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Mr Ashley Dixon
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Dixon

Special measures monitoring inspection of Abbs Cross Academy and Arts College

Following my visit with Rebecca Allott and Jennese Alozie, Ofsted Inspectors, to your academy on 22–23 March 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 second monitoring inspection since the academy became subject to special measures following the inspection that took place in June 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 not taking effective action towards the removal of special measures.

The trust's statement of action is fit for purpose.

The academy's improvement plan is fit for purpose.

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

I am copying this letter to the interim executive board, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for the London Borough of Havering. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

John Lambern
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

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

- Ensure that, as soon as possible and by no later than the start of the Autumn term 2015, all safeguarding policies and procedures meet statutory requirements. These include:
 - checking and completing all records accurately
 - updating all policies and procedures to reflect recent statutory guidance, including *Keeping Children Safe in Education 2015* and *Working Together to Safeguard Children*
 - checking that training and procedures are effective, with good support systems in place that will enable staff to speak out if there are concerns.
- Develop the skills of governors to hold leaders and staff to account for students' achievement and the overall effectiveness of the academy.
- Improve the effectiveness of leaders at all levels by:
 - using assessment information rigorously to identify patterns and trends so that actions for improvement are carefully planned and evaluated to identify: the needs of boys, the most able, disadvantaged students, disabled students and those with special educational needs
 - building the capacity of middle and senior leaders to sustain improvements.
- Improve teaching to consistently good or better, so that it impacts on students' progress, by ensuring that:
 - teachers provide work, including homework, that enables all students, including boys, the most able, disadvantaged students, disabled students and those with special educational needs to make good progress at all times
 - teachers give students clear guidance and evaluative comments on how to improve their work.
- Raise ambition and achievement across all subjects, particularly for the most-able students so that they consistently achieve the highest grades.

Report on the second monitoring inspection on 22–23 March 2016

Evidence

Inspectors met with the chief executive officer (CEO) of the Loxford School Trust, the headteacher, the associate headteacher, senior and middle leaders, other staff, and the vice-chair of the interim executive board. They visited a selection of lessons across the academy, of which leaders accompanied a significant proportion.

Inspectors spoke to groups of pupils representing all year groups and observed during break and lunchtimes. The inspectors also visited an assembly and spoke informally with staff.

Inspectors scrutinised a wide range of documentation, particularly focusing on the academy's current assessment information, self-evaluation and plan for improvement. They also looked at responses to the academy's own parent survey, minutes of meetings, information regarding the attendance and behaviour of pupils, records of the monitoring of the quality of teaching, learning and assessment and the single central record of recruitment checks.

Context

The academy joined the Loxford School Trust on 1 February 2016. As a result, a number of key staff have been seconded to the academy to support its progress.

The change of sponsor was agreed by the previous governing body to support the headteacher in his work to improve the academy. However, at the time of the last monitoring inspection the improvement action plan and statement of action were not fit for purpose.

In the very short time that the new sponsor has been working with the academy, both the statement of action and the improvement action plan have been rewritten.

The CEO of the trust is working closely with the academy leaders. Seconded staff, who include an associate headteacher, a deputy headteacher, a special educational needs coordinator and a safeguarding officer, support her. The trust has completed a staff restructure and is undertaking a process of recruitment for leadership positions.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

Leaders have completed a revised action plan. It now identifies the priorities to address the areas for improvement identified at the section 5 inspection. The academy's action plan is detailed, with clear and specific steps to address concerns raised. The named member of staff responsible for leading each step is included within the plan. It has appropriate criteria to evaluate progress. The planned

timescales to improve the academy are appropriate. The plan sets clear expectations and has milestones in place to monitor the action. The headteacher has the task of providing organisation, structure and a desire to raise expectations of staff and pupils. However, the sponsor rightly recognises that prior to the involvement of the trust, leaders have done too little to improve the academy.

The trust has formed an interim executive board to oversee the strategic developments of the academy. It has met only once following the change in sponsorship. The executive board is not in any way complacent about the challenge ahead. A representative of the executive board reported that the progress made by pupils in 2015 was not high enough. Furthermore, he was clear that the executive board will expect much higher outcomes of pupils, and that staff performance will be scrutinised carefully. However, the challenge and scrutiny of the executive board is yet to be established. It is too soon to see any impact from their work, as it has only been a little over one month since their initial meeting.

Leaders' own evaluation of the areas for improvement, presented during the last monitoring visit, was overgenerous. The evaluation conveyed that, in almost all year groups in English and mathematics, current pupils were making strong progress. Furthermore, it highlighted that the gaps between the performance of disadvantaged pupils and their peers were reducing, in comparison to previous years. However, analysis by the recently established leadership team has shown this not to be the case. Leaders agreed with inspectors that the previous evaluation was inaccurate.

