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John Sheppard
Principal
The Hereford Academy
Marlbrook Road
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Hereford
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Dear Mr Sheppard

Special measures monitoring inspection of The Hereford Academy

Following my visit with Alun Williams, Her Majesty's Inspector, to your academy on 17–18 March 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 fourth monitoring inspection since the academy became subject to special measures following the inspection which took place in November 2013. The full list of the areas for improvement 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 in the mathematics department.

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, the Education Funding Agency and the Department for Education Academies Advisers' Unit.

Yours sincerely

Ian Hodgkinson
Her Majesty's Inspector

- Chair of the Governing Body
- Local authority
- For the Secretary of State
- The Education Funding Agency (EFA)
- Education Academies Advisers Unit

Annex

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

- Improve teaching so that it is at least good, particularly in English and mathematics, by ensuring that:
 - teachers provide lesson activities that cater for different ability levels, so that all groups of students make good progress
 - marking of students' books shows them clearly what they need to do to improve their work
 - teachers use questioning well to check students' understanding and provide support and challenge where they are most needed
 - leaders of subjects raise teachers' expectations and secure improvements
 - senior leaders provide support and training to enable subject leaders to more effectively identify, monitor, support and challenge weak practice.

- Improve the achievement of all students, particularly in English and mathematics, so that it is at least in line with national levels by ensuring that:
 - students' progress is assessed accurately
 - the resulting information is used by all leaders, managers and teachers to identify when groups, classes or year groups are not making good progress, and to plan for improvements in teaching and achievement in a focused way
 - the spending of the pupil premium funding results in the attainment gap between students eligible for the funding and other students in the academy being narrowed.

- Those responsible for governance and leaders at all levels should develop a highly focused development plan which:
 - is founded on an accurate analysis of current performance
 - includes specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time-limited targets
 - makes it clear what key individuals must do to drive improvements at a much faster rate.

Ofsted has made recommendations for action on governance to the authority responsible for the school. An external review of the school's use of the pupil premium should be undertaken in order to assess how this aspect of leadership and governance may be improved.

Report on the fourth monitoring inspection on 17–18 March 2015

Evidence

Inspectors observed the academy's work, scrutinised documents and met with the Principal, other leaders and members of staff, groups of students, the chair and vice chair of the local governing body, and the new chief executive of the sponsor.

Context

Since the last monitoring inspection, the academy has successfully appointed a new and experienced head of mathematics to take charge from April 2015. Another mathematics teacher joined in January 2015, so from April 2015 the mathematics department will be fully staffed with specialist teachers. Relationships with the sponsor, the Bishop Anthony Educational Trust, have continued to evolve with the appointment to the trust of a new chief executive.

Achievement of pupils at the school

Teachers and leaders across the academy have worked hard to ensure that students' attainment and progress are assessed accurately. An extensive programme of internal checking of assessments across subjects, together with highly focused scrutiny of mathematics assessments by a specialist external consultant, have contributed to greater confidence in the academy's data on students' achievements. In mathematics, this work has also provided helpful recommendations to teachers about how best to use assessment information to address gaps in students' skills and understanding.

Academy data on students' achievements show that students' progress, including in English and mathematics, is currently accelerating in all year groups. Gaps between the attainment of students in the academy and of those nationally are consequently narrowing. These gaps nonetheless remain wide for students in Key Stage 4 in mathematics, reflecting the legacy of underachievement which took the academy into special measures. A well-managed programme of support and guidance is promoting better achievement in Year 11 as students approach their GCSE examinations. The success of these interventions is carefully measured to ensure that they are effective in improving outcomes for students. In mathematics, a high proportion of Year 11 students are currently working just below the grade C threshold so important for their future employability.

The academy predicts that better help and guidance, together with the improved teaching and learning observed by inspectors in lessons, should lead to a marked improvement in GCSE results in 2015 that would raise students' performance once more above floor standards. Gaps in attainment for disadvantaged students, while

still wide in a few subjects, have generally narrowed as teachers and leaders have become sharper in identifying students in need of specific support. Academy data suggest that, in contrast to 2014, girls are generally outperforming boys in Key Stage 4.

The focus of subject leaders and teachers on improving subject planning to promote better progress is raising achievement in Key Stage 3, particularly for students in Year 9. This is supported by marked improvements in students' reading abilities, as measured in regular reading assessments. Boys' reading skills have improved especially quickly to bring them closer to national expectations.

Across the academy, the drive to improve students' literacy continues to support better overall achievement. While weaknesses in literacy still constrain progress for some, most students write with increasing confidence at length and for a range of purposes in many subjects, including in science and technology subjects. In English and history, students often show well-developed higher-level skills of inference, analysis and evaluation in their writing, as teachers provide materials that stimulate their independent enquiry. Students continue to achieve well in creative and performing arts, as they work with high-quality resources in stimulating learning environments.

