

Ofsted  
Piccadilly Gate  
Store Street  
Manchester  
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 4234  
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23 March 2017

Mr Marcus Shepherd  
Head of Academy  
Merrill Academy  
Brackens Lane  
Alvaston  
Derby  
Derbyshire  
DE24 0AN

Dear Mr Shepherd

### **Special measures monitoring inspection of Merrill Academy**

Following my visit to your school on 7 and 8 March 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. 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.

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

The school's improvement plan is fit for purpose.

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 executive board, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Derby. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Sally Smith  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**

## **Annex**

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

- Urgently ensure that there is sufficient high-quality leadership capacity within the school to bring about the rapid and sustained improvements needed.
- Ensure that all pupils behave well in school by making sure that:
  - a well-understood behaviour policy is in place and that all staff consistently apply it
  - leaders develop a culture in school where all staff work together and make pupils' good behaviour everybody's business.
- Ensure that precise and pre-emptive strategies are put in place so that more pupils attend school regularly.
- Improve outcomes for pupils by ensuring that:
  - the high proportion of pupils who enter school with attainment that is significantly below the national average are effectively supported to develop the literacy and numeracy skills they need to catch up
  - those most able pupils who have fallen behind their peers are challenged to make rapid progress
  - the progress made by pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities is tracked precisely so that the correct support can be put in place to remedy any gaps in learning
  - the achievement gaps that exist between male and female pupils and disadvantaged pupils and others in the school continue to narrow
  - the underperformance of pupils in science is immediately addressed by improving the quality of teaching so that it is consistently good.
- Improve the quality of teaching by making sure that:
  - all teachers use the information about pupils' starting points to plan lessons that provide sufficient support and challenge for different groups of pupils
  - all teachers provide helpful marking and feedback to help pupils understand how to correct their mistakes and improve their work
  - opportunities are planned more often in all subjects to develop pupils' reading, writing and mathematical skills
  - teachers are challenged and supported to tackle effectively the poor behaviour of a minority of pupils so that the learning of others is not disrupted.
  - Improve the quality of the 16 to 19 study programmes by making sure that effective leadership is in place to drive the rapid improvement that is

required.

## **Report on the first monitoring inspection on 7 March 2017 to 8 March 2017**

### **Evidence**

The inspector met with the head of academy, members of the senior leadership team, subject leaders and members of the teaching and support staff. The inspector also met the chair and vice-chair of the governing body, who were also there as representatives of the current sponsor. She had a brief meeting with a representative from the prospective new sponsor. The lead inspector visited 11 lessons, across different subjects and age groups, with the head of academy. During these visits to lessons, the lead inspector looked at pupils' books and talked to pupils in order to evaluate the quality of their learning. The inspector met with pupils from all year groups, both formally and informally, including during break- and lunchtime, when she observed pupils' behaviour. She also visited 'Merrill Hall', the school's internal behaviour support unit. The inspector evaluated the impact of the school's actions since the last inspection on: behaviour, attendance, pupils' outcomes, the quality of teaching and learning, the sixth form and the effectiveness of leadership and management, in line with the areas for improvement identified in the previous inspection report.

### **Context**

Since the last inspection, there have been significant changes to leadership and staffing. The previous executive headteacher has left and the head of academy has taken up the permanent leadership of the school, under the title of head of academy. Upon his appointment, he took immediate action to restructure the senior leadership team. The previous assistant headteacher has been promoted to deputy headteacher, two internal appointments have been made for assistant headteachers and four further members of the school have been appointed to the extended leadership team. All new senior leadership appointments have been created to lead on the areas identified for improvement at the previous inspection, including a new head of sixth form. Also, 21 members of staff have left the school and 15 new members of staff have joined the school.

The regional schools commissioner is currently in the process of re-brokering the sponsorship of the academy. At the time of the monitoring visit, the new sponsor had not been confirmed.

### **The effectiveness of leadership and management**

The head of academy has been swift in implementing an effective action plan to bring about the necessary improvements. No time has been wasted. He has rightly started by addressing pupils' behaviour and attendance. He has a clear vision and high expectations, which he has successfully communicated to all. His daily blog, for all staff and pupils, keeps everyone up to date with improvements.

Staff and pupils are unanimous in their praise for what he has achieved in a short space of time. They have total belief that, under his leadership, the school will improve because he has created a new and shared culture of trust, belief and raised aspirations. He leads by example and his positive energy is palpable and infectious.

