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21 December 2015

Mrs Simcock
Executive Principal
West Walsall E-ACT Academy
Primley Avenue
Walsall
WS2 9UA

Dear Mrs Simcock

Special measures monitoring inspection of West Walsall E-ACT Academy

Following my visit with Helen Reeves, Richard Ellis and Thomas Walton, Ofsted Inspectors, 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 previous monitoring inspection.

The inspection was the fifth monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures following the inspection which took place in January 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 newly qualified teachers.

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 Walsall.

Yours sincerely

Deborah James
Ofsted Inspector

Annex

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

- Improve teaching so that all is good or better, particularly in English and in mathematics, by:
 - insisting that teachers set high standards for behaviour in lessons so that all students know what is expected of them and no lessons are disturbed through chatter
 - making sure that teachers make accurate assessments of the levels students are working at
 - making sure that all teachers use the information they have on students to identify gaps in their learning and tailor their teaching to effectively fill these gaps
 - making sure that teachers' marking of students' work states clearly what students need to do to improve their work and that teachers check that this has been done.

- Give students a better chance of succeeding in the next stage of their education or training by making sure they leave the academy able to read well and to use their skills in mathematics by:
 - improving students' reading ages so that they are closer to, or above, their actual age
 - providing students with opportunities to practise using their skills in mathematics to solve numerical problems.

- Close the attainment gap between those students who are eligible for the pupil premium and their peers by making sure that all teachers and leaders use the information they have about students' achievement to notice when students are not doing as well as they should and help them to catch up.

- Improve the impact of academy leaders at all levels by:
 - ensuring that leaders, including governors, develop an accurate understanding of the academy, based on effective use of accurate data
 - ensuring that subject leaders are held to account by senior leaders and governors for the quality of teaching in their areas.

Ofsted will make recommendations for action on governance to the authority responsible for the academy. 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 this aspect of leadership and governance may be improved.

Report on the fifth monitoring inspection on 1–2 December 2015

Evidence

Inspectors observed the academy's work, scrutinised documents and met with the Executive Principal, the interim Principal, the Chair and vice-chair of the Governing Body, a representative from the sponsor, senior and middle leaders and pupils. Inspectors also considered the views of 73 staff questionnaires and pupil responses to a school questionnaire. There were not enough responses on Parent View to gain the views of parents.

Context

Since the last special measures monitoring inspection in July 2015 there has been considerable change in the senior leadership of the academy. An Executive Principal joined the academy at the start of October to work alongside the Principal. Two new vice-principals have joined the academy on an interim basis, one in October and one in November. The Principal resigned from the academy in November and an interim Principal has now joined the academy and had been in place for five days at the time of the inspection. Additional leadership support has been provided in English. Eighteen new teaching staff joined the academy in September, replacing staff who left during the previous term.

Outcomes for pupils

GCSE examination results in the summer of 2015 did not meet the academy's targets. The academy was expecting 38% of pupils to gain five or more GCSEs at grades A* to C including English and mathematics but only 32% of pupils reached this standard. Improvements were seen in some areas; notably more pupils are now making the expected levels of progress in English, in line with pupils' progress nationally. There was a smaller improvement in the progress made by pupils in mathematics, where results are still significantly below national standards. There was also an improvement in the overall progress made by pupils, across a range of eight subjects, although overall progress is still below national expectations.

The large differences in the achievement of boys and girls seen in previous years have been reduced. The gap between the progress of disadvantaged pupils and others has closed slightly but the achievement of disadvantaged pupils is not improving quickly enough to ensure they are reaching the same standards as others in the school. A small cohort of disabled pupils and those with special educational needs did less well than other pupils in the academy, particularly in mathematics.

There is considerable variation in the performance information for current pupils in the academy. Pupils in some subject areas, for example science, are not making the expected level of progress and senior leaders are taking steps to put additional

support into these areas. Current Year 11 pupils continue to make better progress in English than mathematics and significant gaps are still evident in the progress made by disadvantaged pupils compared to others.

