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Mr Andrew Bygrave
Acting Principal
University Academy Kidsgrove
Gloucester Road
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Stoke-on-Trent
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ST7 4DL

Dear Mr Bygrave

Special measures monitoring inspection of University Academy Kidsgrove

Following my visit (with Josie Leese, Ofsted Inspector) to your academy on 9–10 February 2016, 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 that have been taken since the academy's previous monitoring inspection.

The inspection was the third monitoring inspection since the academy became subject to special measures following the inspection that took place in February 2015. The full list of the areas for improvement that 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.

Having considered all the evidence I recommend that the academy does not seek to appoint newly qualified teachers.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Governing Body, the Regional Schools Commissioner and the Director of Children's Services for Staffordshire County Council. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Alun Williams

Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection that took place in February 2015.

- Urgently improve leadership and management, so that actions secure a rapid and sustained rise in standards of teaching and achievement by:
 - ensuring that plans for improvement and actions taken by leaders tackle the full range of weaknesses in the academy, including those of the sixth form
 - securing rigorous monitoring and evaluation procedures at all levels so that all leaders are able to gauge how successful they have been in bringing about improvements and can hold all teachers to account
 - ensuring that all leaders, including subject leaders and pastoral leaders, have the skills and capacity to deliver essential improvements to the quality of teaching and to the achievement of students
 - rigorously checking that policies and procedures are adopted consistently across the academy.

- Improve the quality of teaching so that all students make good or better progress by:
 - taking into account the impact of teaching on students' learning and progress over time when evaluating the quality of teaching
 - using the range of information available about students, including their progress, attainment, prior knowledge and understanding, to match work to their needs
 - ensuring that teachers have high expectations of all students in all lessons and challenge them, including the most-able students, middle-ability students, boys, and disadvantaged students, to excel
 - using questioning to check that learning is secure, and to extend and deepen students' knowledge and understanding
 - ensuring that students improve their work based on the guidance offered by their teachers.

- Improve achievement, including in the sixth form, so that standards reach or exceed those of other students nationally for all groups by:
 - rigorously tracking the progress of all students, and groups of students, across the academy so that underachievement is identified early, tackled swiftly, and gaps between different groups of students are closed
 - further developing approaches to improving students' literacy skills across subjects, so that boys, disadvantaged students and middle-ability students make rapid gains in reading and writing.

Report on the third monitoring inspection on 9 to 10 February 2016

Evidence

Inspectors observed the academy's work and visited parts of lessons, some jointly with members of the senior leadership team. Inspectors scrutinised documents and met with the Acting Principal, senior and other leaders, groups of pupils, the Chair of the Statement of Action Committee (SOAC) and a representative of the sponsor, the University of Chester Academies Trust (UCAT).

Context

Since the last monitoring inspection, two mathematics teachers have left the academy. Both posts have been filled, one with a new assistant head of mathematics.

A public consultation into the future of the academy's sixth form has been completed and a final decision about its future is due to be taken shortly. The sixth form has no learners in Year 12 and only nine in Year 13. The academy is not recruiting learners into Year 12 for September 2016.

Outcomes for pupils

Recently published and validated GCSE results confirm that the academy's headline figure of five GCSEs at grades A* to C, including English and mathematics, rose a little in 2015 and the academy remains above the government's floor standards.

Pupils' overall progress also improved a little in 2015 and is now broadly average. The proportion of pupils making at least expected progress rose in English and changed little in mathematics, and both figures are now slightly below the national average. The proportion of pupils making more than expected progress rose in mathematics and is now just below the national figure, but fell in English and is now well below the national average. Boys made much less progress than girls in English, but boys and girls made similar progress in mathematics.

Pupils with disability and those with special educational needs make strong progress across a range of subjects, especially mathematics, because they receive high-quality support in lessons and extra help when they need it.

The progress of disadvantaged pupils declined considerably in 2015 and, as a result, achievement gaps between disadvantaged pupils and others have widened. Leaders have now reviewed their use of the pupil premium and the academy's approach to

improving the outcomes of disadvantaged pupils. Some evidence of improving progress and narrowing gaps is beginning to emerge as a result.

The academy's assessment information for its current Year 11 pupils indicates that 2016 will see further improvement in pupils' progress, but not necessarily in their attainment. The progress of pupils in other year groups is also beginning to accelerate because the quality of teaching across the academy is improving.

Many pupils, especially boys, have weaknesses in literacy skills. Older pupils, even the most able, have a limited vocabulary and struggle to express themselves orally. Younger pupils lack confidence in reading, spelling, punctuation and grammar. Many boys' handwriting is difficult to read and the quality of presentation of work in their books is poor.

Pupils with disability and those with special education needs receive effective support with literacy and so make good progress. However, for many other pupils, especially boys and disadvantaged pupils, weaknesses in basic literacy skills are inhibiting their progress across most subjects.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Teaching continues to improve across the academy so that more of it is now effective in ensuring that pupils make better progress. This is the case across most subjects although some weaknesses remain, for example in mathematics where there has been a high turnover of teachers.

