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11 January 2016

Miss Michelle Ginn
Principal
Blackthorn Academy
Waingrove
Northampton
Northamptonshire
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Dear Miss Ginn

Special measures monitoring inspection of Blackthorn Academy

Following my visit with Ann Glynn-Jones, Ofsted Inspector, to your academy on 15 and 16 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 academy's previous monitoring inspection.

The inspection was the fourth monitoring inspection since the academy became subject to special measures following the inspection which took place in July 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 is not taking effective action towards the removal of special measures.

Having considered all the evidence I am of the opinion that the academy may 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 Academy Advisory Board and the Director of Children's Services for Northamptonshire.

Yours sincerely

David Carter
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

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

- Improve teaching so that all groups of pupils in Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2 make better progress by ensuring that:
 - teachers assess work accurately and have high expectations of what pupils can achieve
 - teaching enables all pupils, including the most-able and those who have special educational needs to make sufficient progress in lessons
 - marking is carried out regularly, provides advice on how to improve, and teachers check whether pupils are using this information to improve their work.
- Improve the effectiveness of leadership and management by ensuring that:
 - leaders check that assessment information collected by the academy is accurate
 - additional funding for the pupil premium and sports activities are being used effectively enough and checks on their impact by governors and the academy sponsor are regular and rigorous
 - the arrangements for teaching literacy and numeracy across the academy are strong enough to result in pupils making rapid progress.
- Improve the behaviour of pupils, by:
 - ensuring that the academy's behaviour policy is used consistently by all staff
 - ensuring that pupils take pride in their work and its presentation
 - improving lessons so they are interesting and stimulating enough to capture the enthusiasm of all pupils.

An external review of governance, including the academy's use of the pupil premium, should be undertaken in order to assess how these aspects of leadership and management may be improved.

Report on the fourth monitoring inspection on 15 and 16 December 2015

Evidence

Inspectors observed the academy's work and met with: the Principal; the Chair of the Academy Advisory Board; leaders responsible for English, mathematics, child protection, and provision for disabled pupils and those with special educational needs; and pupils from Key Stages 1 and 2. Inspectors visited lessons, talked to pupils about their learning and evaluated the quality of their work in a range of subjects. Inspectors considered the academy's most recent data on the attainment and progress of groups of pupils. The quality of the academy's improvement plan was evaluated. Documentation relating to pupils' attendance, the behaviour and safety of pupils and arrangements for safeguarding pupils were also considered.

Context

Since the third monitoring visit, you have recently been appointed as Principal of the academy. Four new teachers started working at the academy in September 2015; however, two have subsequently left their positions. Two directors from the academy sponsor have been supporting you in leading the academy and, very recently, this support has been increased by the appointment of two associate leaders. A new Chair of the Academy Advisory Board has recently been appointed, following the resignation of her predecessor.

Outcomes for pupils

Outcomes for pupils at the end of Key Stage 1 at the end of 2015 show that pupils' attainment in reading and mathematics declined from the previous year. There was a slight improvement in writing. Nevertheless, standards of attainment in each subject are significantly below national averages. Similarly, standards at the end of Key Stage 2 also declined in reading, writing and mathematics from the previous year. Although standards in grammar, punctuation and spelling rose, pupils in Year 6 still left the academy with low levels of attainment and were not adequately prepared for the next stage of their education. While the progress of these pupils accelerated during their final year, this was not sufficient to address prior underachievement. As a result, the proportion of pupils making expected progress or better than expected progress during their time in Key Stage 2 was below average.

Senior leaders have put in place a new system for assessing pupils' attainment following the removal of assessment levels linked to the National Curriculum. This has enabled senior leaders to establish a clear baseline for individual pupils and key groups. The data held by the academy shows that standards in each year group are low. Senior leaders have set ambitious targets for improvement. However, they acknowledge that the oldest pupils need to make substantial progress in order for

the academy to meet the current government floor standards, which sets the minimum expectations for pupils' attainment and progress.

Disadvantaged pupils attained standards that were below that of other pupils at the end of Key Stages 1 and 2. The exception was in reading at the end of Key Stage 2 where it was slightly above those of other pupils. Disadvantaged pupils at the end of Year 6 made slower progress than others across Key Stage 2. Senior leaders have not yet placed the outcomes of termly assessments into their tracking system; at this stage, therefore, they are not in a position to monitor the impact of their use of the pupil premium. Similarly, leaders are at an early stage in monitoring the impact of their work on pupils' outcomes for disabled pupils and those with special educational needs. Scrutiny of pupils' workbooks shows no particular difference between the progress of these two groups of pupils and others in the academy.