The quality of teaching

Since the last monitoring inspection, there has been a step-change in the quality of teaching across the academy. As a result of considerably more rigorous monitoring of teaching, there is now a much greater degree of consistency in the quality of teachers' planning. Teachers are now typically using assessment information effectively to plan lessons and activities that are well matched to the abilities of students. This ensures that students generally work with more pace and purpose in lessons. Students themselves have noticed the change in approach. They spoke positively to inspectors about being able to start activities at different levels of challenge and not having spend time doing work that was too easy for them. Expectations have therefore risen, particularly to the benefit of students of middle and higher ability, although progress targets for the most able are not always challenging enough. Teaching in mathematics has improved sharply, although, just occasionally, whole-class teaching is not adapted sufficiently well to account for the considerable gaps in the understanding and skills of many students in the class.

The quality of teachers' marking and feedback to students continues to develop as a strength. Teachers mark work regularly and their comments clearly identify what could be improved. This approach is supplemented by increasingly effective assessments by the students themselves, both of their own and each other's work, which help them to be reflective and self-critical. However, the academy's framework for marking students' work to support an improvement in their literacy skills is not always used to sufficient effect. As a consequence, the progress of some of the least

able students is still constrained by weaknesses in their writing, and the quality of the writing of some of the most able is undermined by some careless attention to spelling, punctuation and grammar.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

Students' behaviour and the priority given to keeping students safe remain key strengths of the academy. Attitudes to learning in class have improved since the last monitoring inspection as all groups of students are more often purposefully engaged. Leaders and staff took swift action to address concerns around the behaviour and attitudes of a minority of students in Year 8. As a result, students say that behaviour and the climate for learning in Year 8 are much improved. Exclusions have risen in the current academic year but remain low by comparison with schools nationally. Attendance remains at the national average.

The quality of leadership in and management of the school

The Principal has demonstrated firm and effective leadership since the last monitoring inspection in moving the academy forward. He has set out clearly to staff the need for more rapid improvement in aspects of teaching and outcomes for students. Together with his senior team, he has put in place more rigorous processes for monitoring teaching and learning to ensure that expectations are being met. Importantly, outcomes of this monitoring are shared with leaders and staff in the excellent 'monthly briefings'. These identify the strongest and least effective practice seen across the academy in all areas being checked. They also give the results of surveys showing students' perception about aspects of teaching across subjects. These results strongly confirm that students recognise many improvements made in mathematics. Along with English and science, they have now identified mathematics as a strongly performing subject.

New leadership structures are beginning to work effectively. Senior leaders have clearly defined responsibilities, so those in charge of key stages are now taking a prominent responsibility in driving improvements in progress for students in their phases. The senior team works now as a more cohesive unit, with all involved in unannounced lesson observations and work scrutinies. The strong team of middle leaders, known as heads of curriculum areas (HOCAs), much appreciate having clear job descriptions and more certainty about senior leaders' roles and responsibilities. They value the clearer whole-school expectations for teachers' planning and marking, which they can more effectively monitor in their departments. HOCAs have positive working relationships with their senior line managers to support their monitoring and development of teaching, although there is a large variation between subjects in the frequency of line management meetings. Leaders, working with the school improvement adviser, have established many opportunities for teachers to see and share good practice, including peer observations and monthly 'sharepoint'

meetings. All these developments are supporting substantial improvements in the general quality of teaching.

The establishment of new sponsorship arrangements has enabled governors to have a more precise understanding of their roles and jurisdiction. They have now produced an action plan setting out key priorities for the development and improvement of their roles over time. Their involvement in the monthly governors' action group is a key and effective vehicle for holding the academy to account for its progress. The effectiveness of leadership at all levels, including governance, is supported by helpful and increasingly reliable presentations of data on outcomes for students, which are being used more forensically to identify shortcomings and target support. Detailed reports on outcomes of the monitoring of teaching provide further excellent management information.

Leaders recognise that there is now a need for a review and update of the academy's improvement plan so that students' attainment and progress can be more clearly and regularly judged against measurable targets across all year groups. There remains some confusion at all leadership levels about the criteria used to set targets for students' attainment and progress, which in some cases are not challenging enough for individual students.

External support

Senior leaders and governors value the greater clarity that has been established in their relations with the academy's new sponsor. The chief executive of the sponsor is working to establish a shared vision for rapid improvement. He is beginning to explore ways of bringing in further external support, including through more effective links with good schools, which have so far been difficult to establish successfully. Involvement in the multi-academy trust does, however, incur a significant new financial cost, and it will be important for the sponsor to ensure that the academy gets full value from its developing school improvement services.

The external school improvement adviser has continued to give very effective support for the development and leadership of teaching, and this is now having a marked impact in the classrooms. Consultant support in mathematics has helped to substantially improve the reliability and use of assessment in mathematics. The mathematics consultant has also offered valuable specialist advice to support the effective interim leadership of mathematics provided by the head of science.