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Mr Andrew Bygrave
Acting Principal
University Academy Kidsgrove
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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 Melanie Callaghan-Lewis, Ofsted Inspector, to your school on 24 and 25 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 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 strongly recommend that the school does not seek to appoint newly qualified teachers into the mathematics department, but I have no objection to newly qualified teachers being appointed in other departments.

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. 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 fourth monitoring inspection on 24 May 2016 to 25 May 2016

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work and visited parts of lessons, some jointly with members of the senior leadership team. Inspectors talked to pupils at break and lunchtime about their learning and their attitudes to, and opinions about, school. Inspectors scrutinised documents and met with the acting principal, senior and other leaders, two 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, there have been no changes in staff. A restructuring of staffing, including a consultation over possible redundancies, is currently taking place and will be completed by the end of the term.

The decision to close the sixth form has been confirmed and the school's final sixth-form learners will complete Year 13 this term.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

The acting principal, two vice-principals and three assistant principals have become an effective senior team whose ambition and determination have been key factors in the school's continued improvement. They command the confidence of staff and pupils and have successfully steered the school through a difficult year. Many areas are now improving because of their leadership. Other staff in the school form a professional and willing team who are eager to see the school improve.

Middle leaders, including subject and year leaders, are becoming increasingly confident in their roles and they are now much less reliant on their link member of the senior leadership team. They now check the quality of teaching in their area and target training and support at issues and individuals where it is needed. They use assessment information to identify pupils, in all year groups, who are beginning to fall behind their peers and they oversee extra help designed to help pupils catch up.

The school is now rich in assessment information and its use is contributing to better teaching and pupils' accelerating progress. Teachers regularly assess pupils, and subject leaders check their assessments. Senior and middle leaders use assessment information well to identify underachievement and then target extra support to pupils who need it. Many teachers are now using assessment information to inform their planning.

Teaching continues to improve because of strong senior leadership that is now well supported by middle leaders. Leaders evaluate the effectiveness of teaching and

learning using a range of information, including observations of teaching, learning walks, scrutiny of pupils' work and assessment information. Consequently, leaders are aware, for example, that the teaching of mathematics is improving at a slower rate than other subjects.

The SOAC meets regularly to evaluate progress against targets in its action plan. The members are also making increasingly effective use of assessment information to ask questions that challenge leaders about the progress of specific groups of pupils.

Leaders have thoughtfully reviewed the school's curriculum, taking into account the views of staff, parents and pupils, and a new curriculum model will be implemented in September. Inspectors expressed concerns about the proposed reduction in curriculum time for physical education in the new model and the possible impact on pupils' behaviour, motivation and physical development.

As leaders have, rightly, focused this year on improving behaviour, teaching and achievement, they have neglected some areas of the curriculum that encourage pupils' personal development. For example, pupils receive little careers guidance in key stage 3. Aspects of sex and relationships education, which go beyond reproduction and contraception, have not been taught well. Teaching about the dangers that might arise from those with radical views has left pupils with an oversimplified view and a lack of understanding about how it might apply to them as young people in Kidsgrove. Because of these deficiencies, some pupils are not as well prepared for life in modern Britain as they ought to be. Leaders are aware of these issues and are currently planning to rectify them in the new curriculum model.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Teaching continues to improve in most subjects and pupils are making better progress as a result. Teachers increasingly use their strong subject knowledge to provide precise explanations followed by skilful questioning that helps to deepen pupils' understanding of their work.

Typical teaching is now characterised by respectful relationships between pupils and teachers. Pupils are generally keen to do well and eager to learn. Most teachers provide regular and helpful feedback that helps pupils to improve their work. Teachers are becoming more confident in assessing pupils' attainment and they are making better use of this information as they plan lessons. Teachers' expectations of pupils are rising and this can be seen in the quantity and quality of work in many pupils' books. Some weaker teaching remains, where teachers do not insist that pupils work hard, but inspectors observed this in a small minority of lessons.

Teachers and teaching assistants provide thoughtful and well-planned support for pupils in lessons and this is particularly true for lower-attaining pupils and pupils who have special educational needs or disability. For example, inspectors observed high levels of engagement and enjoyment in a Year 7 geography lesson as pupils wrote enthusiastically and at length about the recent Canadian forest fires.

