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4 June 2015

Mr Noel Springett-McHugh and Ms Ceri Hathaway
Executive Principal and Interim Principal
Blackthorn Primary School
Waingrove
Blackthorn
Northampton
NN3 8EP

Dear Mr Springett-McHugh and Ms Hathaway

Special measures monitoring inspection of Blackthorn Primary School

Following my visit with Elaine Long, Additional Inspector, to your school on 2–3 June 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 previous monitoring inspection.

The inspection was the third monitoring inspection since the school 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 school is not making enough progress towards the removal of special measures.

Having considered all the evidence, I strongly recommend that the academy does not seek to 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 Academy Advisory Board and the Director of Children's Services for Northamptonshire, the Director of Education for The Education Fellowship, and the Department of 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
- Contractor providing support services on behalf of the local authority - where appropriate
- The lead and team inspectors.

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 third monitoring inspection on 2–3 June 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. 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 second monitoring visit, two assistant principals have been appointed, to lead on teaching and learning and safeguarding respectively, from the beginning of the summer term 2015. A new Director of Learning for Key Stage 2 has been appointed, who took up her role at the same time. Also, two new higher level teaching assistants commenced their roles at the beginning of the summer term. The Chair of the Academy Advisory Board recently resigned from her position. A Director from the Education Fellowship is temporarily covering this role.

Achievement of pupils at the school

Pupils' attainment at the end of Key Stages 1 and 2 remains low. Despite recent acceleration of pupils' progress in Year 6, the standards that pupils are attaining remain well below average in reading, writing and mathematics. While more pupils are making expected progress since the end of Year 2 than was the case in 2014, not enough pupils are making more than expected progress. The proportion of pupils attaining the higher Level 5 is below average.

Similarly, the standards being attained by pupils in Year 2 remain low and pupils are not making fast enough progress during their time in Year 1 and Year 2. The proportion of pupils who are on track to reach the required standard in the Year 1 phonic screening check is well below what is typical.

Disadvantaged pupils in Key Stages 1 and 2 are making similar rates of progress to other pupils and attaining similar standards. Nevertheless, this masks the fact that both disadvantaged pupils and others in the school are not making fast enough progress to ensure that standards are rising quickly enough.

In most year groups and subjects, girls are making faster progress than boys and are subsequently attaining higher standards. Nevertheless, their attainment remains below that of other girls nationally. Disabled pupils and those who have special educational needs are not making fast enough progress, and their progress is particularly weak in the large minority of year groups.

Pupils' skills in mathematics are not being developed well enough. Pupils are not being given enough activities to enable them to apply their knowledge and skills to solve mathematical problems or to help them develop the ability to reason. Pupils' skills in writing are not being fully developed. Pupils have few opportunities in which to produce extended pieces of writing, either in English or in other subjects. As a result, they are not developing the ability to write for a range of purposes and for different audiences. Pupils' skills in grammar, punctuation and spelling are not improving quickly enough. Teachers are not providing pupils with precise guidance on how to improve this aspect of their work, either during lessons or through their marking.

Despite revised guidance being provided to teachers and the implementation of a new scheme of work for handwriting, there has been little improvement in the quality of presentation of pupils' work or the standard of handwriting. Despite pupils practising their skills in handwriting more frequently, they are not transferring their skills from handwriting exercises into their everyday work.

The quality of teaching

The quality of teaching across the academy remains too variable; there is not enough good-quality teaching to ensure that pupils are making the rates of progress needed to address a legacy of prior underachievement. Senior leaders have provided staff with clearer guidance on how to use their assessments to inform their daily plans. Teachers have recently started to provide different activities for pupils of different abilities; these are beginning to ensure that tasks are being better tailored to support the learning of different groups of pupils. Nevertheless, a majority of teachers are at an early stage in developing their skill in using their assessments of pupils' learning more precisely to inform their daily plans. As a result, too many pupils are provided with work that is not set at the right level for their ability to move their learning forward apace across a series of lessons. The most-able pupils, in particular, are not being provided with sufficiently challenging work.

Teachers' expectations of pupils' attention at the beginning of lessons and during times when they are providing feedback remain too variable. While there has been some clear improvement in specific classes, this is not uniform across Key Stage 1 and 2. This can lead to pupils not being engaged in their learning.

Senior leaders have implemented a further revision to their marking policy. Scrutiny of pupils' books shows that, until very recently, there were examples of pupils' work

being unmarked and a lack of developmental comments being made by teachers to help pupils know what they had to do to improve. However, all teachers are now beginning to follow the revised procedures and are providing pupils with feedback on what they are doing well. Nevertheless, there remains variation in the quality of written comments to help move pupils' learning forward, as well as the extent to which these comments are followed up by pupils and teachers in subsequent pieces of work. Hence, at this stage, while teachers' marking is improving, it is at an early stage in making a positive difference to pupils' learning across the academy.

The quality of provision in the Reception Year has not improved quickly enough since the previous visit. Despite support from a lead practitioner in another school, the quality of provision between the two classes remains variable. Adults' use of assessment of children's learning is not being used precisely enough to inform plans of how to support children's development. As a result, not enough children are being sufficiently challenged, or provided with activities that capture and sustain their interest. The proportion of children on track to secure a good level of development is higher than in previous years; nevertheless, this remains lower than that found nationally.

