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Liam Nolan and Jackie Powell
Headteachers
Perry Beeches III – The Free School
23 Langley Walk
Birmingham
B15 2EF

Dear Mr Nolan and Mrs Powell

Special measures monitoring inspection of Perry Beeches III – The Free School

Following my visit to your school on 1 and 2 December 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 recent section 5 inspection.

The inspection was the first monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures following the inspection which took place in May 2015.

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 that incorporates the school's action plan is not fit for purpose.

Having considered all the evidence I am of the opinion that the academy may appoint NQTs.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the Chair of the Governing Body, and the Director of Children's Services for Birmingham. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Ian Hodgkinson
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

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

- Eradicate students' underachievement and ensure their good progress in all subjects by making sure that all teachers know how, and take action, to:
 - assess students' work accurately and use this information well to identify where there are gaps in learning
 - plan work which addresses weaknesses and builds on earlier learning, avoids too much repetition and is at the right level of difficulty for students
 - give clear instructions to students and check their understanding before they start work
 - tell other adults who are supporting the lesson what they should do and which students they should work with to make sure that all groups of students, but particularly the disadvantaged and disabled students and those with special educational needs, quickly catch up with their peers.

- Take prompt and decisive action to improve students' reading skills by:
 - repeating checks on reading ages for all students to identify those who need more intensive support when they start in the school and those whose reading skills may slow as they move through the school
 - introducing a programme which teaches the weakest students to read and ensures that they read books that are at the right level for their stage in reading
 - training sixth form students and other adults in the use of phonics strategies (the sounds that letters represent) so that they know how to help students in paired reading sessions.

- Implement a whole school approach to numeracy so that students are given every opportunity to apply and to improve their skills across other subjects.

- Improve leadership by introducing more accurate checks so that leaders at all levels, including governors, have an accurate view of the school and the areas that need to improve by:
 - using teacher assessment information in the separate subjects of English and mathematics more strategically, so that leaders know how much progress is being made from individual starting points by groups of students, and how this compares with others in the school and nationally
 - using teacher assessments and information on the progress being made by students to inform judgements being made on the quality of teaching
 - checking students' written work is set at the right level of difficulty
 - checking the quality of teachers' marking in students' books.

- Improve the way in which targets are set for all teachers and, when successfully achieved, are used to reward the best teachers and leaders by:
 - using the teachers' standards and career expectations to make sure targets set are sufficiently challenging
 - using information on the progress being made by students in teachers' classes, in subject areas, in year groups or whole school, as appropriate to the teacher's role in the school.
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External reviews of governance, and of the school's use of the pupil premium and catch up funding should be undertaken in order to assess how these aspects of leadership and governance may be improved.

Report on the first monitoring inspection on 1 and 2 December 2015

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents, and listened to pupils read. They met with the headteachers, senior leaders, members of staff, groups of students, members of the local governing body, the school improvement partner and the Executive Headteacher of The Perry Beeches Academy Trust.

Context

Following the last inspection, the headteacher resigned and the whole senior leadership team was replaced, either by experienced leaders from within the trust or through internal appointment. The school is now led by two headteachers who currently hold executive headship roles in the trust. In total, 19 teachers and leaders are new to the school since the inspection, which is just short of half of the teaching staff. In addition, half of the members of the governing body, including the chair, are new to post. There are now three year groups in the school from Years 7 to 9, and they all follow a Key Stage 3 curriculum. The school no longer has a sixth form. Changes have been made to the building and to entry and exit procedures, including through additional staircases, to overcome concerns in the previous inspection about overcrowding in corridors.

Outcomes for pupils

Rigorous new systems for assessing pupils' achievement have made a strong contribution to improved progress in both English and mathematics. Pupils now generally have a clear understanding about the standard of their work and what they need to do to improve it. Where students' work in English and mathematics is not improving quickly enough, interventions are swiftly put in place to boost their progress. In particular, an extensive and compulsory 'catch-up' programme for half an hour after school each day enables pupils in Years 8 and 9 to work in small groups to address their specific weaknesses. School internal assessments are now moderated by staff from high-performing schools in the trust; they show that the proportion of pupils making expected progress in English compares similarly to the national proportion, while in mathematics the proportion is higher than average.

