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5 February 2015

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 with Denise Bonnette-Anderson, Additional Inspector, to your school on 3–4 February 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 second monitoring inspection since the academy became subject to special measures following the inspection which took place in July 2014. 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 not making enough progress towards the removal of special measures.

The sponsor's statement of action is fit for purpose.

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

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 Academy Advisory Board, the Director of Children's Services

for Northamptonshire, the Director of Education for The Education Fellowship, and the Department for Education Academies Advisers Unit.

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)
- The Secretary of State
- DfE - Academies Advisers Unit

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection which took place in July 2014.

- Improve teaching so that all groups of pupils in Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2 make better progress by ensuring that:
 - teachers assess work accurately and have high expectations of what pupils can achieve
 - teaching enables all pupils, including the most-able and those who have special educational needs to make sufficient progress in lessons
 - marking is carried out regularly, provides advice on how to improve, and teachers check whether pupils are using this information to improve their work.
- Improve the effectiveness of leadership and management by ensuring that:
 - leaders check that assessment information collected by the academy is accurate
 - additional funding for the pupil premium and sports activities are being used effectively enough and checks on their impact by governors and the academy sponsor are regular and rigorous
 - the arrangements for teaching literacy and numeracy across the academy are strong enough to result in pupils making rapid progress.
- Improve the behaviour of pupils by:
 - ensuring that the academy's behaviour policy is used consistently by all staff
 - ensuring that pupils take pride in their work and its presentation
 - improving lessons so they are interesting and stimulating enough to capture the enthusiasm of all pupils.

An external review of governance, including the academy's use of the pupil premium, should be undertaken in order to assess how these aspects of leadership and management may be improved.

Report on the second monitoring inspection on 3-4 February 2015

Evidence

Inspectors observed the academy's work and met with: the executive principal; the interim principal; a representative from the academy sponsor; the Chair of the Academy Advisory Board, and leaders responsible for English, mathematics, disabled pupils and those with special educational needs, child protection, disadvantaged pupils, and the Early Years Foundation Stage. Inspectors visited lessons, talked to pupils about their learning and evaluated the quality of their work in a range of subjects. Inspectors considered the academy's most recent data on the attainment and progress of groups of pupils. The quality of the academy's improvement plan was evaluated. Documentation relating to pupils' attendance, the behaviour and safety of pupils and arrangements for safeguarding pupils were also considered.

Context

Since the first monitoring visit, five teachers have left the school at the end of the autumn term 2014. In addition, five teaching assistants also resigned from their positions. The academy advisory board has appointed two permanent members of staff and have secured long-term supply cover to fill the gaps left by departing staff. Two newly appointed teaching assistants commenced their roles in January 2015. The substantive principal continues to be on maternity leave. The interim principal leads the school for four days each week and continues to be supported by the executive principal for two and half days a week. One member of the academy advisory board has resigned.

Achievement of pupils at the school

In 2014, the standards of pupils' attainment at the end of Key Stages 1 and 2 were low. Pupils at the end of Year 2 reached standards that were two terms behind other pupils nationally. Pupils at the end of Year 6 attained standards that were one academic year, or three terms, behind other pupils nationally. Disadvantaged pupils at the end of Key Stage 2 attained the same standards as others in the school; however, this was below that of similar pupils nationally. Girls' attainment was below that of boys at the end of Year 2 and Year 6, and was particularly low. The proportion of pupils who attained the expected standard in their understanding of phonics (letters and the sounds they make) by the end of Year 1 is below average.

The work in pupils' books shows that standards remain too low and are not rising quickly enough. This is a result of pupils not making enough progress in the majority of classes in Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2. This is because: pupils are not being given work which progressively builds upon their prior knowledge and skills; and too much time is wasted during lessons while adults manage pupils' behaviour. Pupils in

Year 6 are beginning to make faster progress. They say that they are motivated to achieve the short-term targets that they are set in English and mathematics.

There is little improvement in the quality of presentation of pupils' work. Teachers' expectations of pupils' recording in their workbooks are not high enough. The standard of handwriting remains low. Pupils are not transferring their skills from handwriting exercises into their everyday work. Although a handwriting policy has been developed, this has not yet been introduced.

