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Mrs Nicola Jethwa
Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Jethwa

Special measures monitoring inspection of Abbs Cross Academy and Arts College

Following my visit with Des Dunne, Ofsted Inspector, to your school on 21–22 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 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 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.

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

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

Yours sincerely

Janet Hallett
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 end 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 they have 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 achieve consistently at the higher grades.

Report on the fourth monitoring inspection on 21–22 February 2017

Evidence

Inspectors met with the headteacher, senior and middle leaders and members of the teaching staff. Meetings were also held with the chief executive officer (CEO) of the Loxford School Trust and with two members of the interim executive board, including the chair. Inspectors made several visits to classes across year groups and subjects. Many of these visits were made jointly with school leaders.

Inspectors spoke with pupils from all year groups to listen to their views of the school and also talked to pupils informally at break and lunchtime. Inspectors listened to pupils read and discussed their choice of books and their understanding of the text. Inspectors observed pupils' behaviour around the school and in lessons, and also visited an assembly.

Inspectors scrutinised a wide range of documentation, including the school's own self-evaluation of the impact of teaching, learning and assessment on pupils' progress. Inspectors scrutinised information about pupils' current progress in all year groups with a particular focus on the progress of disadvantaged pupils, the most able and pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities. They also looked at attendance and safeguarding records, including the single central record of recruitment checks on staff.

Context

Since the last monitoring inspection in September 2016, there have been some further changes in staffing. The acting headteacher has now been confirmed as the substantive, permanent headteacher. There have been no further changes to the senior team since September, which consists of two deputy headteachers and six assistant headteachers. The head of mathematics has started her maternity leave and the role is being covered by the second in mathematics with support from a trust officer.

The school is a member of the Loxford School Trust. The CEO, who is a national leader of education, supports the headteacher and the senior team. The chair of the interim executive board is a national leader of governance.

Three teaching staff left at the end of the autumn term 2016, bringing the total change in teaching staff since July 2016 to 31 out of 58 staff. These teachers have been replaced as required and there is currently one vacancy in English. During the inspection, pupils often talked about 'the Loxford teachers'. However, the headteacher and CEO confirmed to inspectors that teachers of all classes are employed by the trust as Abbs Cross teachers. The only exception to this is three visiting teachers from the Loxford School mathematics department who lead weekly sessions for Year 11 pupils.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

The headteacher, well supported by her senior team, has a clear focus on securing rapid improvement for the school. This is now beginning to happen and improvements in all aspects of school life were evident during the monitoring visit.

The headteacher is very visible around the school. She models behaviours for all staff and pupils so that everyone knows how to talk and interact with each other. This has a strong impact on the positive ethos around the corridors and in classes. Pupils are impressed that the headteacher knows their name, and their confidence in their school is growing as a result of this positive environment.

Safeguarding is effective. Procedures are robust and constantly reviewed to see if they can be strengthened further. Teachers are well trained and have appropriate training updates when required. There is a strong culture of safeguarding; the school recognises risks to young people, such as sexting, and takes action to ensure that pupils learn about and understand risk so that they can manage it for themselves out in the community. The school's single central record meets requirements.

Leaders' self-evaluation is accurate and thorough. The headteacher has identified key aspects to take forward as a focus for improvement. These are: the provision and outcomes for pupils in mathematics and science, reducing inconsistencies in teaching, developing teachers' questioning skills and continuing to raise pupils' aspirations.

Systems for monitoring and improving the quality of teaching are having a positive impact on pupils' learning and progress. Middle leaders are growing into their roles as leaders of teaching and learning in their subject areas. Curriculum leaders monitor the delivery of the schemes of work and lesson planning through the strategic and operational calendars. New job descriptions highlight responsibility and accountability for teaching and learning. In addition, 'book looks' and 'learning walks' have been introduced. Curriculum leaders feel well supported and say that they are more reflective and pupil-centred than previously. Subject leaders are at different points in their journey to ensure that teaching is at least consistently good, and senior leaders are aware that there is a further need to develop the leadership capacity of middle leaders.

The work of the interim executive board is having a strong impact on the rate of improvement. The CEO is uncompromising in the standards she sets for the school. The board members are thoughtful and knowledgeable. They have a sharp focus on what needs to be done and have kept up the pressure on the school to improve. They have high aspirations and speak eloquently about the need for more rapid progress. The chair of the board has an astute understanding of the school's strengths and weaknesses and the need for a period of consolidation to increase rates of progress consistently for all pupils.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

The quality of teaching, learning and assessment is improving because school leaders are taking effective action to reduce inconsistencies. However there is still some variability across subjects and year groups. This is because of the large turnover of staff and so improvements in teaching have not yet had time to impact fully on pupils' learning. However, pupils in all year groups can describe how teaching has improved and how more is expected of them. There is now a higher level of challenge for the most able pupils.

Pupils have generally positive attitudes to learning in all year groups. In lower year groups, pupils are demonstrably motivated, enthusiastic and participate well. They are keen to answer questions and offer to read or explain their thinking. Pupils in higher year groups also want to do well but are less willing to participate. As a result, their speaking skills are not well developed.

Pupils in higher year groups have experienced the legacy of weaker teaching, so they are less confident in their subject knowledge and skills. Nevertheless, some teachers are uncompromising in their desire to ensure that pupils make the most of all opportunities to articulate their learning. In English, teachers rephrased questions without ever dropping the level of challenge in their attempts to enable pupils to reflect on the text. Pupils that do answer reveal that they can reflect on meaning and empathise with characters they are studying. Teachers in some classes use the language of their subject very well so that pupils hear the vocabulary being used in context and can then apply this in activities.

