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9 May 2016

Mrs Lesley Moule
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Dear Mrs Moule

Special measures monitoring inspection of Millbrook Academy

Following my visit with Karl Sampson, Her Majesty's Inspector, and Tim Gilson, Ofsted Inspector, to your academy on 19 and 20 April 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 and your team gave me during the inspection and for the time you made available to discuss the actions that have been taken since the academy's section 5 inspection.

The inspection was the first monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures following the inspection that took place in November 2015.

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 not fit for purpose.

The academy's improvement plan is not 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 chair of the management board, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Gloucestershire. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Katherine Powell
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

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

- Urgently improve the quality of teaching, learning and assessment by ensuring that teachers:
 - accurately understand what pupils can and cannot do
 - plan learning which sufficiently challenges pupils
 - consistently develop pupils' literacy skills
 - make clear to pupils what they are learning and why
 - inform pupils how well they are doing and what they need to do to improve their learning further.

- Rapidly improve pupils' outcomes by ensuring that:
 - teachers have higher expectations of what pupils can achieve
 - the individual needs of disadvantaged pupils, disabled pupils and those with special educational needs are effectively met
 - the most-able pupils are encouraged to think more deeply about their learning
 - effective provision is in place for the GCSE English and mathematics retakes in the sixth form.

- Improve the quality of leadership and management by ensuring that:
 - leaders accurately evaluate the quality of teaching, learning and assessment by linking it closely to the impact it has on pupils' outcomes
 - subject leaders rigorously monitor and evaluate their departments to improve the quality of teaching, learning and assessment
 - the management board provides robust challenge and support to leaders to accelerate the rate of improvement.

An external review of governance should be undertaken in order to assess how this aspect of leadership and management may be improved.

An external review of the academy's use of the pupil premium should be undertaken in order to assess how this aspect of leadership and management may be improved.

Report on the first monitoring inspection on 19 and 20 April 2016

Evidence

During the inspection, inspectors met with the executive principal, the principal, other members of the academy's leadership team and the head of sixth form. Discussions were held with a group of governors, including the regional director of education for the Academies Enterprise Trust (AET), who also chairs the management board. Inspectors met with groups of pupils from all year groups and talked with pupils at various times in lessons and around the academy. Discussions were held with a group of middle leaders, a group of staff and the mathematics consultant for AET. Telephone conversations were also held with the headteacher of the virtual school (supporting children looked after) and with the mathematics consultant for AET.

Inspectors observed teaching and learning and looked at examples of work in a range of lessons. They made several visits to lessons alongside members of the academy's leadership team. Inspectors scrutinised a range of documentation, including the statement of action, the academy's improvement plans and minutes of the management board meetings. They checked a wide range of information about safety and safeguarding, including the single central record of checks on staff recruitment. AET is currently in dispute with a third-party company to whom they have contracted out the storage of personnel records and information relating to staff at the academy. As a result, these records have been locked down by the third party company until the dispute is settled. Consequently, inspectors could not sample these records to check against the detailed single central record presented by the academy. The lead inspector spoke to the head of information technology for AET to verify this information. Inspectors looked at behaviour and attendance records as well as policy documentation.

Context

Millbrook Academy is part of the AET. A new principal and a new chair of the management board have been appointed and took up their posts in January 2016. A reorganisation of the senior leadership team has taken place and their roles and responsibilities have been redefined. In April 2016, the special educational needs co-ordinator returned to the academy two days a week following her temporary secondment for three days a week at a local primary school. A number of teaching staff have left the academy and more teachers are leaving at the end of this term. The academy has a number of vacant teaching posts which are currently being filled by supply teachers on temporary contracts. In consultation with the regional schools commissioner, the sponsor and the academy leaders have taken the decision to suspend entries into the sixth form until September 2018.

External reviews of governance and of the academy's use of pupil premium funds have only recently taken place.

