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Dear Mr Lloyd

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to North Birmingham Academy

Following my visit to your school on 29 September 2016, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report the inspection findings. Thank you for the help you gave me and for the time you made available to discuss the actions you are taking to improve the school since the most recent section 5 inspection.

The visit was the first monitoring inspection since the school was judged to require improvement following the section 5 inspection in February 2016. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005. At its section 5 inspection before the one that took place in February 2016, the school was also judged to require improvement.

Senior leaders and trust directors are taking effective action to tackle the areas requiring improvement identified at the last section 5 inspection in order to become a good school.

The school should take further action to:

- use the information gained from the evaluation of the impact of actions and interventions to inform future development, in order to most effectively accelerate progress and improve attainment.

Evidence

During the inspection, meetings were held with you, senior and other leaders, and with two of the sponsor's regional directors. I undertook brief visits to a number of lessons accompanied by school leaders where I looked at examples of pupils' work and talked to them about their learning. I evaluated a range of documents and records, including an analysis of pupils' outcomes and the school's action plans.

Context

Since the previous inspection, you have been appointed as principal. The school's sponsor, E-ACT, has replaced the governing body with a regional achievement board (RAB) that is responsible for the governance of the school. Successful recruitment of staff has resulted in a number of recent appointments within leadership and teaching roles.

Main findings

Leaders quickly took action to make plans to tackle the areas requiring improvement identified at the section 5 inspection. High expectations of the quality of teaching are evident, and more rigorous processes to manage teachers' performance are in place. Middle leaders' skills of observation are developing, and they are more involved in monitoring and evaluating the quality of teaching and learning within their subject areas. Senior and middle leaders regularly observe teaching together. This ensures that the judgements made about the quality of teaching between leaders are consistent. Accurate identification of teachers' strengths and weaknesses allows specific coaching and development programmes to be provided. Leaders' use of formal support plans with some teachers has led to improvements, so the plans are no longer required. In some cases, teachers have not met expectations and have left the school, providing opportunities to recruit new staff.

Your actions to increase the level of challenge included additional training for staff. The impact is apparent in pupils' work. For example, in mathematics, pupils are encouraged to move on to more challenging work when they are confident with the work that they are doing. Your observations of teaching show that teachers use questions more effectively, encouraging pupils to think more deeply. During the inspection, teachers demonstrated the questioning skills they have developed. However, these skills are not fully embedded in teachers' practice, as sometimes opportunities are missed to further explore the answers pupils give. The initial impact of improving levels of challenge is seen in the analysis of examination results for summer 2016. Progress rates for Year 11 pupils improved slightly on the previous year. However, the analysis also reveals that pupils made on average one third of a grade less progress, and high prior-attaining pupils half a grade less progress, than pupils with similar starting points nationally. Leaders will be able to

validate their initial analysis once national results are confirmed later this year. Leaders know that improving the rates of progress pupils make remains a key priority.

Leaders are changing the way they collect information about the progress pupils make. The imminent introduction of a new system is welcomed by middle leaders. They say that they will be able to more readily analyse information about how well different groups of pupils are doing. Leaders also expect that assessment information will be more accurate as rigorous procedures to check its quality are in place.

Improving pupils' literacy skills has been a key priority at the school. Opportunities to develop literacy across the curriculum are highlighted in teaching plans. For example, pupils check the spelling, punctuation and grammar of examples of assessments. This reminds them of how this important aspect of communication is assessed. Teachers consistently mark pupils' work and provide targets for developing literacy. Improvements in literacy had a positive impact on summer 2016 examination results for Year 11 pupils. Initial analysis shows that pupils' progress in English improved from the previous year.

Leaders' focus on developing literacy skills has been matched by increasing opportunities for pupils to use and apply mathematical skills. Tutors also support numeracy through weekly problem-solving activities with form groups. New leadership and teachers' appointments in mathematics have secured the capacity to create teaching plans that focus on key mathematical skills in all year groups. Outcomes in 2016 showed the benefit of specific intervention for pupils in Year 11. Preliminary analysis of results shows that almost half of pupils achieved GCSE passes at grade C or better, an improvement on the previous year when the proportion was about one third. However, rates of progress improved only slightly.

Two new leaders have been appointed to coordinate the provision for pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities, as well as supporting pupils who speak English as an additional language. These leaders provide training and development to teachers on this matter. They target their support to subjects where the progress of pupils who speak English as an additional language is less strong. However, as the current systems for tracking pupils' progress do not clearly show this information, their impact will be greater once the school's new systems are in place. Leaders have carried out an early analysis of examination results for 2016 for pupils who speak English as an additional language. However, this analysis does not factor in the progress of pupils at different stages of gaining English language skills.

Sixth-form leaders regularly review the progress of students on 16 to 19 study programmes. Form tutors closely monitor steps taken to support any students who are falling behind, and involve parents when required. Sixth-form leaders and subject teachers are now linked more closely so that subject-specific actions also form part of support for students. Leaders' analysis of sixth-form results for summer 2016 shows that progress for academic and vocational study programmes looks set to increase. This analysis will be confirmed once national progress information is available. Also, a greater proportion of students achieved at all grades in academic qualifications, and at higher grades for vocational qualifications. The school's monitoring systems underestimated the levels of attainment that were achieved, which reduced the sharpness of how well additional support was targeted. This is being addressed by the new assessment information systems that are being introduced.

The proportion of students who began their 16 to 19 study programmes without a GCSE pass at grade C or above in English and/or mathematics and subsequently achieved these qualifications declined this year. Actions leaders have taken to address this area for improvement from the previous inspection have not yet been fully effective. Leaders continue to ensure that appropriate curriculum time is provided for these important qualifications and that students are on study programmes appropriate to their starting points.

An external review of the school's use of the pupil premium was recommended at the previous inspection. You have not yet commissioned this review, reflecting your decision to be involved in the process once you had taken up post at the school. You plan to carry out the review this term. An outward-facing culture exists among leaders responsible for the pupil premium. They are committed to taking appropriate action following the outcomes of the review.

External support

The school's sponsor has changed the structure of governance to address previous weaknesses. This change in structure has superseded the external review of governance recommended at the previous inspection. The recently appointed regional education director appointed by E-ACT has taken on responsibility as chair of the RAB, and already has a clear understanding of the school's strengths and weaknesses. Clear lines of accountability from the sponsor to the school exist, resulting in leaders being held rigorously to account. Regional directors from the sponsor visit the school regularly. They are able to validate the work of leaders, the judgements they make and their progress towards the areas that require improvement and to provide appropriate support. School leaders also welcome, and benefit from, opportunities to share expertise and experience with colleagues in other E-ACT schools.

I am copying this letter to the regional education director who chairs the RAB, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Birmingham. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Rob Hackfath
Her Majesty's Inspector