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Helen Watts
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Dear Mrs Watts

Special measures monitoring inspection of Acle Academy

Following my visit with Peter Sewell, Ofsted Inspector, to your academy on 6–7 December 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 academy’s previous monitoring inspection.

The inspection was the second monitoring inspection since the academy became subject to special measures following the inspection that took place in December 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 academy does not seek to appoint newly qualified teachers.

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

Yours sincerely

Kim Pigram
Her Majesty’s Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection that took place in December 2015.

- Improve teaching and outcomes for all pupils, by:
 - providing teachers with accurate assessment information which they then use well to plan interesting and inspiring lessons that challenge pupils of all abilities
 - ensuring that pupils' literacy and numeracy skills are developed well in all subjects.
- Improve leadership and management, by:
 - increasing the capacity of leaders to bring about change
 - accelerating the work begun by the acting headteacher to restore an ethos which is characterised by high expectations of all pupils by all staff
 - establishing priorities for improvement, based on an accurate understanding of the work of the academy, that have clear timescales and measurable targets
 - ensuring that middle leaders are clearly accountable, well trained and are leading effectively
 - making sure that all pupils' progress is accurately monitored, including that of those who are disadvantaged and are the most able
 - accelerating the implementation of the actions outlined in the recent review of pupil premium spending
 - ensuring that the individual needs of pupils who are disabled or who have special educational needs are diagnosed effectively and that teachers plan lessons that take account of those needs
 - reviewing and amending the curriculum to ensure that it builds on the prior learning and capabilities of all pupils and prepares them for life in modern Britain
 - ensuring that staff understand and apply all academy policies consistently, including those on behaviour and feedback
 - ensuring that the governing body provides robust challenge and support.
- Improve pupils' personal development, behaviour and welfare, by:
 - urgently addressing pupils' lack of confidence in how adults deal with bullying timely and effectively
 - further developing the work to improve attendance, particularly for disadvantaged pupils.

It is recommended that the academy does not appoint newly qualified teachers without the agreement of one of Her Majesty's Inspectors.

Report on the second monitoring inspection on 06 December 2016 to 07 December 2016

Evidence

Inspectors observed the academy's work, visited lessons, scrutinised documents, and undertook a scrutiny of pupils' work in a range of subjects. Additionally, the inspectors met with the head of school, the senior leadership team, middle leaders, as well as staff and pupils. The lead inspector also met with the chair of the Wensum Trust and the chief executive officer of the trust.

Context

Acle Academy joined the Wensum Trust in October 2016. Since September 2016, there has been a new head of school in post. The new assistant headteacher with responsibility for monitoring pupils' progress has also been supported by the trust's data manager for two days a week. There is an interim governance arrangement, the 'challenge board', which includes several governors from the predecessor academy, to help the academy focus on key priorities. Recruitment for a local governing body is currently under way, with a view to being in place by 1 February 2017.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

Since September 2016, the new head of school has swiftly implemented improvements in the quality of leadership and management. She has worked quickly to identify the strengths and weaknesses in the school's provision, and now has an accurate view of the quality of teaching, learning, assessment and achievement. Using this understanding, she has identified the needs in leadership and management at both senior and middle leader level, and is recruiting appropriately. The new head of school's leadership is going a long way in bringing long-overdue stability to the school.

The recruitment of the assistant headteacher for progress has brought about significant improvements in the monitoring of pupils' achievement. The convoluted and confused assessment systems identified in the previous monitoring inspection are a thing of the past. A rigorous assessment system is now in place, which staff are using with increasing effectiveness. Leaders are using the information that they receive from staff to further refine teachers' understanding of the curriculum, to identify weaker teaching and to support pupils who are falling behind. Leaders acknowledge that there are further refinements and training needed for some staff and leaders to make the most of this assessment system. However, staff are now discussing assessment and pupils' progress more routinely and accurately. This is a considerable improvement since the previous monitoring inspection.

