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27 October 2015

Mr Gareth Jones
Interim Headteacher
Sandon Business and Enterprise College
Sandon Road
Meir
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ST3 7DF

Dear Mr Jones

Special measures monitoring inspection of Sandon Business and Enterprise College

Following my visit with Gwen Onyon, Ofsted Inspector, and Alison Broomfield, Ofsted Inspector, to your school on 6 and 7 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 school's previous monitoring inspection.

The inspection was the second monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures following the inspection which took place in January 2015. 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 taking effective action towards the removal of special measures.

The school may not appoint newly qualified teachers before the next monitoring inspection.

This letter and the 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 interim executive board and the Director of Children's Services for Stoke-on-Trent.

Yours sincerely

Alun Williams

Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

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

- Improve systems for safeguarding students so that statutory requirements are met by ensuring that all necessary checks are carried out and documented when recruiting staff.
- Improve the quality of teaching to ensure that students' achievement accelerates, particularly in mathematics and science, by ensuring that teachers:
 - use the information about what students can do to plan lessons that meet their abilities, in particular the most able
 - insist on higher expectations of what students can learn in lessons and over time
 - ask questions in lessons that encourage students to think more deeply about and reflect on their learning
 - mark students' work regularly, providing helpful comments on how to improve
 - consistently and effectively challenge low-level disruption so that the focus is on learning in all lessons.
- Close the achievement gap between disadvantaged students and other students nationally by:
 - analysing achievement information across subjects in all years to provide well-planned support where it is needed
 - making sure that the pupil premium funding is effectively allocated and monitored to raise students' achievement.
- Improve the attendance of all groups of students to at least the national average by:
 - developing systems to identify and tackle regular absence
 - monitoring trends of absenteeism
 - evaluating the success of actions taken.
- Improve leadership at all levels, including governance, so that leadership has a greater impact on students' achievement by:
 - evaluating rigorously the quality of teaching throughout the school, using information about students' progress as well as observations and scrutinies of students' work
 - improving teaching where it is needed

- addressing the key areas for improvement in mathematics and science, which include measurable criteria by which success can be judged
- analysing more thoroughly other information gathered in the school, such as students' attendance, punctuality, exclusions and behaviour and using this information to target actions in a more focused way that lead to improvement
- ensuring that students are taught by teachers who have a strong subject knowledge in mathematics
- ensuring that governors receive clear, analytical reports on students' progress and behaviour and the quality of teaching so they can be more effective in challenging and supporting the school.

Report on the second monitoring inspection on 6 and 7 October 2015

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work and visited parts of lessons, some of which were undertaken jointly with members of the senior leadership team. Inspectors scrutinised documents and met with the headteacher, senior and other leaders, groups of students, the chair of the interim executive board and representatives of the local authority.

Context

Since the last monitoring inspection, a review of the school's senior and middle leadership has been completed and a restructuring process undertaken. One new assistant headteacher has joined the senior leadership team and members of the team now have revised areas of responsibility and accountability. Subjects have been reorganised into seven faculties, some with new leadership in place, including a new head of science. The conversion to academy status, planned to take place on 1 September 2015, has been delayed and a new target date of 1 January 2016 has been set. The school's governing body has been replaced by an interim executive board, with effect from 1 September 2015. External reviews of pupil premium expenditure and teaching and learning have also been completed.

Outcomes for pupils

Unvalidated GCSE results for 2015 present a mixed picture. The headline attainment figure of five GCSEs at grades A* to C, including English and mathematics, rose and places the school just above the government's floor standard. The proportion of disadvantaged students making at least expected progress rose sharply in both English and mathematics, albeit from a previously low base. As a result, gaps between disadvantaged students and others, both in school and nationally, have closed somewhat.

However, the proportion of all students making at least expected progress in English fell a little from its previous strong position in 2014, which was close to the national average, and the figure for mathematics remained almost identical to the 2014 value, which was well below the national average. Based on teachers' forecasts, leaders were expecting better outcomes in both English and mathematics, and so the results were disappointing. The lack of accuracy in forecasting GCSE results in English, mathematics and some other subjects undermines leaders' ability to target and address underachievement effectively. Improving the accuracy of teachers' assessments and forecasts is a key priority for school leaders that is essential if outcomes are to improve significantly.

Results across other subjects were also variable. There were relative strengths in Spanish, history and religious education, but much weaker outcomes in German and science.

The school's assessment information for its current Year 11 students indicates that outcomes will improve in 2016, but leaders do not currently have confidence in these forecasts. Leaders have put systems in place that are designed to improve greatly the reliability of assessment information over the next few weeks, but it is currently too early to judge the success of the new systems.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Improvement in teaching is evident across all subjects and year groups in the school, because leaders have introduced clear and simple policies and expectations, and students are beginning to make better progress as a result. Some inconsistency in practice remains, particularly where temporary or non-specialist staff are teaching classes.

