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12 December 2014

Mr Tomas Ashley
The Headteacher
Willenhall E-ACT Academy
Furzebank Way
Willenhall
Walsall
WV12 4BD

Dear Mr Ashley

Special measures monitoring inspection of Willenhall E-ACT Academy

Following my visit with Mark Capel and Colin Lower, Additional Inspectors, to your academy on 9 and 10 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 academy's previous monitoring inspection.

The inspection was the fourth monitoring inspection since the academy became subject to special measures following the inspection which took place in September 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.

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 Walsall.

Yours sincerely

Deborah James
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

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

- Improve the quality of teaching to at least good in order to raise achievement for students by ensuring that all teachers:
 - use the available information about students to plan and teach lessons that provide suitable challenge for all the students across the academy, including the sixth form
 - frequently evaluate the rate of progress being made by individuals and groups of students during each lesson, so that students move on to more challenging work when they are ready or receive support if they need it
 - use questioning more effectively to probe, challenge and deepen students' knowledge and understanding
 - give clear direction to teaching assistants and other adults in the class to ensure they provide support to those students who need it the most
 - consistently give students written feedback that clearly shows them what they need to do to reach higher levels and corrects errors in understanding, spelling, punctuation and grammar
 - give students opportunities to reflect on, and respond to, comments about their work and check that the improvements have been made.
- Improve leadership, management and governance at all levels by:
 - ensuring that the checks made on teaching, including in the sixth form, focus on the quality of learning and students' progress, and that leaders are suitably trained to support teachers to improve their practice
 - providing opportunities for teachers to see and learn from the best teaching, in order that they can improve their own practice
 - ensuring that the assessment information to support teaching and learning is easily accessible, clear and well-used to plan activities which promote good progress for all students
 - checking on the implementation and impact of whole-academy policies, especially the quality of marking and lesson planning
 - ensuring that the pupil premium funding is used effectively to close the gaps between disadvantaged pupils with others
 - ensuring that governors hold leaders fully to account for the rates of improvement in teaching and students' achievement.

An external review of governance should be undertaken, to include a specific focus on the school's use of the pupil premium, in order to assess how this aspect of leadership and governance may be improved.

Report on the fourth monitoring inspection on 9–10 December 2014

Evidence

Inspectors observed the academy's work, scrutinised documents and met with the Principal and other senior and middle leaders, a group of newly qualified teachers, students, the Chair of the Governing Body, a representative from the sponsor and an E-ACT system leader who is providing support to the academy. Inspectors scrutinised documents including records of students' achievement, students' books, quality assurance records and the academy's surveys of the view of parents.

Context

Thirty two teaching staff left the academy at the end of the summer term and a further 18 staff will leave at the end of this term. A new vice-principal joined the academy in September and all vacancies have been filled.

Achievement of pupils at the school

In 2014 the proportion of students gaining five or more GCSEs at grades A* to C remained broadly the same as last year. However, changes in the formal reporting requirements mean the academy's headline figure is considerably lower than this, with only 39% of students reaching this key benchmark on their first attempt.

The proportion of students making the expected levels of progress in both English and mathematics is below average. Boys made far less progress than girls and only 30% of them gained five or more GCSEs at grades A* to C, compared to 47% of girls. Disadvantaged students also did less well than their peers.

The academy's own data for current Year 11 students show that students are now making better progress. This is reinforced by inspectors' observations of progress in lessons, where students are now receiving better teaching and staff have higher expectations of them.

Students in the sixth form make progress and reach standards that are broadly in line with their peers nationally, although there has been a decline in results since 2013. Current students in Year 12 have been well supported in making the appropriate decisions about the right course for them. As a result, senior leaders expect more students to be successful in their chosen courses.

The quality of teaching

There was evidence that a small proportion teaching over time is now outstanding, giving students an increased opportunity to make rapid progress and catch up on earlier underachievement. This outstanding practice, along with an increased proportion of teaching that is consistently good, gives the academy a secure base of

good practice to ensure that more students can make good progress. There was no evidence of any inadequate teaching.

Improvements in teaching identified at the last monitoring visit have been embedded. Teachers have good subject knowledge which they use to good effect to plan lessons that students find interesting and motivating. In the sixth form, teachers' strong subject knowledge allows teachers to effectively challenge and encourage students to use subject specialist language. Good relationships between teachers and students, along with consistent implementation of the academy's behaviour management model, mean that lessons are generally harmonious and enjoyable. Teachers are planning more carefully and, as a result, most students are moved through an appropriate range of activities at a good pace. This enables most students to make the progress expected of them. Students were keen to tell inspectors that teaching is improving and they learn new things in lessons. They were also pleased with the way that teachers supported them in trying to improve their work.

In a Year 9 English lesson, students were expected to interpret the emotions of a character in a script. Students were fully engaged in this activity and were able to show empathy with the character. The teacher skilfully directed students who were ready to move to the next more challenging stage of the task where they had evaluate the author's choice of language.

However, teaching is not yet supporting all students to make consistently good progress. Teachers make use of a wider range of strategies to question students' basic knowledge, but they do not persist with questioning to deepen students' understanding of more complex ideas. Students are not given enough examples of what would make a high quality answer to help them produce better answers in the future.

