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Mr Ian Frost
Principal
Gloucester Academy
Painswick Road
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Dear Mr Frost

Special measures monitoring inspection of Gloucester Academy

Following my visit with Stephen Lee, Her Majesty's Inspector, to your academy on 25 and 26 November 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. Please also pass my thanks on to the pupils, teachers, other staff and governors we met during the visit. Please compliment the pupils for the way they conducted themselves and staff for their professionalism.

The inspection was the fifth monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures following the inspection which took place in April 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 academy's leaders and managers are taking effective action towards the removal of special measures.

As this was the fifth and final monitoring visit, the next inspection will be a full section 5 inspection.

Having considered all the evidence I am of the opinion that the academy may appoint newly qualified teachers (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, the Chief Executive Officer of the White

Horse Federation, the Regional Schools Commissioner, the Education Funding Agency and the Director of Children's Services for Gloucestershire.

Yours sincerely

James Sage
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

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

- Raise achievement by improving teaching to good or better levels across the academy, ensuring that:
 - teachers demand higher standards of work from their students during lessons and in the written tasks they set
 - students' work is accurately assessed and that new work planned enables them to make good or better progress
 - students' work is marked regularly with comments that help students to improve their work and increase the progress they make
 - the progress made by different groups of students is checked regularly against the quality of teaching they receive.

- Improve the impact of leaders at all levels on raising students' achievement, particularly that of the most able, by:
 - ensuring that senior leaders have the capacity to deliver improvement priorities
 - checking that the information on students' progress is accurate in all subjects and staff are clear about the capabilities of each student
 - checking that students who are eligible for the government's pupil premium funding receive high calibre support that meets their specific needs
 - promoting literacy skills in all subjects across the academy
 - ensuring that the governing body holds the senior leaders and managers to account for all aspects of the academy's performance.

- Improve behaviour and students' attitudes to learning by:
 - making sure all staff and students understand and adhere to the academy's procedures for managing behaviour
 - ensuring students are engaged productively in lessons and participate actively in their learning.

An external review of governance, to include a specific focus on the academy's use of the pupil premium, should be undertaken in order to assess how it can be improved.

Report on the fifth monitoring inspection on 25 and 26 November 2015

Evidence

Inspectors observed many aspects of the academy's work, scrutinised documents and met with the Principal and all other senior leaders, the CEO and the Secondary Director of the White Horse Federation, middle leaders, two members of the governing body, teachers and pupils. Inspectors undertook extensive observations of teaching and learning with senior or middle leaders across the academy. In lessons, inspectors evaluated current assessment information and looked at pupils' work and talked with them about it.

Context

Following a long period of significant change and instability, the new Principal took up post at the start of the academic year in September 2015. The academy now has a full complement of specialist teaching staff in all areas and there is much greater stability. This is a vast improvement over the previous year when around one-third of lessons were taught by cover teachers. The roles and responsibilities of senior and middle leaders are now clearly established. Senior leaders have introduced robust monitoring systems for all years including the sixth form; these include arrangements, which did not exist before, for tracking pupils' progress and for monitoring the quality of teaching.

The support provided by the White Horse Federation that has sponsored the academy since March 2015 is now well embedded. Teachers, including the head of mathematics, have been seconded from the other secondary school in the federation to strengthen teaching and provide strong middle leadership.

In September 2015, a new behaviour system was introduced that is well understood by teachers and pupils and displayed in all classrooms and around the academy.

Since the start of the year, all teachers use an IT-based seating plan that includes assessment and other information about each pupil in the class. These plans identify, for example, pupils supported by the pupil premium funding and those who have disabilities and those who have special educational needs.

The Year 7, 'new basics' curriculum, introduced a year ago, has been further developed and refined. Pupils in Year 7 spend 16 of the 25 hours of lesson time each week on this curriculum.

The sixth form curriculum is being reviewed to raise learners' aspirations and to better meet learners' needs so that they are prepared well for progression to further or higher education, training, employment or an apprenticeship.