The new principal receives external support from an executive principal for two days a week. He is the principal of Broadlands Academy, which is also part of AET. Very recently, the deputy headteacher from Broadlands Academy has also begun to work with the school for one day a week to support senior leaders to improve the quality of teaching, learning and assessment. Further support is provided by AET consultants for mathematics and English and by the Crypt School for science.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

The academy has not improved quickly enough since it was placed in special measures five months ago. Valuable time has been lost and the academy's progress is behind where it should be. Leaders at all levels have not been quick enough to identify the key priorities and actions that are needed to improve teaching, learning and assessment, and pupils' outcomes. These are the two areas of major weakness that led to the school being placed in special measures; both remain weak. If the academy is to come out of special measures within the required timescale, then the rate of improvement must increase rapidly and as a matter of urgency.

The academy's statement of action and improvement plan were initially reviewed by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors in February and found to be not fit for purpose. Despite some improvement, these documents are still not yet effective plans for driving forward the rapid improvement that the academy must make. Leaders and governors have neither a fully formed plan to improve the quality of teaching, learning and assessment nor a clear view as to what needs to be done, specifically, by whom and by when. The plans are still not aligned closely or precisely enough to the areas for improvement identified in the section 5 inspection. This makes it difficult for school leaders and governors to fully evaluate and demonstrate the impact of agreed actions.

Since the last inspection, all academy leaders have been too slow in improving the quality of teaching, learning and assessment. The principal has not established a clear plan to improve the quality of teaching that is underpinned by robust strategies to check that it is working effectively. Consequently, monitoring activities are sporadic, lack sufficient focus on sustained improvement and are not aligned well enough to remedy the specific areas of weakness identified in the section 5 report. For example, leaders' observations of teaching and a recent book scrutiny in science did not focus on what pupils know, understand and can do and use this information to inform and improve teachers' planning. The scrutiny of work was far too generic, focusing predominantly on whether marking was taking place, rather than identifying the weaknesses in pupils' learning and using this information to improve teaching. Leaders do not keep detailed records of their monitoring activities and fail to capture the important strengths and weaknesses in pupils' learning. As a result, school leaders and the management board are unable to evaluate the impact of the academy's work robustly.

Too many middle leaders lack the necessary skills to monitor, evaluate and improve teaching in their subject. While senior leaders recognise that this is a significant

barrier to improvement, they have been too slow to address this issue. Middle leaders are only just beginning to 'grasp the nettle of accountability' for the quality of learning and teaching in their subject. Consequently, the impact of their work to improve outcomes for pupils is still very limited. More work is required to develop middle leadership if the academy is to make up lost ground in improving the quality of teaching, learning and assessment across all subjects.

The management board and the academy's sponsor have been far too slow to respond to recruitment issues and have only just begun to act with a sense of urgency. Also, the management board has not acted quickly enough to secure the consistently good quality of teaching necessary to help pupils make the best possible progress, regardless of their ability, background or starting point. The external reviews of governance and pupil premium spending have only recently taken place. Both reviews found that progress by the management board in improving the academy has been too slow and that their monitoring, to ensure progress towards the removal of special measures, was not vigorous enough. These findings were exemplified during the monitoring inspection. For example, the management board had previously raised some concerns around the accuracy of the assessment information they had been given. Apart from in English and mathematics, there was limited evidence to show that members of the board had pursued this further with senior leaders, to assure themselves that assessment is becoming more accurate in all subjects. The management board needs to have far greater oversight of the academy's work in this area or it will be faced again with the prospect of receiving overgenerous assessment information that masks pupils' actual level of achievement.

Despite a challenging start, and some initial staff resistance, the new principal has the support of many members of staff and the wider community. She has galvanised staff into action so that all are clear about the collective efforts required to take the academy forward. While staff are able to articulate the need to improve teaching swiftly and to ensure that pupils behave better, their work to achieve this is still in its infancy.

A new, more suitable curriculum has been devised for September and a new, more stringent behaviour policy is about to be introduced. Both of these changes are warmly welcomed by staff and pupils. However, these small steps in improvement are fragile. High levels of staff turnover, weak teaching and an increasing reliance on supply teachers in many subjects are jeopardising any initial gains. Pupils told inspectors that they find it difficult to make progress when they frequently experience a change of teacher in the same subject across a year.