The head of academy has successfully improved leadership capacity through the new appointments to the senior leadership team. Senior leaders now support the head of academy in driving whole-school improvements in: behaviour, attendance, teaching and learning, pupils' outcomes and the sixth form. In turn, senior leaders hold curriculum leaders to account for their subject areas. All staff are clear about leaders' expectations and say that senior leaders support them well. Therefore, new school policies are being applied consistently and pupils' behaviour has improved dramatically as a result.

Leaders are clear about what actions are working well and what areas need further development. They are realistic that they are on a journey of improvement and that they cannot achieve everything at once. Therefore, they have put in place a realistic and measurable action plan, which is regularly reviewed and evaluated to ensure that all actions taken have a positive impact. Leaders are not afraid to stop strategies if they are not working. They actively involve staff in decisions, so that there is shared ownership and understanding of new policies and whole-school strategies. In doing so, the head of academy has successfully created a model of leadership that is sustainable.

A new leader for sixth form was appointed in September 2016. She has ensured that 16 to 19 study programmes meet national requirements and that students are on the correct pathways. All pupils have the opportunity of work experience. Students are provided with appropriate careers advice and guidance. Students who spoke with the inspector were clear about their future options and appreciated the advice and support that they had been given.

Leaders have raised the expectations for standards at post-16. Students now wear professional dress, stay in school throughout the school day and have a clear understanding of the commitment they need to make to their studies, before joining the sixth form. Students' attendance has improved dramatically. Students are now part of the wider school community and act as mentors and role models for younger pupils.

The current sponsor, Derby College Education Trust, recognised and appointed the new head of academy and supported his appointments to the senior team. Other than that, the trust has relied upon school improvement to be driven from within the school. Representatives from the trust also sit on the governing body. The governing body reads and reviews action plans submitted by school leaders, but does not provide any additionality, through support and challenge, that has had any measurable impact on pupils' outcomes.

The rapid improvements seen in pupils' behaviour and attendance are solely down

to the relentless drive of the head of academy, ably supported by the senior leadership team.

### **Quality of teaching, learning and assessment**

Since the inspection in June 2016, leaders have put in place a regular programme of support and training for teachers. Most of this training has been based around helping staff to implement the new whole-school behaviour policy. Staff are clear about senior leaders' expectations and this is bringing about improvements in the quality of teaching and learning across the school. Leaders have also supported teachers to retrain in subjects where there are shortages of subject specialists, such as geography and science. There has been a significant reduction in the number of supply teachers at the school. Leaders have created a calm atmosphere around the school. Pupils listen to their teachers, get on with their work without interruptions and willingly offer to contribute in lessons.

Leaders are aware that improving pupils' behaviour for learning was the first step. They now rightly acknowledge that more work needs to be done to ensure that all teachers have high expectations for what pupils can achieve, and plan work that provides pupils with suitable challenge to make good progress.

Leaders have an accurate picture of the quality of teaching and learning at the school. They put in place additional, personalised coaching and mentoring for any teachers who need it. Leaders support trainee and newly qualified teachers well. Teachers are now working better together to share good practice and learn from each other.

Senior leaders work with curriculum leaders to monitor the quality of teaching and learning in their subject areas. Curriculum leaders benefit from working with colleagues across the city at subject network meetings. Leaders have put in place much more stringent moderation of teachers' assessments and they have worked with other schools to check that assessments are accurate. This is helping leaders to put in place more timely interventions for any pupil who is falling behind.

Leaders have identified that more needs to be done to improve whole-school literacy teaching, so that pupils have opportunities to develop their literacy skills across the curriculum. They plan to provide all staff with further training to support this.

### **Personal development, behaviour and welfare**

Leaders have taken rapid action to tackle pupils' poor behaviour, which was prevalent at the last inspection. This has been achieved by a two-fold approach; firstly, through the introduction of a new whole-school behaviour policy. Leaders ensured that staff had plenty of time to understand this policy before it was launched. It is being applied consistently by all staff, with the support of senior leaders. All staff now take responsibility for pupils' behaviour. Secondly, small mentor groups were introduced, which are linked to a new house system. All staff are now mentors for small groups of mixed-aged pupils. This means that all pupils have a member of staff who is responsible for them and closely tracks their behaviour, attendance and progress. Leaders have moved mentor time to the end of the day, so that any incidents can be dealt with promptly on the day that they happen.

