

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 9161
Direct email: ann.morris@serco.com

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Jo Manson
Headteacher
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 Tim McGuire and Nicholas Daws, Additional Inspectors, to your academy on 12–13 May 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 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.

Yours sincerely

Mel Ford
Her Majesty's Inspector

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 fourth monitoring inspection on 12–13 May 2015

Evidence

Inspectors observed the academy's work, scrutinised documents and met with the headteacher and senior leaders, middle leaders, a group of teachers and groups of students, and the Chair and other members of the Governing Body.

Context

There have been no significant changes since the last monitoring visit.

Achievement of students at the academy

Monitoring of students' progress is now embedded in the academy's drive to improve achievement. Increasingly, leaders of subjects outside the core areas of English and mathematics are using the detailed information available to hold teachers to account for students' progress and to identify where further support is required to help students reach their full potential.

The improved rates of progress in English and mathematics have been maintained. As a result, you are expecting that these subjects will make a strong contribution to the predicted 63% to achieve five GCSE grades at A* to C, including English and mathematics. If achieved, this will represent a very significant improvement from the academy's 2014 performance and will be above the 2014 national average. The academy's records suggest that this improvement will be sustained, as there is a similar picture for Year 10 and Year 9. Nevertheless, the very rigorous monitoring of students shows that there are pockets of slower progress and these are a major focus for you and your leaders. For instance, although students eligible for pupil premium funding are now making as much progress as all other students nationally, they are not keeping up with the increased rates of progress of their peers in the academy. The exception to this is the most able in this group, who are making good progress across the academy.

As noted at the previous monitoring visit, there is now a greater focus on achievement at Key Stage 3. Disabled students and those who have special educational needs continue to make good progress in most years and subjects. This includes those students who attend the academy's Autistic Spectrum Centre. However, you have noted, in Year 8, this group does not do make as much progress in English as it does in mathematics and Science. Moreover, the success of Golden Groups in Year 7 has not been as great in Year 8 and, notably, the progress of lower and middle ability students eligible for pupil premium funding has also been identified as a priority here.

You and your leaders are very aware that this year group has a number of potential issues. You have already appointed a new English teacher with specific responsibility

for the improving progress of less-able students in all year groups, with a focus on Year 8. Collaborative working with the special educational needs coordinator to produce a focused support plan, including literacy booster sessions, is beginning to have an impact. However, we agreed that it would be useful for the senior leaders to work closely with pastoral colleagues to undertake a forensic analysis, both of need and of current provision in the year group, particularly so that the progress of those students receiving multiple interventions for different reasons can be carefully monitored.

The Personal Learning Centre (PLC) is now a well-established and successful resource. The academy is able to produce unequivocal evidence that it has had very positive impact on improving behaviour as well as progress. Students appreciate the additional help they receive within the Centre and are happy to explain how provision has helped them to manage their own behaviour and to improve their learning. The small numbers of students attending the Centre enable high staff-to-pupil ratios. This, combined with expectations that students will follow the same curriculum as all others, has had a marked and positive impact on the progress made by these students.

The quality of teaching

Carefully targeted training and professional development opportunities provided for all teachers, alongside rigorous internal and external monitoring, have ensured that the quality of teaching continues to improve. For instance, the most recent training has focused on the use of questioning in the academy, and inspectors noted that strategies are being more consistently applied in lessons. In the best examples, teachers' questioning targeted students to answer, then supported them in extending their thinking, before moving ideas and opinions on around the classroom through well-established routines of 'agree/disagree/build'. Students clearly enjoyed the opportunity to respond to the views of other students as well as to those of the teacher.

All teachers are now following the academy's marking policy and inspectors noted that, in the vast majority of cases, they are providing useful advice to help students understand how to improve. There were frequent examples of students responding to written comments and, in some cases, inspectors saw a developing dialogue that supported students' progress very effectively.

