

Serco Inspections
Colmore Plaza
20 Colmore Circus Queensway
Birmingham
B4 6AT

T 0300 123 1231
Text Phone: 0161 6188524
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.ofsted.gov.uk

Direct T: 0121 679 9154
Direct email: aidan.dunne@serco.com

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Robin Grover
The ACE Academy
Alexandra Road
Tipton
DY4 7NR

Dear Mr Grover

Special measures monitoring inspection of The ACE Academy

Following my visit to your school on 17 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 school's recent section 5 inspection.

The inspection was the first monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures following the inspection which took place in November 2014.

Evidence

During this inspection, meetings were held with the headteacher and other senior leaders; and the education director, senior adviser on school improvement and the school improvement adviser from ECMAT, the sponsor to the academy. The sponsor's statement of action and the academy's improvement plan were evaluated.

Context

Since the section 5 inspection, you have continued to receive support from your sponsor. Significant changes have taken place to leadership across the academy. Four senior leaders have left the academy and a new temporary senior leadership structure is in place. A new senior leader started in the academy in February and another senior leader has been permanently recruited from the interim leadership team. Two further appointments have been made and two vice associate headteachers are due to join the academy in April. A new subject leader for English was appointed immediately after the inspection and a new subject leader for technology joined the academy in December. The pastoral and student support team

are being restructured, resulting in two year heads leaving the academy. The post of coordinator for students with special educational needs is currently vacant and this responsibility is shared between two senior leaders until a permanent appointment can be made. A number of other teachers have also left the academy and there is one teaching post still vacant, with classes being taught by a temporary teacher working in the academy. The academy aims to have a fully stable and permanent staffing structure in place for September and the recruitment process is under way to achieve this.

The quality of leadership and management at the school

Leaders have taken swift action to address the areas for improvement from the inspection. Academy leaders recognise that there is much work to be done and are under no illusions as to the challenges that lie ahead.

The sponsor has successfully brokered a range of appropriate support for the academy through Heartlands Academy and Highfields School, and this is outlined in the sponsor's statement of action. The academy improvement plan reflects the need for urgency and is sharply focused on the key actions needed to bring the school out of special measures. Monitoring processes within the academy improvement plan demonstrate rigour and there are clear lines of accountability. The summary document presented to governors and sponsor representatives clearly shows the work in progress and allows them to identify any slippage in the rate of improvement.

The recommended review of the use and impact of the pupil premium and the Year 7 'catch-up' funding is being commissioned through Caludon Castle School and is due to take place shortly. A review of governance was carried out shortly before the inspection so a further review at this time is unlikely to present a different picture. Some training has taken place in an attempt to address some of the gaps in governors' skills identified during the review, such as in developing governors' understanding of the use of data and their awareness of financial management. This training has been delivered through the sponsor and has ensured that governors are more able to ask challenging questions of academy leaders.

Governance continues to be weak and it was particularly disappointing that during this inspection only one governor, a parent governor, was available to meet with me. This same governor was the only member of the local academy board who could be present at the feedback meeting at the end of the visit. The Vice-Chair of the Governing Body has resigned and the academy is desperately in need of additional committed, and suitably skilled, governors who are better able to hold leaders to account. More effective governance must be secured as a matter of urgency.

Improving the quality of teaching has been a key priority. Training, delivered to all teachers, makes clear the expectations for all lessons in the way teachers plan activities to provide an appropriate level of challenge for their students. Teachers are now receiving the support they need to help them to improve their practice. Leaders say better teaching is being achieved as a result of support programmes provided by Heartlands Academy's improving teacher programme and the outstanding teacher programme. A new teaching and learning policy is currently being developed and will be introduced to teachers in April, with further training linked to this.

Senior leaders' self-evaluation identified weak assessment practice. Previously, leaders at all levels have been unable to use the GCSE, A and AS-level predictions provided by teachers as it was woefully inaccurate. This has now improved through external validation from other schools, commissioned effectively through the sponsor. Accurate assessments can now be used in teachers' planning and also in identifying when progress slows to enable interventions to be targeted at those who need this additional help the most. Key Stage 3 achievement information is less reliable and it is not clear what information teachers use to make their assessments. Tests and other checks on learning are not yet being used well enough in all subjects to check how well topics have been taught, to identify weaknesses in teaching and to fill any gaps in learning. This work has been carried out successfully at Key Stage 4 and in the sixth form so urgently needs extending to other year groups.

The academy has developed a new quality assurance process which includes much sharper tracking of the achievements of students, particularly at Key Stage 4. Leaders are now better able to identify where there are gaps in the progress of certain groups of students, such as the disadvantaged or those who have special educational needs, and to act to address this. The most recent assessment point shows that students in Year 11 are already making better progress in English and mathematics than in 2014.

Achievement in the sixth form is improving but the sixth form section of the academy improvement plan fails to identify the key actions needed to address the weaknesses in provision of the 16-19 study programme identified during the inspection. For example, there is no clear plan to improve the independent careers advice and guidance for students, or to provide all students with an opportunity for work experience if they want one or to take on positions of responsibility in the academy. Further support for this area will now be brokered through Highfields Academy.

Weak readers are identified as soon as they start in the academy. However, there is not yet a consistent approach to teaching students how to read using phonics (the sounds letters make) by teachers who are trained in its use. Being aware of this weakness, a new senior leader has been appointed from April, with specific responsibility for improving literacy throughout the academy.

The new behaviour policy has resulted in an increased number of fixed-term exclusions as students start to accept the new higher expectations for their behaviour in classrooms and around the academy. There is still a core group of around 60 students who present more challenging behaviours and the academy is developing more suitable strategies to support these students. Part of this strategy involves a restructuring of the pastoral and student support areas of the academy, which is planned to start shortly.

Leaders are committed to raising students' and parents' expectations of attendance. Letters are now sent home reminding parents of this higher expectation when attendance falls below 97%. This strategy to promote good attendance is not yet showing any signs of impact and attendance is broadly similar to the same point last year (September 2013 through to March 2014).

Following the monitoring inspection, the following judgements were made:

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

The academy's improvement plan is fit for purpose but some further refinement is required to improve the section on sixth form provision.

Having considered all the evidence, I strongly recommend that the academy does not seek to appoint newly qualified teachers before the next monitoring inspection.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the Education Funding Agency, the Chair of the Governing Body and the Director of Children's Services for Sandwell. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Denah Jones
Her Majesty's Inspector