The teaching of mathematics stands out as being weaker than other subjects. Several pupils told inspectors that they were making less progress in mathematics than in other subjects. Inspectors' observations of learning and the school's own assessment information confirm that they are correct. Planning remains weak with work not well matched to pupils' abilities. Expectations remain too low and pupils do not work hard enough in lessons. However, there is also good practice within the mathematics department, for example in a Year 8 mathematics lesson, inspectors observed pupils working very hard, thinking deeply and refusing to give up, as they solved difficult problems.

Weaknesses in pupils' literacy, noted in previous inspections, remain. However, the school's recent focus on encouraging active listening and speaking in full sentences is already beginning to yield results. Inspectors observed teachers insisting on full and detailed verbal responses from pupils in several subjects, including mathematics, science and technology.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Most pupils continue to demonstrate good attitudes to learning. They behave well in lessons and around school between lessons, at break and at lunchtime. Pupils are courteous, respectful and polite to each other and to adults. The school is calm throughout the day. Teachers' focus on 'smart starts' continues to ensure that lessons start promptly, with pupils correctly equipped, and therefore little time is wasted.

Fixed-term exclusions remain low in most year groups and there has been none in Years 7 and 8 this year. There has been an increase in the use of exclusion in Year 11, resulting from leaders' appropriate insistence on high standards of behaviour. The great majority of Year 11 pupils who have received an exclusion have learned their lesson and have not been excluded again.

Attendance has improved again this year and is now well above last year's national average for secondary schools. The attendance of disadvantaged pupils has improved more than other pupils and consequently the gap between their attendance and that of others is closing rapidly.

Increased stability in leadership and teaching is resulting in pupils growing in confidence and self-assurance across year groups. For example, inspectors observed pupils in a Year 10 English class confidently assessing their own work and maturely discussing complex moral and social issues arising from their study of 'Blood Brothers'.

Pupils feel safe in school. Pupils told inspectors that bullying is very rare and that staff deal well with any that does occur. Pupils have a good understanding of how to keep themselves safe from many potential threats including those that the internet might pose. However, their understanding of the potential dangers from people with extreme or radical views is not well developed. Although statutory

requirements for the teaching of sex and relationships are in place, pupils do not have a strong understanding of the importance for respectful personal relationships.

Outcomes for pupils

The school's much-improved assessment system is now providing leaders with detailed information about how much progress pupils, and groups of pupils, are currently making. Pupils' progress is accelerating because of better teaching; however, weaknesses remain as a legacy of weaker teaching in recent years.

Teachers have helped pupils in Year 11 to catch up with a wide range of targeted help and support. Current assessment information indicates that their progress is accelerating, but that their attainment will be a little lower than the 2015 Year 11 cohort. Outcomes are predicted to rise in English but fall in mathematics. Gaps between the achievement of disadvantaged pupils and others are set to grow, when compared with 2015.

Stronger progress is evident in Year 10 across most subjects, and gaps between disadvantaged pupils and others are closing.

At key stage 3, pupils are generally making the progress expected of them. Pupils in Year 7 are doing particularly well, whereas the progress of pupils in Years 8 and 9 is a little patchier. However, teachers and leaders are now well aware of where progress is weaker and extra help is seeing pupils catch up and gaps are closing.

Pupils who have special educational needs or disability make consistently good progress in all year groups because of the effective extra support they are given by their teachers and teaching assistants. There is also some early evidence that pupils' literacy skills are beginning to improve because of the recent renewed whole-school focus on listening and speaking.

External support

The school's sponsor, UCAT, continues to broker a range of support, including a full-time assistant principal and part-time mathematics leadership support. Much of this support is helping to improve teaching and achievement, although improvement in mathematics remains too slow.

UCAT has brokered support in planning and assessment for the history, geography and modern foreign languages departments from the Cheshire Vale Teaching School Alliance. Cheadle Hulme High School has provided support by reviewing the accuracy and use of assessment information in school. This has contributed to leaders' improved use of, and confidence in, teachers' assessments.

UCAT facilitates a number of subject cluster groups with the other three UCAT secondary academies. For example, groups exist for heads of English, mathematics, science and more recently history, geography, languages, physical education and

religious education. These groups are proving effective in developing common approaches across UCAT and improving the confidence of middle leaders. The school's heads of English and science are beginning to take a lead role in their groups.

A separate, combined primary and secondary, UCAT cluster group focusing on literacy has helped leaders to develop their plans to address this area in school, and some early impact is already evident.

The six UCAT principals meet regularly and are coached by a national leader of education from Fallibroome Academy.