The headteacher has revised the evaluation to improve the academy. He is clear of the need to raise standards across the academy. However, since the inspection, senior leaders have not significantly changed the culture of the academy. They have failed to ensure that middle leaders truly understand that weak teaching, learning and assessment leads to inadequate outcomes over time. Consequently, leaders at all levels have not ensured the rapid and accelerated progress of all pupils, including those disadvantaged, the most able, and those who have special educational needs or disability. Consequently, a number of issues identified at the first monitoring visit remain. The headteacher is clear that standards at present are inconsistent and that expectations have failed to impact on the process of improvement. However, the CEO of the trust is rightly uncompromising in her expectations that staff must rapidly respond to meet the needs of all pupils, to raise ambition and achievement across all subjects.

Leaders have taken a number of steps in recent weeks to raise standards. The structure of the academic and pastoral system has changed. A year team structure has replaced the vertical tutoring system. Year team leaders, who focus on raising academic achievement, have replaced the head of house responsibilities. Year team care leaders are now responsible for the care, guidance and support of pupils.

Since the last monitoring visit, middle leaders have not regularly engaged in

observing teaching and evaluating pupil progress in their subject areas. Consequently, the records presented to inspectors of recently conducted observations are overgenerous in their judgements regarding the progress made by pupils.

Middle leaders have been the focus of development since the academy joined the trust. The trust has a clear strategic operational calendar in place to ensure that middle leaders hold teachers to account. The operational calendar includes set dates to undertake checks on the progress made by pupils and observations on the quality of teaching, learning and assessment.

During the monitoring visit, middle leaders were rightly aware that the expectations of teachers were often too low. When reporting to the CEO and headteacher, middle leaders summarised well their observations of the impact of teaching, learning and assessment. They agreed that staff do not yet achieve the culture of high expectations to raise pupils' ambition.

Leaders have introduced many new strategies to raise ambition. Pupils in Year 11 have been set new expectations for their progress. Leaders now carefully check the monitoring of attendance and higher standards of pupils' behaviour are expected. As a result, leaders and staff are more visible around the academy before the start of the day, during lessons and at breaktime.

Safeguarding continues to be effective. The trust's safeguarding officer now supports the operational day-to-day practice of the staff member responsible for safeguarding. As a result, regular meetings confirm that policies and procedures reflect the actions taken to promote pupils' safety. The safeguarding officer ensures that recruitment checks are completed and carefully recorded. Furthermore, he works closely with the safeguarding team so that any concerns regarding pupils that may arise, are referred appropriately to external agencies.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Since the academy has joined the trust, a stronger focus has been taken to monitor the quality of teaching, learning and assessment. Middle leaders are now involved in observations within their subject areas. There is telling evidence that the expectations of teachers across the academy vary. During their joint visits to lessons with inspectors, middle leaders identified pupils making insufficient progress over time in a range of subjects. The progress of disadvantaged boys was not as strong as that of disadvantaged girls. In a number of books scrutinised by leaders and inspectors, the work of boys was poorly presented and lacking detail. Furthermore, praise of boys' work was often generous when compared to that given to recognise the same level of work from girls.

Inspectors observed pupils of a lower set in Year 8 having a greater pride for learning than those of a higher set, within the same subject. In a number of English

and science classes in key stage 4, new exercise books have been issued to pupils. As a result, the progress made by pupils over time is unclear. Leaders have introduced an academy assessment policy used by all teachers in the trust. However, this policy has not yet embedded. Teachers inconsistently use assessment feedback to support pupils in their learning. Consequently, some pupils do not know their targets. For example, pupils reported that they had missed work and failed to understand what was expected of them. Few teachers are aware of pupils' prior learning or have accurate information on their starting points. The lack of guidance to extend the learning of pupils is disappointing. Furthermore, one middle leader told inspectors he was shocked by the variation seen in the books of pupils regarding presentation, pride and depth of content.

The depth of written work is too inconsistent across subjects. For example, in a Year 9 mathematics lesson, pupils' work showed little evidence of understanding concepts. As a result, pupils were not always able to explain the reason for their answers. Furthermore, in a Year 11 information communication technology (ICT) lesson, most pupils could not explain how to secure higher examination marks.

Leaders' evaluation of the inconsistencies in teaching, learning and assessment is accurate. However, the section 5 inspection areas for improvement regarding the progress of all pupils and raising ambition and achievement across all subjects have not been sufficiently addressed. The CEO and the headteacher rightly recognise the need for rapid and accelerated progress to be made in order to improve the quality of teaching, learning and assessment. As a result, a new subject leader of mathematics has been appointed and a clear focus on raising expectations across the academy has been set. The associate headteacher now directly manages the subject leaders of English and science. She has set clear targets for middle leaders to meet the higher expectations of the trust.

