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5 November 2015

Mr Andrew Bygrave
Acting Principal
University Academy Kidsgrove
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Kidsgrove
Stoke-on-Trent
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Dear Mr Bygrave

Special measures monitoring inspection of University Academy Kidsgrove

Following my visit (with Rob Steed, Ofsted Inspector) to your academy on 20 and 21 October 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 became subject to special measures following the inspection which took place in February 2015. 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:

Leaders and managers are taking effective action towards the removal of special measures.

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

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 Governing Body and the Director of Children's Services for Staffordshire.

Yours sincerely

Alun Williams

Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection which took place in February 2015

- Urgently improve leadership and management, so that actions secure a rapid and sustained rise in standards of teaching and achievement by:
 - ensuring that plans for improvement and actions taken by leaders tackle the full range of weaknesses in the academy, including those of the sixth form
 - securing rigorous monitoring and evaluation procedures at all levels so that all leaders are able to gauge how successful they have been in bringing about improvements and can hold all teachers to account
 - ensuring that all leaders, including subject leaders and pastoral leaders, have the skills and capacity to deliver essential improvements to the quality of teaching and to the achievement of students
 - rigorously checking that policies and procedures are adopted consistently across the academy.

- Improve the quality of teaching so that all students make good or better progress by:
 - taking into account the impact of teaching on students' learning and progress over time when evaluating the quality of teaching
 - using the range of information available about students, including their progress, attainment, prior knowledge and understanding, to match work to their needs
 - ensuring that teachers have high expectations of all students in all lessons and challenge them, including the most-able students, middle-ability students, boys, and disadvantaged students, to excel
 - using questioning to check that learning is secure, and to extend and deepen students' knowledge and understanding
 - ensuring that students improve their work based on the guidance offered by their teachers.

- Improve achievement, including in the sixth form, so that standards reach or exceed those of other students nationally for all groups by:
 - rigorously tracking the progress of all students, and groups of students, across the academy so that underachievement is identified early, tackled swiftly, and gaps between different groups of students are closed
 - further developing approaches to improving students' literacy skills across subjects, so that boys, disadvantaged students and middle-ability students make rapid gains in reading and writing.

Report on the second monitoring inspection on 20 and 21 October 2015

Evidence

Inspectors observed the academy's work and visited parts of lessons, some jointly with members of the senior leadership team. Inspectors scrutinised documents and met with the acting principal, senior and other leaders, groups of pupils, the Chair of the Statement of Action Committee (SOAC) and a representative of the sponsor, the University of Chester Academies Trust (UCAT).

Context

Since the last monitoring inspection, the interim principal has left the academy and has been replaced by the acting principal, who was previously a vice-principal at the academy. An additional acting vice-principal has been appointed, and an assistant principal has joined the academy, seconded by UCAT. The acting principal has revised the responsibilities and accountabilities of the six members of the senior leadership team.

One pastoral leader has left the academy and has not been replaced. Eight other teachers have left and all have been replaced, notably in the mathematics department, where three new teachers started in September 2015.

The academy did not recruit pupils into Year 12 of its sixth form in September 2015 and now has only nine pupils in Year 13. A review into the future of the academy's sixth form is currently underway.

Outcomes for pupils

Unvalidated GCSE results for 2015 present a mixed picture. The proportion of pupils making at least expected progress rose in English and changed little in mathematics, with the effect that both figures are now a little below the national average for 2014. The proportion of pupils making more than expected progress rose sharply in mathematics to reach close to the 2014 national average, but fell equally sharply in English to well below last year's national figure.

The headline attainment figure for five GCSEs at grades A* to C, including English and mathematics, remained at 45% and places the academy above the government's floor standard.

Based upon teachers' forecasts, leaders and governors were expecting better outcomes in several subjects including English and mathematics, and so were very disappointed with these results. The lack of accuracy in predicting GCSE results in several subjects undermines leaders' ability to target and address underachievement effectively.

The progress of disadvantaged pupils declined considerably in mathematics and a little in English. As a result, achievement gaps between disadvantaged pupils and others, both in the academy and nationally, have grown.

Results across other subjects were also variable. There were strong results in science, design technology, information communication technology and geography, but much weaker outcomes in English literature, sport, history, art and drama.

In the sixth form, the mixed picture was also evident, with A level outcomes showing improvement in pupils' progress, but AS level results declining from 2014.

Actions to support pupils who struggle with reading are having an impact and the literacy skills of these pupils are improving as a result.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Some improvement in teaching is evident across most subjects and all year groups. The introduction of new expectations for marking and feedback to pupils are beginning to have a positive impact, although some feedback still does not tell pupils precisely what they need to do in order to improve their work and achieve their targets.