Leaders have simultaneously introduced a reward system, to accompany the new behaviour policy. This is proving highly motivational for pupils. Incidents of poor behaviour have reduced dramatically and there is a positive climate of learning around the school. Pupils say that the house system has created a sense of belonging and community at the school, which they have warmly welcomed.

Leaders have introduced a staggered lunchtime break for pupils, so that only half the school take their lunch at any one time. Leaders have also ensured that break- and lunchtimes are well supervised and that pupils are clear about where they can and cannot go during these times. The inspector observed good conduct and behaviour by pupils around the school. There is little litter around the school and most pupils are smartly dressed and polite to adults, including visitors. All pupils who spoke to the inspector said that behaviour had improved massively and that teachers were consistent in their application of the new behaviour policy. Pupils also said that they feel safe at the school and that there has been a reduction in incidents of bullying. As a result, pupils have developed a new-found respect for each other and teachers. They are proud of the school and keen for people outside the school to see the positive changes. Lots of pupils spoke about how grateful they were to staff, who had helped them to improve their behaviour, so much so that they now want to support and mentor other pupils.

Leaders carefully track any incidents of poor behaviour. They put in place well-thought-out, reparative approaches, designed to provide the minority of pupils who need it with additional strategies to improve their emotional well-being and learning. Leaders have also introduced 'Merrill Hall', the school's own behaviour support unit for a small number of vulnerable pupils who need to learn outside lessons. Pupils who attend this unit have dramatically improved their attendance and attitudes to learning because of the well-targeted support they receive.

Pupils' attendance, although still below national expectations, is improving quickly, particularly that of disadvantaged pupils. Students' attendance in the sixth form has



also risen by over 20% compared with last year. This is because of the relentless approach of the senior leader for attendance and the team that supports him. All pupil absences are followed up promptly. Mentors call home for any pupil who is absent that day and staff, including the head of academy, take the minibus out to collect pupils if needed. Leaders have implemented a clear escalation system for pupils who are persistently absent. They work with external agencies and serve appropriate legal notices when necessary. Pupils are rewarded for good attendance. All pupils who spoke to the lead inspector were fully aware of the importance of being in school. Pupils' punctuality has also improved. Pupils have a renewed sense of enjoyment in their learning and appreciate the enrichment afternoons, which the head of academy has provided for them. They now want to be in lessons.

### **Outcomes for pupils**

In 2016, pupils' attainment was below the national average. However, pupils' overall progress score, although still low, was above the minimum expectation set by the government. Pupils, including disadvantaged pupils and those who are lower attaining, made positive progress in mathematics. Pupils' progress in other subjects was variable. For example, pupils made poor progress in English, humanities and French but better progress in subjects such as health and social care, childcare and sports studies. Pupils' progress in science was below the national average, but showed an improvement from previous years as a result of improved teaching and learning in this subject.

Leaders have put in place lots more work to improve the validity of teachers' assessments of pupils' work. Leaders are also closely monitoring the progress of all pupils. Consequently, leaders have a better understanding of when pupils are falling behind and need more support to catch up.

Leaders acknowledge that, due to a legacy of poor teaching and learning, pupils have a lot of catching up to do to make good progress in all subjects from their low starting points. The school's current assessment information indicates that pupils' performance this year is improving in English and mathematics at key stage 3 and in subjects such as additional science, English literature and French at key stage 4.

The gap between boys' performance and that of girls has closed in mathematics and science but remains in English. The progress of pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities, the least able and those who speak English as an additional language is improving. The very small number of most-able pupils are still not making the progress of which they are capable. The performance of pupils of average ability is poor. The difference between disadvantaged pupils' progress, compared with that of other pupils nationally, is diminishing, but still remains a whole-school priority as there is still a significant gap.

Current Year 7 pupils, who receive additional support to catch up with their peers in reading and mathematics, have made a 30% improvement this year compared with

last year. This is because leaders have ensured that they receive better quality support.

Students continue to do well in vocational subjects in the sixth form. Those who are re-taking mathematics are making better progress this year, but the progress of students who are re-taking English remains poor.

### **External support**

Derby College Education Trust has not provided additional and effective support and challenge, over and above those provided from within the school and its leadership team. As such, it has fallen short of its duty to the school to support the urgent improvements needed for pupils. Despite this, the headteacher and senior leaders have taken effective action, particularly to improve pupils' behaviour and attendance. However, the sponsor can take no credit for the recent improvements to the school.

The head of academy has been proactive and sought external support, from a local teaching alliance and through an external consultant, to provide him with additional support and advice.