Pupils told inspectors that they are now expected to do more homework. They are aware that form tutors check on their completed homework. However, a small number of pupils said their form tutors were not following up on the use of homework planners.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

The vast majority of pupils continue to behave well around the academy. A high proportion of pupils show positive relationships with each other and staff. They have good attitudes towards learning. When speaking with inspectors they recognised that the expectations of their behaviour have been even higher since half term. Pupils told the inspectors that 'teachers are now everywhere' to check on them.

In lessons, pupils' behaviour is generally positive. They are able to work with little distraction. However, middle leaders were right to comment that pupils are often unenthused in their learning because of weak teaching. Insufficient challenge exists

in too many lessons. Consequently, inspectors identified pupils' work in books that was often untidy or incomplete. This is disappointing because pupils often demonstrate a keen desire to learn.

Pupils told inspectors about having to wear their uniform neatly and that the stricter rules since half term have been effective. For example, they feel bullying is better dealt with and incidents of poor behaviour are now more swiftly addressed. When asked what they liked most about the academy, pupils said, 'it feels like a family as it's small'. Parents who responded to the academy's own survey support the views of pupils. Two thirds of the parents strongly agreed that parents are made to feel welcome. A very high proportion consider the academy to be a safe place for their children.

Punctuality and attendance have improved following a decline in the period between September 2015 and February 2016. The current attendance of all pupils has risen to a figure of 94.5%. However, it is below the academy target of 95% and lower than the same period last year.

The number of pupils who received fixed-term exclusions has increased since the autumn term. This is a consequence of the higher expectations for pupils' behaviour. Leaders rightly recognise that interventions will need to support the strong behaviour of all pupils and reduce the rate of exclusion. As a result, the year team leaders support pupils to improve their behaviour across the academy. Pupils know who to seek support from and understand that the increased visibility of staff is a positive change. Pupils say that the year team leaders care about them. They told inspectors they were unaware of any homophobic bullying and the decision to disallow mobile phones has reduced cyber bullying. As a result, pupils say they feel safe at the academy.

Outcomes for pupils

The 2015 GCSE results were not strong enough. A comparison over time shows that the proportion of Year 11 pupils who achieved five or more good GCSE results including English and mathematics in 2015, although above the national average, was lower than in 2014. The achievement of girls has continued to remain above the national average. Although boys' achievement improved in 2015, it remained significantly behind girls' and below that of boys nationally.

In 2015, the number of Year 11 pupils who have special educational needs or disability who achieved five or more good GCSE results including English and mathematics declined in comparison to the 2014 figure.

The proportion of Year 11 disadvantaged pupils who achieved five or more good GCSE results including English and mathematics in 2015 was just below average. The outcomes for most-able pupils followed a similar trend, with their performance being just below the national figure in 2015. However, the gap between the

performance of disadvantaged pupils and that of their peers significantly increased from 2014 to 2015. The performance gap between Year 11 disadvantaged pupils and their peers increased to 28% in 2015, and was similar to the national figure.

In December 2015, leaders predicted the proportion of current Year 11 pupils expected to achieve five or more good GCSE results including English and mathematics to be 69%. They indicated to inspectors that this would be an increase of 10% from the previous results in 2015, although lower than the academy's target of 79%. However, since joining the trust, leaders now consider these predictions for pupils' outcomes to be inaccurate following their further analysis. Consequently, the proportion of current Year 11 pupils who are expected to achieve five or more good GCSE results including English and mathematics is now 62%. This represents an increase of only 3% on the 2015 examination results.

The percentage of pupils in 2015 who made at least the expected progress in English, considering their starting points, was lower than the national figure. Similarly, the percentage of pupils who made more than the expected progress was lower than average. In mathematics, the outcomes were even further below the national figures.

Current assessment information indicates that a higher proportion of Year 11 pupils will make expected progress or more than expected progress in English and mathematics. However, the progress pupils make in English is stronger than in mathematics. Leaders rightly recognise that this gap needs addressing. They have already taken action to appoint a new subject leader of mathematics.

External support

The academy has received significant support since its change of sponsor to the Loxford School Trust. The CEO is a national leader of education. She is providing a vital role in developing the leadership capacity of the academy. The vice-chair of the interim executive board is a national leader of governance. He has a clear vision to ensure that there is challenge for improvement. The executive board has authorised the secondment of staff from the trust to the academy to provide challenge, support and further training.

The trust has completed a statement of action. It is suitably challenging. The statement of action sets out clear tasks for completion in the first year, and the key areas for improvement. It demonstrates how the trust will work alongside the headteacher and the current senior leadership team to secure change and demonstrate improvement.

The CEO and her team have taken rapid action to implement a range of strategies aimed at raising the expectations of staff and pupils. However, as the change in sponsor occurred only recently, it is too soon for the trust's support to impact significantly on improving the academy.