The quality of provision in the Nursery has been sustained since the previous inspection. Children continue to make a positive start to their education and are making at least the progress they should in all areas of learning.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

Teachers' expectations of pupils' behaviour in classrooms is still not consistently high enough. Low-level disruption still persists in classes where rules and routines are not firmly established or applied consistently. Nevertheless, across Key Stages 1 and 2, more pupils are applying themselves to their learning tasks during lessons and pupils' attitudes to learning have improved in a minority of classes since the previous visit.

Pupils' behaviour at lunchtimes has improved. This is because there are better arrangements to ensure that lunchtimes run more smoothly. Senior leaders have a greater presence during lunchtimes to check on pupils' behaviour and act decisively where required. Also, pupils are more closely supervised as they move from the playground to the dining hall. This has resulted in a calmer atmosphere being evident at lunchtime.

Pupils' attendance rates have improved since the second monitoring visit. Nevertheless, attendance remains below average. There has been some improvement in attendance rates of those who are persistently absent. These pupils are now missing fewer sessions than was the case previously.

The quality of leadership in and management of the school

Senior leaders have faced a number of challenges since the previous visit in relation to recruiting and retaining staff. Nevertheless, changes have not been managed well enough to ensure that the quality of teaching is improving sufficiently quickly to have a positive impact on pupils' achievements.

Senior leaders have put in place a system of assessment to support teachers in assessing the standards of pupils' work. While teachers' assessment of pupils learning in mathematics appears accurate, this is not the case in relation to pupils' writing. Samples of assessment showed that, in a large majority of cases, this was overgenerous and, as a result, pupils are not being set work that precisely helps their development.

Senior leaders have refined their monitoring of the use of the pupil premium and are checking more closely on the extent to which funding is being used to support pupils of different abilities. This has resulted in disadvantaged pupils making similar progress to others in the school. Although there remains more work to be undertaken in this aspect of the school's work, there are some 'green-shoots' of improvement.

The leader responsible for the use of the physical education and sport premium has continued to implement the plan of action. While this has resulted in more pupils taking part in competitive sports, the leader is not checking which pupils are involved. Consequently, senior leaders are not in a position to ensure that all pupils, irrespective of background or circumstance, have an equal opportunity to be involved in a range of participative and competitive sports. Teachers are still not benefiting from observing good practice in physical education and sport as part of their professional development. Hence, 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 responsible for mathematics has recently provided guidance to staff on ways in which they can provide pupils with activities to develop their ability to reason. While there are some early signs that staff are implementing her ideas, this initiative remains at an early stage of development. The review of the mathematics curriculum is due to take place at the end of this term, as leaders recognise that the weaknesses in the structure and content of the mathematics curriculum is not conducive to securing consistently good rates of pupils' progress across the academy.

The leader responsible for English and the Director responsible for teaching and learning have quickly recognised that pupils' skills in writing are not being developed well enough. Prior to the end of this visit, they had already set out their plans for

how they intend to adapt the curriculum to ensure that pupils are given more tasks to write at length and in a range of subjects in order to support their development.

The leader responsible for disabled pupils and those who have special educational needs has introduced a more robust system for planning individualised support programmes for pupils. The leader recognises that more work needs to be undertaken on checking on the extent to which support programmes are being effective in accelerating pupils' progress. This is because not enough these pupils are making expected or better rates of progress.

Senior leaders have revamped the learning environment and provided pupils with a wider and better range of resources to support their development in reading. The classroom and shared areas are highly attractive and stimulating places in which to learn. Pupils say that, alongside the acquisition of new materials, this is motivating them to read a wider range of books.

The Chair of the Academy Advisory Board has recently resigned following a period where she was providing good levels of challenge to senior leaders. A Director from the academy sponsor is currently acting in the role of Chair. Consequently, governance is at a point of transition. At this stage, however, governors have not yet undertaken the planned reviews of their work and of the use of the pupil premium. These are scheduled to take place later this term.

At the previous visit, shortcomings were identified in the academy's procedures for ensuring the safeguarding of pupils. Senior leaders quickly organised a review of their work in this area and a plan of action was drawn up. The leader responsible for safeguarding has worked assiduously to put in place systems to ensure that the academy's policy is being implemented in practice and that the academy fully meets statutory requirements.

Scrutiny of pupils' books shows that senior leaders have not checked closely enough that they are providing a broad and balanced curriculum. Teachers are not providing pupils with enough activities to help them develop their literacy and numeracy skills in subjects other than English and mathematics. Pupils are not given enough activities in subjects such as science, history, geography or religious education to help them to develop their knowledge and skills in these subjects. This is limiting pupils' ability to be well prepared for their next stage of their education.

External support

The Director of Education for The Education Fellowship, and the Director responsible for improvement, acknowledge that issues relating to the recruitment and retention of staff, allied to changes in the leadership structure, have been barriers to securing improvement at the required rate. Despite this, the package of support provided to the academy has not been sufficient enough to improve the quality of teaching at a

fast enough rate. As a result, significant improvement is required in the next year if the school is to come out of a category of concern within the required timescale.

Priorities for further improvement

- Senior leaders need to review the curriculum to ensure that it is broad and balanced to enable pupils to be well prepared for the next stage of their education.