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22 January 2015

Joanna Manson
The High Arcal School
High Arcal Drive
Sedgley
Dudley
DY3 1BP

Dear Mrs Manson

Special measures monitoring inspection of The High Arcal School

Following my visit with Alan Brewerton and Elizabeth Gaffney, Additional Inspectors to your school on 20–21 January 2015, 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 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.

Having considered all the evidence I am of the opinion that the academy may appoint 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 Governing Body and the Director of Children's Services for Dudley and as below.

Yours sincerely

Mel Ford
Her Majesty's Inspector

The letter should be copied to the following:

- Chair of the Governing Body
- Local authority
- For the Secretary of State use the following email address:
CausingConcern.SCHOOLS@education.gsi.gov.uk
- open.FREESCHOOLS@education.gsi.gov.uk- for academies

Annex

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

- Improve the quality and consistency of teaching, so that it is good or better, in order to raise students' achievement, by:
 - making sure that teachers use lesson time effectively and that planned activities challenge and interest all students
 - providing regular opportunities in lessons for students to explore what they are learning about in greater depth
 - ensuring teachers check students' understanding during the course of the lesson and adjust teaching to challenge or support appropriately.

- Increase the rate of students' progress in English and make it consistently good in mathematics, by:
 - checking students' progress in these subjects to identify any underachievement, particularly by students supported by the pupil premium, disabled students and those with special educational needs, and taking swift and effective action where this is needed
 - improving the quality and range of students' work in English
 - ensuring writing tasks set in lessons are always imaginative and well-resourced and hold the attention of boys in particular
 - reviewing the use of time in mathematics by students entered early for GCSE once they have completed their examinations.

- Improve the leadership and management of the academy, including that of the governing body, by making sure that:
 - the leadership of weaker subjects, particularly English, is urgently improved
 - all leaders, including those in charge of subjects, have an accurate understanding of the performance of the academy and the steps required to raise standards
 - all leaders accurately and rigorously use information about students' progress in order to hold staff to account where students are underachieving
 - the pupil premium is used effectively to close remaining gaps between students eligible for the additional support and other students
 - improvement planning is rigorous and includes precise targets so that leaders know whether improvements are being made
 - governors develop the knowledge and skills required to ask questions of the academy's leaders so that they can systematically identify and seek explanations for any underperform.

Report on the third monitoring inspection on 20–21 January 2015

Evidence

Inspectors observed the academy's work, scrutinised documents, including records of students' progress and the work in their books, and met with the headteacher, senior leaders and middle leaders, groups of students, the Chair of the Governing Body and other governors.

Context

There have been no major changes to staffing since the last monitoring inspection.

Achievement of students at the academy

The monitoring systems and processes that were introduced last academic year are becoming embedded in the academy's routines. Rigorous analysis of the information generated is ensuring that leaders know exactly where improvements still need to be made and take rapid action to implement them. Such actions are followed up by close monitoring of impact and, where impact is lacking, further action is taken.

Rates of progress in English have continued to improve and there is now evidence that progress is also improving in mathematics. The academy's monitoring of students' achievement shows that overall expected progress in both subjects for Year 11 students at this point in the year is above the national average for 2014. This picture is repeated at Year 10.

Progress has improved for all groups of students, including disadvantaged students and those with a disability or special educational needs, when compared to the academy's own performance in 2014 and to national averages for that year. For instance, the academy's monitoring suggests that disadvantaged students are on track to make at least as much progress as all students nationally. However, leaders are aware that the gap between this group and other students in the academy has increased because, with the exception of those who also have a disability or special educational needs, those who are not disadvantaged have made faster progress. Appropriate actions have been taken to address this, and leaders are monitoring their impact carefully.

The early signs of the impact of the new Personalised Learning Centre noted at the last monitoring inspection are now being realised. There has been a notable impact on improving the progress of students who struggle to meet the academy's expectations of behaviour. Working closely with the Student Support Centre, leaders have ensured that all students accessing this facility have a detailed provision map

and a personalised curriculum. Consequently, the progress of this group of students has continued to improve in English and is now also improving in mathematics.

Importantly, leaders are now focusing increasingly on Key Stage 3 achievement in order to secure the long term and sustainable improvement required. Leaders describe the additional support provided for Key Stage 4 students as a 'rescue package', whereas the focus on Key Stage 3 is seen as preventative action that, in the longer term, is intended to reduce the reliance on intervention later on. The close scrutiny from Year 7 onwards is having a positive impact as there is now rapid identification of additional support needs, for instance, where reading skills are below the levels expected. The investment in a reading programme to assist with this is due to be evaluated in the next couple of weeks and early indicators suggest that significant gains will have been made.