Expectations of what students should achieve in lessons have improved as teachers increasingly use assessment information about their students to plan lessons that better match students' ability and aptitude. Marking has also improved greatly, with teachers now consistently applying the school's marking policy and providing students with helpful feedback on how to improve their work. Teachers are also using questions more effectively to encourage students to think about their work and deepen their understanding of it.

Students interviewed by inspectors were very clear about, and appreciative of, the improvements in their lessons over the last nine months. They identified greater challenge, lessons in which they were more active and more support from their teachers as particular areas of recent improvement.

Weaknesses remain in mathematics and science, especially where temporary or non-specialist staff are teaching classes, and students are not making sufficient progress as a result, especially in Years 7 and 8. In mathematics, some questioning lacks depth and precision and teachers are too quick to move students on to new material before they have thoroughly grasped basic concepts. In science, some teaching does not demand enough thinking from students and they become bored as a result. However, even in these two areas of remaining weakness, improvement is still evident, and Year 11 students singled out science and mathematics as the subjects where their lessons had improved the most.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Because teaching is improving and lessons are more interesting, more challenging and better matched to students' ability, students' behaviour in lessons and their

attitudes to learning have improved. Low-level disruption of lessons is now rare and limited to lessons where teaching is weak. In most lessons, students are eager to learn, concentrate well and work hard. Students behave sensibly around school between lessons, at break and lunchtime, and the school is calm and orderly.

Safeguarding is now effective. The headteacher's swift reorganisation of roles and responsibilities in this area has led to strong leadership, clear and compliant policies, detailed monitoring and comprehensive training for all staff. As a result, all staff understand their responsibilities and play their part in keeping students safe. Students confirm that they feel safe in school and parents concur with this view.

Improving attendance from its previously very low base last year has been a major focus of school activity over recent months. Again, strong leadership combined with a dedicated team and a whole-school focus is beginning to yield improvement. Attendance this year, albeit only a few weeks into the term, is currently close to the national average for previous years, representing an improvement of more than 3% from 12 months ago. Attendance of disadvantaged students has improved by more than that of others so gaps are beginning to close.

Effectiveness of leadership and management

The headteacher provides strong, no-nonsense leadership that is welcomed and appreciated by staff, students and parents. Staff speak of his clarity of vision and their understanding of the direction in which the school is moving and what still needs to be done. Students speak warmly of the improvement in their school since his arrival. Supported by an increasingly effective senior team, the headteacher is promoting a new culture of aspiration and 'effort, hard work and practice, practice, practice' among students and staff, and this culture is being readily embraced by all.

Leadership has been strengthened at the middle-leader level through the new faculty structure. Faculty leaders share seniors leaders' vision and ambition, and are committed to improving their subject areas. Some early signs of the impact of their work is evident in the detailed analyses of 2015 examination results and their plans to improve outcomes.

The impact of strong leadership is evident in several areas. Teaching is improving because of clear policies, rigorous evaluation of the quality of teaching, and appropriate training for teachers. To date, training has been focused on the basic expectations of lesson planning, marking and behaviour management, but more subject-specific support and training is now planned, for example for the mathematics and science departments. Curriculum changes are ensuring that students are more sensibly grouped into classes that are taught by teachers with relevant expertise. Strong leadership of personal development, behaviour and welfare is resulting in better behaviour, improving attendance and effective safeguarding.

New systems to validate and analyse student progress data are being warmly welcomed by teachers and faculty leaders, and their use is showing early signs of impact. Leaders believe that the new systems will address their current inability to identify and tackle underperformance effectively because of teachers' unreliable assessments.

The ongoing uncertainty over academy conversion has proved an unhelpful distraction over recent months, and it is to leaders' credit that it does not appear to have significantly hindered the progress that the school has made in that time. The local authority has been slow to finalise governance arrangements for the school, citing the delay in academy conversion as the reason and finally replacing the governing body with an interim executive board on 1 September 2015. As a result, now, 10 months after the school was judged to require special measures, the interim executive board, although with significant expertise, is new in place, does not yet know the school and cannot effectively support and challenge leaders.

External support

The school has made effective use of the support provided by Ormiston Sir Stanley Matthews Academy (OSSMA) which the local authority commissioned. Prior to the establishment of the interim executive board, OSSMA's Chair of the Governing Body added external scrutiny to the school's progress board and, more recently, the Ormiston Academies Trust has provided an education adviser to support the headteacher. The school has also sourced various other links with schools and the local authority to provide targeted support.