The new head of school, well supported by her team, has established a line management system and now has an accurate picture of the quality of leadership and management across the school. Improved line management is supporting hard-working middle leaders to be better guided about how to raise standards in their departments. However, a number of middle leaders are new to their posts or require more training to ensure that they use the new assessment systems in place to their best effect. In particular, leaders need to use work scrutiny more sharply to quality assure the information about pupils' progress, most notably for the most able pupils. Consequently, the trust has now ensured that the new assistant headteacher for progress has been given more time each week to carry out this work. The trust is also actively recruiting a new permanent deputy headteacher for the summer term to continue to drive improvements in leadership.

The newly appointed special educational needs coordinator, very well supported by a knowledgeable deputy, is beginning the task of undoing the previously poor provision for pupils in the school. Leaders have an accurate understanding about the current special educational needs code of practice and have quickly established some basic routines that have previously been missing. Pupils are now being accurately identified and registered when they have a special educational need and/or disability. Leaders are implementing better quality-review processes that ensure that pupils get a 'voice' in their education. Regular fortnightly training for staff is also now in place and beginning to raise the profile of pupils' needs. However, leaders have identified that there is a backlog of reviews that need to be completed for pupils. The trust continues to ensure that the newly appointed leader is supported on a fortnightly basis by a more experienced leader from Hellesdon High School. Parents say that the provision for pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities has improved since September, but that the quality of teaching does not yet consistently meet the needs of these pupils in lessons.

Governors are providing interim support for the school, while the trust advertise, interview and recruit for a local governing body. Owing to the historical poor performance of the governing body, the Wensum Trust took the immediate decision to disband the original governing body and formulate an emergency governing body, 'the challenge board'. A number of governors, alongside trustees, sit on this board and routinely review and challenge leaders on the quality of leadership and management, and about pupils' achievement. Although there are named governors for key responsibilities like safeguarding, and they routinely visit the school, there is not sufficient clarity around how governors challenge leaders over aspects of pupils' personal development and well-being. The trust and challenge board acknowledge this. They are working hard to recruit high-quality governors for a local governing body by 1 February 2017.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Since the previous monitoring inspection, leaders have developed their pupil progress reviews effectively to monitor the quality of teaching with greater

precision. Leaders are using their accurate understanding of the quality of teaching to identify where teaching is stronger and to support teaching that is weaker. There are a number of 'coaches' who are now beginning to share their best practice with other staff. However, although teaching is beginning to improve, there is still too much that does not facilitate good progress for pupils in lessons.

Where teaching is stronger, staff are using the assessment system to plot where pupils are not achieving as well as they should, and to plan activities which help them to catch up. Some teachers are using high-quality questioning and the school's agreed feedback system to support pupils to learn effectively. This was most apparent in English, some areas of humanities and physical education.

Middle leadership is now starting to make a difference to the quality of teaching and pupils' achievement, although there is still much work to do. Middle leaders are actively engaging with the new curriculum and assessment systems and use their knowledge of their subjects to raise expectations about what staff should expect from pupils in their lessons. Middle leaders are diligent in their quest for improvement, despite the turbulence that they have faced over the past year. Subject leaders and pastoral leaders are beginning to work together to identify where pupils are underachieving, and how they can work together to make a difference. Middle leaders continue to develop their skills in work scrutiny when looking at the progress that different groups of pupils are making, especially the most able.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Upon her appointment, the head of school swiftly recruited an assistant headteacher to take charge of personal development, behaviour and well-being who is due to start in January 2017. This position has been created following the head of school's accurate evaluation that greater clarity and capacity is needed in the school's pastoral structure. In the interim, the trust has recruited an experienced and well-qualified senior leader to support the school's current work. The trust has also ensured that this position will continue in the spring term so that the new assistant headteacher will have a mentor to ensure that his transition to the school is smooth.

Leaders are now accurately monitoring the quality of behaviour and are beginning to use this information to directly intervene to improve poorer behaviour using the new 'engage team' and clearer behaviour systems. Pupils unanimously say that the school has improved since September. They say that behaviour is the thing that has improved the most. Most pupils say that bullying is rare, and that it is being dealt with with increasing effectiveness, although some staff are still inconsistent in their actions to deal with pupils' concerns. Pupils commented on the assemblies and life skills lessons, which are starting to give them more information about different viewpoints, how to be respectful of differences, and to prepare them for life in modern Britain. However, pupils identify that there is still a significant core of their

peers who cause disruption around the school and in some lessons. The least able pupils identified that this is a more regular occurrence for them. This concurs with leaders' own evaluations. Equally, some of the most able pupils identify that they would like leaders to look at more reward opportunities for those pupils who are working hard and attending well consistently.

