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Dear Mr Grover

Special measures monitoring inspection of The ACE Academy

Following my visit with Rob Hackfath, Her Majesty's Inspector, and Patrick Amieli, Ofsted inspector, to your academy on 20–21 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 third monitoring inspection since the academy became subject to special measures following the inspection which took place in November 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:

Leaders and managers are not taking effective action 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 Chief Executive Officer of Education Central multi-academy trust, the sponsor to the academy and the Director of Children's Services for Sandwell.

Yours sincerely

Denah Jones
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection which took place in November 2014

- Urgently improve the quality of teaching in order to raise achievement, especially in English, mathematics and science by ensuring that:
 - teachers plan and deliver activities that have clear learning intentions and are pitched at a level of difficulty that meets the needs of all groups of students
 - students' work is accurately assessed during and after lessons so that the new work teachers then set enables all groups of students to make rapid progress
 - all marking and feedback show students exactly what they need to do to improve their work and that teachers systematically check that students quickly act upon this advice
 - teachers demand consistently high standards of work and effort from the students in their classes, especially the most-able students
 - teaching assistants receive better training in how to support less-able students who do not understand how to tackle the problems they are set
 - students have the necessary skills to solve problems and to persevere when difficulties are encountered
 - students have opportunities to develop their literacy, communication and numeracy skills in all subjects.
- Improve the support for disadvantaged students so that they make at least expected progress and that increasing numbers make more than expected progress in English and mathematics at GCSE.
- Improve the overall effectiveness of the sixth form by ensuring:
 - the statutory sixth form study programmes are fully implemented
 - good practice seen in the teaching of chemistry, biology, history and mathematics is shared with teachers of all other subjects
 - students make appropriate subject and career choices by receiving high-quality work experience, information, advice and guidance
 - the number of students leaving the sixth form before the end of their courses is reduced
 - all students who do resit examinations in English and mathematics at GCSE level improve their Year 11 grade.
- Urgently improve the effectiveness of leadership and management, including governance, so that students' achievement and behaviour rapidly improves by ensuring that:
 - academy improvement plans identify all the key priorities for raising standards, that milestones to measure progress are challenging, specific and measurable and that methods, timescales and staff responsible for monitoring, evaluating and reviewing the work of the academy are clear

- subject leaders, including the head of sixth form, have the skills to monitor, evaluate and review their work and are held to account for students' progress
- leaders at all levels are capable of delivering improvement priorities
- current initiatives to improve the quality of teaching are embedded so that all teachers get the help, support and guidance they need to teach all groups of students effectively and, in doing so, raise achievement
- procedures to manage the performance of teachers are consistently applied so that underperformance is eradicated
- teachers promote and enforce the academy's policies on behaviour and anti-bullying so that all students feel safe while in the academy
- the curriculum more effectively supports the development of students' basic literacy and numeracy skills and meets the requirements for the teaching of religious education in Year 10
- funds available through the pupil premium and the Year 7 catch-up funding are spent appropriately so that all students eligible for this support make better progress
- members of the governing body hold leaders and managers to account for all aspects of the academy's performance.

An external review of governance and an external review of the academy's use of the pupil premium and Year 7 catch-up funding should be undertaken in order to assess how these aspects of leadership and management may be improved.

Report on the third monitoring inspection on 20–21 October 2015

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the headteacher, members of the senior leadership team, other subject leaders and three representatives from the External Scrutiny Group who are also representatives from Education Central multi-academy trust (ECMAT), the sponsor to the academy. Twenty-six lessons were observed, with a further 19 short visits to lessons. An inspector visited 'The Hub' to evaluate the quality of support provided for pupils through this on-site centre. Inspectors spoke with pupils during lessons about their work, and at breaktime and lunchtime to gather their views on the academy. Inspectors also met formally with groups of pupils from Years 7, 8, 12 and 13.

Context

Since the second monitoring inspection there has been a large turnover of staff. Following the departure of almost a quarter of the staff at the end of the summer term, 22 new members of staff have started working in the academy, about half of whom are teaching staff. A restructuring of senior leaders' roles took place for the start of term in September, with some changes in other leaders' roles. A new subject leader for science joined the academy in September and the post of special educational needs coordinator (SENCo) is currently filled through a temporary arrangement with oversight by a senior leader. Several other teaching vacancies remain, including in English and mathematics. A restructuring of governance has taken place and a new governing body will shortly be assembled.

