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Ms Michelle Ginn
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Dear Ms Ginn

Special measures monitoring inspection of Blackthorn Primary School

Following my visit to your academy on 1 to 2 February 2017, 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 recent section 5 inspection.

The inspection was the first monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures following the inspection that took place in June 2016.

Having considered all the evidence I am of the opinion that at this time:

Leaders and managers are not taking effective action towards the removal of special measures.

The trust's statement of action is fit for purpose.

The school's improvement plans are fit for purpose.

Having considered all the evidence I am of the opinion that the academy may appoint newly qualified teachers.

I am copying this letter to the advisory board, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Northamptonshire. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Di Mullan
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection that took place in June 2016.

- Improve the quality of teaching, learning and assessment, and rapidly accelerate outcomes for pupils, by:
 - ensuring that the teaching of spelling, grammar and punctuation is consistently effective in all classes and across a range of subjects
 - giving the most able pupils tasks that are appropriate to their ability, and using questioning effectively to challenge these pupils' understanding in class
 - ensuring that all teachers have consistently high expectations for pupils' behaviour and for what pupils are able to do
 - developing teaching strategies that capture pupils' imagination and inspire them to do their best, especially for boys
 - ensuring that teachers consistently apply the school's marking policy so that pupils receive effective feedback on their work.
- Improve pupils' personal development, behaviour and welfare, by:
 - ensuring that there is a consistently robust response to all safeguarding concerns
 - improving pupils' engagement in lessons so that low-level disruption continues to reduce.
- Improve leadership and management, by:
 - reviewing roles and responsibilities to ensure that the school increases its capacity to secure further improvement
 - ensuring that leaders with safeguarding responsibilities receive sufficient support to carry out their roles effectively
 - developing the skills of middle leaders so they are able to hold others to account for the quality of teaching, learning and assessment in the areas they lead
 - increasing opportunities for teachers to learn from the best practice within the school and the trust, in order to improve their practice
 - maintaining the current level of support from the trust and building relationships with effective leaders from other trust schools, so that new leaders are helped to develop the skills they need to carry out their roles effectively.
- Improve the early years, by:
 - ensuring that there are more opportunities for children to develop their imaginative skills
 - increasing opportunities for parents to engage with their child's learning.

Report on the first monitoring inspection on 1 to 2 February 2017

Evidence

The inspector met with the principal, assistant principal, two directors of learning and seven other members of staff. She also met with the chief executive of The Education Fellowship Trust, the executive principal and two members of the education support team from the trust. The inspector spoke with some parents as they brought their children to school in the morning, with pupils in lessons and with a group of six pupils from a range of year groups. The inspector visited 10 lessons to see learning taking place. Some of these visits were conducted with a member of the education support team and the remainder were conducted with the principal. The inspector looked at pupils' workbooks with the principal. A range of documentation was scrutinised, including the single central record, other documentation relating to safeguarding of pupils, documents relating to pupils' attainment and progress, and the progress that has been made in the areas for improvement identified at the inspection in June 2016.

Context

Since the inspection in June 2016, there have been significant changes to staffing at Blackthorn Primary School. Nine new teachers are in post and two assistant principals have been appointed. An additional learning mentor has been appointed. At the time of this inspection, one director of learning and one assistant principal were absent due to ill health.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

At the time of the inspection in June 2016, inspectors raised concerns about the arrangements for safeguarding pupils' welfare. The principal tackled this as a top priority. With useful support from a member of the trust's education support team, an audit of safeguarding was carried out. Following this, the principal introduced an electronic system to record safeguarding and welfare concerns. The principal ensured that staff received training to make sure they know how to use the new system to raise a concern and how to implement any actions that need to be completed. Several staff explained to the inspector that they feel confident with the system and that they believe it has made procedures much more secure. The principal and senior staff with responsibility for safeguarding pupils now meet regularly to discuss safeguarding issues. A representative of the trust is on hand, should they wish to discuss any concerns further. The procedures that the school has for recording and checking concerns about a child's welfare are now secure.

At the start of this school year, the principal reviewed the roles and responsibilities of the newly formed leadership team. There were two assistant principals and three directors of learning, one of whom was appointed to the role on a temporary basis. Since that time, however, one of the assistant principals has been absent due to ill

health, one director of learning is currently taking maternity leave and another director of learning has tendered her resignation and will be leaving the school at the end of this term. The unavoidable long-term absences and changes to the leadership have hampered the work of the leadership team in bringing about rapid improvements to the school.

The instability in the leadership team means that leaders have not successfully improved the quality of teaching across all year groups. For example, they have not checked that new policies and procedures, including those intended to provide greater challenge to the most able pupils, are reliably being implemented across all classes. Plans for supporting pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities are not as advanced as they were intended to be.

The school's improvement plan contains a large number of actions, many of which have been carried out. Leaders have not checked carefully enough, however, that these actions have had the desired impact. Considerable staff training has taken place, for example, but leaders have not checked that staff are reliably putting this training into practice. As a consequence, leaders have not secured the improvements that are urgently required.

The effectiveness of middle leadership has increased since the inspection in June 2016. Members of the education support team from the trust have provided useful training and support to middle leaders, so that they have been able to draw up action plans and begin monitoring the areas for which they are responsible. Middle leaders have not yet developed their whole-school view so that they can have an impact on improving the quality of teaching, learning and outcomes across the school.

The principal has made some use of the links within the trust to enable some teachers to visit other academies to see effective practice. For example, the school's learning mentor visited another academy to improve her practice. The school is currently part of a science hub, based at another of the trust's academies. The teacher with responsibility for science has shared ideas with colleagues to engage in a 'science in action' day at Blackthorn.