The impact of training was evident in the strategies and approaches used by teachers, but they are not yet skilled in selecting the right strategy at the right time. For example, teachers stopped students' activities to check on their learning at a point where students were fully engaged and making good progress with their task. At times, this meant that good learning was interrupted. This can make lessons seem stilted and slow the pace of learning. On occasions, teachers lack the confidence to move away from planned activities even if they are not generating the required student progress.

The improvements in mathematics seen at the last monitoring visit have been further strengthened. Students were enthusiastic about their mathematics lessons, often enjoying the teaching and making rapid progress because of work that is targeted to different ability groups within the lesson. However, in many subjects, all students are still expected to complete the same tasks at the same pace. As a result, more-able students are not given enough opportunities to be challenged and stretched in their learning.

The education plans to support disabled students and those with special educational needs have been reviewed this term. Plans now give more specific guidance on how teachers and teaching assistants can best help students to succeed.

The marking policy has now been in place for two terms. It is used consistently by all staff within the academy. Marking takes place on a regular basis and praises students for their good work. In the great majority of subjects, students are given the opportunity to reflect on their work and their teachers' comments. However, this is often rather superficial, with low expectations of how deeply students should respond. There is considerable variation in elements of marking, for example some teachers always identify strengths in a student's work before going on to areas that require improvement. Targets are consistently set to help students improve, but these are not always linked to a grade or criteria. Some teachers accept poor and scrappy presentation, whilst others expect and get much higher standards of written work.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

Students told inspectors that behaviour within the academy has improved. That was evident in lessons where students' attitudes to learning were generally positive. There was little evidence of any disruption in lessons and many students were actively engaged in their tasks. Parents' views, collected by the academy through a survey at a recent parents' evening, were overwhelmingly positive about students' behaviour.

Teachers manage behaviour consistently in line with academy policies and make good use of praise and rewards. At the time of the inspection the academy was undertaking a 'WOW' week, where students and teachers were issuing reward cards for small incidents worthy of praise. Students were keen to receive praise for their good work and proud to share their achievements with inspectors.

There are still some concerns about students' behaviour around the academy outside of lesson times. There is boisterous and loud behaviour evident at break and lunch times and at lesson changeovers. Such behaviours made movement in such a complex site more difficult and present a challenge to the safe movement around the site for younger and more vulnerable students. Students generally take care of their academy buildings, although litter was evident in corridors after break and lunchtimes.

Despite these concerns, the great majority of students we met were respectful, polite, well mannered and helpful. They provided us with honest opinions of the academy and were clearly proud of its recent improvements.

Attendance has improved slightly over the same period last year but is still below national levels, and the proportion of students who are persistently absent from the academy is very high. Punctuality remains a concern, with more than 40 students late to the academy on the first day of the inspection.

Students told inspectors that they felt safe in the academy. They could describe incidents of bullying but were insistent that the academy dealt with such incidents rapidly and effectively. The curriculum includes opportunities to develop an understanding of e-safety and drug awareness, but there were gaps in students' knowledge about some challenging issues such as forced marriage.

The academy's specialist provision for the most vulnerable students provides effective care and support. A small group of students who attend off-site provision for part of their timetable are carefully monitored by the academy, with daily checks on their attendance and well-being.

The quality of leadership in and management of the school

The Principal has gained the confidence of sponsor, governors, students and staff. They share his vision for a thriving successful community and there is a strongly held belief that the academy is improving. For the first time since the academy went into special measures, a permanent senior leadership team is in place. New leaders have rapidly understood their role and had an immediate impact on procedures within the academy. Self-evaluation is accurate and reviewed regularly with governors and sponsors.

This term the academy has made rapid progress in developing the skills of middle leaders. A well planned calendar of quality assurance activities means that every head of department knows what they should be monitoring and when. There is a coherent process for middle leaders to regularly check the quality of teaching, marking and planning within their department. The views of students are also sought to enhance further the depth of evidence. Regular evaluations of the outcomes of this monitoring are shared with senior leaders and appropriate interventions are put in place. These evaluations are well used to inform academy planning, professional development opportunities for teachers and performance management targets.

The academy has sustained a focus on improving the quality of teaching. The increasing number of good or better teachers gives the academy the capacity to provide well targeted one-to-one support for those teachers whose teaching requires improvement. Senior leaders make accurate judgements about the quality of teaching and give well targeted advice to help teachers improve. Newly qualified teachers have been well supported in developing their teaching skills.

Assessment processes are now securely in place, with student tracking information collected and analysed in detail six times a year. Heads of department welcome the detailed analysis of the performance of different groups of students within their department and use it to target interventions to help students who have fallen behind.

The governing body is still in the process of recruiting governors with the full range of skills to ensure that the academy leaders will be fully held to account. The actions identified in last year's review of governance have been implemented. However, governors do not yet have a full understanding of the impact of the spending of the pupil premium funding.

All statutory requirements for safeguarding are met. The academy has good procedures in place to ensure students are kept safe and know how to be safe.

External support

The academy has received considerable support from the sponsor, targeted at a number of different levels within the academy. The science, mathematics and French departments have benefited from considerable additional help which has had a demonstrable impact on the quality of teaching. The Principal and senior leaders receive support through a principal of a local outstanding academy who has acted quickly to provide additional capacity when necessary. For example, she currently provides a sixth form leader for the academy two days a week whilst the academy seeks a permanent solution. The heads of the English and mathematics departments spoke highly of termly leadership seminars organised through E-ACT. The sponsor continues to lead a half termly Raising Achievement Board which has been effective in ensuring the academy remains focused on its key improvement priorities.