Outcomes for pupils

The conditions for raising pupils' achievement have now been established. Dramatic improvement in pupils' behaviour enables teachers to teach more effectively. However, in too many classes across a range of subjects this has not yet led to sufficient improvement in achievement. Too many lessons do not challenge pupils sufficiently, including the most able, and, as a result, they do not make as much progress as they should. The balance between rebuilding pupils' confidence, often following extensive periods of time without specialist teachers, and challenging them to work at the level required, is not yet quite right. Too much work is not at a high enough level given the pupils' ability and prior attainment.

The 2015 GCSE examination results were extremely poor. Far too many pupils did not make the progress expected, particularly in mathematics and in a range of other subjects. The academy has analysed the results carefully and has clearly identified what needs to be improved. This has led to concerted actions to improve pupils' attitudes to their learning, the quality of teaching, the tracking of pupils' progress and the arrangements for monitoring the impact of these improvement measures. A highly significant indicator is that many pupils now enjoy their learning and this provides a secure basis for ongoing improvements. However, for too many, poor attendance holds back their progress.

The academy's most recent assessment information shows that current Year 11 pupils' achievement in English has improved and the proportion on track to make the progress expected of them is in line with national averages. These improvements were seen in many of the English lessons observed. There is also clear evidence of the more embedded impact of improvements in teaching in Year 10 groups and those in earlier years. In a minority of English lessons, the level of work is still not challenging enough.

Many pupils do not read, write or speak well when they enter the academy. The extensive work to improve pupils' reading, writing and speaking skills is making a difference. The intensive focus on these literacy skills in Year 7, both in the 'new basics' curriculum and in English lessons, is working well. The impact of this work that started last year can be seen in the improved skills of Year 8 pupils. The extent of the work still required is evident in some Year 11 top English set pupils continuing to make basic errors in punctuation. While these improvements in basic literacy are fundamental, they are greatly enriched by a much broader approach to encourage a depth and diversity of reading to raise pupils' aspirations and broaden their cultural development.

In mathematics, the academy's assessment information shows that currently only around half of pupils in Year 11 are making the progress they should. Again, this matches what was seen in many, but not all, of the mathematics lessons observed with the Principal and/or the head of mathematics. This new subject leader is

absolutely clear about what needs to improve and there are encouraging signs of this stronger leadership beginning to make a difference. Significantly, pupils are beginning to look forward to and enjoy their mathematics lessons. It is encouraging that some teachers are prepared to take risks to ensure that their lessons engage pupils' interest and develop deeper mathematical thinking, rather than simply provide formulaic methods to solve mathematical problems.

Pupils' progress and achievement across a wide range of other subjects, such as science, geography and history, are too variable. In some classes, remedial work by teachers to compensate for previous underachievement is making a difference. For example, pupils in a Year 11 Spanish class are already producing work of at least good quality following a year without any specialist teaching. In other lessons, teachers do not set high enough expectations, particularly for the most-able pupils. Too many of these pupils are not making as much progress as they should.

More than half of the pupils in the academy are from disadvantaged backgrounds. Their achievement is in line with that for others and is too variable. Similarly, the progress made by disabled pupils and those who have special educational needs is in line with other pupils and is also too variable. However, their achievement in many mainstream lessons has improved to build on the good work undertaken when they are taught in smaller groups.

Achievement in the sixth form is not good enough. The consequences of poor achievement in the examinations learners took at the end of Year 12 in 2015 were that too few of them stayed on into Year 13. Learners with similar prior attainment achieve very different outcomes. Learners' achievement is not good enough in too many sixth form lessons. Even when teaching is good, some learners lack the skills to work independently and take sufficient responsibility for their work.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

The quality of teaching is improving and there is considerable good practice to build on. The academy has introduced a strong framework for what good and better teaching looks like. This has been supported well by focused training for teachers. This training has developed teachers' deeper understanding of why particular strategies are effective as well as giving them the tools to teach well. Teachers' morale and confidence are much improved. They know that they will be supported well, given clear guidance and encouraged to take risks without 'fear of failure'. They are developing the skills to make more effective use of the opportunities created by pupils' much improved behaviour and attitudes. This is a significant improvement and testament to the high quality of the support from senior and middle leaders and to the work of the White Horse Federation leader on professional development.