Nevertheless, pupils' progress remains too variable across the academy. This is because of the inconsistencies and weaknesses that persist in teaching. For instance, while pupils are having more regular opportunities to practise their skills in calculations, their understanding of mathematics is not being developed well enough. Pupils are not being given enough activities to enable them to apply their knowledge and skills to solve mathematical problems or to help them develop the ability to reason.

In Key Stage 1, pupils have few opportunities in which to produce extended pieces of writing, both in English and in other subjects. As a result, they are not developing the ability to write for a range of purposes and for different audiences.

In Key Stage 2, a minority of pupils have gaps in their knowledge of phonics (letters and the sounds they make) which are not being addressed quickly enough to have a positive impact on improving their skills in spelling.

Nevertheless, there are signs of improvement in specific aspects of pupils learning in English. Pupils' skills in grammar and punctuation are beginning to improve. There have been some improvements in the quality of the presentation of pupils' work, with adults providing pupils with clearer guidance on what they expect in pieces of recorded work.

Pupils' skills and knowledge of phonics in Key Stage 1 is improving more quickly due to more regular and sharply focused teaching. However, there is more work to be done as adults are not modelling language correctly during other lessons so that pupils are able to apply their phonics skills in other subjects.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

While there have been improvements in the quality of teaching since the previous visit, the quality of teaching remains too variable to ensure that all pupils are making the progress required to address a legacy of prior underachievement.

Teachers are beginning to use information from their assessments to plan work for the different abilities of pupils. However, this is not always precise enough to ensure that activities are suitably challenging, especially for the most-able pupils. This hinders the progress that pupils make.

Senior leaders have introduced a new system for planning to try to guide teachers' thinking about making learning more meaningful for pupils. This is having an impact as adults convey more clearly to pupils what they are learning about and why. As pupils can see a relevance to their work, more pupils than previously are engaged in their learning.

Adults' checks on learning during lessons are not always focused enough on identifying where learning can be moved forward more quickly or where misunderstandings go undetected and errors are made.

Teachers are following the marking policy with a greater consistency. As a result, pupils are given more time to respond to feedback, especially in English and mathematics. They tend to receive less detailed feedback in other subjects.

Recent developments in moving the Reception class to be adjacent to the Nursery has meant that children in both classes have more opportunities to learn outside. Staff from both classes are planning activities together, applying a new approach where daily assessments are used more sharply to inform the activities that children undertake. As a result, their learning and development needs are met more successfully. While this approach can be refined further so that all activities are suitably challenging, it should not undermine the fact that clear improvements have been made in the early years since the previous visit. Children behave well and are settled. You, as leader of the early years, are very clear about the next steps that are required to improve the quality of provision.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Pupils say that behaviour has improved, both in lessons and outside the classroom. The recently implemented revised behaviour policy has resulted in a much calmer and ordered atmosphere in the academy. Pupils are clear about the sanctions that are applied if they choose to misbehave; they are motivated to achieve the rewards for displaying positive behaviour around the academy and when demonstrating positive attitudes during lessons. Where pupils are engaged in their learning,

behaviour is more positive than previously. However, where teaching is weaker, pupils can become less engaged and they can lose interest in completing their work.

Senior leaders have a greater presence during lunchtimes to check on pupils' behaviour and act decisively where required. Also, pupils are more closely supervised as they move from the playground to the dining hall, which has resulted in a calmer atmosphere being evident at lunchtime.

Senior leaders have communicated to parents and pupils the importance of attending the academy regularly, and they are ably supported in their work by the family support team. As a result, attendance rates have improved. Senior leaders are now sharply focused on reducing the proportion of pupils who are persistently absent from the academy.

Effectiveness of leadership and management

Since you began your role in September 2015, you have quickly identified what needs to be done to bring about the rapid improvement that is required. You have put together clear plans for improvement, which focus sharply on strengthening leadership and identifying the precise areas where teaching needs to improve to impact on accelerating pupils' progress. You have worked tirelessly at putting in place systems to help to secure improvements, and there are signs that this is beginning to turn the academy around.