Teachers who are new to the profession have joined a programme locally to support newly qualified teachers. They are finding this support useful. Members of the trust's education support team and teachers in school who teach a similar age group have provided support for these new teachers. The assistant principal who has responsibility for the overseeing support for new teachers is currently absent from school.

The academy's advisory board currently comprises of three members, all of whom have taken up their role since the inspection in June 2016. The chair of the board has been in post since September 2016. Board members have undertaken some important work to get to know the school and the improvements that are being

made. The chair recognises that a great deal of work is still to be done. She is adamant that the board will play a role in ensuring that improvements will be sustainable over time.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Since the inspection in June 2016, members of the trust's education support team have supported several teachers to improve their practice. This is ongoing and there is scope for them to offer support more widely in the school. A new policy for teaching spelling, punctuation and grammar has been introduced. However, due to the absence of the leader with responsibility for English, the implementation of this policy has not been checked to see how effective it is. Pupils' books show that, while pupils are having regular opportunities to improve their skills in this aspect of English, teachers have not adopted a consistent approach across the school. For example, in some books, teachers who had commented on pupils' work or corrected pupils' spelling had incorrectly spelled the words themselves.

There is similar variation in the use of the newly introduced marking policy. Scrutiny of pupils' books during this inspection showed that teachers are not applying the policy consistently. This shows that, while leaders have examined pupils' books, they are not ensuring that teachers implement the school's marking and feedback policy thoroughly.

Teachers are planning learning that captures pupils' imagination. Topics start with 'wow' days. For example, pupils in Year 4 began their topic to learn about New York with an imaginary visit to the city. They made passports and set out their classroom to simulate a flight on an aeroplane. Pupils told the inspector that they particularly like it when their learning is fun. During the inspection, pupils in Year 6 were engaged well in acting out parts of Shakespeare's 'King Lear' to help them to understand the text.

Too often, teachers do not have high enough expectations of what pupils can do. They do not reliably make sure that the learning is closely matched to what pupils already know and understand. Visits to lessons and pupils' books show that pupils are sometimes completing work that is too easy for them, particularly for those who are most able. This slows the progress that pupils make.

Teachers do not consistently ensure that pupils are clear about what they are learning. In some classes, the language that the teacher was using was too difficult for pupils to understand and the teachers' explanations were not always clear. Better practice was seen in mathematics, when teachers checked that pupils understood the vocabulary being used, for example, but the quality of teaching throughout the school remains too inconsistent.

Recently, the principal has brokered the support of a specialist leader of education to work alongside some teachers to improve their skills. There is some evidence

that her work is beginning to make a difference, but it is too early to say whether the work will bring about long-term improvement.

In the nursery, children engage well with singing and the activities that staff provide. Staff model well the actions for songs and good table manners, which children copy. In the Reception classes, time is not always used to good effect. For example, too much time was given for children to tidy up at the end of a morning session. Despite this, teachers in the Reception class are ensuring that children are having opportunities to develop their imaginative skills. Teachers are using high-quality texts as starting points to inspire children's learning in design and junk-modelling work. During the week of the inspection, children were making fans and dancing to celebrate the Chinese New Year.

Teachers in the early years have made some efforts to engage parents more effectively in their children's learning. They have introduced a system for parents to email them with information about their children's achievements at home, or to write on stars as they arrive at school in the mornings. Some parents were invited in and spoke with the children during a topic about pets. This has had very limited success, however. The leader with responsibility for the early years has not pursued this sufficiently to find a more successful way of engaging parents.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

The assistant principal has provided staff with useful training in managing pupils' behaviour effectively. Staff have appreciated this training. They are now more skilled in managing challenging behaviour when it arises. Pupils say that behaviour is getting better. They understand the school's behaviour policy. Despite this, low-level disruption has not been eradicated. Occasionally during this inspection, teachers allowed low-level disruption in classes to go unchecked, or were unsuccessful in tackling it. In the lessons where the teachers had higher expectations and implemented the behaviour policy fully, pupils' levels of engagement were much better.

The assistant principal keeps a check on incidents of behaviour throughout the school. She readily acknowledges that behaviour has not yet improved sufficiently and that her tracking does not yet provide her with all the information she needs.

Outcomes for pupils

At the end of 2016, the proportion of children in the early years reaching a good level of development reached its highest level for three years. The proportion of pupils achieving the expected standard in the phonics screening check at the end of Year 1 improved from the previous year. The progress that pupils made by the end of Year 6, however, was well below that seen nationally in each of reading, writing and mathematics. The proportion of pupils making the expected progress by the end of key stage 2 was well below that of other pupils nationally.

The school's assessment information for the autumn term 2016 shows that too few pupils in each year group are making the expected progress so far this year.

Leaders have introduced a new system to track the progress that pupils are making. Leaders have provided teachers with training to use the software. Middle and senior leaders are making some use of the information the system provides to check on how much progress is being made. Leaders do not use this information rigorously enough, however, to ensure that all groups of pupils receive the interventions and challenge they require to make the progress of which they are capable.

External support

The Education Fellowship Trust has provided some useful support for Blackthorn Primary School since the inspection in June 2016. It has enabled two associate leaders to extend their time with the school to provide continuity when the new assistant principals took up their posts. Five members of the trust's education support team have supported leaders with improving safeguarding arrangements and the quality of teaching and learning. The trust has had some success in supporting the principal to recruit staff, through a recruitment fair, for example. This has been limited, however, to the appointment of newly qualified teachers. Unforeseen circumstances mean that there is now an urgent need for the trust to assist in securing a stable, high-calibre leadership team to support the principal so that rapid, sustainable improvement may be made.