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Mrs Elizabeth Robinson
Tabor Academy
Panfield Lane
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Dear Mrs Robinson

Special measures monitoring inspection of Tabor Academy

Following my visit with Vanessa Love, Ofsted Inspector, to your school on 11 and 12 May 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 school's previous monitoring inspection.

The inspection was the fourth monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures following the inspection that took place in November 2014. It was the third monitoring inspection since the Loxford Trust became the sponsor of the school. 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.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the governing body, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Essex. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

John Lucas
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

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

- Rapidly improve the quality of teaching and raise standards across the academy by making sure that:
 - all teachers have high expectations of all groups of students, and that these expectations are translated into effective classroom practice
 - planned teaching activities lead to rapid progress
 - advice to students on how to improve their work is clear and they are given the opportunity to act on it
 - all teachers provide for the needs of disabled students and those with special educational needs
 - teachers are aware of the needs of disadvantaged students in their classes and of the extra resources that are available to support them.

- Improve the effectiveness of leadership and management by:
 - reducing the excessive changes of teacher that lead to poor experiences for students
 - ensuring that the assessment of students' progress is accurate and is used effectively to aid teaching
 - making sure that policies on marking, literacy, numeracy and behaviour management are clear to all staff and that they are applied consistently across the academy
 - improving communication with parents so that they have confidence in the leadership of the academy.

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 fourth monitoring inspection on 11 May 2016 to 12 May 2016

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, and scrutinised documents relating to safeguarding, attendance, achievement and behaviour. Members of the inspection team also met with the chief executive of the Loxford Trust (a national leader of education), the headteacher, other senior leaders, teachers, groups of pupils and two governors. An inspector also held a telephone discussion with a representative from the local authority.

Context

Since the last monitoring visit, school leaders have appointed three temporary curriculum team leaders to cover absence in mathematics, modern foreign languages and science. Leaders have also appointed two new teachers in English and two new teachers in mathematics. In addition, leaders have also appointed several teachers across a range of subjects, who are due to take up their posts in September 2016.

Effectiveness of leadership and management

School leaders continue to bring both consistency and clarity, which are leading to higher expectations as well as more opportunity for these expectations to be realised. The leadership of the headteacher and chief executive officer remains a strong feature of the school. Supported by an effective senior team, these leaders skilfully continue to plot a journey of rapid improvement at Tabor Academy.

The headteacher is held in high esteem by her staff and pupils. Adults feel increasingly valued and appreciate the opportunities for their professional development. Many pupils share the optimism that is now clearly evident in the school. They explained that teaching and behaviour are improving and that the school is a better place in which to learn. Increasing numbers of parents agree. In the words of one parent, 'the atmosphere is completely different and the academy is a more pleasant place to be'.

School leaders' self-evaluation demonstrates an accurate knowledge of the strengths and areas for development that exist. The school development plan outlines appropriate strategies to ensure that structures are in place to secure the improvements needed. Leaders have, in the 12 months that they have been in charge, developed a powerful ethos and put in place many of the necessary processes that are leading to rapid improvements.

There is increasing confidence evident in leadership throughout the school. Middle leadership, although affected by the absence of three curriculum leaders, is more effective than at the time of the last monitoring visit. The knowledgeable curriculum leaders welcome the headteacher's clarity of vision. They explained that they know what is expected of them and that they value the 'no surprises' approach to leadership and management. Middle leaders share the high expectations and passion for improvement modelled by the senior team. They are empowered to carry out their roles and those who have accessed the well-planned training are quickly developing their leadership skills.

Middle leaders are accurate in their assessments of teaching and increasingly confident in supporting and challenging teachers whose practice is not of the high standards demanded by school leaders. Achievement leaders and curriculum leaders work well together to monitor the behaviour and learning of their pupils. This is contributing well to the improvements seen. The fragility in subject leadership noted at the last monitoring inspection is less in evidence, but there are subject areas – mathematics, science and modern foreign languages – that, while improving, lack the all-round highly effective practice that is needed to accelerate progress as rapidly as leaders would like.