However, while progress is improving in English and mathematics, literacy and numeracy skills remain relatively weak for a significant number of pupils. This particularly constrains the standard of their written work across other subjects in the curriculum, where in some cases the school's moderated assessments suggest their progress has been relatively slow. It also contributes to some persistence of gaps

between the achievement of disadvantaged pupils and others. Nonetheless, well-targeted programmes of support are helping disadvantaged pupils, and those with special educational needs, to overcome barriers, especially in reading. Leaders have acted swiftly to address the shortcomings in the skills of the weakest readers identified in the last inspection report. The training of all staff in the use of phonics (the sounds letters make) to support pupils' reading, and the introduction of a phonics-based intensive reading programme for weaker readers, have given pupils the essential skills they need to read with confidence. In addition, a class reader programme is successfully supporting pupils' comprehension of the texts they read. Pupils of all levels of attainment are now reading, and having their reading skills assessed, more regularly. The school library, however, currently offers a relatively narrow selection of fictional texts and very few reference books for independent reading and study.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

The school's new assessment system is being well-used by leaders and teachers to identify students who need additional support in English and mathematics, and to monitor the success of their catch-up programmes. Those students identified for support are given purposeful help in and out of class by teachers and teaching assistants who are able to address specific areas of weakness. Ongoing assessment information is also now generally well-used by teachers to identify how well students are achieving, and to plan activities that successfully extend pupils' learning. Occasionally, work is pitched too low for the more-able pupils in class, which slows the pace of learning. However, the school's policy for 'response marking', where teachers' feedback on pupils' work systematically leads to pupils making corrections or improvements to their work, is being used with increasing success to extend the challenge to all. Pupils are well aware of their levels of attainment and what their target levels should be, although in some instances the targets that are given in their 'passport' planning booklets are too generically linked to effort rather than subject-specific skills and knowledge.

Warm relationships based on mutual respect prevail between staff and pupils and promote a positive ethos for learning in classrooms. Teachers' questioning of pupils is in some cases a real strength, for example in encouraging debate of sensitive moral and social issues in religious education. However, teachers' planning to support and develop pupils' literacy and numeracy skills varies widely across subjects. Not enough is being done in every subject to support pupils' writing and vocabulary, for example through encouragement for pupils to use dictionaries and through ensuring corrections of spellings and grammar. There are some instances of planned promotion of pupils' use of number skills in subjects outside mathematics, especially in computer science, but this is not yet widespread.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Pupils now demonstrate positive attitudes to learning in the large majority of lessons. They apply their attention to tasks set for them, and, while occasionally rather passive in class, always respond positively when asked a question by the teacher. Their high attendance and very good punctuality are testament to their determination to succeed. The behaviour of students around the school site is calm and orderly, and has been helped by the school's new staircases and systems to regulate movement between floors during the day. While instances of bullying and poor behaviour do occur, school records show that they are dealt with quickly and thoroughly.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

The school's leadership at all levels clearly articulate a vision and a passion for raising pupils' aspirations and challenging disadvantage. The new headteachers have taken swift action to strengthen pupils' achievement, to improve the quality of teaching and to strengthen the effectiveness of senior and middle leadership. Central to the success so far has been the introduction of a system of assessment, which helps pupils to know how to improve, teachers to plan to help pupils improve and leaders to hold staff properly to account for the progress pupils make. At all levels, then, the school knows itself better than at the time of the last inspection. A new performance management framework for teachers appropriately incorporates generally challenging pupil progress targets and professional development objectives. Leaders now rightly appraise the success of teaching in terms of the impact it has on pupils' learning and progress, and professional development programmes support this approach. Teachers say they feel well supported in developing their skills.

However, while positive improvements have been made, some weaknesses have yet to be fully tackled. Although significant steps have been taken to improve pupils' reading, weaknesses in writing still constrain the progress of too many pupils. The imminent appointment of a literacy coordinator should boost a whole-school literacy drive, for example to improve writing across subjects and further promote independent reading and the use of the library. A whole-school numeracy policy has yet to be implemented, although the recent appointment of a numeracy coordinator is a significant step forward. A review of the school's use of the pupil premium was completed as required in November 2015. This review praised the interventions already in place to support disadvantaged pupils and made recommendations for further action, including in strengthening literacy, mentoring and target-setting for staff.

A review of governance has been commissioned for December 2015 but had not been undertaken at the time of this inspection. This review should be valuable in promoting the further involvement of the newly constituted local governing body in monitoring and supporting the improvement of the school. The governing body has met once since the last inspection. Governors have undertaken a series of sharply focused monitoring visits to the school as part of the 'Monitoring Intervention Group' (MIG) process. The MIG visits and their subsequent reports enable governors to take a view of aspects of the school's performance linked to the inspection framework. However, there is not currently a coherent framework in place for governors to systematically evaluate the school's success in addressing the specific issues raised by the last inspection.

The statement of action for the school was judged not fit for purpose when submitted after the inspection. The revised version is improved in setting out actions to be taken beyond 2015, but it still lacks clear timelines and interim success criteria or milestones against which progress can be monitored. The lack of clearly defined processes for monitoring and evaluating the success of actions taken, for example through formal scrutiny by governors or the trust, reduces leaders' accountability and weakens the capacity to improve.

External support

The Perry Beeches Academy Trust has provided significant resources to support the school's improvement. It has quickly deployed new specialist leaders and staff to enable improvement actions to start quickly, and it commissions an experienced school improvement partner to support the headteachers. Through joint moderation activities with staff at other trust schools and academies, teachers at Perry Beeches III have been able to refine and develop the accuracy and reliability of their assessments in order to get a much clearer view of students' progress.