Leaders agree that while the focus on English and mathematics has paid dividends, there now needs to be a wider lens on achievement across other subject areas. This is particularly the case for science, where achievement is significantly weaker than in English and mathematics. Leaders have already secured external support to address the issue and this now needs to be accelerated.

The quality of teaching

The focus on improving teaching has continued, supported by robust performance management systems. Inspectors saw evidence that training has been well matched to the needs of the teaching staff so that it has had a positive impact on improving the teaching of individuals. This is reflected in the academy's records and verified by progress reports from external partners.

Whole-academy training has been carefully considered so that it supports leaders in meeting priority targets. For instance, there has been recent training on differentiation through questioning. Where learning was best, there was clear evidence of teachers applying their knowledge and using questioning very effectively to challenge and stretch their students, although this is not yet consistently the case.

The 'tasks on entry' introduced in September have had a positive impact. They were evident in all lessons seen by inspectors and ensured that students were engaged in learning very quickly on entry to the classroom. It was clear that students expected to be challenged to learn in this way and nearly all said that it helped them to settle to their learning more quickly.

Less consistent is the quality of advice provided by teachers when marking students' work. Leaders are aware that this is an area that needs a boost. Nevertheless, almost all students spoken to knew what their targets were and whether they were on track to achieve them. The vast majority could explain what they needed to do to improve. In students' books there was evidence of students being required to

respond to teachers' marking and in the best examples inspectors could see a useful dialogue between student and teacher that had a clear and positive impact on progress over time. However, not all teachers follow up on the responses made and in these cases it was clear that the practice was having notably less impact on the progress of students because errors or misconceptions were not necessarily addressed.

The delivery of personal and social education has improved substantially since the last monitoring inspection. Inspectors noted that students were engaged because teachers were making sure that concepts, knowledge and understanding were linked well to students' lives and experiences. For instance, in a Year 11 session on managing finances, students were asked to think carefully about the next stage of their lives, at college or in training, and to calculate what the costs might be and how they might identify funding streams.

The short Wednesday form period is less successful. This is because teachers are trying to do too much in a very short time. The session does not have a clear purpose because activities to promote students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural (SMSC) development and administration tasks are taking place at the same time. Leaders agreed that this needed to be addressed and discussed the plans that have been developed for the SMSC curriculum, designed to enable them to improve this aspect of teaching.

Behaviour and safety of students

Inspectors were impressed with the behaviour of students around the academy at different times of the day. Without fail, students behaved sensibly and courteously towards each other, staff and visitors, including in crowded conditions on corridors and in the dining hall. This means that they arrive calmly at lessons following breaks and are ready to learn.

Low-level disruption in lessons is now rare and confined to those lessons where teaching is not yet good. The vast majority of students agree that their learning is seldom disrupted by the behaviour of others. In part this is because of the effectiveness of the Personalised Learning Centre, but also because nearly all teachers apply the academy's behaviour policy consistently, so that students know exactly what is expected of them.

Leaders agree that attendance remains a key issue for the academy. Records for the autumn term show that there has been an improvement in comparison to the same period last academic year. However, it is still too low, particularly for disadvantaged students. Leaders have put appropriate actions in place, but it is too early to judge whether these will be successful over time.

The quality of leadership in and management of the academy

The headteacher and senior leaders work together effectively because the restructure of roles and responsibilities noted at the previous monitoring inspection has been embedded. They have a very clear and accurate view of what progress has been made and what still needs to be done. Leaders do not shy away from rigorous analysis of actions or from recognising when actions have not had the expected impact. Communication of this analysis, both between senior leaders and to other staff, is regular and unequivocal.

Leaders have a well-defined view of how the wider aspects of leadership have improved and where development is still required. For instance, there has been a strong focus on improving subject leadership. Consequently, these middle leaders are now held to account for students' achievement and the quality of teaching in their areas of responsibility and are increasingly able to hold their subject staff to account. However, as the headteacher agrees, there has been less focus on developing other middle leaders and this is now an academy focus.

The accuracy of assessment is improving because the six-weekly reviews ensure that any issues are addressed very quickly. In addition, the academy is planning to extend the external moderation that already takes place at Key Stage 3 to include Key Stage 4. A number of staff are also now trained, or training, as markers for examination boards.

The governing body has responded very positively to the review of governance and now has a well-focused improvement plan in place. We discussed the addition of milestones to the plan so that they are able to show the progress they have made more precisely. Governing body committees have been restructured so that these now match the academy's priorities for improvement more effectively. As a result of on-going training on students' achievement information, minutes show that there is an increasing level of challenge. We agreed that the next step is to ensure that there are clear records of how governors have followed up on these challenges.

External support

The external support commissioned from high-performing schools continues to have a positive impact. However, the support provided by the local authority for science has not been as successful in ensuring that the rapid improvement required to improve students' progress is secured. This is because assessment of the quality of teaching has been over-generous.