Teachers are increasingly using information about what pupils already know, understand and can do to plan lessons that interest, challenge and support pupils to learn effectively. More teachers are now using the academy's feedback policy effectively to help pupils to improve their work. Pupils who spoke with inspectors were unanimous in their view that teaching has improved, specifically citing better-planned lessons and higher-quality feedback as noticeable improvements. However, some weakness remains where teachers plan activities that are too easy or too hard, and pupils make less progress than they should as a result.

Teachers have strong subject knowledge that they are using increasingly skilfully to question pupils and deepen their understanding of their work. Relationships between adults and pupils are very strong across the academy and pupils recognise and value the support that their teachers provide. Year 11 pupils are particularly appreciative of the well-organised additional intervention currently being provided for them.

Although some teachers are trying to develop pupils' literacy skills, their efforts are not having sufficient impact. This is because improving pupils' literacy has not been a high enough priority, and strategies have not been applied consistently across the academy.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Attendance, which was already above the national average, has improved again this year and is now well above the national figure for secondary schools. The improvement in disadvantaged pupils' attendance is more than double that for other pupils and so the gap between the attendance of disadvantaged pupils and others is closing rapidly.

The number of fixed-term exclusions, which was already below the national average, has fallen again when compared with the same period last year. The reduction in exclusions has been greater for disadvantaged pupils than for others, and so this gap also continues to narrow.

Pupils behave well in almost all lessons and they are attentive and eager to learn. Low-level disruption is now rare and limited to those lessons where the teaching is weakest and the work is too easy or too hard.

The academy is very calm and orderly at the start and end of the day, at break and lunchtime. Pupils are cheerful, courteous and polite to adults and to their peers. Pupils who spoke with inspectors said that behaviour had continued to improve since the last inspection. They described the academy as 'peaceful' and said that behaviour was now much better even in lessons where their usual teacher was absent.

Pupils continue to feel safe in the academy. They say that bullying is very rare and they have confidence in adults in the academy to deal with any bullying that does occur.

Effectiveness of leadership and management

The Acting Principal is ambitious and determined to see the academy improve. He is well supported by an effective senior leadership team. Together, the Acting Principal and senior leadership team have acted swiftly and robustly since the last monitoring inspection to tackle, head on, the academy's weaknesses, and considerable progress is evident as a result. Teachers and pupils hold the academy's senior leaders in high regard and they express confidence in the changes that leaders are making.

Leaders' evaluation of the quality of teaching is now accurate because it draws upon a range of sources of information, including lesson observations, learning walks and pupils' work. Leaders can now accurately identify strengths and weaknesses for individual teachers, subject departments and the teaching staff as a whole. Leaders are increasingly using this information to target training and support to the weakest aspects of teaching and to those individuals who need it most. The improved targeting of training and support is one of the key reasons that teaching is improving across the academy.

Teachers' ability to assess pupils' attainment accurately is improving because leaders have introduced much more rigorous and challenging processes alongside specific training for teachers. As a result, the academy's assessment information, including forecasts of pupils' GCSE results, is now more reliable and leaders are able to use the information to identify pupils who are falling behind and then provide them with extra help to catch up.

Leaders have thoughtfully reviewed their use of the pupil premium grant and changed the academy's approach to supporting disadvantaged pupils. Teachers are now more aware of their responsibility to improve the progress of disadvantaged pupils. Leaders provide disadvantaged pupils with a range of personalised support, based on an analysis of each pupil's individual needs. Because of these actions, disadvantaged pupils' attendance has improved considerably and their academic progress is beginning to improve as well.

The academy's subject leaders are growing in confidence and independence. They now have a clear understanding of their role and of their accountability for pupils' outcomes in their subject. They work together well as a team and are beginning to use assessment information more consistently to identify weaknesses and to target intervention to where it is most needed. Senior leaders still drive the improvement of teaching in subjects, but subject leaders are increasingly involved and some are beginning to take a lead in their area.

Leaders have not made the development of literacy across the academy a sufficiently high priority, because their energies have been directed to securing improvement in other areas. Poor literacy skills are hindering the progress of many pupils, especially boys and disadvantaged pupils. A number of initiatives have taken place, but these have been implemented in a piecemeal fashion and their impact has been limited because the academy lacks an overarching strategy for improving pupils' literacy.

The governing body, or Statement of Action Committee (SOAC), meets every three weeks to review assessment and other information and to scrutinise the Statement of Action Plan, which sets out the academy's improvement strategies. The SOAC are committed, knowledgeable and able to question leaders about the academy's performance. However, their evaluation of the Statement of Action Plan is not sharp enough. Governors have not demanded from leaders sufficiently precise information to enable the SOAC to assess accurately how successful, or unsuccessful, individual actions and strategies in the plan have been.

External support

The academy's sponsor, the University of Chester Academies Trust (UCAT), is brokering a range of effective support for the academy, including a full-time assistant Principal and part-time mathematics leadership support. The acting Principal receives peer support from an experienced UCAT Principal. The English, mathematics and science departments are part of UCAT networks, serviced by Cheadle Hume High School, an outstanding school. UCAT have brokered support for the history, geography and modern foreign languages departments from the Cheshire Vale Teaching School Alliance.