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27 September 2016

Mrs Nicola Jethwa
Acting headteacher
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Dear Mrs Jethwa

Special measures monitoring inspection of Abbs Cross Academy and Arts College

Following my visit with Gary Rawlings, Ofsted Inspector, to your school on 13–14 September 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 third monitoring inspection since the school 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 taking effective action towards the removal of special measures.

I strongly recommend that the school does not seek to appoint any further newly qualified teachers prior to the next monitoring inspection.

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 school.
- 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 third monitoring inspection on 13 to 14 September 2016

Evidence

Inspectors met with the chief executive officer (CEO) of the Loxford School Trust, the acting headteacher, senior and middle leaders, and other staff (including newly qualified teachers appointed to the trust). Inspectors also met with two members of the interim executive board, including the chair. They visited a selection of lessons across the school. A significant proportion of these visits were conducted jointly with school leaders.

Inspectors spoke to pupil representatives from all year groups, and observed their behaviour and conduct during lunchtimes. An inspector also visited a Year 8 assembly. Both inspectors spoke informally with staff.

Inspectors scrutinised a wide range of documentation, particularly focusing on the school's 2016 examination results, and leaders' evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of the school and their plans for improvement. They also looked at responses to Ofsted's 'Parent View', minutes of meetings, attendance and behaviour information, monitoring records of teaching, and the single central record detailing staff recruitment checks.

Context

Since the last monitoring inspection in March 2016, a number of key staff have left the school, including the former headteacher. The associate headteacher is now the acting headteacher and a restructured leadership team is in place to support her. The leadership team consists of experienced staff supported by the CEO, who is a national leader of education (NLE). It includes two deputy headteachers, six assistant headteachers – one of whom is the special educational needs coordinator (SENCo), and four officers from the academy trust.

The interim executive board is now fully in place. The chair, who is a national leader of governance (NLG), brings a balance of experience to the strategic leadership of the school. The executive board personnel are experienced professionals from both the academy trust and the local authority.

The academy trust has appointed newly qualified teachers. A clear monitoring and mentoring programme is in place to develop their professional skills. No staffing vacancies remain.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

The school has stabilised despite a high turnover of staff and the departure of the former headteacher. Leaders at all levels, including the executive board, have set

high expectations. Consequently, there is now a focus on ensuring that rapid improvement takes place.

Leaders have completed a revised evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of the school. The acting headteacher is both honest and accurate in her analysis of the action needed to raise standards. Leaders' self-evaluation rightly recognises that while outcomes for pupils in 2016 improved in English and mathematics, this was not consistent for all subjects and for all pupils. Furthermore, pupils' progress from their different starting points was not high enough when compared to their peers nationally. The performance of White British boys remains a concern.

The acting headteacher has ensured that there are higher expectations for pupils and staff. Her leadership team ably supports her and action taken to raise standards is beginning to take effect.

The expectation for pupils to attend regularly, on time, and in appropriate dress has been clearly set. This has been supported through the introduction of a new uniform and the visible presence of staff throughout the day. Pupils welcome these changes. The revision of middle leaders' roles, including those of care team leaders, has greatly facilitated this.

Action has been taken to complement the already effective procedures for safeguarding. All staff are required to demonstrate an even deeper understanding of policies and procedures. They have received continued and appropriate safeguarding training on a range of issues including child sexual exploitation (CSE), social media use and the 'Prevent' duty. Additionally, the environment across the school has been widely improved. This includes new toilet facilities, additional classrooms and the library. The school's internet access has been refined so that additional filters and firewalls are in place. Pupils are no longer permitted to use mobile phones. Leaders regularly report on safeguarding matters to the interim executive board, and the trust's safeguarding officer has conducted a review of safeguarding.

Following the last monitoring inspection, leaders introduced a comprehensive and effective system to monitor the quality of teaching, learning and assessment. This has created an uncompromising culture where staff are clear about what is expected. Staff reported to inspectors that they welcomed this change because they now have a clear understanding of leaders' expectations. The academy trust's cycle of monitoring the standards of teaching and holding teachers to account is an embedded part of the day-to-day running of the school. It focuses on improving the standard of teaching, learning and assessment, and outcomes for pupils. Staff are clear on what is expected of them.

The capacity for middle leaders has improved through the drive of a new and galvanised leadership team. Middle leaders are now actively involved in monitoring the standard of teaching and sharing good practice with their colleagues.