Leaders have ensured that regular lessons for learners (sixth formers) that have not already gained a C grade in mathematics or English are now taking place in the sixth form. Closer monitoring of learners' attendance and the progress they are making needs to take place now to ensure that these lessons prepare pupils well for their summer examinations.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

A lack of understanding from leaders remains with regard to judging the impact of teaching on pupils' learning and progress. Leaders' monitoring activities lack clarity. They do not focus well enough on what needs to be done to improve the quality of teaching. During visits to classrooms and when looking at pupils' work, inspectors saw too much work set at the same ability level for all pupils, regardless of their different starting points. Pupils say this is often the case and that work in a number of subjects is too easy. At all key stages, low expectations and a lack of challenge are the reasons for pupils' and learners' poor achievement.

Despite some work to improve the way that pupils' progress is tracked, it is still too early to see what difference this is making. Teachers have a greater awareness of different groups of pupils, such as the most able and those who are disadvantaged or who have special educational needs or disability. They are not, however, making good use of this information to ensure that pupils make greater gains in their learning. Further work is required so that teachers are able to confidently use what pupils already know, or need to know next, to plan learning that will challenge them in every lesson. While there are early signs that more teachers are giving regular feedback to pupils about their work, too few pupils understand precisely what they need to do to improve their work further. To improve outcomes rapidly, staff at all levels urgently need to ensure that a much greater focus is placed on how well different groups of pupils are learning.

Teachers' current predictions of the standards that pupils are working at are overgenerous in many subjects. Senior leaders have not done enough to make sure that middle leaders and teachers are assessing pupils' work accurately. During visits to lessons with senior leaders, there was a clear mismatch between the quality of work in pupils' books and the teachers' assessment information. The work to moderate assessments with other schools is showing early signs of securing improved accuracy in English but there is very little evidence of this in other subjects. Year 11 pupils' recent mock examination results were considerably lower than teachers' predictions. These results highlight that many pupils, once again, are in great danger of leaving the academy ill-prepared for the next stage of their education, employment, self-employment or training.

Despite the limited improvement in the quality of teaching across the academy, there are a number of teachers, in different subjects, who are getting the best out of the pupils they teach. Inspectors saw strong evidence of good impact on pupils' learning over time for individual teaching groups in science, art, history and English. As result, pupils in these groups were making much stronger progress than found elsewhere across the academy. In such cases, teachers' high expectations, strong subject knowledge and good use of feedback were underscored by an unremitting focus on meeting the needs of pupils, regardless of background, ability or starting point. One pupil, capturing the sentiments of many others, said, 'We do best when working with teachers who explain things well.'

While academy leaders know where this good work is taking place they are at an early stage in sharing it more widely.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

A 'back to basics' approach for all lessons is helping to establish how pupils should behave and to reinforce what good attitudes to learning look like, but much more needs to be done here. Although a more effective climate for learning is beginning to emerge, this is fragile, both across and within subjects. For example, too many lessons are being interrupted by low-level disruptive behaviour. This disruption is most acutely felt, though not solely, in lessons that are taught by supply teachers on temporary contracts. On too many occasions, inspectors observed pupils disobeying teachers, and/or talking loudly to each other while the teacher was trying to talk to the rest of the group. Elsewhere, inspectors found a lack of respect and a general unwillingness to accede to reasonable requests by staff. While this behaviour is not the norm in every lesson, its frequency is a cause for concern for school leaders, governors, staff and pupils alike.

During the inspection visit, the academy was in the process of introducing a new behaviour policy to staff, pupils and parents. Though it is too soon to see any impact, the policy outlines a clear and unambiguous approach to improving pupils' behaviour and the way that it will be managed. Parents, staff and pupils all told inspectors how pleased they were with the proposed changes. Pupils say that, since the arrival of the new principal, expectations of how they should behave and conduct themselves around the academy have risen.

Although, the number of fixed-term exclusions is high, staff and pupils appreciate the principal's more stringent approach to dealing with poor behaviour. All are acutely aware that pupils cannot afford to lose any more learning time.

A closer monitoring of attendance is beginning to pay off. Overall, attendance is rising for different groups of pupils, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds. This improvement needs to be sustained and must also include focusing on attendance in the sixth form, which remains too low.