Results for learners in the sixth form improved on previous years, although the overall progress made by learners on academic courses was significantly below the progress made by learners nationally. Progress on vocational courses was in line with national expectations and learners studying childcare and health studies did particularly well.

A major review of the sixth form provision took place last year and led to changes in available courses and increased some course entry requirements. As a result, several learners left part way through courses and retention rates for the sixth form are very low, particularly for boys.

In lessons, weaknesses in literacy skills are still evident, particularly in the quality of oral responses, where pupils are allowed to provide very simple answers to questions. The academy has had considerable success over the last year in improving reading ages but pupils are struggling to write at length, even with encouragement from their teachers. Improvements in the quality of teaching in English, with high expectations and more frequent opportunities for discussion, are supporting better progress in literacy.

There is little evidence of a whole-academy approach to developing numeracy skills but the mathematics department is ensuring pupils develop their skills in applying their mathematical knowledge to a range of different situations.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Standards are rising too slowly because the inconsistencies in the quality of teaching and assessment result in too many pupils not being supported well enough in making good progress.

High levels of staff turnover mean that senior leaders need to continually reinforce standards and expectations around lesson planning, behaviour management and marking. Pupils commented frequently on the negative impact of changing teachers and the high proportion of temporary teachers that cover their lessons. Despite an academy focus on activities to match the different learning needs of pupils, inspectors found little evidence in lesson observations or in pupils' books that this was happening. As a result the work was often too easy and pupils finished the work quickly. They would then have to wait for the teacher to set them new work.

A change of the school timetable in November has produced additional issues for the quality of teaching and learning. Pupils have been placed in new groups with new teachers and are using new exercise books. For some pupils this has led to a

repetition of work that was already undertaken earlier in the term and pupils raised concerns about work being too easy or boring. On occasions, this results in poorer behaviour.

Evidence of some of the good practice seen on previous visits has been sustained and a number of common positive features of teaching were noted across the academy. The majority of staff know their pupils well and have good relationships with them in lessons. Teachers are keen to support the learning of their pupils and actively engage with individuals and groups of pupils throughout the lesson to help them understand their work. Lessons, including those taught by temporary supply teachers, have a clarity of structure and purpose that enables most pupils to learn something new and make some progress through the lesson.

Pupils make most progress when they are excited and motivated by their lessons. This is most evident when teachers carefully plan activities that meet the needs of different groups of pupils within the class. Examples were seen in Spanish, drama and art of pupils who made good progress because they were enthused by the subject matter and keen to learn more. In a history lesson, less-able pupils were well supported in developing their literacy skills. In some mathematics lessons, pupils are well supported to take on more challenging work.

Most teachers are consistently following the academy's marking policy and pupils receive written feedback on what they have done well and what they need to do to improve. Pupils' work is also frequently marked by their peers. This has a mixed impact; at times it helps pupils understand a topic more deeply but it also can lead to a very superficial level of support and guidance for the pupil whose work has been marked by an unskilled peer.

Not all staff, particularly those new to the academy, are confident about reaching accurate judgements about pupils' attainment. This makes it difficult for the senior leaders to accurately track pupils' progress and set up the necessary intervention for pupils who are falling behind.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Academy attendance improved in the 2014/15 academic year compared to the previous year. There is little difference in the attendance of different groups of pupils. The academy has also been successful in reducing the number of pupils who are persistently absent. Attendance has dipped slightly this term, mainly as a result of a number of absences for religious observances that have fallen on school days.

The number of pupils receiving fixed-term exclusions for poor behaviour has increased over the same period last year. The behaviour policy introduced in January 2015 appears to be having little impact on reducing the number of exclusions. There have been 39 fixed-term exclusions so far this term, primarily for verbal abuse or

fighting. On this visit, inspectors also noted a high proportion of pupils placed outside of lessons because they had behaved badly. Although this practice is an agreed step in the academy's behaviour policy and is generally recorded, there is no evidence that it is changing the behaviour of these pupils. Staff raised concerns about poor pupil behaviour.