Despite this, there is still work to be done so that all teachers can:

- make best use of the reliable and accurate information they have on pupils' current achievement in their planning and teaching
- involve all pupils in lessons more effectively
- set higher expectations and inject more pace into lessons, while still supporting those pupils who are 'fragile' and lack confidence
- create the space for pupils to talk and think more about and consolidate what they have learned
- monitor learning more rigorously through, for example, using more directed questions and probing and sharing pupils' responses more deeply to encourage wider discussion
- provide sharper feedback to pupils on their work, set clear 'next steps' and ensure that all pupils improve their work as a result.

Encouragingly, the impact of good teaching on pupils' progress and quality of work was seen in lessons across a wide range of subjects, including English, mathematics, science, geography, history and languages. This provides a secure basis for further improvement. Teaching assistants are deployed well in these lessons. They are actively involved in supporting a range of pupils to learn well. The variation in the quality of teaching is within subjects rather than in specific curriculum areas or years, although too much teaching in the sixth form is not good enough. The quality of Year 7 pupils' work in the 'new basics' projects is often high. This curriculum establishes basic skills, such as literacy and enquiry techniques, very well. The challenge is for teachers in all subjects to build on these well when these pupils move into Year 8 and beyond.

Teachers mostly mark pupils' work regularly and frequently and often provide them with useful feedback. In some English lessons, they set pupils a higher level of challenge or provide work to consolidate learning, but this approach is not widely used. Where it is in use, there is far too much variation in pupils' responses. Teachers do not always interpret this as an indication of pupils having poor attitudes and make the connection with the academy's behaviour system. In some lessons, such as in some mathematics lessons, when pupils' work is completely correct, the teacher does not recognise that this means it is too easy.

Teachers now have access to reliable and accurate assessment information on the pupils in the classes they teach. Teachers' day-to-day assessment of pupils' progress in lessons is too variable. This leads to, for example, lack of challenge for the most-able pupils in the class or lack of targeted support for those at risk of falling behind.

Too much teaching in the sixth form is not good enough. There is good practice to build on, as seen, for example, in a BTEC sports science lesson. Elsewhere, learners spend too much time on work that could have been set as preparation for the lesson. Some learners do not have the necessary skills to make best use of

independent study time. Despite small classes, some teaching is not well matched to individual learners' prior attainment, potential and current achievement.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

The improvement in pupils' behaviour is marked. They are overwhelmingly positive about the changes made by the Principal and many now enjoy coming to school and their lessons. The achievement of such improvement in such a short period of time is testament to the impact of the new Principal and the support from senior and middle leaders. The new behaviour system is very effective but is already being reviewed to raise expectations further, particularly regarding its impact on raising pupils' achievement.

The academy is an impressively calm and orderly place at all times. It has a very diverse population of pupils but it is a harmonious and fully inclusive community where all are respected and valued. Developing pupils' deep understanding of, and respect for, British values permeates much of its work: in lessons, tutorial sessions and assemblies, and through a wide range of other activities.

Pupils mostly move to lessons promptly and arrive well prepared to start learning, despite there being no bells for the beginning and end of lessons. Pupils are polite to each other, to teachers and other staff and to visitors. It was a pleasure to meet and talk with so many pupils around the academy and to be so warmly welcomed into lessons. All willingly engaged in, and often initiated, conversation. Many were keen to tell inspectors about their 'personal journeys' from consistently disruptive behaviour to enjoying their lessons and making positive contributions to class discussions, as seen in their lessons.