Some teachers demonstrate considerable expertise and subject knowledge and relationships between teachers and pupils are consistently strong across the academy. Disabled pupils and those with special educational needs receive effective support from their teachers and from teaching assistants who help them in lessons.

However, planning remains weak in too many lessons and therefore activities are not well matched to what pupils already know, understand or can do. In some lessons, pupils struggle to get started, either because they do not understand what they have to do, or because they do not have the knowledge or skills to be able to attempt the task that has been set. In a few lessons, activities are dull, mundane and lack challenge, and, as a result, pupils, especially the most able, make less progress than they could.

A particular weakness remains in mathematics, especially in Key Stage 3, where temporary staff are teaching classes and pupils are not making sufficient progress as a result. Leaders have secured additional mathematics support, from UCAT, but it is too early to judge its effectiveness.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Pupils' personal development, behaviour and welfare remains an area of relative strength in the academy and the one where improvement is most evident.

Pupils behave well in most lessons and the academy is calm and orderly between lessons, at morning break and at lunchtime. Pupils are polite and respectful towards their peers and adults. The number of incidents of poor behaviour and exclusions continue to fall and are much lower than they were 12 months ago.

Some low-level disruption remains in lessons, especially where teaching is weaker. However, even when activities are mundane or when pupils do not understand what they are doing, it is to their credit that their behaviour is still, for the most part, compliant.

Pupils' attendance remains high, and is currently above the 2014 national average. Following a concerted effort from leaders and teachers focused on a 'smart start' to the academy day, pupils' punctuality and readiness to learn is much improved this year. Pupils recognise and appreciate the increased visibility of senior staff, and especially the fact that they are now met and greeted as they arrive at the academy each morning.

Pupils say that they feel safe in the academy, that bullying is rare and that any bullying that does occur is dealt with well.

Effectiveness of leadership and management

The eight months since the section 5 inspection has been turbulent, with two changes of principal in that time. UCAT's tardiness in securing stable leadership in the academy has undoubtedly slowed its rate of improvement. However, some progress is evident and the rate of improvement has accelerated since September with the appointment of the new acting principal.

The acting principal has stabilised the academy and has gained the confidence of governors, staff and pupils. He has a clear idea of what needs to be done and has ensured that senior staff are equally clear about the part that they are expected to play. Supported by an increasingly effective senior team, his initial focus on introducing consistent rules and routines has resulted in improved behaviour, attendance and punctuality across the academy.

Leaders' evaluation of the academy's strengths and weaknesses is honest and accurate, and leaders have put in place clear plans to address the weaknesses, but it is too early to see hard evidence of improvement in a number of those areas.

The inaccuracy of teachers' assessments and forecasts of GCSE results is a major impediment to improving pupils' outcomes. New systems to train staff and to validate data on pupils' progress are being introduced, but evidence of impact is not yet apparent. Leaders believe that the new systems will address their current inability to identify and tackle underperformance effectively.

Leaders' actions to improve teaching across the academy are also at an early stage, with improvement currently limited to better marking and feedback. New systems to evaluate the quality of teaching, using a range of information, have just been introduced and have yet to yield results. Because of this, training has not been carefully targeted at those areas of teaching that are most in need of improvement.

Subject leaders are willing and committed to seeing the academy improve, but they do not yet have a clear understanding of the part that they are to play in improving the quality of teaching and learning in their areas. Pastoral leaders have a much stronger understanding of their role and, as a result, have played a significant part in the improvements seen in the academy this year.

The governing body, or Statement of Action Committee (SOAC), has considerable expertise, is well informed and able to support and question academy leaders; these qualities were recognised by the external review of governance that was carried out in May 2015. However, they have been too ready to accept information from academy leaders without careful checking or challenge. For example, the disappointing 2015 GCSE results came as a surprise to governors because they had been too willing to accept leaders' assurances about the accuracy of predictions.

An external review of pupil premium expenditure was carried out in June 2015, and its recommendations are currently being implemented. A vice-principal has been given responsibility for improving outcomes for disadvantaged pupils and for closing achievement gaps, and plans are in place.

External support

The academy is receiving considerable, appropriate, but belated support which is brokered by its sponsor, UCAT. The acting principal receives peer support from an experienced principal, and leadership coaching from a national leader of education. UCAT has increased the academy's senior leadership capacity by providing a full-time assistant principal and a director of mathematics for two days each week. Support for the English and history departments is being sourced from a teaching school and other subjects are to be supported through cluster groups made up from the UCAT family of academies.