupils can and should attain by challenging pupils to work harder in lessons
 - making sure teachers use information about pupils' progress to plan lessons which meet the individual needs of all pupils
 - enabling pupils to be less reliant on adult support
 - asking pupils more challenging and probing questions
 - ensuring teachers check the progress that pupils are making during lessons, spotting mistakes that pupils are making and adapting their teaching accordingly.
- Raise achievement in reading and mathematics by:
 - making sure that all teachers plan and teach phonics at the right level for pupils so that they can apply this knowledge with confidence
 - ensuring that the teaching of reading to older pupils places more emphasis on understanding the meaning of new words, whole sentences and the text as a whole.
 - providing pupils with more opportunities to develop and apply their reading skills across all subjects
 - making better use of resources to support pupils' mathematical skills, particularly for less-able pupils in Key Stage 2
 - improving teachers' planning so that pupils have more opportunities to use and apply their mathematical skills.
- Improve leadership and management by:
 - ensuring that teachers whose practice is not good enough receive high-quality support to help them improve rapidly
 - analysing information about pupils' attainment and progress more rigorously and taking action when appropriate to ensure pupils in every class are making at least good progress
 - developing the skills of all leaders so that they can fully contribute to improving the school
 - making sure that the interim management board holds school leaders robustly accountable for improvements in pupils' achievement.

Report on the third monitoring inspection on 3 and 4 December 2014

Evidence

I observed teaching and learning in all classes and made further short visits to some classes and groups. I looked at the work in pupils' books and scrutinised various documents including the revised improvement plan, minutes of the management board, safeguarding information, senior leaders' monitoring of teaching and learning and the most up-to-date checks on pupils' achievement in reading, writing and mathematics. I met with senior leaders, subject leaders and three members of the management board, including the Regional Director of Education for the Academies Enterprise Trust (AET). I also met with an English consultant from AET who the academy has commissioned to provide additional support.

Context

Since the last visit, there have been changes in teaching staff in the Early Years Foundation Stage. There is a new Chair of the Management Board who is also the Regional Director of Education for the AET.

Achievement of pupils at the school

There was a mixed picture in the summer term assessments of reading, writing and mathematics. There was a drop in the proportion of children leaving Reception last July having achieved a good level of development. However, these pupils are now making rapid progress in Year 1. At the end of Key Stage 1 there was also a slight drop in reading and writing standards. On a brighter note, there was a very positive increase in the percentage of Year 1 pupils who achieved the expected levels in the phonics screening check and a welcome improvement in the end of Year 6 national tests.

The most recent checks show that the increasing pace of improvement seen in the last visit has been maintained and in many classes is speeding up. This is most obvious in Years 1 and 2 but is fairly steady across the academy. The improvements are very noticeable in many of the pupils' books, both in terms of the quality and quantity of their work. In the younger classes, a majority of pupils are now on track to reach expected levels by the end of the year. This is not as evident in the older classes as these pupils have the most ground to make up because of inadequate provision in the past. Nonetheless, if the current rate of improvement continues, three quarters of Year 6 pupils are now on track to achieve the expected levels for their age group. The academy's careful assessment and tracking show very clearly now where the pace of improvement is too slow and, because most pupils are making reasonable progress, it is very obvious when this is not the case. For example, in some classes, pupils eligible for additional government funding and pupils with special educational needs are well behind their classmates and not catching up quickly enough.

Pupils are reading more widely and there has been a concerted effort to give more opportunities to read a variety of texts. Pupils of all ages are beginning to make use of their knowledge of letters and sounds to spell and read unfamiliar words. The poor teaching of these skills in the past means that many pupils find spelling difficult. Across all age groups, writing is the weakest subject and there is a strong focus on improving the opportunities for pupils to write more often. As a result, there is evidence of rapid improvements in many of the pupils' books, albeit from very low starting points.

The quality of teaching

The quality of teaching is getting better and the impact of this is beginning to be more apparent in pupils' improving skills. There has been a shift upwards since the last visit so that now more than half of the teaching is good. Most of the rest requires improvement and there is still a little inadequate practice. Teachers are planning more relevant, interesting and practical activities and giving pupils suitable resources to support their learning. For example, children in the nursery learned about different fruit and healthy eating choices while making fruit kebabs. They also practised their fine motor and counting skills. Year 6 pupils were enthusiastic about their mathematics task to design rooms for specific purposes within set budgets and space restrictions. The best teaching is more evident in the classrooms rather than in small-group work. The academy leaders need to carefully evaluate the effectiveness of the large amount of small-group work that currently takes place and consider whether the impact of this support outweighs the opportunities these pupils are missing when they are out of class.