The quality of teaching

The quality of teachers' assessment of pupils' learning is not improving quickly enough to ensure that, on a daily basis, pupils are provided with work that is set at the right level for their ability. As a result, the most-able pupils are not provided with sufficiently challenging work; pupils who find learning difficult are often given tasks which are too demanding for them, particularly in Key Stage 1. The presentation of learning at the beginning of lessons is not always interesting enough to capture pupils' interest. This can lead to pupils not being engaged in their learning. Teachers' expectations of pupils' learning behaviour during lessons are not high enough. This can lead to pupils disrupting the learning of other pupils as they are not listening or following the teacher's instructions.

The marking policy is not being adhered to in equal measure across the academy resulting in the quality of teachers' marking remaining inconsistent. Some pupils' work is not marked at all, or teachers' comments are simplistic and do not tell pupils how well they have done; other pupils receive helpful comments which they follow up and are beginning to accelerate the progress they are making. Overall, teachers' marking at this stage is not making enough difference to pupils' learning across the academy.

The quality of provision in the Reception Year has not been maintained since the previous inspection. Activities that are planned for children to undertake on their own are not capturing their interest or providing adequate challenge. As a result, children spend time with little purpose and this lack of engagement can result in incidents of poor behaviour. Adults have not deepened their understanding of how to promote children's learning and development. As a result, activities are not closely matched to the needs of the different groups of children. The leader responsible for the Early Years Foundation Stage has correctly identified that the quality of resources in the outdoor area are poor. This presents a barrier to children learning effectively.

The quality of provision in the Nursery has been maintained since the previous inspection. Children are thriving in the attractive and well-ordered environment. Parents are encouraged to support their children's development by contributing to

the learning journals. Children continue to make at least expected progress in all areas of learning.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

Since the first monitoring visit, the behaviour code has been fully implemented to include a system of rewards for pupils who demonstrate positive attitudes to learning and who behave well during break times. Pupils, especially in Key Stage 1, say that they like the new 'smiley' reward system and that they are increasingly motivated to follow the behaviour code. Senior leaders, staff, pupils and the Chair of the Academy Advisory Board, all feel that behaviour around the academy is beginning to improve. While there are occasions when pupils behave well, for instance, in assembly, where they responded enthusiastically when singing, their behaviour is not consistently good at other points during the day. Pupils in Key Stage 2 say that difficulties arise from moving from the playground to lining up to receive their dinner. On a few occasions, pupils were observed behaving in a disruptive manner and disobeying the instruction of lunchtime supervisors. Despite staff receiving training, leaders acknowledge that pupils' behaviour at lunchtime remains a cause of concern. Senior leaders have collated a 'luscious lunchtime' plan, which aims to improve the academy's approach to behaviour management during part of the day. The new arrangements for storing lunchboxes and enhancing the dining room environment are encouraging pupils to show better manners while they eat. However, the full impact of this work is yet to be seen.

Pupils' attitudes to learning have improved in a minority of classes. Nevertheless, where teaching is weakest, pupils resort to low-level disruption. As a result, adults have to reinforce expectations regarding behaviour, which inevitably slows the rate and pace of learning during lessons.

Despite attendance rates improving in the first three months of the academic year, this has not been maintained. The attendance rates of those who are persistently absent have also declined.

The quality of leadership in and management of the school

Senior leaders' actions are not effective in significantly improving the quality of teaching since the previous section 5 inspection. Despite staff receiving training and guidance, practice is not improving at a fast enough rate across the academy.

The director of learning, who is responsible for allocating the funds that are provided for the benefit of pupils for whom the school receives the pupil premium, has started to implement the actions that are outlined in the academy's plan. As a result, a programme of intervention and support, including individual guidance and focused work within small groups, has commenced. The director's checks are not rigorous enough to evaluate the impact of the use of the funding on pupils' achievements.

For instance, the director is unaware of the prior attainment of eligible pupils. Consequently, leaders are not able to evaluate the extent to which the funding is being used effectively to support disadvantaged pupils.