Teachers' questioning remains an area for development. This is because sometimes pupils' understanding is not checked; the same pupils are asked questions while others are not challenged to answer.

Since the last monitoring visit, teachers are now more secure in their knowledge about the pupils they teach. Teachers have access to the information they need and now use it to identify disadvantaged pupils and those who have special educational needs, as well as different ability groupings. Teachers have begun to use this information to meet the needs of these different groups and this is having a positive impact on the progress of these pupils. For example, in geography, the teacher used a range of questions which were carefully targeted at individual pupils according to their needs. However, in another class, the adapted resources for a pupil were not helpful in enabling the pupil to understand the work. School leaders recognise that there is more work to be done to ensure consistency of provision for all pupils.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Pupils are clear that the school is improving and are positive about behaviour in lessons. They say that lessons are only rarely disrupted and that teachers deal with any issues well. Inspectors agree with this view that, overall, pupils behave

well in lessons; they are attentive, concentrate and support each other. Occasionally, pupils are distracted if teachers do not explain the activity or they are given too long to complete the task. However, pupils understand the school's expectations of behaviour very clearly and so they do not disrupt others' learning.

Pupils conduct themselves well around the school site. There is a calm, orderly atmosphere. At change of lessons, corridors are sometimes crowded, but pupils wait politely while other pupils move forward. Adults supervise pupils effectively. They take every opportunity on the corridors to say good morning to pupils and talk to them about their day. Pupils are very appreciative of the way adults interact with them.

Pupils across year groups say that they feel safe. The tone and manner in which adults speak to them helps them to feel safe in the school environment, so pupils are confident in talking to them. Pupils are clear that adults care for them; they trust the care teams and know that they will be listened to if they have any concerns.

The school's work to educate pupils about how to keep themselves safe is developing effectively. Pupils are taught how to keep themselves safe when using the internet, which has had a positive impact on their understanding and confidence. One pupil explained how last year it had just been about using common sense, but this year they had gone much deeper into the issues. During the inspection, Year 9 pupils attended workshops about child sexual exploitation. Pupils responded positively and said that learning how to recognise the danger signs and the advice they were given had been really useful.

In 2016, attendance for disadvantaged pupils and those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities was in the lowest 10% of schools nationally. Consequently, attendance linked to progress was a key line of enquiry for this inspection visit. School systems for monitoring attendance are robust and leaders take action to address pupils' absence. Pupils' attendance has improved overall and for most groups. Currently, attendance for all pupils has risen by 0.8% since July 2016. The attendance of boys, including disadvantaged boys, has improved: for boys by 0.3% and for disadvantaged boys by 0.9%. The attendance of disadvantaged girls has not improved. The attendance of pupils who have special educational needs has improved. Persistent absence has reduced.

Improved attendance is having a positive impact on the progress of these groups. However, school leaders recognise that further improvement is required, as figures for some groups remain low compared with the national picture.

Outcomes for pupils

Since the last monitoring visit, the government's analysis of pupils' progress and attainment for the 2016 results has been published. The school's headline attainment figure of 65% of pupils achieving five or more good GCSE passes

including English and mathematics was the highest in the school's history. However, this masks the fact that pupils did not make enough progress. This is for all pupils and for disadvantaged pupils, particularly the most able disadvantaged group and pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities. For some groups, progress was in the lowest 10% of all schools nationally. Progress in mathematics and science was particularly weak compared with other subjects.

Evidence in pupils' books and the school's own assessment system show that pupils are now making better progress. However, leaders acknowledge that there is still a long way to go to ensure that all pupils make at least good progress. Nevertheless, there are many positive indicators from this monitoring visit, from the work in pupils' books, visits to classes and the school's progress information.

In Years 7 and 8, pupils are making better progress overall. The difference between the progress of disadvantaged pupils and other pupils is small in Year 7, compared with higher year groups. In Year 8, there is no difference and disadvantaged pupils make progress in line with their peers.

In higher year groups, pupils have a range of gaps in their knowledge in science and mathematics. They are a long way behind because expectations have been too low in the past and differences are diminishing more slowly. Pupils in higher year groups have less confidence in speaking and listening and are more reluctant to answer questions and contribute as they were not previously expected to do this.

Boys are now making better progress in higher sets in English, mathematics and science across year groups. Teachers have higher expectations of them and boys are responding positively. Boys participate actively in lessons, particularly in Years 7 and 8 and when teaching captures their imagination. Boys' progress is more mixed in middle- and lower-ability sets in science and mathematics or when expectations are not so clear.

The school's reading initiative is particularly successful. Able pupils read widely and can talk confidently about their preferred authors and genres. Lower-ability pupils are reading texts in line with what would be expected for average pupils of their age. They sometimes struggle with complex words and their meaning, but they persevere and are starting to enjoy reading much more.

Pupils who have special educational needs are making better progress, particularly in English and mathematics.

External support

The CEO and other officers of the Loxford School Trust have continued to offer effective support and challenge to school leaders. The CEO sets the strategic direction of the school and keeps a close eye on the impact of leaders' actions to make sure that they are having sufficient impact. The CEO models high standards of commitment for the headteacher and other senior leaders.

During the visit, the trust officers played an important role in identifying the impact of improvements in the school to date. They understand perfectly what their role is, in enabling and empowering others to do their job. For example, during the inspection, several trust officers attended meetings with school leaders. They let the school leaders speak for themselves, did not dominate the meetings or speak for the school. As a result, school leaders greatly benefit from this very effective support, which empowers them to develop their leadership qualities and recognise their own ability to improve the school.