During observations of learning with inspectors, middle leaders identified weaknesses in pupils' learning and progress over time. They reported concisely on the areas for improvement and focused on the need for pupils' learning to be challenged. However, some middle leaders were less confident in the steps they would take to ensure that teachers responded to the weaknesses identified.

Senior leaders have introduced an informed approach to checking on the progress of pupils and setting aspirational targets for them to achieve. This includes a revised reporting and assessment strategy that includes all pupils being identified on an individual 'flight path' based on their starting points. However, the use of this system by teachers remains inconsistent.

The challenge of the interim executive board has been clear and timely. The CEO is relentless and determined in her drive to improve the school. Members of the executive board have provided strategic guidance to the acting headteacher. The chair has ensured that a full evaluation of the plans to improve the school has been undertaken. Many of the actions that were identified at the time of the section 5 inspection are being implemented. However, while effective progress is being made, these have not fully embedded across the school. Members of the executive board are clear about their roles and responsibilities and provide appropriate and active external support. The acting headteacher is required to report regularly. Members of the executive board undertake regular visits to view the work of the school and gauge the rate of improvement. Executive board meetings are well attended and any required action is clearly documented along with the person responsible. Leaders are being held to account.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

There is evidence to confirm that the leaders' drive to ensure that pupils make consistent and strong progress is not yet secure. Differences remain in the application of pupils' literacy and numeracy skills across year groups and within subject areas. Inspectors observed some pupils in key stage 3 who were not working at age-related expectations. This was true of the work seen from some pupils in Year 7, within humanities and food technology. For example, teachers' expectations were too low because of their limited knowledge about the capabilities and individual starting points of pupils. Leaders who accompanied inspectors agreed that evidence gathered from observations of learning indicated that greater challenge to extend pupils' learning over time is required.

In key stage 4, the pupils' understanding of their level of work towards their target grades at GCSE is varied. Some pupils are of the impression that their work is of a higher standard than that seen in their books by inspectors. For example, while the most able often included numerical facts and statistics in their answers, their written explanations did not always show the required depth of understanding to achieve the highest grades. Furthermore, in some learning observed in modern foreign

languages and science, pupils were seen to be repeating work learned in key stage 3. Therefore, there remains insufficient challenge for some groups of pupils, particularly the most able.

Since the last monitoring inspection, middle leaders have developed their experience in observing the quality of teaching, learning and assessment. Their evaluations are accurate. As a result, leaders are able to challenge teachers in their areas of subject expertise in order to raise standards. Leaders' records from monitoring the quality of teaching, learning and assessment show that teaching is improving across the school. Inspectors agree that teachers have now established clear and consistent routines in their classroom to focus on pupils' learning.

All pupils are expected to have planners during lessons and use them to record their homework set. Therefore, parents and tutors can closely monitor the completion of pupils' homework. This was seen in the planners of pupils in those lessons visited by inspectors. Pupils also have individual reading books available during lessons. This enables five minutes' reading time to take place at the start of lessons. Further reading time is designated on a Thursday. The school has used this to develop the pupils' free reading. Key stage 4 pupils who met with inspector said that they were now enjoying the start to lessons because of the reading time. Furthermore, the improved resources in the library give pupils greater opportunity to find time to read during the school day. However, while pupils generally read with confidence when requested to do so by their teachers, some less able readers are not able to include punctuation and expression when reading text. Leaders have begun to develop an approach to focus on improving boys' reading across the school.

Teachers' use of assessment and feedback remains inconsistent. The assessment policy has been further clarified since the last monitoring inspection. Leaders' analysis showed differing approaches used by individual subject areas at the end of the last academic year. Inspectors scrutinised the use of assessment in the previous term and it confirmed leaders' views. Too often, assessment did not help the pupils to make progress in their next piece of work.

Currently, some teachers remain insecure in the contextual knowledge about the pupils they teach. While teachers identify the less able and most able pupils, not all use the available information to identify all groups of pupils; for example, the most able disadvantaged pupils, or the specific needs of those pupils with special education needs and/or disabilities. Consequently, the progress that these pupils make from their individual starting points remains variable. The work by White British boys seen during the monitoring inspection shows clear comparable differences in the progress made over time compared with that of White British girls. This gender difference is not diminishing quickly enough. The progress of White British boys and pupils who have special education needs and/or disabilities remains a challenge to address.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

The school is a calm place. The pupils continue to behave well around the site and the improved physical environment has helped facilitate this. Pupils told inspectors that lessons are calmer at the start because of the reading time. They are particularly appreciative of the new and improved facilities.