The leader responsible for the use of the physical education and sport premium for the primary sector has collated and started to implement a plan of action. As a result, pupils receive specialist coaching in sports from an external provider, and a teaching assistant is employed specifically to work with pupils during breakfast club and lunchtimes in promoting sport. However, at this stage, teachers are not benefiting from observing good practice in physical education and sport as part of their professional development. Pupils have received limited opportunities to be involved in competitive sports. Despite these initial actions, the funding is not being used effectively to make enough improvements to the quality of provision for physical education and sport in the academy.

The leader of mathematics has accurately evaluated that, while there are emerging signs of improvement in the quality of teaching, many shortcomings remain in the provision for mathematics. For instance, pupils are not given enough work to develop their skills in solving problems or their capacity to reason. The most-able pupils, other than in Year 6, are not challenged sufficiently to help them make the progress of which they are capable in the subject. Pupils have a limited understanding of mathematical vocabulary, which is a barrier to deepening their understanding of the subject. A new calculation policy has been introduced; however, it is too early to assess the impact of this work on pupils' progress. A review of the curriculum is due to take place next term. This is timely because the current framework for the mathematics curriculum is not structured well enough to ensure that pupils in every class are making at least expected rates of progress.

The leader of English acknowledges that pupils' engagement during lessons presents a barrier to them making faster progress in all aspects of the subject. Despite some improvements to the quality of teaching in English, notably in Year 4 and Year 6, the root cause of pupils' underachievement is the lack of consistency in teachers' use of assessment. As a result, pupils of different abilities are not being provided with activities that move their learning forward apace.

Senior leaders have written an improvement plan which complements the academy sponsor's statement of action. The plan details how senior leaders aim to tackle other aspects of the academy's work, beyond the key issues identified at the previous inspection, that have emerged as areas for improvement.

Members of the academy advisory board have strengthened their system to gather first-hand evidence of the academy's work by undertaking focused visits. Consequently, the Chair of the Academy Advisory Board has a precise understanding of aspects of the academy's work that have improved and the areas where progress has not been fast enough. For instance, members welcome the improvements that

have been made to enhance the quality of resources and learning environments in the academy. These improvements are beginning to engage the older pupils in particular more in their learning. Nevertheless, members of the board acknowledge that they have not held senior leaders to close enough account for the fact that teaching is not improving quickly enough and there is limited evidence of the extent to which teaching is having a positive impact on pupils' achievements.

During the inspection, shortcomings were identified in the academy's procedures for ensuring the safeguarding of pupils. Senior leaders have not responded quickly enough to recommendations that were identified following a review of the academy's policy and practice by the academy sponsor in the autumn term 2014. Although senior leaders were able to satisfy inspectors that pupils are kept safe, the lack of vigilance in checking the work of the interim and designated leader of safeguarding raises concerns about the importance which is attributed to the safeguarding of pupils.

External support

The Director of Education for The Education Fellowship acknowledges that the academy has found it difficult to recruit permanent staff following a number of staff resignations. Despite this being a barrier to securing improvement, the package of support provided to the academy is not sufficient to improve the quality of teaching at a fast enough rate. The external review of governance, including the academy's use of the pupil premium, was delayed while additional members were appointed to the academy advisory board. As the academy is unsuccessful in recruiting new members, an external review of governance is arranged for later this term. However, the review of the use of the pupil premium is yet to be organised.

Following the judgement at the first monitoring inspection, the academy sponsor has taken appropriate steps to ensure that the statement of action is fit for purpose. The statement includes sharper measures of success so the sponsor and members of the academy advisory board can check more closely at the end of each term on the rate of improvement.

Only in exceptional circumstances, where they are crucial to the school's future success, should priorities for further improvement be added

- Ensure that the academy sponsor commissions an external review of the policy and procedures for the safeguarding of pupils and that any shortcomings are addressed immediately to ensure that safeguarding arrangements meet statutory requirements.
- Ensure that improvements are made to the quality of the outdoor learning environment in the Reception classes.