School leaders continue to develop provision for pupils who have special educational needs or disability. This is an area that is not yet good enough and still requires considerable support from the Loxford Trust leader of special educational needs. As a result of his work, the leadership of special educational needs has a clearer understanding of the capabilities and requirements of the pupils in the school's care. However, teachers are not using this information well enough in their planning and execution of learning activities for pupils who have special educational needs or disability. Consequently, these pupils do not make the progress of which they are capable, in particular in key stage 4. This remains an area of concern for some parents.

School leaders can point to the positive impact of the programme of support that they have put in place to support disadvantaged pupils. For example, the work of the school's year care teams is leading to an improvement in the attendance of disadvantaged boys. However, the monitoring and review of this expenditure are not sufficiently precise to enable leaders, including governors, to make the necessary adjustments to rapidly improve outcomes for this group of pupils still further.

Evidence seen on inspection indicates that a greater proportion of parents are supportive of the work of school leaders. Of the 50 parents who submitted their views to Parent View (Ofsted's online parent survey), 68% would now recommend the school. While this is a considerable rise since the previous full inspection, it is still a concern. Attendance at parents' evening is much improved and there is more frequent communication with parents from leaders across the school. As a result, substantially more parents have completed the school's own surveys. Analysis of

these surveys indicates much higher levels of satisfaction with the quality of education being provided at Tabor Academy. However, school leaders are aware that more work still needs to be done with a small number of parents to demonstrate sustained improvement and positive relationships.

Governance continues to develop. The governing body benefits from the knowledge and expertise of the vice-chair of the Loxford Trust, who is a national leader of governance. Governors are sharply focused on improving standards. They are not afraid to challenge senior leaders to reduce the variances in pupils' outcomes and teaching, and this is helping to secure the rapid improvements that are taking place. Governors have also supported the headteacher by providing additional resources for staffing in English, mathematics and science. Governors know that pupil premium funding spending needs to be more precisely analysed. (The pupil premium is additional government funding to support disadvantaged pupils who are known to be eligible for free school meals and children who are looked after by the local authority). The governing body has appropriate plans in place to ensure that this closer analysis will be done.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

The quality of teaching, learning and assessment continues to improve across the school. Pupils informed inspectors that the improvements in teaching noted at the last monitoring inspection have been sustained. There are increasing strengths in teaching, learning and assessment across many subjects and the wide range of variability noted at the last visit has reduced. Leaders are aware that inconsistencies remain. This is particularly the case in mathematics and science. However, within these subjects, there is evidence of stronger practice than that seen previously.

School leaders have correctly focused on developing the skills of the teachers who work at Tabor Academy. Leaders' effective training programme has led to an improvement in the quality of teaching and a further reduction in the number of temporary teachers employed at the school. Pupils welcome this continuity, which is contributing to the clearer sense of community and improved relationships between staff and pupils.

In some cases, the quality of teaching results in confident, enthusiastic learners who willingly take part in learning activities and display a determination to do well. For example, this was the case in a Year 8 drama lesson, in which pupils responded energetically to the teacher's careful planning and skilful classroom management. However, this positive picture is not the case throughout and where learning is not as well planned and executed, pupils' enthusiasm for their learning is more muted.

Teachers are now making better use of the improved assessment information to inform the planning of learning in their lessons. Where this planning is well executed, it makes a considerable difference to the progress that pupils are able to make. For example, in one mathematics lesson, Year 8 pupils were skilled at selecting work of an appropriate level for their ability and were making better progress over time as a result.

Teachers are becoming increasingly skilled at using questioning to develop pupils' understanding and deepen their knowledge across a range of subjects. For example, the teacher's well-crafted questioning in a Year 10 physical education lesson enabled pupils to explain their understanding of the decision-making processes needed when playing ball sports.

Some teachers do not routinely employ the strategies to enable them to meet the needs of the range of pupils' abilities in their classroom. Inspectors observed several lessons in which the teacher's delivery of learning in lessons did not match their skill in planning. For example, in one science class, pupils whose attainment spanned GCSE grades E to B were provided with the same work with little amendment. This slowed their progress over time. There is also not enough evidence of learning being amended to accurately meet the needs of pupils who have special educational needs or disability. The progress of these pupils is slower as a consequence.