The main priority for academy leaders is how to improve pupils' attendance and reduce persistent absence further; they know this and have set challenging targets. Attendance information is collected and analysed rigorously for individual pupils and for all years and groups. This analysis is being used very well to monitor the impact of the wide range of strategies being used. Attendance is improving and persistent absence is reducing, but not yet rapidly enough. Academy leaders are dealing with a long history of disillusionment, low aspiration, low self-esteem, an inadequate quality of education and some deeply entrenched negative attitudes. They are open and honest about the challenge and are tackling it in every way they know how. They are willing to seek advice and are working with other schools to get as much help as they can. They are working with the local authority to initiate legal proceedings against some parents; staff and governors are actively involved in working with other parents to avoid getting to this position.

Effectiveness of leadership and management

Since the start of this academic year the academy's leaders, supported well by the White Horse Federation and by governors, have improved many aspects of the academy, building on work started towards the end of the previous year. Pupils' behaviour in classes and around the academy and their attitudes to their work have improved dramatically. Teachers' morale and confidence have risen significantly. One middle leader said: 'the morale and happiness amongst staff is the best it has been for 17 years.' There is a strong culture of striving to improve rapidly with a clear and shared vision of what the academy should look like and how to get there quickly.

Since arriving at the start of the year in September, the new Principal has provided inspirational and dynamic leadership. Pupils and staff are unanimous in their praise for the way he has tackled difficult and long-standing problems, created an atmosphere where everyone wants to do well, and established a real pride in the academy. Both pupils and teachers value highly his constant presence around the academy and in lessons. He has very quickly established highly effective relationships with everyone; this is impressive. He is supported well by the team of senior leaders who value the clarity of their roles and purpose that the Principal has brought.

Strand (subject) leaders, year progress leaders, the leader of the Year 7 'new basics' curriculum and others form a strong, cohesive and influential middle leadership team. They have been supported and had their skills developed extremely well through the regular sessions with the White Horse Federation professional development leader. Leaders have been given great confidence in their ability to make things better quickly and value highly the responsibility they have been given; as one said, they have 'been given the tools they need to do the job well'. They are instrumental in turning the Principal's vision into sustained improvements in teaching and learning. They have an impressive passion and enthusiasm that is infectious and highly encouraging.

Governors have a deep and accurate view of what has improved and what still remains to be done. Their deep knowledge of all aspects of the academy enables them to provide an effective balance between support and challenge. They know what questions to pose to senior leaders and are relentless in getting the answers they need. This complements well the strong qualities of the academy's leadership team.

The academy's 'golden book' establishes the values and expected behaviours of pupils, staff, parents and all involved with the academy. It sets the systems and procedures within a strong framework of what leads to sustained and deeply embedded improvement and a sense of moral purpose; everyone values this highly. The systems that have been introduced, such as the frequent and intensive tracking of pupils' progress, the extensive and rigorous monitoring of the quality of teaching

and the relationship between these, have established a very secure platform for further improvements. It means that senior and middle leaders have a deep and accurate understanding of the impact of actions taken and of what needs to improve further and more rapidly. There is, rightly, 'no hiding place' in this academy and staff are mostly responding to this very well.

There is strong leadership in the sixth form because the sixth form leader has extensive experience and insight into what improvements are required in teaching and learning. The leader also has a good understanding of the requirements of the 16–19 study programmes, clarity as to why the academy is not currently meeting them and why the sixth form provision is not doing the job it was designed to do. The current arrangements in the sixth form do not help to set the extremely high level of aspiration for learners that academy leaders strive for. The sixth form provision is currently being reviewed so that it can meet these aims and high expectations much more effectively.

Safeguarding arrangements are effective. Academy leaders are fully aware of the importance of their duty to protect pupils from the risk of extreme or radical views and influences. They provide appropriate training and meet all required expectations.

External support

Since becoming part of the White Horse Federation, the academy has received high-quality and effective support; for example, from the CEO, the secondary director, the leader of professional development and the secondment of key teachers. The financial support from the federation is currently essential to maintain the curriculum and breadth of provision. The academy also has good links with other schools to help with specific concerns, such as raising attendance.

The academy had very little contact with the local authority through the long period of inadequate support from previous sponsors. Even when 'in limbo' between sponsors, the academy leaders believe that no tangible support was provided.