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Mr Simon French  
Principal  
The Discovery Academy  
Discovery Drive  
Stoke-on-Trent  
ST2 0GA

Dear Mr French

### **Serious weaknesses monitoring inspection of The Discovery Academy**

Following my visit to your school on 25 May, 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 third monitoring inspection since the school was judged to have serious weaknesses following the section 5 inspection which took place in January 2015. 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 actions towards the removal of the serious weaknesses designation.**

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

Yours sincerely

Deborah James  
**Ofsted Inspector**

## **Annex**

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

- Improve teaching in order to raise standards in English and mathematics and speed up the progress of all groups of students, especially disadvantaged students, the most able students and those with special educational needs, by making sure that:
  - all teachers use every opportunity to support students to develop their basic literacy skills in lessons
  - teachers frequently check students' progress in mathematics and accurately identify gaps in their knowledge, understanding and skills so that they can plan targeted activities which will help students to move forward more quickly
  - teachers increase the level of challenge in lessons for all students, especially the most able, by helping students to explore what they are learning in greater detail, so that they can deepen their knowledge and understanding and develop their subject skills
  - all teachers accurately assess students' work so that students know what they have to do to catch up or move forward with their learning more quickly
  - all students know how to respond effectively to subject specific feedback so that it helps to improve their learning.
- Develop regular opportunities for students to practise and apply their numeracy skills in subjects other than mathematics.
- Reduce the persistent absence of students to at least the overall national average by making sure that:
  - students, parents and the local community become more aware of the direct link between good levels of attendance and achieving well
  - all staff take responsibility for promoting good attendance and ensure that students catch up on the learning they miss when they are away from school.
- Reduce exclusion rates for disadvantaged students to at least the overall national average by making sure that effective systems to manage and improve the behaviour of those students who do not conform to the academy's expectations are consistently implemented.
- Improve leadership and management so that all actions drive improvements in students' achievement by: supporting and challenging middle leaders, particularly in mathematics, to speed up the progress made by all groups of students making sure that all teachers precisely target their support for students who are falling behind in their achievement making sure that the spending of the pupil premium funding has a direct impact on the achievement, behaviour and attendance of disadvantaged students.

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 third monitoring inspection on 25 May 2016**

### **Evidence**

The inspector met with the principal, senior leaders, leaders in the mathematics faculty, groups of pupils, the chair of the governing body and the education consultant for the College Academies Trust. The inspector also made a number of brief visits to lessons, walked around the school at break and lunchtime, and reviewed the school's documentation, including the evidence provided by external reviews of the school's performance.

### **Context**

A new principal took over the leadership of the school in January. At the same time, a vice-principal, an assistant principal and two middle leaders on secondment joined the leadership team. A lead practitioner in mathematics also joined the school in January. There has been a restructuring of the academy trust so that a chief executive officer is now responsible for the performance of the schools within the trust. A new chair of governors took up her role in December.

### **The quality of leadership and management at the school**

The new principal, working with the trust, has drawn up a vision for the school based around 'expect excellence'. The impact of this is not only visible in all school displays and signage but evident in the attitude of senior leaders and governors, in classroom activities and in discussions with pupils.

The capacity of the leadership team has been significantly increased by the January appointments and senior leaders confidently articulate an understanding of the school's current position and the areas in which improvement is still necessary. They share a deep respect for their pupils and demonstrate a commitment to getting the very best out of every pupil.

Leaders use data effectively to carefully monitor the performance of pupils and the impact of the school's actions. They present their findings in a coherent and helpful format that clearly identifies underachieving groups and cohorts, and ensures that governors and the trust are well informed about their work.

### **Strengths in the school's approaches to securing improvement:**

- Validated examination results from 2015 support the school's own assertions at the last monitoring visit of improvement in some key areas. The proportion of pupils reaching the key benchmark of five or more GCSEs at grades A\* to C including English and mathematics rose from 36% in 2014 to 42%. There was a significant improvement in the progress made by pupils in English and science.