The support and wrap-around care for some of the most vulnerable pupils remains effective. The introduction of a nurture room, as a safe haven for them, is strengthening this provision well and is valued by these pupils. While it is too soon to see what impact this support is having, leaders and governors need to focus keenly on the progress of this group of pupils to ensure that their achievement improves.

Outcomes for pupils

Pupils' outcomes remain weak in all years because there has not been a strong enough focus on improving the quality of teaching. An examination of pupils' work,

visits to classrooms with senior leaders and discussions with pupils show that too many of them are simply not doing well enough. The academy's predictions for Year 11 pupils' GCSE results in 2016 are very low. Consequently, the academy is in danger of making too little improvement on the 2015 results which fell below the government's floor standards for attainment and progress. The vice-principal has been working with a group of Year 11 pupils who are on the borderline of achieving five good GCSEs including English and mathematics. While this intensive support work appears to have yielded some initial success, it also serves to highlight the importance of securing better-quality teaching from the moment pupils join the academy in Year 7.

There are some positive signs for better results in English. With the support of the regional schools commissioner, the academy opted for early entry examinations for a number of Year 11 students. Strong subject leadership and generally good teaching in English, supported by the work of the AET consultant to check the accuracy of teachers' assessment, have been instrumental in improving outcomes in English for current Year 11 pupils. Results from early entry examinations confirm this.

The same level of improvement is not evident in mathematics, and achievement remains too low. The quality of teaching is inconsistent within the department and additional support to help teachers with their planning has not been effective. Pupils are not getting enough opportunities to deepen and apply their mathematical reasoning and fluency to solve problems. This results from some resistance to embrace the new 'mastery curriculum'. Compounding these concerns, the head of mathematics leaves the academy in a few weeks and a replacement has not yet been appointed.

In all years, the gaps in achievement between pupils who have special educational needs or disability and those from disadvantaged backgrounds and others remain far too wide. Too many of these pupils have made little or no progress since the section 5 inspection. Leaders are beginning to raise teachers' awareness of the need for them to be accountable for the progress of different groups of pupils, especially the disadvantaged pupils. A clear overview on how pupil premium funds will be spent is now in place and management board members understand their role in holding school leaders to account for whether the better use of funds has generated improved progress. While middle leaders have been given the responsibility for using the funding to improve outcomes in their subjects, weaknesses in their leadership and their ability to evaluate the difference it is making is limiting the full impact of their work. The vice-principal is reviewing this situation termly and working closely with middle leaders to develop their skills further.

Basic literacy skills remain a weakness for many pupils in all key stages. There is not a clear enough focus on the importance of developing these vital skills. As result, too many spelling, punctuation and grammar errors go unnoticed and pupils repeat the same mistakes. Teachers are not setting high enough expectations for the

quality of work and its presentation. In science for example, very little work is being done to prepare pupils effectively with the skills and knowledge to answer questions in the depth needed for the new GCSE examinations. Responsibility to improve literacy across the curriculum has only been transferred to a senior leader very recently, so the academy has hardly started to tackle pupils' weak literacy. Leaders and governors understand that poor reading and writing are a barrier which many pupils need to overcome before they can learn well. The pace of improvement in this area needs to be immediate, swift and widespread.

External support

AET's support for school leaders has not been effective in securing the rapid improvement that the academy needs. This is felt most keenly in the lack of urgency to recruit new teachers and in too slow a start in supporting current leaders to drive up the quality of teaching, learning and assessment. The appointment of an executive principal has been helpful in supporting the new principal to set her expectations and reorganise leadership roles and responsibilities. However, precious time has been lost, particularly with regard to improving the quality of teaching. The executive principal and the management board must ensure more rigorous challenge to check that agreed actions are implemented promptly so that pupils' achievement rises rapidly.

The mathematics consultant has accurately diagnosed the barriers to improved achievement but so far there is no evidence that this has generated better teaching. Support for English has helped to secure more reliable assessment information for Year 11 pupils, some of whom were successful when they took the GCSE examination early. Support for science, however, shows little evidence of any impact on improving teaching or standards. During the visit the regional director of education for AET outlined plans for a further two leaders to be attached to the academy to help the principal to drive improvement. It is vital that any external support is monitored carefully and evaluated by leaders and the management board so that swift action can be taken should there be no improvement.