Teachers are making more consistent use of the school's feedback policy than was the case during the last monitoring visit. Pupils explained that they consider the feedback is most useful in English lessons. Inspection evidence supports this view. Teachers give precise, concise feedback in English, humanities and physical education which helps pupils understand where they have gone wrong. Where this is the case, pupils respond easily because they are sure what they need to do to correct their mistakes. For these pupils, this feedback is helping them to make faster progress. However, this practice is not applied frequently enough across the school to be considered fully effective. Inspectors saw targets that were too vague to be helpful for pupils to improve their work. For example in some cases, targets in mathematics simply said 'algebra'.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Behaviour is much improved. The school is now a calmer and happier place in which to learn. Movement around the school site is generally ordered and good humoured. Pupils are proud of their school in a way that was not evident previously.

Pupils at Tabor Academy want to learn. They are more punctual to lessons and positive in their relationships with each other and their teachers. Pupils understand the school's expectation that they will be 'in the right place, at the right time, doing the right thing'. They welcome leaders' high-profile and consistent approach to managing behaviour. Pupils also value the presence of the year care team around the site. In discussions with inspectors, pupils explained that they know what is expected of them and the consequences for poor behaviour choices. Pupils' conduct

on the corridors is much improved, but they explained that at times these areas are very congested and this remains a little daunting for some younger and more vulnerable pupils.

Leaders have raised the level of expectation when it comes to behaviour. Pupils are more aware, and less tolerant, of any peers who disrupt their learning. Pupils told inspectors that they feel safe, and that they like the quieter classrooms; they commented that much less teacher time is taken up responding to poor behaviour. There is considerably more pride on display in the work seen in pupils' books and folders. This is a reflection of teachers' higher expectations of how work should be presented.

Pupils informed inspectors that while behaviour is considerably better, there are still pockets of poorer behaviour in science, modern foreign languages and mathematics. They explained that this occurs where teachers do not manage the classroom well. However, inspectors saw no evidence of low-level disruption during the inspection.

Leaders have taken firm actions to improve attendance at the school. The year care team is well organised and monitors the attendance of pupils regularly and carefully. As a result, overall attendance is rising and is in line with national averages. The attendance of pupils who have special educational needs or disability is improving. The attendance of disadvantaged pupils is below that of other pupils and remains too low.

Outcome for pupils

While outcomes continue to improve, school leaders acknowledge that they are not as high as they should be. Accurate school assessment information indicates that current Year 11 pupils will achieve outcomes that are broadly in line with their peers nationally. Leaders acknowledge that the historic variations in teaching in mathematics and science have resulted in leaders being less certain about the outcomes for the current Year 11 pupils in these subjects.

Leaders at all levels continue to provide an impressive range of carefully targeted additional learning opportunities to ensure that older pupils are able to catch up following poorer and disrupted teaching in previous years. Year 11 pupils approached inspectors to explain how much they appreciate the Saturday revision classes, after-school support sessions and school holiday work programmes. The support offered through these activities is helping to improve pupils' outcomes.

Inspection evidence, which includes leaders' own assessment information, indicates that disadvantaged pupils are making improved progress, particularly in key stage 3. This is due to improvements in teaching and the appropriate support that these pupils receive. Disadvantaged pupils are closing the gaps in achievement with their peers more slowly in key stage 4, where their achievement is not as good as it should be.

A greater proportion of pupils who have special educational needs or disability are making expected progress from individual starting points, especially in Year 7. However, the progress that these pupils are making remains slower than it needs to be. This is because, too frequently, teaching is not well matched to their needs. Similarly, the quality of support provided by learning support assistants for pupils who have special educational needs or disability is too variable. In a Year 10 geography lesson, the learning support assistant was well informed, well prepared and deployed to good effect. Leaders acknowledge that this effective practice is not replicated consistently enough across the school. Inspectors agree.

External support

School leaders continue to make effective use of the support from teachers and leaders from schools within the Loxford Trust. The high-quality nature of this support has helped those who have accessed it to secure improvements in teaching, learning and assessment as well as in middle leadership. The work of external agencies is also helping to improve the attendance of pupils at the school. The local authority continues to provide appropriate support and challenge through an officer who is a member of the governing body.