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29 June 2015

Mr Tomas Ashley
Principal
Willenhall E-ACT Academy
Furzebank Way
Willenhall
Walsall
WV12 4BD

Dear Mr Ashley

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Willenhall E-ACT Academy

Following my visit to your academy on 29 June 2015, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report the inspection findings. Thank you for the help you gave me and for the time you made available to discuss the actions you are taking to improve the academy since the most recent section 5 inspection.

The visit was the first monitoring inspection since the academy was judged to require improvement following the section 5 inspection in March 2015. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

Senior leaders and governors are taking effective action to tackle the areas requiring improvement identified at the recent section 5 inspection. The academy should take further action to:

- ensure that the local governing body is equipped with the skills and expertise to take over the monitoring and evaluation role that is currently being fulfilled by the raising achievement board
- focus on raising the achievement of particular groups of students including disabled students and with those with special educational needs and the most able students.

Evidence

During the inspection, meetings were held with the Principal, other senior leaders, students, the Chair of the Local Governing Body, a representative of the sponsor, E-Act and the systems leader who currently supports the academy, to discuss the actions taken since the last inspection. The academy development plans for this and next year were evaluated as well as minutes of local governing body meetings. I also joined you on a tour of the academy where we briefly visited several lessons.

Context

Since March's inspection, one Vice Principal has left the academy and three lead practitioners have joined. Two more lead practitioners will join the academy in September 2015.

Main findings

The academy improved rapidly under your leadership, from your arrival in September 2013 up to March's inspection, which deemed that the academy no longer required special measures. This trajectory of improvement has continued, at a pace, and further improvements are now evident.

You are very clear about what the academy needs to do in order to secure a good or better judgement at its next inspection. The energy, enthusiasm and commitment shown by you and your senior leaders has ensured that the pace of improvement in the academy has not slowed at all; a fact recognised by leaders, governors, the sponsor and students. Planned improvements are summarised in a detailed academy development plan that spells out the areas that need to improve, along with clear actions to achieve that improvement.

Teaching is improving in the academy. You have successfully recruited specialist teachers including 'lead practitioners' in key subjects, who coach members of staff and help them to improve their practice. Few teachers are leaving Willenhall at the end of this term, and September 2015 will see the lowest turnover in teachers for many years. Students are very clear that teaching has improved considerably in the past 12 months, and they are grateful for the quality, stability and commitment of their teachers now.

Students' progress is accelerating because of better teaching and you are cautiously optimistic about results in 2015, although the progress of disabled students and those with special educational needs, and of the most able students is not improving at the same rate as for other students. Because a number of students took GCSEs in English or mathematics at the end of Year 10, published GCSE results for 2015 will not reflect the best results that the students achieve.

Improvements in teaching and progress throughout the academy are reflected in the sixth form. The good practice in tracking and intervention that is well-established at Key Stage 4, has been introduced into the sixth form this year. Improved tracking and intervention, better teaching and students taking more appropriate courses is seeing a sharp improvement in the progress that sixth-form students are making.

Attendance has improved from January of this year and has been running above the national average in recent half-termly periods. Taking into account the disappointing figures for the autumn term, the whole year's figures will still be better than the previous year, but the academy should see a marked improvement in published attendance figures from September 2015.

Students' attitudes to learning also continue to improve and the numbers of fixed-term exclusions and incidents that cause students to be removed from lessons have reduced considerably. Students say that behaviour continues to improve and they appreciate the work that leaders have done to bring this about.

The academy's progress is carefully monitored by the sponsor's raising achievement board (RAB), which was established when the academy required special measures. It currently meets every six weeks and includes representatives from the local governing body (LGB) and the local authority. Both the RAB and the LGB provide leaders with effective support and challenge, but over the coming 12 months, it is intended that the RAB will dissolve and the LGB will take over as the sole group with the task of supporting and challenging academy leaders. Both the RAB and the LGB recognise the risk that this transition could slow the academy's progress, if the quality of monitoring and evaluation currently provided by the RAB were to be lost.

Ofsted may carry out further monitoring inspections and, where necessary, provide further support and challenge to the academy until its next section 5 inspection.

External support

E-Act has provided you with effective support through a systems leader from Heartlands Academy, Birmingham. In regular meetings with the systems leader, you identify areas where help is needed and agree the scope of the support. Recent Heartland's support has been more advisory and less 'hands on' as you develop greater leadership capacity in the academy and you seek to ensure that you are not reliant on external help.

You are also successfully identifying and accessing support from a range of other partners, because you are clear about what support is needed to secure further improvement.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Governing Body and the Director of Children's Services for Walsall.

Yours sincerely

Alun Williams

Her Majesty's Inspector