You have put in place more regular checks on the quality of teaching, and are using the standards that teachers should achieve to support the way in which you manage their performance. Staff are set targets to improve and are supported to achieve them by being coached by other members of staff. This is helping to create a culture of improvement, whereby teachers are reflecting on how they can improve their practice. Senior leaders are drawing on a wider range of evidence to inform their judgements on teaching. More attention is given to taking into account the views of pupils and scrutinising pupils' workbooks and this is helping to provide more precise feedback to teachers about their work. There is more scope for even more detailed checks to ensure that teaching is having a positive impact on pupils' outcomes.

You have drawn on the expertise of other senior leaders to help you to drive improvements in the first instance. However, you recognise the need for leadership to become more distributed. For example, the leaders of English and mathematics are at an early stage in developing their skills in checking on the quality of provision in their subjects and to drive improvements through training and modelling practice. The leaders of subjects require training in how to hold teachers to account.

You have implemented a new system for assessing pupils' attainment. While this has enabled senior leaders to establish a clear starting point for assessing the progress of individual pupils and key groups, the first set of summative assessments has not

yet been completed and recorded. As a result, senior leaders are at an early stage in being able to monitor and evaluate the impact of teaching on the progress of different groups of pupils.

You have produced a clear plan on how you intend to use the pupil premium to support the progress and personal development of eligible pupils. This has helped to improve their attendance and behaviour; a closer analysis of the impact on learning is in the process of being conducted.

You have taken the lead on developing the academy's approach to the teaching of physical education and how the sport premium funding is used. This has resulted in more pupils taking part in competitive sports. Teachers are now benefiting from observing good practice in physical education and sport as part of their professional development. A new scheme for physical education has been implemented which is helping to provide better continuity and progression in pupils' learning. At this stage, however, there are not close enough checks on which pupils are involved. Consequently, senior leaders are not in a position to ensure that all pupils, irrespective of background or circumstance, have an equal opportunity to be involved in a range of participative and competitive sport.

The leader responsible for disabled pupils and those with special educational needs has put in place a more robust system for planning individualised support programmes for pupils. The leader recognises that more work needs to be undertaken on checking on the extent to which support programmes are being effective in accelerating pupils' progress. This is because historically not enough of these pupils made expected or better rates of progress.

Senior leaders have continued to improve the quality of the learning environment. The classroom and shared areas are highly attractive and stimulating places in which to learn. Pupils have been provided with a better range of resources to support them in their learning, especially in reading. Pupils say this is motivating them to read a wider range of books.

Senior leaders have introduced a new curriculum. Although this is at an early stage of implementation, this is helping to ensure that pupils are in receipt of a broader and balanced curriculum.

Senior leaders have continued to face a number of challenges in relation to recruiting and retaining staff since the previous visit. Leaders acknowledge the need to secure staffing arrangements to help them to ensure that the momentum in improving the quality of teaching is accelerated. As there is now a culture of coaching in the academy, with clear support being provided by senior leaders, I am of the opinion that the academy should be allowed to appoint newly qualified teachers.

A new Chair of the Academy Advisory Board has recently been appointed. Governors have now commenced a programme of monitoring and are beginning to hold leaders to account for the rate of implementation of the action plan. At this stage however, governors have still not undertaken the planned review of their work and the use of the pupil premium. Consequently, arrangements for governance, while becoming stronger, have not been sufficiently robust over time to ensure that the academy is improving at the required rate.

External support

The chief executive officer and the academy outcomes director for the academy sponsor acknowledge that issues relating to the recruitment and retention of staff, allied to changes in the leadership structure, have been a barrier to securing improvement at the required rate since the academy was placed in special measures in July 2014. Consequently, they have put in place a broader and more substantial package of support since the previous visit to help you in turning the academy around by allowing you to sharply focus on improving teaching. The introduction of more focused improvement plans combined with closer monitoring means that they have a greater understanding of the rate of improvement and the next steps that are required. The support that has been provided, allied to the work of you and other senior leaders, has enabled the academy to begin to move forward; there is a sense that momentum is building and there have been clear improvements since the previous visit. Nevertheless, significant improvement is still required over the next two terms if the academy is to come out of a category of concern within the required timescale.