- A recent external review of the quality of teaching and learning reinforced observations on this inspection and the views of pupils that standards of teaching continue to improve.
- Leaders are confident that the teaching is now good with more teaching that is supporting very rapid progress. All teachers receive training on key themes, along with more targeted help, including individual coaching, for staff in need of support.
- Pupils are much more engaged in their learning because teachers involve them actively and this holds their interest, as do the frequent opportunities to discuss their learning with each other.
- Pupils value the additional help that teachers give them to ensure that they understand their work.
- Marking and assessment continue to be strengths of the school's work. Pupils say that marking is regular and helps them to improve their work. Teachers consistently use an agreed method of marking that gives pupils specific information on what they have done well and then provides them with activities that they can do to get better.
- Senior leaders have been working closely with a group of parents to review the school's approach to homework. As a result of this work, homework is now being set on a more regular basis and more checks are made to make sure that pupils record their homework in their planners. Additional resources are available to help pupils complete homework and pupils understand the sanctions if they fail to hand in their homework on time. As a result of this renewed focus, teachers, parents and pupils have commented on the improvement in the amount of homework given and completed.
- The quality of teaching in mathematics has improved following the appointment of a new mathematics leadership team during the course of this year. Staff ensure that pupils have covered the required content and they provide individualised help with topics that pupils are less confident about. As a result, leaders' assessments indicate considerable improvement in mathematics outcomes for current Year 11 pupils, although standards are expected to remain below national averages.
- A whole-school numeracy programme has now been developed. Departments are aware of the role they can play in improving pupils' confidence in numeracy. Some departments have embraced the strategy and are being supported by the mathematics team to develop resources.
- Careful tracking of pupils' attendance has remained a priority for the school. Short focus periods with rewards and prizes are used to support pupils in reaching school targets. Individual pupils are supported through a broad range of activities including weekly meetings for parents, collection in the school's minibuses and provision of bus passes. Attendance has improved since last year and is now in line with national levels, with a notable improvement in attendance for disadvantaged pupils.

- The new behaviour system is used consistently by staff and the impact is evident in the reduction in the numbers of pupils receiving 'behaviour logs' and fewer exclusions. Pupils report that there is little disruption to lessons and staff follow a consistent procedure if poor behaviour occurs.
- Pupils are proud of being part of the school. They value the increased opportunities they have to lead others this term. They are aware of being listened to and being able to make a difference. For example, the student council has been able to provide more seating areas around the school and played a role in the introduction of the 'expect excellence' culture.
- Providing additional support for disadvantaged pupils is an expectation for all staff. Teachers make use of a range of strategies and activities to support disadvantaged pupils. As a result, disadvantaged pupils in key stage 3 are now making more rapid progress than others in the school in English and mathematics, and catching up with their classmates.

### **Weaknesses in the school's approaches to securing improvement:**

- The validated examination results for 2015 showed that standards in mathematics were well below national levels. Only 47% of pupils made the expected level of progress. Although current pupils are benefiting from improved leadership and teaching in mathematics, the legacy of previously poor teaching means that current Year 11 pupils are not expected to make as much progress as other pupils nationally.
- Although work has begun on a school-wide programme to develop numeracy skills across the curriculum, this is still at an early stage. Not all departments are participating yet, and it is too early to see any impact of actions on pupils' mathematical skills.
- Despite the improvements in overall attendance, too many pupils are still persistently absent from school. Attendance for persistently absent disadvantaged pupils is improving at a faster rate than for other pupils but there is still a considerable gap.
- At key stage 4, too few disadvantaged pupils make more than the expected levels of progress in English and mathematics, leaving a considerable gap between them and their peers.
- Leaders need to continue to develop the accuracy of some assessment information, in particular for the new GCSE English and mathematics qualifications in Year 10.

### **External support**

Trustees and governors continue to thoroughly scrutinise the impact of leaders' actions through meetings of the governors' executive board. However, these meetings now take place on a less frequent basis as governors gain confidence that senior leaders are taking greater responsibility for sustaining the high pace of improvement and are effectively monitoring the impact of their actions.

The College Academies Trust provides a number of central administrative and support functions that school leaders value, including the provision of an education welfare officer to support attendance, and support for safeguarding. Close links between high schools in the trust provide excellent opportunities for shared staff training and standardisation of examination work. Trustees have commissioned external reviews to provide additional expert analysis where required, for example to monitor progress in mathematics or to track improvements in the quality of teaching.