Despite these recorded increases and the poor behaviour seen in lessons, the behaviour of pupils at break and lunchtime is generally sensible and calm. There are a significant number of staff on duty at these times, who are highly visible in fluorescent jackets. Pupils appreciated their presence, commenting that it added to their sense of feeling safe at the academy. Pupils were polite to inspectors and talked confidently about their experiences at the academy.

Steps taken to improve punctuality have been effective, with the great majority of pupils arriving on time every day. The small group of pupils late on the morning of the inspection made every effort to hurry into school and were apologetic about their lateness.

Pupils were particularly unhappy about frequent changes in staffing, recent changes to the timetable and 'having to teach themselves'. A few pupils could see the positive in this approach as it supported them in developing increased resilience and independence to cope and succeed. Pupils said that they felt they had not been kept informed of the wide range of changes this term.

Some sixth form learners requested an additional meeting with inspectors to express their concern about recent changes to their provision. They are unhappy about frequent changes in teachers and feel they are not trusted enough to work independently.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

Following the summer's results, when performance was not as high as predicted in the key measure of five or more GCSEs at A* to C including English and mathematics, a number of changes have been put in place by E-ACT to accelerate the academy's progress.

Additional senior leadership capacity has been added to the academy by E-ACT to increase the pace of improvement, including the introduction of an Executive Principal and two new vice-principals. Senior leaders expressed disappointment over the 2015 examination results but have put in place detailed plans for each subject area to address the concerns. Extensive changes have been made to the curriculum, pupil groups, assessment timetable and teacher planning requirements.

The coaching programme to support staff who are not consistently teaching well has been reviewed and shorter timescales have been introduced for staff to demonstrate

the necessary improvements. Middle leaders are receiving additional support to quality assure the work of their departments, with more activities taking place alongside members of the senior leadership team.

Staff recognise the need to improve teaching and learning and are committed to improving the outcomes for their pupils. However, staff, like the pupils, commented about the difficulty in dealing with the current levels of change and turbulence. Staff morale is very low. A large proportion of staff do not believe the academy is now well led or that leaders have created a climate in which staff are trusted to be innovative in support of pupils.

There is considerable hostility to the way in which E-ACT have overseen recent changes. Staff raised concerns about poor communication, a lack of trust and a concentration on the negatives. Some staff commented on their perception of a developing culture of fear. The recent resignation of the previous Principal was widely seen by staff and pupils as a huge loss to the academy. Staff believe that E-ACT have not had enough regard to the strengths and skills that exist within the academy, with an insistence on academy-wide common initiatives that have been hurriedly introduced. Previous Ofsted monitoring visits have highlighted that there remains much work that needs to be done to ensure pupils get the best possible education.

Governors are also feeling 'out of the loop' on current changes. There has been very limited consultation and governors are unclear about their role and whether they have any function in monitoring the work of the new Executive Principal.

A small group of trainee teachers within the academy feel well supported by leaders and staff coaches in developing their teaching skills. They have opportunities to work in other academies within the chain and are confident that they will successfully complete their training.

External support

The impact of external support is variable. The summer examination results did not reach the level that E-ACT had expected from their regular monitoring of the academy. As a result, they have re-examined their processes to make them more rigorous. A sample of pupils' work following recent predicted data in English has been shared with another academy to check the accuracy of the predictions. This is a new level of quality assurance of data and has not been in place in previous years.

E-ACT continues to lead a Raising Achievement Board (RAB) meeting each half term which reviews the most recent monitoring information about the academy and considers what interventions are necessary. The trust also carried out two reviews of the academy in the autumn term, both highlighting continuing weaknesses in the quality of teaching and learning. These reviews were critical of the progress made by

the academy and have led to the changes in the senior leadership of the academy, with additional capacity being provided for timetabling changes and teaching and learning. It is too early to evaluate whether the leadership changes and the major re-structuring of the timetable and teaching groups will have a positive impact on outcomes in the academy.