All staff are benefiting from weekly, short and lively training sessions so their subject knowledge is improving. The classrooms and corridors provide stimulating and valuable displays to celebrate and support learning. Lesson planning is improving and there is better use of what pupils know and can do already to move learning on more quickly. Teachers and learning support assistants are working hard to provide pupils with opportunities to develop their vocabulary and ideas through discussion. They are also, for the most part, matching activities to different abilities so that there is a better level of challenge for most pupils. They are also increasing the expectations and opportunities for pupils to work independently and at length. This is still an aspect which needs further development as occasionally adults still take up too much time in lessons, and in group work, giving unnecessary instructions and explanations. This leaves too little time for the pupils to really extend and deepen their learning. In a few cases, the resources provided and the match of activity to different abilities is still not quite right.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

As the quality of teaching improves, there is a noticeable improvement in pupils' attitudes to their learning. In most classes, there is a purposeful atmosphere and

pupils willingly engage with the learning activities. This is partly because the learning is more interesting now. The increasing eagerness of pupils to learn can be seen in many of the lessons and in the quality of the learning they do at home and bring in to share with others. They respond quickly to teachers' signals and routines are well established in most classes. Relationships are positive and pupils generally behave well. In the younger classes, pupils are more able to work independently and persist even when the work is quite challenging. This persistence when the going gets tough is less evident in some of the younger Key Stage 2 classes. When this happens the adults need to persevere and not jump in too quickly. However, pupils are much less reliant on constant direction than previously.

Attendance is still just below average but is creeping upwards. The rate of exclusions remains much higher than average but there has been a very sharp drop in the number this year when compared with the same time last year. This is partly because of an improvement in overall behaviour, but also because of better support and provision for those pupils with significant emotional, social and behavioural needs. The systems for ensuring pupils' safety are rigorous and, as a result of the improvements, the school is a safer place now than previously.

The quality of leadership in and management of the school

Both the Principal and Vice Principal are growing in confidence, decisiveness and influence. There is clarity of purpose throughout the academy and a willingness to improve. Senior leaders have encouraged an atmosphere where staff feel confident to acknowledge their own areas for improvement and most readily ask for, and act on, advice. This is resulting in improvements to teaching and learning. New approaches to assessment and a revised curriculum have been introduced since September and have clarified what pupils should learn and achieve in each class. Intensive and practical staff training and development are well focused and improving their knowledge and skills. English and mathematics subject leaders are becoming increasingly influential, partly as a result of leading regular training sessions.

Senior leaders know the staff and pupils very well. This is because they spend much of their time out and about in classrooms, corridors and on the playground. They have introduced a rigorous monitoring system which provides a clear picture of the quality of teaching and learning over time in each class. They visit classes regularly, check the books, talk to pupils and track how well pupils are acquiring key skills. They therefore have a good understanding of what support, encouragement or action is needed to make sure the pace of improvement continues to speed up and that any remaining weaknesses in teaching are tackled swiftly.

The management board meets regularly and the records of their meetings show that board members know the academy well and provide both support and challenge to senior leaders. The new improvement plan is much sharper and practical. The planned actions are appropriate and the responsibilities of all staff and management

board members are explicit. It would be improved further with the identification of a small number of measurable milestones for each key area so that everyone can easily see whether the academy is on track to meet the end of year targets. The academy is still reliant on providing a great deal of out-of-class individual and group support. The effectiveness of this support has not been rigorously evaluated and the rate of progress of some pupils who receive additional support is poor. Similarly, a new curriculum was introduced relatively recently and it is not clear whether all pupils are able to access all subjects in sufficient depth.

External support

The AET continues to provide consultancy, support and training. This is being enhanced by the academy because they buy in additional literacy consultant time to work regularly with staff and pupils. The senior leaders are increasingly in control of, and directing, external support because they understand very well the particular needs of the academy. The Principal of a neighbouring AET academy, who is also on the management board, provides valuable support for the senior leaders. The academy continues to develop useful links with other schools. For example, Key Stage 1 teachers have visited another primary school to observe good practice in the teaching of early reading and writing.