When speaking with inspectors the pupils conveyed that they feel better cared for by staff. They said that it helps start their day when they are greeted with 'good morning' from the 'care team' staff. Pupils appreciate the changes to the toilets and the availability of soap to wash their hands. When talking about the building improvements, pupils were very clear that the new classroom spaces helped them to feel more comfortable to learn.

In lessons, pupils' behaviour is generally more consistent and focused. However, a few pupils are still allowed to drift from learning. In these instances, teachers and support staff do not always ensure timely interventions. Therefore, the expectations for some pupils could be even higher.

Pupils identify with a change in expectations since the acting headteacher has been in post. They told inspectors that there is now a competitiveness to learn between peers when in lessons. This is considered to be a result of the use of school achievement boards. Key stage 4 pupils described to inspectors how 'it is important to get their face on the board' because they know the quality of work by other pupils. Key stage 3 pupils feel that improvements in teaching have taken place.

Punctuality and attendance has continued to improve since the last monitoring inspection. Effective systems are now in place to follow up on any absence. Pupils see the care team leaders as providing an important role in their pastoral care. As a result, pupils say that they feel supported across the school.

The number of pupils who received fixed-termed exclusions has continued to decrease. There were a lower number of exclusions in the summer term last year, when compared to the autumn and spring. There have been no exclusions this academic year to date. Pupils reported to inspectors that staff now quickly resolve any unkind behaviour. They also welcomed the restriction in the use of mobile phones because this reduces any issues that may arise from social media. However, pupils did report to inspectors that they sometimes receive mixed messages regarding educational trips and visits taking place. While pupils were clear that trips were purposeful, they did feel that the cultural opportunities and careers guidance they provided were less frequent than they had expected.

The outcomes for pupils

In 2015, the number of Year 11 pupils who had special educational needs and/or disabilities who achieved five or more good GCSE results including English and mathematics declined. The proportion of disadvantaged pupils in Year 11 who achieved five or more good GCSE results including English and mathematics in 2015 was just below average. The outcomes for the most able pupils followed a similar trend, with their performance being just below the national figure in 2015.

At the time of the last monitoring inspection, leaders had revised their predictions for GCSE performance. The proportion of Year 11 pupils who were expected to achieve five or more good GCSE results including English and mathematics was 62%.

The school's own information regarding the Year 11 results in 2016 shows that 64% of pupils did actually achieve five or more good GCSE results including English and mathematics. The performance of pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities improved, with 52% of these pupils achieving five or more good GCSE results including English and mathematics. The differences between the performance of disadvantaged pupils and similar pupils nationally reduced.

However, across a wide range of subjects the performance of Year 11 pupils in 2016 was too inconsistent. For example, in science and textiles less than half of all pupils entered achieved a good GCSE result. Furthermore, the difference between pupils' outcomes in mathematics and English was 14 percentage points, with 72% achieving a good GCSE result in mathematics compared to 58% in English. A significant gender difference remained between the performance of Year 11 boys and girls in 2016.

Leaders rightly understand that while attainment improved in 2016, the performance of individual groups remained a concern. For example, the most able pupils did not all achieve the highest results across a wide range of subjects. Leaders are clear through their analysis that the progress made by all pupils from their starting points remains an issue. Inspectors agree that too few pupils achieve the highest outcomes from their starting points. The work of pupils currently in the school shows that some are not working at age-related expectations or challenged sufficiently. This remains a concern.

External support

The Loxford School Trust has continued to provide clear guidance and assist in the development of the school. The interim executive board has reviewed the use of funding and provided expertise to challenge and support leaders. The CEO continues to provide mentoring support for the acting headteacher and is determined in her drive to support further improvement. The vice-chair of the

executive board has taken careful and measured action to gauge the rate of improvement. He and his colleagues have assisted in the recruitment of newly qualified teachers by ensuring a trust support package is in place, so that they are able to develop their professional skills. The school has stabilised because of the levels of external support. The acting headteacher is well supported in developing her vision and making sure that the picture of improvement continues to address the areas of weakness identified in the section 5 inspection.