Literacy is now a regular feature of lessons in all subjects. Teachers plan to support students in developing and practising their skills and ensure that they understand the importance of transferring what they have learned in English to their work in other subjects. However, as you agree, cross-curricular numeracy is less well established and is a priority for development.

All teachers plan their lessons carefully and the vast majority include additional challenge for the most able. However, sometimes teachers do not direct the relevant students to complete the more challenging tasks and, when they do not choose to do so, do not always guide students appropriately. In addition, some 'challenge' tasks do not effectively support rapid progress of the most able because, except in best lessons, the challenge provided is often more of the same work rather than work that is harder.

In a few cases, teachers are not yet confident enough to move away from their plans when things do not develop as they expected. Further, a minority are not clear enough about how they might assess small steps of progress. For instance, when checking recall of prior learning, teachers often used this effectively as a springboard for discussion, inference and deduction, but did not necessarily recognise the opportunity to assess progress. We agreed that it would be useful for senior leaders to focus on this in their programme of monitoring activities.

Teachers are very successful in communicating the importance of learning in their subject areas, and students respond to this very positively. However, they are less successful in conveying the importance of tutor periods at the beginning of the day. You are aware of this and there are plans in place for the next academic year to ensure that there is a more productive use of this time.

Behaviour and safety of students

Once again, inspectors were impressed with the behaviour of students around the academy and in lessons. Although students say that there are very occasional incidents of low-level disruption in lessons, inspectors saw none. The academy's recording of behaviour incidents is rigorous and demonstrates very clearly the improvement in behaviour over the last year, both in relation to the decrease in the number and severity of incidents. This is reflected in the continuing reduction in fixed-term exclusions.

Attendance overall is now in line with the national average. However, you have identified that there are still some groups of students for whom attendance remains too low. The attendance action plan is now having an impact, as seen by the decrease in absence over the last term.

The quality of leadership in and management of the academy

The senior leadership team have continued to work together very effectively and you are now beginning to extend the team to improve the capacity for the further improvement you wish to achieve. Internal promotions have been carefully planned to have a positive impact on the most-recent focus of improving pastoral leadership.

You and your leaders have worked effectively to restructure the pastoral team so that roles and responsibilities are very clear. The senior leadership 'umbrella' enables effective monitoring of impact on the wide range of aspects that come under this area of the academy's work. For instance, behaviour, attendance, parental engagement, intervention and multi-agency work are all essential components of the provision plan. Close working between heads of house and student support managers mean that students are exceptionally well supported and relationships with families are well developed.

At my last monitoring visit, you were keen to secure accuracy of assessment. To this end, you have ensured that both internal and external moderation are in place in both key stages. You and your leaders are now very confident that the predictions of attainment for the current Year 11 will be confirmed. This has been well supported by staff training as examiners.

You are very aware of the need to continue to develop capacity within the leadership team so that improvements are maintained. You have begun to analyse the team's increased expertise against the level of external support currently in place. You have identified those aspects where you feel secure and have been able to scale back the support where appropriate or to take a more equal role in sharing school-to-school support. For instance, you have forged links with a local teaching alliance, receiving valued support from them over the last year. Next term, the support plan is more collaborative so that The High Arcal School is providing expertise as well as receiving it.

Governors have made very effective use of training to continue to improve their skills. They have put in place a programme of audit and review to ensure that any gaps in skills or knowledge are rapidly identified and 'filled' through the annual training programme now in place. Minutes now show regular challenge supported by a much more detailed understanding of the data and other information that the academy produces. The new committee structure is now confirmed, and this has reinforced very clear roles and responsibilities for all members. There has been a notable increase in focused visits to the academy with a clearly identified purpose, linked to academy priorities, which are then shared with the full governing body.

External support

External support has been very effective. You have drawn from a range of providers including schools, teaching alliances, consultants and the local authority, according to need. The success of this is demonstrated in the academy's increased capacity to draw on internal expertise for further training.