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Barry Hersom
Principal
Colchester Academy
Hawthorn Avenue
Colchester
CO4 3JL

Dear Mr Hersom

Serious weaknesses monitoring inspection of Colchester Academy

Following my visit to your academy on 19 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 second monitoring inspection since the academy was judged to have serious weaknesses following the section 5 inspection which took place in July 2014. 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 the serious weaknesses designation.

This letter and monitoring inspection report will be published on the Ofsted website. I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the Chair of the Governing Body, and the Director of Children's Services for Essex.

Yours sincerely

Christopher Moodie
Her Majesty's Inspector

cc. Chair of the Governing Body
cc. Local authority

Annex

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

- Improve the quality of teaching across the school by:
 - raising teachers' expectations of what students are capable of achieving and increasing the level of challenge in lessons, especially for the most able
 - improving students' attitudes to their learning
 - ensuring that students understand the targets that are set for them and how well they are progressing towards meeting them.

- Strengthen students' achievement, particularly in English, science and humanities by:
 - improving students' writing skills
 - ensuring a consistent and coherent approach to developing students' literacy skills
 - improving teachers' expertise in accurately assessing the standards of students' work.

- Improve the effectiveness of leadership and management by:
 - strengthening whole-school self-evaluation so the school assesses its own progress against relevant benchmarks
 - ensuring that new middle leaders can learn from already effective leaders in the academy
 - ensuring that governors have a better understanding of school achievement.

An external review of governance should be undertaken in order to assess how this aspect of leadership and management may be improved.

Report on the second monitoring inspection on 19 March 2015

Evidence

During this inspection, meetings were held with the Principal, senior leaders and the Chair of the Governing Body, and two representative of the new sponsor. Short visits were made to lessons in several departments. Students' work was scrutinised in lessons. Some of the academy's documentation was looked at, including assessment data, and safeguarding records.

Context

Five teachers, including two subject leaders, have left the academy since the previous monitoring inspection. A new literacy leader joined in January 2015.

The academy's sponsor is set to change in April 2015 from Colchester Institute and the University of Essex to Bright Tribe, a multi-academy trust.

The quality of leadership and management at the school

The academy has improved in important areas since the previous monitoring inspection. Senior leaders have focused on raising the quality of teaching and this has had a positive impact on students' achievement. The academy's assessment data indicate that 55% of students in Year 11 are on track to achieve five A* to C GCSEs including English and mathematics (the national figure in 2014 was 55%). This will, if achieved, represent a significant improvement on 2014 figures. Improvement in English and the humanities is especially strong, as pass rates in these subjects were very low last year.

The quality of teachers' assessment continues to improve. In mathematics and science, teachers are making good use of examination questions to assess students' understanding precisely. In history, one teacher is providing feedback which very clearly shows students exactly what they need to improve. In general teachers' feedback is also improving across all subjects, although inconsistencies remain in a small number of classes.

Students' attitudes to learning are improving. Better teaching and higher expectations have contributed to this change. Low-level disruption is less frequent and behaviour in and between lessons is generally very calm, making the academy an orderly and welcoming environment. Senior leaders recently introduced a change to the way that lessons start. This involves students immediately undertaking an activity as soon as they walk into a classroom, rather than waiting for everyone to settle before the learning can begin. Students say that this has improved things in most lessons as little time is now wasted.

Governors have received the final report following an external review of their work. This has identified aspects of their work that are effective and areas where improvement is needed. Governors are working through an action plan and have already made changes. For example, governors requested, and now receive, more detailed information about students' achievement.

Strengths in the school's approaches to securing improvement:

- Senior leaders have a clear understanding of the quality of teaching. Their self-evaluation is accurate and they are providing teachers with appropriate support and training.
- The academy's structured approach to improving the quality of students' writing, including their spelling, grammar and punctuation, is raising standards.

Weaknesses in the school's approaches to securing improvement:

- Achievement in modern foreign languages continues to be well below national levels.
- Disadvantaged students (those eligible for the pupil premium funding) do less well than other students in most subjects.
- The academy is not making effective use of the information that primary schools provide about achievement in Year 6.

External support

The academy is in a state of transition between sponsors. The current and new sponsors have worked in partnership to limit the disruption to the academy. Representatives of the new sponsor, Bright Tribe, have made several visits to the academy. They are establishing a clear understanding of its strengths and where more work is needed. The new sponsor has clear plans to support the academy's future improvement.