The new head of school is adamant that the voices of pupils and parents must be heard at Acle Academy. She and her team are finding ways to gather pupils' and parents' perceptions and are acting on this evidence to improve the provision in the school. Surveys of parents and pupils are being used increasingly to give leaders an accurate viewpoint of how the school community feels. Equally, staff and parents comment on how the new head of school is making herself available to talk to them about their concerns and queries. This is helping to create a caring and responsive ethos throughout the school. However, leaders are not complacent and know that there is much more work to do to win the hearts and minds of the local community.

Leaders continue to ensure that pupils are safe. Staff are well trained and use this training to make referrals to the designated safeguarding staff. Senior leaders liaise with external agencies, such as children's services, quickly when they receive a referral. This includes referrals where leaders are concerned about pupils' being vulnerable to extremism. Pupils are also being taught how to stay safe, especially online. On occasion, there are times where the administration of safeguarding paperwork does not reflect the good practice of the school. Equally, there are occasions where there is a lack of clarity around the specific roles of certain personnel in this administration. Consequently, leaders are reviewing the roles of key personnel and the trust is providing additional administration support in the spring term to ensure that the good-quality work around safeguarding is maintained.

Leaders have identified that attendance and persistent absence continues to be an area that needs considerable improvement. Leaders have now put in place much more effective ways to monitor the attendance of individual pupils and key groups. They are working closely with the local authority, where appropriate, to improve this provision. However, the progress of too many pupils is hampered by poor attendance and this is a priority for the school in the spring term.

Outcomes for pupils

Leaders and governors rightly acknowledge some strengths in the 2016 outcomes for Acle Academy, most notably in the numbers of pupils achieving at least a grade C in English and mathematics. Leaders are rightly adamant that achievement is not yet good enough, especially for disadvantaged pupils, and those with special educational needs and/or disabilities. Equally, as pupils enter the school with attainment that is in line with the national average, and there is an increasing proportion of the most able pupils entering the school, leaders know that pupils need to make even more rapid progress so that they attain the highest grades.

Leaders are using the assessment systems to identify key pupils and lessons where further support is required. This is a drastic improvement since the previous monitoring inspection in July 2016. Leaders are beginning to use this information to intervene with pupils who are underachieving, or where there is teaching that is not yet ensuring that pupils achieve well enough. However, this work is still relatively new and leaders are seeking more opportunities to work with Hellesdon High School on quality assuring their assessment. The CEO of the trust is now providing strategic support to ensure that this cross-subject moderation, and support between the two schools, is systematic for the spring term.

Leaders also identify that their work to improve the outcomes for pupils who need further support to catch up in their literacy skills has not yet been tackled sufficiently. Consequently, more work is needed to identify how well the additional Year 7 catch-up funding is being used.

In 2016, disadvantaged pupils did not make the progress of which they were capable. Leaders can show that they did use the additional funds to make some difference to these pupils' outcomes between January and July 2016. However, leaders' information shows that current disadvantaged pupils are also not making enough progress in all year groups. Leaders have identified that they have some significant work to do to ensure that the funding this year supports pupils across all year groups to catch up with their peers nationally.

External support

Recruitment remains a challenge for the school, and where the head of school has yet to recruit key positions, the Wensum Trust is providing good-quality interim leadership capacity. For example, the trust has employed two experienced senior leaders to support the work in the school while the recruitment for permanent senior leaders is underway.

The trust's data manager has been pivotal in helping leaders to create systems, monitor and self-evaluate effectively. His insightful knowledge and immense support have been essential in supporting leaders to make effective progress in the development of school systems to analyse how well pupils achieve.

The diligent chair of the trust and the trust's chief executive officer (CEO) continue to seek out potential candidates for governance. They have been successful so far in recruiting several people to the interim challenge board from a variety of successful professional backgrounds, including law, education and business.

The trust's CEO has also provided mentoring to the new head of school during her first term, and support for other senior leaders who are developing their roles.