Outcomes for pupils

Attainment for Year 11 pupils in 2015 remained broadly similar to 2014 and continues to be below the floor standard. Only about a third of pupils achieved five or more GCSEs at grades A* to C. Attainment in mathematics fell sharply and pupils overall made below average progress. Academy leaders did not see this coming as predictions provided by mathematics teachers were grossly inaccurate and had not been checked carefully enough by academy leaders. However, this decline in overall standards masks a substantial improvement in English where pupils made much better progress, similar to other pupils nationally.

Disadvantaged pupils in mathematics made very slow progress compared with other Year 11 pupils in the academy in 2015. The already wide gap in achievement in mathematics widened further because academy leaders are not doing enough to help the most vulnerable pupils in mathematics. This is not the case in English, where disadvantaged Year 11 pupils made much better progress in 2015, compared with 2014, and the gap with other pupils nationally reduced markedly. Disabled pupils and those with special educational needs in Year 11 continued to

underachieve in most subjects as they made much slower progress than all pupils in the academy in 2015.

Academy leaders provided information on current pupils in the academy which indicates underachievement is set to continue for disadvantaged pupils and those with special educational needs in a range of subjects. In mathematics, there is very little sign of improvement because teaching is not yet good enough to make up for the consistently weak teaching that pupils have experienced in the past.

Learning in lessons varies, but is weakest for Year 10 pupils, where behaviour is often poorly managed by teachers, resulting in lessons that are disrupted. Frequently, this is because work set does not interest pupils, is not particularly challenging and teachers do not expect pupils to work hard enough. This is not the case in physical education and in some option subjects that pupils have chosen to study, such as French, where teachers have high expectations of learning and behaviour.

Weak readers are identified when they start in the academy in Year 7 and are given additional help to improve their reading, which now includes the use of phonics (letters and the sounds they make). Further support with literacy skills is provided through 'solace', Year 7 personal development lessons. The new leader of literacy does not yet know if this strategy is making any difference to the reading levels of the weakest readers.

Achievement in the sixth form is improving, particularly in work-related subjects, where attainment for sixth form pupils in 2015 is indicated to be above national. Very few pupils in Years 12 and 13 study academic subjects and, where they do, information provided by academy leaders suggests attainment continues to be below national. However, in work-related subjects, sixth form pupils make effective progress due to better teaching. Work is sufficiently challenging and pupils respond well to this, showing interest in, and enthusiasm for, their learning.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Not enough teaching is good enough to make up for past inadequacies in teaching. Teaching in mathematics continues to be weak overall, but especially for pupils in Year 10 where work set is often too easy for pupils, who spend far too long on repetitive tasks that will achieve very few marks in an examination. Pupils in all year groups are unable to develop a deeper understanding of topics and are moved on to new topics too quickly before they have fully grasped work. In a Year 7 lesson for more-able pupils on finding the area of a circle, pupils did not have to think about their work but instead repeated the same method several times in questions where only the numbers changed. In a sixth form lesson for pupils retaking their GCSE they were asked to rearrange equations using their rule of 'swapping a times for a divide' but did not appear to understand why they were doing this.

Work seen in books and on computers is marked regularly and teachers tell pupils where they have gone wrong. Although teachers follow the academy policy on marking, not enough thought is given to 'even better if' statements that tell individual pupils what they need to do to improve that piece of work. 'Next extended tasks' are sometimes tokenistic to comply with the academy policy rather than providing something for pupils to think harder about. Often these are ignored by pupils, who are not expected to complete them as teachers do not check if this has been done.

Pupils' work has not been accurately assessed in the past but this has improved. Pupils take regular tests or assessments and mark schemes are followed by all teachers so that assessment information is now accurate and consistent across a subject. However, it is not yet used well enough by teachers to help them in planning work at the right level for pupils or to identify when pupils need extra support to help them to catch up if they are underachieving.

Teaching assistants, seen working with pupils during the inspection, provided very effective support for all pupils in lessons. Good explanations of the work are given and teaching assistants used resources well, such as textbooks and tablet computers, to help pupils. This support is appreciated by pupils, who were able to improve their work and get more done as a result.

Teachers told inspectors they appreciate the opportunity to work with colleagues in other departments as a 'coaching triad'. Academy leaders' work to support teachers in developing their skills is making a difference to the way in which teachers use questions in lessons. For example, teachers ask pupils to explain 'why', and to listen carefully to others and improve their responses. Literacy development has become a whole-academy priority and teachers consistently highlight and explain key words in lessons.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Behaviour around the academy continues to improve and this was acknowledged by pupils. Occasional incidents of boisterous and inconsiderate behaviour were seen by inspectors such as a group of boys 'play fighting' in the mathematics corridor and pens and coats being thrown to other pupils across the classroom. Year 10 lessons are often disrupted by pupils talking over the teacher or chatting with their friends and taking part in other off-task behaviours to avoid doing the work set. However, attitudes to learning are improving and pupils were seen working exceptionally well together in PE and drama, and other lessons where they were asked to share their ideas in groups such as in 'solace'. Pupils take pride in their written work, which is well set out when teachers insist on this.

Pupils told inspectors they feel safe and this was confirmed to be the case by inspectors who found that safeguarding procedures are effective.

Exclusions remain high because academy leaders now have much higher expectations of behaviour. However, the number of pupils excluded has reduced over the last academic year. Pupils with special educational needs and disadvantaged pupils are more likely to be excluded than their peers and these pupils account for the majority of all exclusions in the academy. Attendance overall is showing little signs of improvement and, information provided by academy leaders suggests, this is indicated to remain just below average. Disadvantaged pupils and those with special educational needs are more likely to be absent than their peers.

Academy leaders have not yet fully explored the reasons for the poor attendance, and more frequent incidents of unacceptable behaviour, seen by these groups or to find out if there is any link with underachievement for these pupils.

The 16 to 19 study programme continues to improve. However, sixth form pupils say they do not know about the threats posed by extremism and radicalisation and have little understanding of managing a bank account, fundamental British values or how the Government works. Pupils told inspectors they would appreciate more information on these themes.

Vulnerable pupils continue to be well supported through 'The Hub' for a range of their needs such as literacy, mental health and welfare. For example, inspectors saw pupils being taught effectively how to improve their reading by learning mentors.

Effectiveness of leadership and management

The headteacher has an accurate picture of the academy, confirmed by external reviews. He knows the strengths and weaknesses well and is aware there is still much work to do. The recent restructuring of leaders' roles 'plays to peoples' strengths' and there is now no excuse for responsibilities not being carried out well. Governance, previously identified as being weak, is in a state of transition and a new governing body is due to be assembled shortly. In the interim, the External Scrutiny Group provide the necessary rigour and challenge for academy leaders.

Improvements to teaching are slow and have inevitably been delayed by the high turnover of staff. However, there are now very few temporary teachers and therefore pupils are less likely to experience frequent changes of their teachers as has happened in the past. Temporary teachers are avoided because all senior leaders, including the headteacher, teach more lessons than would typically be seen for senior leaders in a school of this size. Although improving the quality of teaching, time available to check on the work of subject and other leaders is reduced.

Information on pupils' achievements provided by teachers in the past was inaccurate, particularly in mathematics and Key Stage 3 subjects. External consultants, organised by the sponsor, have now checked the accuracy of teachers' assessments in all subjects and confirmed this to be accurate. Leaders are now in a much stronger position to be able to use this information well to quickly identify underachievement at the first sign of progress slowing.

Pupils' progress, including that of groups of pupils such as disabled pupils, those with special educational needs and disadvantaged pupils, is not tracked well enough by academy leaders. Information management systems need improvement so that senior and subject leaders have access to concise and simple to understand information. Use of teacher predictions of future likely performance in examinations is unhelpful, as it is not clear from this information if teaching is improving or if any of the strategies to improve outcomes are actually making any difference. Academy leaders must now use the accurate information they have on pupils to monitor their progress and attainment more sharply.

Literacy development is well planned but there is no evidence to show if this is successful or not and no consideration has been given to a whole-academy strategy to improve numeracy. Academy leaders could not provide inspectors with any evidence of the difference being made by the Year 7 catch-up funding. They do not know how many pupils last year actually caught up with their English and mathematics as a result of this additional support. Similarly, there is no evidence of the impact of the pupil premium funding, especially in mathematics. Reports of reviews on the use of these funds carried out by external consultants suggest funding is not being used well.

The acting SENCo has carried out a thorough review of the way in which pupils are identified as having special educational needs. Academy leaders are now confident that all pupils are accurately identified for their specific needs and appropriate support is in place. Academy leaders could not provide information to show if pupils are making any better progress as a result of this support.

External support

A range of effective support has been commissioned by ECMAT through two nearby outstanding schools which has led to whole-academy and subject reviews. In addition to checking assessment data, support and challenge is provided for the headteacher, and subject leaders are supported in improving their leadership skills.